

Sports Desk

Iran enters the third and final week of the preliminary round knowing its FIVB Volleyball Nations League fate will be decided over four matches that could either propel Roberto Piazza's side into the VNL Finals or leave it battling to avoid relegation.

With no team having yet secured a place in the knockout stage and the relegation picture still unresolved, the final week of the preliminary round promises high drama across the competition.

After eight matches, Iran sits 14th in the 18-team standings with two victories and six defeats. Piazza's men defeated Argentina in straight sets in Week 1 in Brasilia, before adding a second win (3-1) over Cuba in Week 2 in the French city of Orleans, keeping their hopes alive despite remaining in the bottom half of the table. At the opposite end of the standings, Japan leads the field with a perfect run, followed by the United States, Poland and Slovenia on six victories each. Ukraine, Italy, Turkey, Bulgaria and Brazil have all won five matches, highlighting the fierce battle for the Finals.

Iran is joined near the foot of the table by Argentina, Canada, China and Cuba, with only a handful of wins separating several teams. That congestion means Week 3 will determine not only the teams qualifying to the last eight but also the two



Volleyball Nations League: Finals dream, relegation fears collide as Iran faces decisive Week 3

● PAYAM SANI/volleyball.ir

sides that will be relegated.

China, however, is guaranteed a place in the Finals as host nation regardless of its league position, effectively leaving only seven qualification spots available through the standings.

For Iran, the final week – start-

ing today in Belgrade – presents a daunting schedule against Ukraine, Germany, Slovenia and Turkey.

Three of those opponents – Ukraine, Slovenia and Turkey – are direct rivals in the race for the Finals, meaning every Iranian

victory would not only improve its own position but also deny crucial points to competing teams. The most optimistic scenario remains within reach. Should Iran win all four matches, it would finish the preliminary phase with six victories, a tally that could put

the team firmly in contention for a top-seven finish, especially if results elsewhere fall in its favor. Such a run would also include victories over Ukraine and Turkey, two teams currently above Iran in the standings, significantly reshaping the qualification race.

Iran could also remain mathematically alive with three wins from its remaining four matches, although that scenario would leave Piazza's men relying heavily on favorable results involving rivals such as Bulgaria, Brazil, France, Serbia, Germany and Turkey. The other side of the equation is equally significant.

Because China cannot be relegated as Finals host, the remaining two lowest-ranked teams will drop out of next year's VNL. Iran therefore cannot afford a poor finish, even if qualification proves beyond reach.

Argentina, Canada and Cuba – the teams immediately below Iran – will face one another in several direct encounters during the final week, ensuring they cannot all collect maximum points. That could work in Iran's favor, provided it continues to pick up victories.

Winning at least two of its four remaining matches would lift Iran to four victories overall and significantly reduce the risk of slipping into the relegation zone. Few teams head into Week 3 with as much at stake as Iran. Over the next four matches, Piazza's squad will attempt to transform a difficult campaign into a memorable comeback, with every contest carrying the weight of a final. One victory could keep the Finals dream alive; one defeat could bring survival into sharper focus.

WT World Cup Team Championships: Iran stunned by Thailand, crashes out in men's first round



● WORLD TAEKWONDO

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Iran's men's team suffered a shock first-round exit at the World Taekwondo World Cup Team Championships after a dramatic defeat to Thailand in Chuncheon, South Korea, on Tuesday.

Head coach Payam Khanlarkhani fielded reigning Asian champion Amirzina Bakhtiari, Asian bronze medalist Amirreza Sadeqian, and Mohammadhossein Yazdani in the starting lineup as Iran began its title defense against a Thai side that ultimately prevailed in straight rounds to advance to the semifinals.

Iran made a sluggish start to the opening round, falling behind in the opening seconds before recovering quickly to seize control through a series of effective attacks. Timely substitutions by Khanlarkhani, who was making his debut as Iran's head coach, helped shift the momentum, and Iran appeared to be cruising to the round victory with a 55-40 lead and just five seconds remaining.

However, the match took a dramatic turn after Iran's final substitution. The newly introduced athlete was caught off guard immediately upon entering the contest, conceding a crucial score that sparked a late Thai comeback. Thailand overturned the deficit in the closing moments to claim the opening round.

Iran responded strongly in the second round, opening up a commanding advantage early and maintaining control for much of the contest. The Iranian team led comfortably midway through the round before a string of errors allowed Thailand to fight back and erase the deficit.

Iran rallied once again to level the score, setting up a tense finish as the teams remained deadlocked in the closing seconds. The round ended in a tie, but under the competition rules, Thailand was declared the winner after recording a spinning kick during the match, with that technical criterion serving as the tie-breaker.

With six titles, Iran remains the most successful men's team in the history of the competition.

The tournament continues today with the women's competition, where Iran will be represented by Yalda Valinejad, Hasti Mohammadi, Baran Nemati, and Fereshteh Ahmadi.

Valinejad arrives fresh off a bronze-medal finish at the Asian Championships in May, while 20-year-old prospect Mohammadi will look to build on her breakthrough campaign at last year's Islamic Solidarity Games, where she claimed bronze on her senior international debut. Nemati and Ahmadi, meanwhile, will be eager to bounce back after missing out on the podium at the Asian Championships.

Sitting Volleyball World Championships: Iran men sweep Croatia to advance to last eight

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Iran continued its men's title defense at the Sitting Volleyball World Championships in style, routing Croatia in straight sets (25-17, 25-11, 25-6) on Tuesday to book its place in the quarterfinals in Hangzhou, China.

Iran's women's team also progressed to the quarterfinals, recovering from a set-back against the host on the preceding day to beat Germany 3-0 (25-16, 25-17, 25-14) in the first knockout round.

Masoud Emami led the scoring for Iran men with 10 points, including two aces, while Morteza Mehrzad, Meisam Alipour, and Mahdi Babadi added nine points apiece as the two-time defending champion registered its fourth consecutive victory of the tournament.

Iran will take on the United States, which defeated Canada in straight sets earlier in the day, in the men's last eight today.

Iran opened its Pool D campaign with a come-from-behind 3-1 victory (23-25, 25-13, 25-10, 25-15) over Poland.

It then rallied past familiar rival Bosnia



Iran's Morteza Mehrzad (2) hits a spike during a men's quarterfinal victory over Croatia at the Sitting Volleyball World Championships in Hangzhou, China.
● FLICKR

and Herzegovina in four sets (24-26, 25-21, 25-22, 25-21) in a repeat of the previous two world championship finals, as well as the gold-medal match at the Paris 2024 Paralympics, all of which Iran won. A comfortable 3-0 victory (25-14, 25-16, 25-7) over Japan on Monday secured

top spot in the group.

As if Iran needed extra motivation in its pursuit of a record-extending ninth world title in 14 editions, the men's and women's champions in Hangzhou will both earn direct qualification for the Los Angeles 2028 Paralympic Games.

Asian Boys' U18 Volleyball Championship: Iran coach cites nutrition concerns despite perfect run in China

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Iran head coach Abdolreza Alizadeh has revealed that his players have struggled with nutrition during the AVC Boys' U18 Volleyball Championship in Haikou, China, saying several members of the squad have lost weight because they have been unable to adapt to the local cuisine.

Alizadeh made the comments after Iran completed a flawless group-stage campaign with a straight-set victory (25-12, 25-18, 25-14) over Bahrain on Tuesday to finish atop Pool B and book its place in the quarterfinals.

Iran will face South Korea in the quarterfinals after the Koreans were beaten in straight sets by Japan later on Tuesday.

Despite the team's impressive form on the court, Alizadeh said off-court conditions have presented significant challenges, with nutrition emerging as Iran's biggest concern.

"The most important problem for our team in China has been nutrition," he said. "The players cannot eat much of the local food, and most of them have lost weight."

Alizadeh also pointed to organizational issues at the tournament venue.

The host has divided the competition hall into two courts, allowing two matches to be played simultaneously inside the same arena. While praising the quality and size of the venue, the Iranian coach said the setup has made it difficult for players to maintain their concentration.

"The arena is large and of very good quality, but holding two matches at the same time creates problems for the teams," Alizadeh said.

"The noise from the adjacent court is distracting, and sometimes the referee's whistle from the neighboring match interrupts the flow of our game." He added that the issue becomes even more noticeable when host nation China is in action.

"These problems affect all teams," he said. "Players at this age need a high level of concentration, and it is difficult to maintain that under these conditions. It is especially challenging when China is playing because the crowd noise from the neighboring court becomes very loud."

Iran is chasing a record-extending eighth title in the competition—its first in 12 years after finishing runner-up to Japan and China in the 2022 and 2024 editions, respectively.

The four semifinalists will qualify for the 2027 FIVB Boys' U19 World Championship.