

Volleyball Nations League: Iran edges the Dutch to close in on Finals spot

Sports Desk

Amin Esmailnejad and Pouria Hosseinkhanzadeh led the way as Iran salvaged a 3-2 victory (25-19, 22-25, 21-25, 25-19, 15-9) over the Netherlands in their final outing in Week 2 of the FIVB Men's Volleyball Nations League in Belgrade, Serbia. The hard-fought win helped the Asian powerhouse move up to 10th in the 18-team table with a 4-4 record and stay in contention with a place in the VNL Finals in Ningbo, China.

The top seven of the preliminary-round table will be joined by China in the Finals – starting with the quarterfinals on July 30. Sunday's result also meant Iran has already won as many games in this year's preliminary phase as in the previous two editions combined. Having suffered a 3-1 loss to Ger-

many at the Belgrade Arena on the preceding day, Iran was much more prolific in attack, outscoring the Dutch by 62-57, while capitalizing on the abundant unforced errors (35) by the European opponent, which is now under a serious threat of relegation – sitting second from bottom in the table with a 1-7 record.

Esmailnejad chipped in a joint game-high 22 points – alongside Dutch opposite Michiel Ahji. The Iranian opposite spiker signed off with a 61% success rate in attack, two kill blocks and an ace, while 20-year-old Hosseinkhanzadeh added 21 points, including two aces, and his cross-court teammate Ehsan Daneshdoust finished with 14 points to his name.

As many as four other players finished in double figures on the Dutch side – outside-hitters Bennie

Tuinstra (13) and Tom Koops (11), as well as middle blockers Twan Wiltenburg and Cornelis Luuc van Der Ent with 11 apiece. The two middles put up as many as nine kill blocks combined – six and three, respectively.

"I should first say congrats to the other team, because they played great! Of course, we played better than yesterday. We should continue to improve, because we have good talent, good young players, and we also have a good coach to head the team. Every game is important for us and we should just think about the next one," Esmailnejad told VBTv after the match.

Iran head coach Roberto Piazza, meanwhile, was thrilled to see his men "change their mindset in the fourth set" to stage a comeback. Asked what was the biggest challenge for his team against his for-

mer employers, the Italian said: "The toughest challenge was their tactical serving strategy. They targeted specific zones with their serves, which at times troubled our setter. They also effectively pressured Iran's middle blocker, managing to get a touch on most of our attacks."

Piazza and his men will still have to overcome some formidable tests in the third and final week of action in the preliminaries in Gdańsk, Poland, to secure a first last-eight spot since in three years.

A first game for Iran in Week 3 will come against European powerhouse Poland – second in the table with six wins – on July 16, followed by an all-Asian encounter against China.

Piazza's men will square off against reigning Olympic and VNL champi-

on France on July 19, before facing Bulgaria the following day at the Ergo Arena.

Elsewhere on Sunday, Brazil defeated Poland 3-1 (25-21, 25-21, 21-25, 28-26) in the clash of the titans to finish the second week on top of the table with seven victories.

Third-placed Italy made a quick work of USA in straight sets (25-21, 25-22, 25-18) to move level on a 6-2 record alongside Poland.

Japan is fourth with five wins, thanks to a 3-0 (27-25, 25-15, 25-16) victory over Slovenia on Sunday, with France, which eased past Türkiye in straight sets, in the fifth place.

Ukraine, the surprise package at this year's event, came from behind to beat Bulgaria in four sets in Burgas and stand sixth, followed by Argentina, Germany, Cuba, and Iran.



Iranian players celebrate a point during a 3-2 victory over the Netherlands at the Volleyball Nations League in Belgrade, Serbia, on June 29, 2025.

● FIVB

Injured Yousefi to miss Islamic Solidarity Games



● IWF

Sports Desk

Iranian weightlifter Alireza Yousefi will not recover in time from knee surgery to compete at the Islamic Solidarity Games, Iran coach Ali Jabbari told ISNA on Monday.

The sixth edition of the multi-sport event will kick off on November 7 in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia.

The recovery process had already ruled the Iranian out of October's IWF World Championships in Førde, Norway.

Two-time world junior champion

Yousefi had to undergo treatment on his injured knee right after last December's World Senior Championships in Manama, where the 21-year-old headlined Iran's medal haul with a gold medal and a bronze in the superheavyweight contests.

Yousefi lifted 262kg to walk away with the ultimate prize in men's 109kg clean & jerk event – shattering the Asian record in the process – before settling for the total bronze with 456kg, finishing behind Armenian Varazdat Lalayan (467kg) and fellow-Iranian Ali Davoudi (459kg).

World Cup Asian qualifiers:

Four Iranians shortlisted for Dream XI

Sports Desk

Four Iranian players are among the candidates for a place in the Dream XI of the 2026 World Cup Asian qualifiers.

Goalkeeper Alireza Beiranvand is joined by strike force duo Mahdi Taremi and Sardar Azmoun, as well as midfielder Mohammad-Mahdi Mohebbi in the 41-man shortlist, released by the Asian Football Confederation.

Football fans will have until July 4 to vote for the members of their dream team on the official website of the Asian football governing body.

Beiranvand registered five clean sheets in 10 Group A games, while Taremi and Azmoun had nine goals



Iranian striker Sardar Azmoun (20) is in the AFC shortlist for the World Cup Asian qualifiers Dream XI.

● AFC

between them in the third round of the qualifiers as Iran finished atop the table with 23 points to secure a place in next year's finals in North America.

Mohebbi, meanwhile, made little contribution to Iran's campaign, but still impressed with a goal and an assist in two games.

Luis Enrique eyes historic PSG season as they reach Club World Cup quarters

REUTERS – Paris St Germain manager Luis Enrique said his team were making history after they brushed aside Inter Miami 4-0 in the Club World Cup last 16 on Sunday.

The French side, who have already won their domestic league, the French Cup and the Champions League, are edging closer to completing a perfect season by lifting the Club World Cup.

"This is clearly a historic season for our club, and we intend to continue making history in this competition," former Barcelona coach Luis Enrique told reporters.

The reunion with ex-Barcelona players Lionel Messi and Miami coach Javier Mascherano – both central figures during Luis Enrique's Camp Nou tenure between 2014 and 2017 – added emotional weight to what was otherwise a clinical dismantling of the MLS side.



● AFP

"It was a very special game because I met people who are very important to me, people with whom we shared successes and failures," the 55-year-old Spaniard said. When asked if he would like to coach Messi in Europe again, he said it was a question for the Argentine.

"We have all seen his qualities as a player, and he still has them. It's very difficult to play against this kind of player. It was hard, but I believe that as a team we did a really great job."

PSG's ruthless first-half display effectively settled matters before Miami found their footing after the interval.

"I think that's the first half where we really dominated the game. We didn't concede a single chance, but then in the second half, maybe because of the results, Inter Miami created more chances and got us into trouble," he added.