

Volleyball Nations League:

Iran out in preliminaries
but fuels optimism for future

Sports Desk

Iran's bid for a coveted spot in the Volleyball Nations League Finals ended in vain, but the future remains bright for Italian head coach Roberto Piazza and his team.

On Sunday, star opposite Amin Esmailnejad chipped in a game-high 19 points as Iran swept Bulgaria in straight sets (25-17, 25-17, 25-16) in Gdansk to finish the preliminary round in the eighth place of the 18-team table with six wins in 12 outings. Outside-hitter Amirhossein Esfandiari also had an excellent all-around performance in the Iranian outfit, delivering 14 points, with eight kills, four blocks and two aces.

The emphatic victory – coupled with defeats for the United States and Ukraine against Japan and Canada, respectively – briefly gave Iran a last-gasp hope for a place in the Finals, lifting Team Melli by seven spots in the table. However, Slovenia rallied from behind to edge out Serbia in a five-set thriller in Ljubljana later in the day and leapfrog Iran in the standings.

In fact, an eighth-place finish would have been enough for Iran to progress, had China – second from bottom in the preliminary table – not automati-



Iranian opposite Amin Esmailnejad (10) goes up for a spike during a straight-set victory over Bulgaria at the Volleyball Nations League in Gdansk, Poland, on July 20, 2025.

● FIVB

cally qualified as the host of the VNL Finals, which start on July

30 in Ningbo.

"It doesn't matter if we're in or

not, we always have to play our best volleyball," Piazza said after

Sunday's victory. "We wanted to show that we can play at our

level regardless of the pressure. I think we served very well and showed great discipline with our blocking."

"It was amazing today because we played, I think, our best game in the tournament.

"Bulgaria won against Poland yesterday, so maybe they thought it would be easy against Iran, but that is a wrong mentality. I am really happy because our guys played in a way that we need to for a place in the top level of volleyball," added the Italian, who was appointed to Iranian job in February.

Despite failing to secure a first VNL last-eight spot since 2022, Piazza's team has definitely done enough to win over Iranian fans again – following a dire run of results over the past couple of years that saw Team Melli finish in the bottom three of the VNL table on two occasions and miss out on a berth for Paris Olympics last summer.

Next for Iran and Piazza, who set his sights on a strong Olympic campaign three years from now upon taking the Iranian role, is September's FIVB World Championship in the Philippines, where the Asian powerhouse has been drawn into the same group as the host nation, Egypt, and Tunisia.

French midfielder Nzonzi leaves
Sepahan for 'safety reasons'

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Former France international Steven Nzonzi walked out on his contract with Sepahan on Sunday, bringing an end to weeks of speculation about his future at the Persian Gulf Pro League club.

A 2018 World Cup winner, the 36-year-old Frenchman – who had not reported for Sepahan's preseason earlier this month – is the second foreign employee to leave the club following the 12-day war between Iran and Israel, which was triggered by Israel's aerial aggression on Iranian territory on June 13.

French head coach Patrice Carteron stepped from his role days before a ceasefire went into effect on July 24,

with Sepahan announcing club legend Moharram Navidkia as his successor.

"Thank you to the great people of Isfahan and this beautiful city for the way you welcomed me and family," Nzonzi wrote on Instagram on Sunday, adding: "Me and my family decided that it was best for us not to come back especially for safety reason, I tried to find the strength but I couldn't."

"I had a great season, I wish all of you nothing but the best for the upcoming season."

Having joined as a free agent from Turkish club Konyaspor on a two-year deal last summer, Nzonzi made 34 appearances for Sepahan across all competitions, bagging three goals and an assist, as the Is-

fahan-based outfit finished runner-up to Tractor in the Iranian top-flight table, while crashing out of the Hazfi Cup quarterfinals and the group stage of the AFC Champions League Two.

Sepahan's new season will begin with a visit to Al Duhail of Qatar on Aug. 12, where a place in West's league phase of the AFC Champions League Elite will be on the line at the Khalifa International Stadium. Sepahan has made six signings during the summer transfer window – including former Iran skipper Ehsan Hajsafi, goalkeeper Mohammadreza Akhbari, and ex-Esteghlal midfielder Arash Rezavand – while Omid Nourafkan is back in the squad following a loan spell at Malavan.

Arsenal manager Arteta pleased with
early transfer business

REUTERS – Mikel Arteta said he was happy that Arsenal had signed a number of top-quality players in the early stages of the transfer window, and that they had given the Premier League club impetus to raise their level in the coming season.

Runners-up for the last three seasons, Arsenal have signed winger Noni Madueke and goalkeeper Kepa Arrizabalaga from Chelsea, as well as midfielders Christian Norgaard from Brentford and Martin Zubimendi from Real Sociedad.

"They bring new excitement, a new energy as well," Arteta told reporters in Singapore on Monday ahead of a pre-season match against Serie A side AC Milan.

"We signed very important players as well. Again, everybody feels like their height has to go to a different level, and that's what we're seeking," he added.

"Ideally, you want it (transfers) done on day one in pre-season. We've done very, very well so far. I'm very pleased with the way the club is supporting the necessities and improvements that we required in the team." Swedish striker Viktor Gyokeres, who scored 54 goals in 52 games for Sporting last season, is also expected to move to the Emirates Stadium.

"There's still a long time in the window, and we are seeking. In terms of numbers, we are short, and we have to improve the depth and the quality of the squad," Arteta added.

"We are constantly looking in the market, but until that happens, I can focus on the players that we actually have, work with them, and I'm very pleased with what I've seen so far in the first 10-15 days." Arteta briefly spoke about former player Thomas Partey, who was charged with rape and sexual assault this month, after leaving the club at the end of last season. "I think the club was very clear in its statement. There are a lot of legal matters that are very complicated so I cannot comment on any of that," Arteta said. Asked if he felt like the club had followed the right processes in dealing with the issue, he replied: "100%, yes."

Arsenal have let Premier League

titles slip through their grasp in the last couple of years but this season will be different, defender Gabriel Magalhaes said.

"I think the players that came will help us out a lot. The club is doing what is best for the players and the manager," Gabriel told the BBC in an interview published on Sunday.

"We want to have the best players. To be in the dispute for titles, you have to have the best players ... We have let a couple of titles slip through our fingers recently. We almost won but I think this year, things will be different."

Arsenal begin their 2025-26 Premier League campaign on August 17 with a trip to Manchester United.



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