

Volleyball Nations League:

Iran returns to winning ways, revives last-eight ambitions

Sports Desk

Iran bounced back from a setback against Poland to beat China 3-0 (28-26, 25-21, 25-16) in Week 3 of the FIVB Men's Volleyball Nations League in Gdansk on Friday.

Stepping into the game less than 24 hours after an exhausting five-set battle against the European powerhouse, Roberto Piazza's men showed remarkable resilience to secure a fifth win in the preliminaries and stay in contention for a place in the VNL Finals.

The straight-set victory left Iran in the ninth spot of the 18-team table with 16 points with two rounds of fixtures remaining in the preliminary round. The top seven of the table will join host China in the Finals – starting with the quarterfinals in Ningbo on July 30.

Morteza Sharifi produced yet another prolific performance with a game-high 15 points – including three aces – while fellow outside-hitter Amirhossein Efsandiar and star opposite Amin Esmaeilnejad also finished in double figures for Iran, chipping in 12 and 10 points respectively.

China had team captain and opposite Jiang Chuan as the leading scorer with 11 points, one more than middle blocker Li Yongzhen. "This match was very important for

us," Efsandiar said in an on-court interview. "Before the match, our coach told us that we had three finals to play because we want to qualify for the Finals. We won the first one, now there are two more to come and we'll use the day off tomorrow to prepare for them."

Next for Efsandiar and his teammates is a formidable test in reigning Olympic and VNL champion France today, before Iran concludes the preliminary campaign against Bulgaria at Gdansk's Ergo Arena on Sunday.

"Today we should celebrate, but we must also focus and prepare for our next match against France – which will be extremely tough. As I've said before, it will be a second final for Iran," Piazza said of today's showdown.

Pleased to have a full day of recovery for his players, the Italian coach said: "Tomorrow we'll need to recover some players – Pourya [Hosseinhanzadeh] wasn't fully fit, so he didn't play today and needs more rest. Other guys like Morteza, who really pushed themselves to the limit, also need recovery time. I don't want Morteza to train tomorrow. We probably won't have an intense session, but we still need to practice. That's just how it works – if you want to win, you've got to put in the work."



Iranian middle-blocker Eisa Nasseri (66) hits a spike during a straight-set victory over China at the FIVB Men's Volleyball Nations League in Gdansk, Poland, on July 17, 2025.



AFC Women's Asia Cup qualifiers:

Iran to face do-or-die battle against Jordan

Sports Desk

Iranian girls will step onto the pitch against Jordan today in their AFC Women's Asia Cup qualification campaign in Amman, knowing anything but a victory over the host will end their bid for a place in next March's finals in Australia.

Iran's hopes of a second successive appearance at the continental showpiece suffered a major blow after a shock 3-1 loss to Lebanon, which had been without a point prior to the game, on Wednesday.

Lebanese striker Christy Maalouf, who plays for French club VGA Saint-Maur, scored a hat-trick, with Fatemeh Shaban finding the net for Iran, as Lebanon inflicted a first defeat in the qualifiers on Marziyeh Jafari's side.

The setback was followed by Jordan's

3-0 win against Bhutan later in the day as the host moved atop the Group A table with a perfect nine points – three clear of second-placed Iran – ahead of today's showdown at the King Abdullah II Stadium.

Iran head coach conceded that her team paid a heavy price for the mistakes against Lebanon but vowed that Iran will bounce back in the decisive final game in Amman.

"This defeat is entirely my responsibility. My players gave everything they had and fought to win, but this is football. Individual mistakes can change the course of a game," said Jafari after Wednesday's game.

"The truth is we didn't play well. We made too many mistakes in both defense and attack. After conceding the second goal, the players' focus wavered, and we couldn't capitalize on

our chances. In football, if you don't score, you're bound to lose.

"This game is a wake-up call. We must play with greater seriousness and concentration against Jordan. Our focus now is on the players' mental and physical recovery because we have a crucial match on Saturday. There's only one way to reach the Asian Cup, and that's by beating Jordan. Nothing is over. We will fight with everything we have for this victory."

Having enjoyed comfortable wins against Singapore (4-0) and Bhutan (7-1), Iranian girls will face their toughest test yet in Amman against an in-form Jordan, which has scored 12 goals in three games, while conceding none. Maysa Jbarah has found the net in every game and Iran will have to contain the 35-year-old forward if it is to secure all points.

Marathon world record holder Chepngetich suspended for doping

BBC – Ruth Chepngetich, the women's marathon world record holder, has been provisionally suspended by the Athletics Integrity Unit (AIU) after testing positive for a banned substance. The diuretic hydrochlorothiazide (HCTZ) was detected in a sample collected from Kenyan Chepngetich on 14 March, the AIU said in a statement. Chepngetich, 30, broke the world record to win the Chicago Marathon in October 2024, clocking a time of two hours, nine minutes and 56 seconds. HCTZ is used clinically to treat fluid retention and hypertension and is prohibited at all times under the World Anti Doping Agency (WADA) code.

Chepngetich's time in Chicago sur-

passed Ethiopian Tigst Assefa's previous record set at the 2023 Berlin Marathon by nearly two minutes. Used commonly as a masking agent, HCTZ has a minimum reporting level of 20 nanograms per millilitre (ng/mL) in urine. Chepngetich's sample showed 3,800 ng/mL.

Chepngetich was not provisionally suspended by the AIU at the time of notification on 16 April. However, on 19 April, she opted for a voluntary provisional suspension while the AIU's investigation was ongoing.

"In the intervening months, the AIU continued its investigation and today issued a notice of charge and imposed its own provisional suspension," AIU head Brett Clothier said.

Persepolis signs Montenegrin midfielder Bakic

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Persepolis signed Montenegrin international midfielder Marko Bakic on a one-year contract – with the option of a 12-month extension – on Thursday, the Persian Gulf Pro League club announced.

Bakic, 31, joins the Tehran Reds as a free agent from OFI Crete, after bagging nine goals and six assists in 80 appearances during two-and-a-half season at the Greek top-flight side.

Capable of playing as both a deep-lying midfielder and a number eight, the former Fiorentina player is the seventh summer signing for Persepolis – and first under new head coach

Vahid Hashemian, who replaced Turkish Isamil Kartal earlier in July – ahead of the new season.

Persepolis finished third in the Iranian league last season – the Reds' lowest finish in a decade – and crashed out of the domestic cup last-16, as well as the league phase of the AFC Champions League Elite, before the Turkish head coach parted ways with the club in the aftermath of the 12-day war between Iran and Israel last month.

Having made his international debut in August 2012, Bakic has 35 caps under his belt, with his latest appearance in the Montenegrin shirt coming in a friendly 2-2 against Armenia in June.

