



Iranian outside-hitter Morteza Sharifi (49) hits a spike during a 3-2 victory over Ukraine at the Volleyball Nations League in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, on June 15, 2025.
● FIVB

Volleyball Nations League:

Iran given injury boost ahead of vital Week 3

Sports Desk

Iran head coach Roberto Piazza has received good news from his medical staff, as outside-hitter Morteza Sharifi will be fit to feature in the third and the final week of the preliminaries at the Volleyball Nations League.

The outside hitter suffered an ankle injury in the closing stages of a 3-1 victory over Argentina last Friday and was ruled out the final two games in Week 2 against Germany and the Netherlands.

"I had a calf strain against Serbia but still managed to play until the end of the game. Then against Argentina the next day, I twisted my ankle and I thought it might be broken as the pain was so intense," Sharifi said of the incident.

Iranian team doctor Ali Haddadi, however, rejected a serious injury setback for Sharifi on Monday, saying: "He no longer feels any pain in his ankle and is continuing with his recovery process. He will return to team training in a few days and I am confident he will be available for the third week."

Sharifi has contributed 67 points – including a team-high 14 against 14 – across eight rounds of preliminary fixtures for Iran at this year's tournament.

Iranian setters Javad Karimi and Arshia Behnejad, as well as Issa Naseri have also been dealing with injury problems throughout the tournament but Haddadi said all three will be fit for the remainder of the campaign.

Iran is 10th in the 18-team table with

a 4-4 record before the third week gets underway in Gdansk, Poland, on July 16. Piazza's men will return to action against European powerhouse Poland – second in the table with six wins – followed by an all-Asian encounter against China. Iran will square off against reigning Olympic and VNL champion France on July 19, before facing Bulgaria the following day at the Ergo Arena.

The top seven of preliminary table will be joined by host China at the VNL Finals – starting with last-eight round in Ningbo on July 30.

Looking to progress to the Finals for the first time since 2022, Iran got off to a slow start in the competition under the new Italian head coach, suffering successive defeats against Brazil (3-0), USA (3-2), and Slovenia (3-2), before salvaging a five-set win against Ukraine in the final Week 1 game in Rio de Janeiro.

The Asian powerhouse, however, delivered much-improved displays in the second week of action, defeating Serbia in four sets in Belgrade, before claiming victories against Argentina and the Netherlands (3-2) either side of a 3-1 loss to Germany.

Iranian Pouria Hosseinkhanzadeh has been the joint-best server in the preliminary round – alongside German opposite Filip John – with 15 aces. The 21-year-old outside-hitter is second in the scoring chart for the country with 96 points, following opposite-spiker Amin Esmaeilnejad, who has chipped in 100 points.

Azmoun to undergo surgery on injured ankle

Sports Desk

Iran and Shabab Al Ahli striker Sardar Azmoun is set to undergo a surgery on his injured ankle in Dubai in the coming days.

Azmoun, 30, has been out of action since a 3-2 victory over Dibba Al Hisn on May 20 in the penultimate round of fixtures in the UAE Pro League and missed Iran's final two games in the World Cup Asian qualifiers against

Qatar and North Korea in June.

The prolific striker is expected to be sidelined for four to six weeks, facing a race against time to be part of the national team at the CAFA Nations Cup – starting August 29 in Uzbekistan and Tajikistan.

The second edition of the CAFA tournament will feature Iran, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, the Kyrgyz Republic, Turkmenistan, Afghanistan, Oman, and Malaysia.

Having joined from Bayer Leverkusen last summer, Azmoun bagged 26 goals and 10 assists in 39 games across all competitions for Shabab Al Ahli in the newly-finished season – including 11 strikes in the league title-winning campaign.

Azmoun also scored eight goals, including four in the third qualification round, in the World Cup Asian qualifiers as Iran finished atop the Group A table and secured a place in next year's finals in North America.



● MOJTABA SALEH/AFC

Inzaghi hails 'extraordinary' Al Hilal after City upset

AFP – Al Hilal's Italian coach Simone Inzaghi hailed his "extraordinary" team after Monday's stunning 4-3, extra-time win over Premier League giants Manchester City at the Club World Cup.

"We knew had to do something extraordinary if we were to beat Manchester City and that is what the boys did tonight, the lads were simply wonderful," said Inzaghi after the shock of the tournament in Orlando.

"We had to be extraordinary because well, Manchester City, we all know that team. So we had to climb Everest without oxygen to win the game and we made it.

"We were great. All the players were exceptional in everything, in the possession phase, non-possession phase," added the former Inter Milan coach

whose previous club were defeated by Fluminense just hours before the kick-off at Camping World Stadium.

"It is only right in this moment, this evening, to enjoy this achievement up against the Manchester City of Guardiola. The heart that they put in tonight....." he said.

Inzaghi had only been in charge of the team for a few days before the opening game where his side drew with Real Madrid and said the credit for the performance belongs with the players. "It is barely three weeks that we are together and you can see the level of application, they really put the effort in. As a coach clearly that is very satisfying.

"The lads delivered that performance, they have reached the quarter-finals," he said.

City won all three of their group stage

games and after a 5-2 win over Juventus in their last game before the knock-out stage they were viewed as one of the favourites for the title.

City boss Pep Guardiola gave credit to Al Hilal but clearly hadn't seen such an outcome on the horizon.

"It is a pity, we have been on an incredible journey together and so good place. The vibe was really good, I cannot thank Manchester City enough and especially the players for training and how they have been playing," he said.

"We were so open. When the crosses arrived, in the first action, they had the ability to pass the ball and attack and they have quick players. We created a lot and had a lot of chances against a team that defend so deep. They punished us on the transitions," the Spaniard added.



Al Hilal players celebrate after their 4-3 victory over Manchester City at the FIFA Club World Cup in Orlando, FL, US, on June 30, 2025.
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