

Hazratpour backs Iran to rebound from VNL setback ahead of Asian Championship

Sports Desk

Iranian libero Mohammadreza Hazratpour says he is confident the national volleyball team's disappointing 2026 Volleyball Nations League (VNL) campaign will prove to be a temporary setback, vowing a strong run at the upcoming Asian Championship.

A dreadful VNL preliminary phase saw Iran manage just three victories in 12 games to finish 14th in the 18-team standings and narrowly retain its place in next year's edition of the competition. Despite the team's struggles, Hazratpour emerged as one of Iran's few stand-out performers, finishing as the tournament's fourth-best receiver with 67 successful receptions.

Speaking to Varzesh3 days after the VNL concluded, the veteran libero admitted the results fell well short of expectations but promised supporters the team would respond.

"I personally promise that Iran will never experience another Volleyball Nations League like this," Hazratpour said. "I give this promise to the people and the volleyball community that next year we will be in a much better position."

Next up for the Iranian team is the all-important AVC

Men's Volleyball Continental Championship, which will kick off on September 4 in the Japanese city of Tokyo.

Hazratpour said Iran has already shifted its focus to the Asian Championship, describing the tournament as a crucial step toward the team's long-term Olympic ambitions.

As if Iran needed extra motivation to chase a fifth continental title in eight editions and make amends for its 2023 final defeat to Japan on home soil, the tournament also offers an Olympic berth, with the winner securing a place at the Los Angeles 2028 Games.

"The Asian Championship is by no means out of reach," he said. "It's not as if Japan can beat us easily. It will certainly be a very difficult match, but Japan isn't our only challenge. China, the Philippines and South Korea are also strong teams."

"Volleyball has progressed everywhere. There are no easy opponents anymore, whether in Asia or Europe. Every team uses modern game plans, so every match will be difficult."

Reflecting on Iran's poor VNL campaign, Hazratpour said several factors affected the team's preparation, including the disruption of last season's domestic league because of the mil-



Iranian libero Mohammadreza Hazratpour (c) is seen in action during a defeat against Ukraine at the Volleyball Nations League preliminary round in Belgrade, Serbia, on July 15, 2026.

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itary conflict in the country, which limited training opportunities and reduced the number of warm-up matches.

"I'm not making excuses, but those circumstances definitely affected our performance," he said.

Hazratpour nevertheless believes Iran deserved a better VNL campaign, pointing to narrow defeats against Belgium, France and Japan.

"We had the ability to win six or even seven matches," he said. "Those games were decided by the smallest of margins, and we had genuine chances to come away with victories."

The libero described the defeat to eventual runner-up the United States as Iran's weakest display of the tournament but praised the team's performances in several other matches, including those against France and Brazil.

Looking beyond the disappointing campaign, Hazratpour backed Italian head coach Roberto Piazza's long-term project and urged Iranian fans to remain patient with one of the world's youngest national teams. "Piazza truly loves Iranian volleyball and the players. He has a clear approach, and we're gradually implementing it. We simply need time," he said. Hazratpour revealed he be-

lieves he has implemented around 60 to 70 percent of what the Italian coach expects from him, adding that the team will continue to improve as players become more familiar with the system. He also highlighted a new generation of talented players, including Arshia Behnejad, Ali Haqqarast, Pouria Hosseinkhanzadeh, Nima Bateni, Ali Hajipour and Morteza Sharifi, saying they have the potential to

become future stars of Iranian volleyball.

"I've played alongside Iran's golden generation and witnessed that era firsthand, but I also see tremendous talent and a very bright future in this team," Hazratpour said.

"These aren't just words to give people hope. I've seen the quality of these players up close. Every one of them has the ability to compete among the best in the world."

Hazratpour concluded by reiterating his belief that Iran can compete on equal terms with Asian powerhouse Japan, which completed a clean sweep of 12 wins in the VNL preliminaries, and urged supporters to continue backing the national team.

"We're already preparing for that challenge. Every player is training, everyone is motivated, and we won't step onto the court with a losing mentality," he said.

"Our future is very bright. Give this team time, and I'm certain it will become one of the strongest teams in world volleyball."

Iranian striker Taremi on Lille radar: Report

Sports Desk

Ligue 1 club LOSC Lille is considering a move for Olympiacos striker and Iranian international Mahdi Taremi, according to French football news website Foot Mercato.

Having joined the Greek giant as a free agent from Internazionale last summer, Taremi, 34, struggled to establish himself as a

regular starter, though he still registered 16 goals – including two Champions League strikes against Bayer Leverkusen and Real Madrid – and six assists in 39 appearances across all competitions.

With prolific Ayoub El Kaabi serving as the first-choice striker and Ukrainian international Roman Yaremchuk, Clayton and Gelson Martins providing further depth in attack, Taremi's time at Olympiacos could come to a premature end. The Iranian is reportedly said to have informed head coach José Luis Mendilibar that he is unwilling to accept a backup role amid stiff competition for places in the squad.

Taremi was omitted from Olympiacos' squad for Tuesday's goalless home draw against Dutch outfit NEC Nijmegen in the first leg of their UEFA Champions League qualifying tie, further fueling uncertainty over his future at the club.

The Iranian, who has scored 58 goals in 107

international appearances, was part of the squad at the recently concluded FIFA World Cup in North America, where Team Melli finished third in Group G with three points and failed to advance to the knockout stage.

Lille, meanwhile, is rebuilding under new Italian head coach Davide Ancelotti following several departures and is seeking additional firepower before beginning its UEFA Champions League campaign. With Hamza Igamane recovering from injury, veteran Olivier Giroud nearing the end of his career, and Matias Fernandez-Pardo attracting transfer interest, the French club is exploring experienced attacking reinforcements. Interest from French clubs is not new for Taremi. Olympique Lyonnais and OGC Nice were both linked with the Iranian striker last summer, but neither club completed a move.

Whether Lille's interest develops into concrete negotiations remains to be seen as the Ligue 1 side continues to reshape its squad ahead of the new campaign. Lille finished third in Ligue 1 last season with 61 points, 15 behind champion Paris Saint-Germain and nine adrift of runner-up Lens.

ISSF World Rankings:

Rostamian up to fifth in women's 10m air pistol

Sports Desk

Iranian shooter Haniyeh Rostamian climbed seven places to fifth in the women's 10m air pistol category of the ISSF World Rankings – released by the International Shooting Sport Federation for August – with a rating of 3,685 points.

The significant rise comes after Rostamian won the bronze medal in the discipline at the latest ISSF World Cup stop of the 2026 season in Hangzhou, China, last week.

The 27-year-old Olympian, the highest-ranked Iranian across all categories, shot 579-25x to finish eighth in qualification before scoring 221.0 points in the final to secure the fourth World Cup medal of her career.

China's Yao Qianxun, who won gold in Hangzhou, tops the rankings with 7,630 points, while India's Esha Singh (4,961), India's Suruchi Inder Singh (4,042) and China's Shen Yiyao (3,900) complete the top four.



● ISSF

Esteghlal parts ways with Rezaeian, club confirms

Sports Desk

Iranian top-flight club Esteghlal has announced the departure of veteran international full-back Ramin Rezaeian.

In a statement released on Wednesday, the Tehran-based Blues said the decision to part ways with Rezaeian came after the 35-year-old declined the terms offered for an extension to his one-year contract.

The prolific right-back joined Esteghlal at the start of last season and went on to score once

and provide two assists in 12 appearances. However, he fell down the pecking order under then-Portuguese head coach Ricardo Sá Pinto and secured a loan move to Foolad Khuzestan midway through the campaign in a bid to boost his chances of earning a place in Iran's squad for the FIFA World Cup. He registered one goal and four assists in six appearances for Foolad before the domestic league was canceled due to wartime conditions in the country, doing enough

to convince Iran head coach Amir Qalenoee to include him in the squad for the global showpiece.

Rezaeian was widely regarded as Iran's standout performer at the World Cup, scoring twice and providing an assist, though his contribution was not enough to help Team Melli secure a historic place in the knockout stage.

His equalizer in the 1-1 draw against Egypt saw Rezaeian overtake Mahdi Taremi as Iran's all-time leading World Cup scorer with three goals.



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