

Sports Desk

There will be much more on the line than a fifth title in eight editions when Iran gets its AVC Men's Volleyball Continental Championship campaign underway against New Zealand in Fukuoka, Japan, on Friday.

With the champion qualifying for the Los Angeles 2028 Olympics, the Asian event provides Italian head coach Roberto Piazza's side with the most realistic shot at securing a place in the sporting extravaganza, compared with next year's World Championship in Poland – where the top three will qualify – or the three remaining berths through the FIVB World Rankings. Piazza's men will still face a daunting task at the upcoming showpiece, as Japan will be the heavy favorite to secure back-to-back titles on home soil.

Having dominated men's volleyball on the continent for the best part of the 2010s and the early years of the following decade, Iran has been dethroned by Japan in recent years, comprehensively falling short against its Asian foe in the previous four meetings between the two sides, including a straight-set defeat in the 2023 Asian Championship final in front of the home crowd in Urmia.

The two sides last squared off in the Volleyball Nations League in June, with Japan

emerging victorious in five sets in Orléans, France, as part of a 12-game winning run in the preliminary phase.

Iran will still look to take inspiration from that meeting after fighting back from two sets down to force the game into a decider, having been swept in straight sets by the Japanese in the previous three encounters.

The Asian Championship could also play a defining role in Piazza's future with the Iranian national team. When the Italian was appointed to the role on a 2+2-year contract midway through 2024, he said he had set his sights on securing "a constant place among the top eight teams in the world" with Iran.

Piazza delivered on that objective to some extent in his first year in charge, as Iran recovered from a shaky start to finish eighth in the preliminary standings of the 2025 VNL and then reached the World Championship quarterfinals later in the year.

The second year of his tenure has been anything but successful.

The young, new-look Iranian team managed just three victories in 12 preliminary outings to finish 14th in the 18-team table, leaving Piazza and his side under massive scrutiny ahead of the Asian Championship. Despite Iranian Volleyball Federation chairman Milad Taqavi throwing his sup-

AVC Men's Volleyball Continental Championship: Japan the team to beat as Iran eyes Olympic berth



● PAYAM SANI/IRIVF

port behind the Italian on several occasions in recent weeks, anything but the ultimate prize in Fukuoka may well lead to a premature end to his time with

the Iranian national team. A run of poor friendly results in the buildup to the continental event, meanwhile, added to concerns among Iranian fans. The

team was beaten by Russia and Belarus either side of a three-set win against Cuba at the Ufa Cup, before losing twice to Russian club Dynamo Moscow.

Piazza, however, will be thrilled to have Amin Esmaeilnejad available again, after the prolific opposite missed the World Championship and this year's VNL

campaign with an ankle injury.

Friday's opener for Iran will be followed by a game against India on Sunday, before a final Pool B fixture against China next Wednesday.

Japan, meanwhile, will open its Pool A campaign against Oman, followed by potentially tricky tests against Bahrain and Australia.

Qatar, which won bronze in 2023, South Korea, Chinese Taipei and Thailand complete the field in Pool C.

The top two teams in each of the three pools will be joined by the two best third-placed teams in the quarterfinals.

The following is Iran's 14-man roster for the Asian Championship:

Arshia Behnejad, Ilshan Davoudipour, Issa Nasseri, Nima Bateni, Mohammad Valizadeh, Ali Hajipour, Amin Esmaeilnejad, Morteza Sharifi, Pouria Hosseinkhanzadeh, Ali Haqqarast, Esmaeil Mosafar, Mobin Nasri, Mohammadreza Hazratpour and Hossein Hajikalateh.

Asian Men's Youth Handball Championship: Iran finishes fourth but finds consolation with world spot



● IRIHF

Sports Desk

Iran missed out on the bronze medal at the Asian Men's Youth Handball Championship in Amman, Jordan, after suffering a 29-28 setback against South Korea in the third-place contest on Monday.

The Iranian boys delivered a brave performance against the most decorated team in the history of the competition, leading 15-14 at halftime and still holding a one-goal advantage with one minute left on the clock. South Korea, however, scored twice through Oh Junseok, who finished with a game-high 12 goals, and Seong Jiseong in the closing seconds to secure a victory by the narrowest of margins.

Despite the late heartbreak, Iran still left the Jordanian capital with something to cheer about, as reaching the semifinals had already seen head coach Mohammadreza Rajabi's boys qualify for next year's IHF U19 World Championship.

Mohammad-Taha topped the scoring for Iran with seven goals, with Seyyed Mohammad Keshavarz adding six. Farshad Norouzipour and Ali Ghayour, who was named to the tournament's Dream Team as the Best Right Wing, contributed four goals apiece, as Iran – runner-up to South Korea in 2022 – achieved its second-best finish in the tournament since its bronze-winning run in the 2008 edition.

The Iranian boys kicked off

their campaign with an impressive victory over Saudi Arabia – a 2024 semifinalist – in Group B, before falling short 24-22 against Qatar, which went on to beat Bahrain 28-24 in Monday's final to claim its third gold medal and first since 2012.

Rajabi's side, however, was quick to bounce back, defeating traditional Asian powerhouse Kuwait 21-18 and Syria 45-30 to finish second to Qatar in the group standings and advance to the quarterfinals. Iran delivered yet another sublime showing to comprehensively defeat Uzbekistan 36-24 in the last eight and punch its ticket to the World Championship, before being undone 26-23 by Bahrain in Saturday's semifinal clash.

Golmohammadi enduring tough start to life in Iraqi top flight

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Head coach Yahya Golmohammadi is enduring a difficult start to life with Duhok in the Iraqi top flight, with the club failing to register a victory in its first four matches of the new Iraq Stars League season.

The Iranian coach's presence at Duhok, along with the continued tenure of compatriot Alireza Mansourian at Al Talaba, has drawn increased attention from Iranian football fans to the Iraqi league. Several other Iranian players are also plying their trade in Iraq, with Siavash Yazdani and Jafar Salmani joining Al Talaba during the summer transfer window, while Sina Moridi, Sina Asadbeigi and Mohammadreza Soleimani followed Golmohammadi to Duhok.

A three-time Iranian league champion as Persepolis coach, Golmohammadi, who had also been linked with a return to the Tehran Reds in the summer, took charge of Duhok after an inconsistent spell with Foolad Khuzestan toward the end of his time in the Iranian Premier League. His move to Iraq was expected to provide a fresh start, but his beginning at Duhok has fallen short of expectations, with criticism from the club's supporters and Iraqi media emerging after only four games.

Duhok began last season in similarly disappointing fashion, losing their first four matches before finally beating Newroz in their fifth outing.

The club's management subsequently turned to Golmohammadi in an attempt to change the team's fortunes, improve on last season's results and establish Duhok as a contender. The club also enjoyed a busy transfer window ahead of



● VARZESH3

the new campaign, signing many of the players targeted by the Iranian coach.

The results, however, have yet to improve significantly.

Golmohammadi's side has opened the new campaign with four consecutive draws, and while that represents four more points than Duhok had collected at the same stage last season, its failure to secure a victory remains a major concern.

The performances of the Iranian additions have also failed to meet expectations, particularly Soleimani, who has struggled to make an impact as Duhok's leading striker. Their underwhelming displays have further fueled criticism of Golmohammadi's recruitment and the team's overall performances.

Duhok supporters, despite acknowledging the team's improved points tally, have voiced considerable dissatisfaction with the way the side has performed and have quickly grown frustrated with Golmohammadi.

The situation has been further

complicated by reports that Golmohammadi has expressed concerns over Duhok's financial and administrative situation and has clashed with club officials.

Iraqi media have also circulated claims that the Iranian coach could be considering a return home. Sport Iraq, following Duhok's fourth consecutive draw of the season, criticized Golmohammadi and alleged that his mind was already in Iran because Sepahan had contacted him.

The report further claimed that Golmohammadi had fallen out with Duhok officials and suggested that the coach was "only physically in Iraq," while his thoughts were in Iran. The claims have not been confirmed by Golmohammadi, Duhok or Sepahan.

Golmohammadi has so far remained silent amid the criticism and speculation. His response to Duhok's difficult start, as well as the reports linking him with a possible move to Sepahan, will be closely watched as the season progresses.