

## Volleyball Nations League:

## Iran beats Cuba to snap losing streak

## Sports Desk

Iran defeated Cuba 3-1 (25-22, 25-21, 20-25, 30-28) in Orléans, France, on Sunday to end a four-match losing streak in the preliminary round of the FIVB Men's Volleyball Nations League.

Only a second victory in eight outings lifted Iran to 14th place in the 18-team standings with nine points. Still without a win at this year's tournament, Cuba remained bottom of the table with two points and faces relegation at the end of the preliminary phase's second week.

"We desperately needed this victory. I think we delivered some solid performances over the past two weeks, except in the match against Belgium, when we made too many mistakes," said Ali Hajipour, Iran's leading scorer with 20 points.

"Unfortunately, bad luck and our lack of experience prevented us from capitalizing on our momentum at times," the Iranian opposite added.

Outside hitter Ali Haqqarast added 15 points, including three aces, for Iran, while Cuban outside hitter Marlon Yant was the match's top scorer with 23 points. Jose Israel Masso Alvarez (17), Robertlandy Simon (11) and Miguel Angel Lopez (11) also



Iranian opposite Ali Hajipour hits a spike during a 3-1 victory over Cuba in the Volleyball Nations League preliminary round in Orléans, France, on June 28, 2026.  
● PAYAM SANI/volleyball.ir

reached double figures for Cuba at CO'Met Arena.

"There is no easy game in the VNL," Iran head coach Roberto Piazza said after the match, adding: "Even when we lost in straight sets to the USA, it wasn't an easy match for them. It's al-

ways difficult to play in this tournament because you're facing the strongest teams in the world." The Italian praised his young team's performance in the first two sets before a serious leg injury to Cuban middle blocker Javier Octavio Concepcion proved to be

a turning point in the contest. "We were really good until the end of the second set, when Concepcion suffered a terrible injury. Then they found another level of energy, while we lost our focus because the players were thinking about their middle blocker rather

than the game," the Italian said.

Iran will resume its campaign in Week 3 in Belgrade, beginning with a daunting match against surprise package Ukraine – fifth in the standings with a 5-3 record – on July 15. Piazza's men will then face Germany and Slo-

venia before wrapping up the preliminary phase against Turkey on July 19.

Piazza said he was pleased with the progress his team – the second youngest among the tournament's 18 teams – has made ahead of the third week, while acknowledging it remains far from the finished article.

"The final week is going to be a long one and we have to improve. The players are starting to play better and better, but that's not enough for me. Now it's time to analyze the situation with the team before we start thinking about the final week," Piazza said. The top seven teams in the preliminary standings will be joined by hosts China (17th) in the VNL Finals, which begin with the quarterfinals at Ningbo's Beilun Gymnasium on July 29.

Japan has already secured a place in the last eight after maintaining its perfect record atop the standings. The United States, Poland, Slovenia, Ukraine, Italy and Turkey currently occupy the remaining qualifying spots.

## Nemati edges Abazari to secure kumite berth for Asian Games



● ISNA

## Sports Desk

Iranian karateka Mahmoud Nemati secured the +84kg berth in the men's national kumite roster for September's Aichi-Nagoya Asian Games thanks to a victory over Saleh Abazari in the national team trials on Sunday. Nemati emerged victorious 3-2 in a thrilling best-of-five series against the former world champion, who came from behind to level the contest with back-to-back wins before suffering a 7-3 loss in the decider.

Nemati will be a clear favorite to reach the top step of the podium at the multi-sport event, having claimed gold at the Asian Championships in Bali, Indonesia, last week courtesy of a 4-0 victory over Saudi defending champion Sanad Sufyani in the final.

Joining Nemati in the Iranian Asian Games squad will be his brother, Morteza Nema-

ti, who will compete in the -75kg class.

Morteza Nemati will also head to September's showpiece as the reigning Asian champion after defeating Nurkanat Azhikanov 3-2 in the final in Bali to make amends for last year's title-match defeat to the Kazakhstani karateka.

Former world bronze medalist Ali-Asghar Asiabari completes the Iranian men's kumite trio with a berth in the -84kg class.

Asiabari had to settle for a bronze medal at the Asian Championships and was also part of the Iranian team – alongside Morteza Nemati – that fell to Jordan in the final of the team kumite event. Atousa Golshadnejad, meanwhile, will be the Iranian to watch in the women's kumite competition.

Golshadnejad enjoyed a remarkable international season in 2025, winning the second Asian title of her ca-

reer before claiming gold at the Islamic Solidarity Games and making history as the first Iranian female karateka to capture a kumite world title.

Golshadnejad, however, was unfortunate to miss out on defending her -61kg title in Bali following an injury setback in the national team trials.

Fatemeh-Zahra Saeidabadi will also fancy her chances of a podium finish at the Asian Games after featuring in the Iranian quartet that defeated Japan in the final to win the country's first Asian women's team kumite gold since 2019.

In the women's kata event, the Iranian trio of Fatemeh Sadeqi, Sepideh Amini, and Zeinab Hosseini will compete on the back of the team's Asian bronze medal, while Sadeqi, who also won individual bronze in Bali, will be part of the women's individual draw.

## Persepolis in advanced talks with ex-Tractor coach Skocic: Report

## Sports Desk

Persian Gulf Pro League club Persepolis is closing in on a deal to appoint Croatian coach Dragan Skocic as its new head coach ahead of the upcoming top-flight season, according to reports in the Iranian media. Skocic, who led Iran to qualification for the 2022 World Cup but was replaced by Portuguese coach Carlos Queiroz for the finals in Qatar, has been without a job since parting ways with Tractor SC in mid-February.

The 57-year-old Croatian etched his name into Tractor history after steering the northwestern Iranian club to its maiden league title in the 2024-25 campaign, before lifting the Iranian Super Cup with a 2-1 victory over Esteghlal ahead of last season. Tractor was second in a tightly contested league table with 35 points from 20 matches, one point behind Golgozar with a game in hand, when

Skocic walked away from his job. The Tabriz-based side also impressed in the league stage of the AFC Champions League Elite under the Croatian, securing a place in the round of 16 with two matches to spare. However, local media reported that tensions between Skocic and several senior players following a 2-0 defeat to Al Sadd in an ACL Elite dead rubber may have contributed to his decision to leave. Should the deal go through in the coming days, Skocic will replace Brazilian coach Osmar Loss Vieira on the Persepolis bench. The Brazilian, who led Persepolis to the domestic league title in the 2023-24 season, endured a poor run of results after returning to the club for a second spell last November, managing just

two wins in seven matches while suffering five defeats before the Iranian league was called off due to the country's war with the United States and Israel in February. Persepolis, which was sixth in the table when the league was suspended, hit a new low under Osmar on Friday, falling 2-1 to Chadormalou after extra time in a domestic playoff for a place in next season's AFC Champions League Two.



## IHF Men's Beach Handball World Championships:

## Iran finishes ninth after shootout win over France

## Sports Desk

Iran secured a consolation ninth-place finish at the IHF Men's Beach Handball World Championships after defeating France in a shootout in the classification playoff in Zagreb on Sunday. Head coach Mahdi Qashqaeirad's side won the first period 24-21 before the European team bounced back to claim the second 23-15 and force the contest into a shootout, which Iran won 7-6. Iran's Ali Heidarian scored a game-

high 15 points, while teammates Ali Pirzadeh (13) and Amin Kazemi (10) also reached double figures. Horace Quintin led the scoring for tournament debutant France with 12 points, while Marius Inocencio and Paco Nichelatti added nine and eight, respectively. The result marked Iran's fifth victory in nine matches and concluded the country's fourth appearance at the global showpiece since making its debut in 2008. Iran's best finish remains eighth place, achieved in the 2022 edition.

Entering the tournament on the back of last year's silver-medal finish at the Asian Championships, Iran made a losing start in the preliminary round, suffering back-to-back 2-1 defeats to Spain and 2024 bronze medalist Portugal.

More daunting tests awaited Iran in the main round, as the Asian side lost 2-0 to Denmark, runner-up in each of the previous two editions, before falling 22-20, 23-22 to 2010 finalist Hungary later on Thursday. A 2-0 victory over Tunisia saw Iran finish fifth in Main Round Group I before the team defeated Puerto Rico and Tunisia again – both by 2-1 scorelines – to book its place in Sunday's playoff against France. Germany defeated Brazil 2-0 in the final later on Sunday to win the title, while Argentina beat two-time defending champion Croatia in a shootout to claim the bronze medal.