

# All-Iranian coaching cast signals new era for Persian Gulf Pro League

**Sports Desk**

When Mahdi Tartar was appointed Persepolis head coach last week, replacing Brazilian Osmar Loss Vieira, it marked a rare milestone in the history of the Persian Gulf Pro League. For only the second time in the competition's 26-season history, every top-flight club will begin the campaign with an Iranian in the dugout.

With the FIFA World Cup set to conclude in just over a week, clubs across Iran are stepping up preparations for the expanded 18-team 2026-27 season despite persistent financial and logistical challenges.

The coaching landscape has been reshaped by developments over the past year, most notably the regional military conflict involving Iran and a U.S.-Israeli coalition. Coupled with the country's economic difficulties, those factors have led to a sharp decline in the number of foreign coaches willing or able to work in Iranian football.

As a result, all 18 clubs will start the new season under Iranian head coaches.

The only previous instance came in the pandemic-hit 2020-21 campaign. The preceding season had begun with seven foreign managers across the league's 16 clubs, but COVID-19, travel restrictions and mounting financial problems triggered a mass exodus. Some, including Zob Ahan's Montenegrin coach Miodrag Radulović, never returned after leaving Iran, while others – such as Italian Andrea Stramaccioni at Esteghlal and Argentine Gabriel Calderón at Persepolis – had already departed amid financial disputes with their clubs.

The 2025-26 season initially appeared to buck that trend. Patrice Carteron and Ismail Kartal declined to return to Sepahan and Persepolis respectively, paving the way for Moharram Navidkia and Vahid Hashemian, but Portuguese coach Ricardo Sá Pinto took over at Esteghlal and Croatian Dragan Skočić



L-R: Sepahan's Moharram Navidkia, Esteghlal's Sohrab Bakhtiarzadeh, Persepolis's Mahdi Tartar, and Tractor's Mohammad Rabiei will be among the Iranian head coaches at the upcoming Persian Gulf Pro League season. **FOOTBALL360**

continued with Tractor. Later in the campaign, Osmar replaced Hashemian at Persepolis, en-

surging foreign coaches still had a presence on the touchline. That, however, has now

changed. The absence of foreign managers presents what many view as

a significant opportunity for Iranian coaches to establish themselves at the highest domestic level. At the same time, financial constraints and security concerns have discouraged many overseas professionals from pursuing opportunities in Iran, reducing foreign involvement in the league to its lowest level in years.

The domestic coaching contingent is also relatively inexperienced at the elite level. Among the 18 head coaches, only Mes Rafsanjan's Mojtaba Jabbari has won a major trophy as a manager, lifting the 2024-25 Hazfi Cup while serving as Esteghlal's interim coach. Even that distinction could disappear if Jabbari departs Mes Rafsanjan or if the club fails to survive the relegation playoff.

Whether the new season, which kicks off on August 7, heralds the emergence of a new generation of successful Iranian coaches or exposes the drawbacks of the league's lack of international expertise remains to be seen.

## Sitting Volleyball World Championships:

# Iran men survive early scare to beat Poland in opener



GETTY IMAGES

**Sports Desk**

Iran's men's and women's teams got off to winning starts at the Sitting Volleyball World Championships in Hangzhou, China, defeating Poland and Rwanda, respectively, on Friday.

Chasing a record-extending ninth title in the tournament's 14th edition, the Iranian men were stunned in the opening set by Poland, slipping to a 25-23 defeat before bouncing back in emphatic fashion to take the next three sets 25-13, 25-10 and 25-15.

Hossein Golestani led the scor-

ing for Iran with 23 points, including eight aces, while Davoud Alipourian and Meisam Alipour also reached double figures with 12 and 10 points, respectively.

Tomasz Labocha was Poland's leading scorer with 11 points, followed by Marcin Polak with 10.

The victory lifted Iran to second place in Pool D behind familiar rival Bosnia and Herzegovina, which cruised past Japan in straight sets (25-14, 25-16, 25-12).

Iran and Bosnia will meet later today in what is expected to decide top spot in the group. The clash will be a repeat of the previous two World Championship

finals as well as the gold-medal match at the 2024 Paralympic Games, all of which were won by Iran.

Earlier in the day, the Iranian women swept Rwanda 25-11, 25-11, 25-11 in Pool A, which also features two-time champion China and Kenya.

Zahra Nejati spearheaded Iran's victory with a match-high 19 points, while Farzaneh Heidari added 12.

The Iranian women will return to action later today against Kenya before concluding the pool stage against host China on Sunday.

Iran's women's team is making

its fifth appearance at the World Championships after qualifying with a runner-up finish behind China at the 2025 Asia-Oceania Championships, also held in Hangzhou.

Back-to-back eighth-place finishes in 2000 and 2002 remain Iran's best results at the tournament. The team finished ninth in the 2022 edition.

The top two teams from each of the four groups in both the men's and women's competitions will advance to the quarterfinals, while the two champions will secure qualification for the Los Angeles 2028 Paralympic Games.

## World Para Taekwondo Open Challenge:

# Iranians finish with five medals in Chuncheon

**Sports Desk**

Iran claimed five medals, including one gold, across the men's and women's competitions at the Chuncheon 2026 World Para Taekwondo Open Challenge in South Korea.

Two-time Asian silver medalist Amirmohammad Haqiqatshenas led Iran's medal haul, claiming gold in the men's K44 -70kg division after Uzbekistan's Kudratulla Sunnatov withdrew from the final.

Meanwhile, 2024 Paralympic silver medalist Alireza Bakht had to settle for silver in the men's K44 -80kg category after losing to South Korea's Jeong Hun Joo, a two-time Paralympic bronze medalist, in the final.

Iran's third men's medal came in the +80kg division, where Hamed Haqshenas claimed bronze after falling to an Uzbek opponent in the semifinals.

Abolfazl Imani, Mohammadtaha Hassanpour, Mahdi Pour-Rahnama, and Saeid Sadeqian were the other members of the Iranian men's squad, all missing out on podium finishes in their respective weight classes.



Iran's Alireza Bakht (L) is seen in action against South Korea's Jeong Hun Joo in the men's K44 -80kg final at the World Para Taekwondo Open Challenge event in Chuncheon, South Korea, on July 9, 2026. **WORLD TAEKWONDO**

Iran added two more medals in the women's competition, with Maryam Abdollahpour and Marziyeh Nasrollahi each taking bronze.

The event brought together 165 athletes from 36 countries, as well as the Refugee Team and World Taekwondo (Costa Rica), and featured 21 Paralympic medalists from the

Tokyo 2020 and Paris 2024 Games over two days of competition.

Taekwondo action in Chuncheon will continue with the one-day Demonstration and Breaking Championships on Monday, followed by the World Cup Team Championships, which get underway the following day.

## AVC Gala Awards:

# Iranian duo wins Fans' Choice prize in men's beach volleyball

**Sports Desk**

The Iranian duo of Abbas Pourasgari and Alireza Aqajani has won the Fans' Choice Men's Beach Volleyball Players award ahead of the inaugural AVC Gala Awards.

The Asian Volleyball Confederation (AVC) announced the winners on Thursday following a month-long public vote that attracted nearly 400,000 votes from fans across the continent. As the only categories determined entirely by public voting, the Fans' Choice Awards gave supporters the opportunity to recognize the athletes who inspired them most throughout the 2025 season.

The Philippines' Cherry Ann Rondina and Bernadeth Pons were voted the Fans' Choice winners in the women's beach volleyball category. In the indoor categories, China's Zhu Ting was named Fans' Choice Women's Volleyball Player, while the Philippines' Bryan Bagunas claimed the men's honor.

AVC President Ramon Suzara welcomed the overwhelming response from fans and highlighted



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the importance of their participation in making the inaugural AVC Gala a resounding success.

"The Fans' Choice Awards embody the spirit of the AVC Gala by placing our fans at the heart of the celebration. The almost 400,000 votes cast through AVCGala.com demonstrate the incredible passion that exists for volleyball across Asia and the special bond between our athletes and their supporters. "Congratulations to Zhu Ting, Bry-

an Bagunas, Cherry Ann Rondina, Bernadeth Pons, Abbas Pourasgari, and Alireza Aqajani on receiving this special recognition from the fans. We look forward to honoring them alongside all of our AVC Gala awardees during the 1st AVC Gala Awards Night in Bangkok this August as we celebrate Asian volleyball excellence together." All winners will be formally honored at the 1st AVC Gala Awards Night, which will be held in Bangkok on August 8.