

Sports Desk

Ricardo Sa Pinto has been dismissed as the head coach of Persian Gulf Pro League side Esteghlal, the Tehran-based club confirmed late on Friday.

The decision follows the team's elimination from the AFC Champions League Two in the round of 16 on Tuesday. Esteghlal conceded two late goals to lose 3-2 against Jordan's Al Hussein in Amman, crashing out 4-2 on aggregate in Asia's second-tier club competition. "Esteghlal wishes to express its gratitude to Mr. Ricardo Sa Pinto, the former head coach of the senior football team, for his efforts, and hereby announces that the collaboration has come to an end," a club statement read.

"At the outset of his tenure, the club provided its full backing by meeting his technical and operational requests and assembling the squad in line with the head coach's vision.

"However, the results achieved throughout the season did not align with Esteghlal's stature. The team's elimination from the Asian competition – one of the season's primary objectives – led to dissat-

Sa Pinto sacked as Esteghlal head coach

isfaction among supporters and the club management. With no clear prospect for improvement evident in the remainder of the domestic campaign," the statement added, also citing "certain unconventional communication

challenges on the part of the coaching staff" as a contributing factor to his dismissal. "Esteghlal Club wishes Mr. Sa Pinto to success in his future endeavors and reaffirms its commitment to advancing the team with full

force and determination, striving to meet the aspirations of its loyal supporters. The process of appointing a new head coach will be announced in due course." Sa Pinto began his second spell in charge ahead of the current sea-

son, having previously guided the Blues to a third-place league finish and the Hazfi Cup final in the 2022/23 season, where they lost to archrival Persepolis. Esteghlal has recorded 13 wins and eight defeats in 31 matches

across all competitions this season and currently sits third in the Persian Gulf Pro League with 35 points from 20 games – one point behind leader Golgozar Sirjan, which has played two matches more, and level on points with second-placed Tractor.

Esteghlal remains in contention for a second successive Hazfi Cup title and is set to meet Khaybar Khorramabad in the quarterfinals. The lowest point of Esteghlal's inconsistent run under Sa Pinto came in the Group A opener of the Champions League Two last September, when the Blues suffered a humiliating 7-1 defeat to the UAE's Al Wasl in Dubai.

The Capital Blues travel to face bottom-placed Mes Rafsanjan today, a match that will also mark a reunion with former coach Mojtaba Jabbari, who led the club to domestic cup success last season. Several names have already emerged in Iranian media as potential successors to the Portuguese. Former player Sohrab Bakhtiarizadeh, who impressed during two short spells as caretaker coach last season, is reportedly the frontrunner to take charge for the remainder of the campaign.

● AHMAD MOEINI JAM/IRNA

Ebadipour 'not expecting' call-up from Iran coach Piazza

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Iranian outside hitter Milad Ebadipour says he is "not expecting" a call-up from national team head coach Roberto Piazza ahead of a busy 2026 international calendar.

The 32-year-old, a two-time Asian Games gold medalist and double Asian champion with Team Melli, last represented Iran under then-caretaker coach Peyman Akbari during the preliminary round of the 2024 Volleyball Nations League (VNL), where Iran finished second from bottom in the 16-team standings and failed to reach the Finals.

Speaking to Varzesh3, Ebadipour – who plays for KS Norwid Czestochowa in Poland's PlusLiga – said he recently met Piazza during the Italian coach's visit to Poland. However, he stressed that their brief conversation "had nothing to do with a possible return to the Iranian team" and instead focused on changes Piazza is considering within his national team coaching staff.

"I don't really expect Piazza to call me up," said Ebadipour, who made his senior international



● FIVB

debut in 2014.

"I think Piazza wants to continue with the same squad from 2025. The issue of confidence comes into play – he wouldn't want it to be perceived that he doesn't trust his current team, nor would he want to appear to be turning back to more experienced players. That's why I believe he will stick with the same group from last year."

Despite his doubts over a recall, Ebadipour reaffirmed his commitment to the national side. "I have always been, and will always be, a soldier of the

national team. Whenever I am needed, I will be at the service of the team," he said.

Piazza, who was appointed to the role in January last year, guided Iran to an eighth-place finish in the VNL preliminary round with six wins from 12 matches. However, the team narrowly missed out on the Finals after China advanced to the quarterfinals as host nation despite finishing second from bottom.

Momentum from several encouraging VNL performances carried into September's World

Championship in the Philippines, where Iran reached the quarterfinals before falling 3-1 to surprise package Czechia.

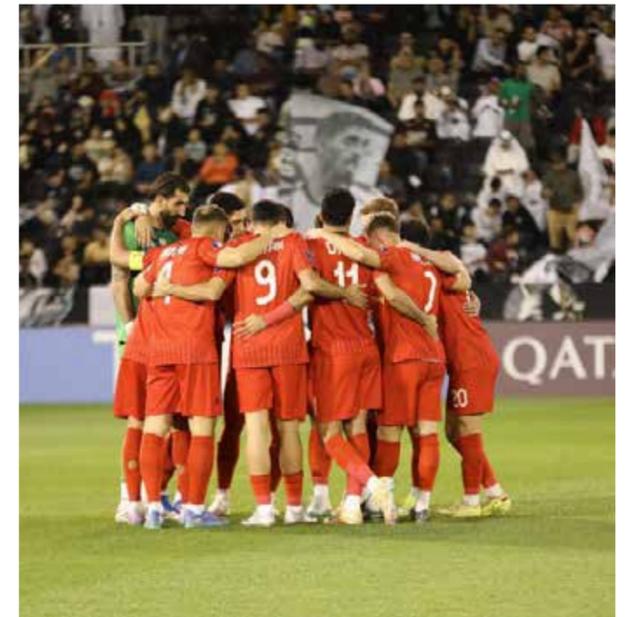
Iran will look to build on a promising first year under Piazza by securing its first VNL quarterfinal berth in four years when it opens its campaign against South American powerhouse Brazil on June 10.

A congested international schedule will also see Iran compete at the Asian Men's Volleyball Championship, which begins on September 4 in Fukuoka, Japan. Iran will be targeting a fifth title in eight editions.

Beyond continental glory, additional incentive awaits in Fukuoka: The tournament winner will secure an Olympic quota place for the men's volleyball competition at the 2028 Los Angeles Games – added motivation after Iran's defeat to Japan in the 2023 final on home soil. Another potential showdown between Iran and Japan could follow at the Aichi-Nagoya 2026 Asian Games, which begin on September 19, where Piazza's side will be chasing a fourth consecutive men's gold medal.

AFC Champions League Elite:

Tractor to host Shabab Al Ahli in neutral venue



● AFC

Sports Desk

Persian Gulf Pro League champion Tractor will have to stage its AFC Champions League Elite last-16 home leg against the UAE's Shabab Al Ahli at a neutral venue, the Asian Football Confederation (AFC) has confirmed.

The two sides will meet at Dubai's Rashid Stadium on March 2, before facing off in the return leg seven days later. The venue for the second leg has yet to be finalized by the Iranian club in coordination with the continental governing body.

The knockout tie will mark a repeat of the teams' opening league-phase encounter, which ended in a 1-1 draw in Dubai last October. Iranian clubs Tractor, Sepahan and Esteghlal have been barred from playing their matches on home soil in the AFC's two club competitions following last month's protests in the country, as well as escalating regional tensions between Iran and the United States in recent weeks.

Tractor suffered a 2-0 defeat to Al Sadd in Doha on February 10 in a fixture designated as its Matchday 7 home game. However, the Tabriz-based side closed out the league phase with a 2-0 win over Al Gharafa in Al Rayyan last Tuesday to secure third place in the 12-team West Zone standings with 17 points – five behind leader Al Hilal and level on points with second-placed Al Ahli Saudi, trailing only on goal difference.

Shabab Al Ahli, meanwhile, fell to a 4-3 defeat against Al Ahli in Jeddah on Monday but still advanced to the knockout stage as the sixth-placed side with 11 points.

Domestically, Tractor sits second in the Persian Gulf Pro League with 35 points – one behind leader Golgozar, which has played two games more. The club resumes league action with a trip to Malavan FC today.

Newly appointed head coach Mohammad Rabiei is set to make his debut on the Tractor bench after replacing Croatian Dragan Skocic, who parted ways with the club on the eve of the Al Gharafa fixture.

Iranian Women's Basketball Super League:

Sahar Academy, Esteghlal seize early advantage in semifinals

Sports Desk

Sahar Academy and Esteghlal moved a step closer to the final of the Iranian Women's Basketball Super League after winning their opening semifinal games on Friday.

American center Alexis Poole recorded a double-double of 16 points and 10 rebounds, along with four steals, for an efficiency rating of 22 as Sahar secured a 68-58 victory over Naft Abadan in the first game

of the best-of-three series.

Esteghlal, meanwhile, cruised past Bahman Group with a commanding 72-50 win. Sabria Dean led the charge with 20 points, four rebounds and four assists, finishing with a game-high efficiency rating of 23.

The second round of the semifinals is scheduled for today, with Naft Abadan and Bahman aiming to level their respective series and force a decisive third game.



● IRIBF