

# Volleyball Nations League: Iran finds momentum in Week 2

## Sports Desk

Unlike the first week of action, Iran got off to a flying start in Week 2 of the Volleyball Nations League in Belgrade, Serbia.

Having managed a single victory in four outings in Week 1 – a 3-2 win against Ukraine on the final day in Rio de Janeiro – Roberto Piazza's men defeated the host 3-1 in their opening game in the Serbian capital, and then beat Argentina by the same scoreline on Friday.

Iran took the first set 25-21 before Argentina – on three wins in five prior to the game – bounced back with a 25-22 win in the second set.

Iran, however, restored the lead in the third set (25-22) and then fought back from five points down early in the fourth set to win 25-22 and collect the maximum three points – a first triumph for the Asian powerhouse over the South American opponent in six years.

Outside-hitter Morteza Sharifi topped the scoring for Iran with 14 points, with Ali Haqparast contributing 13 – including six in the final set.

Argentine opposite Pablo Sergio Koukartsev chipped in a game-high 18 points, while Luciano Palonsky (15) and Agustin Loser (14) also finished in double figures.

Despite a third successive win, Piazza said his team still needs to

improve for the future games in the preliminary phase.

"We have to understand how to play [against an opponent] with a fast tempo like today, so it gave us a really big lesson," Italian Piazza said after the game, adding: "We were a little bit late [at some stages] and that can be a problem in the future."

Asked how his men recovered from a five-point deficit in the fourth set, the Italian said: "That's a good question. I really don't know. I need to ask them, because their culture is different and I have to understand them."

"I made some substitutions [midway in the fourth set] and they started to believe that was possible [to win the game]. After one block I guess the mood changed totally."

The bad news for Piazza was that Sharifi would miss the remaining two games in the second week against Germany and the Netherlands after suffering a foot injury in the closing stages.

Hopping to progress to the VNL Finals for the first time since 2022, Iran will visit Gdańsk, Poland, for Week 3 – starting with a game against the home side on July 16.

An all-Asian encounter will see Iran take on China a day later at the Ergo Arena, followed by games against Olympic champion France (July 19) and Bulgaria (July 20).



Iranian middle-blocker Mohammad Valizadeh goes up for a spike during a 3-1 victory over Argentina at the FIVB Volleyball Nations League in Belgrade, Serbia, on June 27, 2025.

● FIVB

## World Deaf Futsal Championships: Iran beats Brazil to lift the trophy

### Sports Desk

Iran won a fourth title in five editions at the World Deaf Futsal Championships, thanks to 2-0 victory over Brazil in Montesilvano, Italy. Ali Zeinalvand and Ali-Asghar Mahboubi were on the scoresheet in the final showpiece as Mahdi Sanei's men rounded off their campaign in emphatic fashion, claiming an impressive eight wins in as many outings in the competition.

Having lifted the trophy in the 2011, 2015, and 2022 editions, Iran began its title defense with a 12-1 rout of Morocco in the group stage, before defeating Italy (1-0), Uruguay (9-0), England (11-0), and Poland (3-1) to finish atop the group table. Iran then hammered Kuwait by seven unanswered goals in the quarterfinals, followed by a 3-2 win against Croatia in the last four.

There further joy for the Iranians in the awarding ceremony as Mahboubi took the top scorer prize with 15 goals, while Sanei was the named the best coach.

Alireza Mokhtar-Abadi won the Most Valuable Player prize, with Mohammad-Hassan Abdollahi taking the award for best young talent in the tournament.

Earlier on Friday, Italy defeated Croatia 2-1 in the men's third-place showdown.



● MNA

## Wilder scores stoppage KO of Herndon for first win in three years

**BBC** – Former heavyweight world champion Deontay Wilder returned to winning ways with a low-key comeback victory, stopping the overmatched Tyrrell Herndon in the seventh round in Kansas.

Wilder dropped his fellow American in the second round, scored another knockdown in the sixth, and closed the show with two chopping right hands a round later, prompting the referee to wave it off. After a torrid few years – three defeats in his previous four bouts, most recently a punishing loss to Zhilei Zhang in Saudi Arabia – Wilder registered his first win since October 2022.

But while it was a dominant performance, it was far from vintage Bronze Bomber.

Once the most feared puncher in the division and perhaps the greatest one-

shot finisher of all time, the old Wilder would likely have dispatched Herndon earlier and to more fanfare. With a sparse crowd at the Charles Koch Arena in Wichita and no major television broadcast, it was a modest setting for a fighter who once shook arenas and

headlined pay-per-view events against the likes of Tyson Fury.

"I've been laid off for a long time, getting myself back together, repairing myself emotionally. It is just nice to be back in the ring. This is a new beginning for me," the 39-year-old said.



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## Ivankovic and China part ways

**AFC** – Branko Ivankovic has left his role as head coach of the China PR national team after his side were eliminated from the AFC Asian Qualifiers – Road to 26 earlier in June.

The 71-year-old Croatian was removed from his role as a result of his team's fifth place finish in Group C, which ended the country's hopes of a first FIFA World Cup appearance since their debut at the Finals in Korea-Japan in 2002.

"The Chinese Football Association expresses gratitude to Mr. Branko Ivankovic and his coaching staff for their dedicated efforts during their tenure with the men's national team and their contributions to Chinese football," the CFA said in a statement.

"We wish Mr. Ivankovic all the best in his future work and life." Ivankovic had been appointed in February 2024 to replace Aleksandar Jankovic following a disappointing performance at the AFC Asian Cup Qatar 2023 during which the Chinese failed to score in their three group phase matches, resulting in elimination.

He oversaw an immediate upturn in fortunes and the team qualified



● AFP

for the third round of Asia's preliminaries for the FIFA World Cup 2026.

That phase of the qualifiers started poorly for China PR, with a 7-0 defeat at the hands of Japan at Saitama Stadium followed by losses against Saudi Arabia and Australia.

A 2-1 win over Indonesia in Qingdao in October kick-started the campaign, however, and a subsequent 1-0 victory over Bahrain rekindled Chinese hopes of a place in the fourth round of the preliminaries. But losses to Japan, Saudi Arabia,

Australia and, crucially, Indonesia ended Chinese prospects of a place in the next round, with a 1-0 win over Bahrain in the last qualifier on June 10 only enough to deliver a fifth place finish in the Group C standings.

Dejan Djurdjevic, who led China PR during the AFC U20 Asian Cup in Shenzhen in February, have been appointed to replace Branko in a caretaker capacity and will lead the team at the East Asian Football Federation E-1 Football Championship in Korea Republic next month.