

AVC Men's Volleyball Continental Championship:

Iran sweeps New Zealand, makes statement start to Olympic bid

Sports Desk

Iran's bid for a coveted Olympic volleyball berth got off to an emphatic start at the AVC Men's Continental Championships on Friday, as the Asian powerhouse swept New Zealand 3-0 (25-15, 25-12, 25-22) in its Pool B opener in Fukuoka, Japan.

Making his first international appearance since the preliminary round of the 2025 Volleyball Nations League, star opposite Amin Esmailnejad topped the scoring for Iran with 11 points, surpassing the 1,000-point mark for the national team.

Outside hitters Morteza Sharifi and Pouria Hosseinkhanzadeh added seven and six points, respectively, as Iran finished the match with 35 points from attacks, five blocks, two aces and 33 points from New Zealand's errors, wrapping up the game in

58 minutes at Kitakyushu City Gymnasium.

Opposite spiker Seth Dylan Grant chipped in a game-high 12 points but could not prevent the Oceanian team from suffering a fourth defeat in as many meetings between the two sides at the competition, dating back to 1987.

With the champion in Fukuoka securing a place at the Los Angeles Olympics in two years, Iran will have extra motivation to chase a fifth Asian crown in eight editions, though Japan remains the heavy favorite to secure back-to-back titles on home soil.

The hosts enter the showpiece on the back of a remarkable 12-0 run in the VNL preliminary round earlier in the summer before ultimately finishing fourth. Japan also holds a superior head-to-head record against Iran in recent years, emerging victorious in their previous four



encounters, including a straight-set win in the 2023 Asian Championship final in Urmia and a five-set VNL thriller in Orléans, France, in June.

Iranian outside hitter Hosseinkhanzadeh hailed the comfortable victory as "a

perfect preparation" for his side on the way to its ultimate objective in Fukuoka. "As you saw, it was not really a difficult game for us. The players were focused on making a strong start to the tournament, which I think we did," he said.

"Our goal here is something else, and today's match served as a perfect preparation for us as we pursue our main objective. We always give 100 percent on the court, and that's exactly what we did today," added the Iranian, who



Iranian players celebrate a point during a straight-set victory over New Zealand at the AVC Men's Volleyball Continental Championship in Fukuoka, Japan, on Sept. 4, 2026.

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finished with six points, all coming from attacks. Iran head coach Roberto Piazza, meanwhile, praised the way his team approached the game right from the outset.

"This is just the beginning of the championship, and we started very well in the first set," Piazza said. "I think the opponent also made some mistakes on serve, but we were in the game from the beginning."

"Today I told the players to focus on ourselves and simply think about the details. If we can do that, we can compete even against the strongest teams."

"The second set was easier for us, so I started making substitutions. In the third set, we should have done

much better from the beginning, though it was important that all the players in the squad played today," he said. "A team is really not just a collection of individual players. All the players have to work together for the team," added the Italian, who is desperate to see his players deliver a much-improved performance from their below-par VNL campaign, in which Iran managed just three wins in 12 outings to finish 14th in the 18-team standings.

Iran will resume action against India on Sunday before concluding the pool phase against three-time champion China on Wednesday – a rematch of the 2023 semifinals, which Iran won in straight sets.

The top two teams in each of the three pools will be joined by the two best third-placed teams – determined through a combined ranking system – in the quarterfinals.

AFC Women's Champions League

Khatoon lands defending champion Naegohyang in group stage

Sports Desk

Iran's Bam Khatoon has been drawn alongside defending champion Naegohyang Women's FC of North Korea, Japan's INAC Kobe Leonessa and Myanmar's Ayeyawady FC in Group A of the upcoming AFC Women's Champions League.

The draw for the group phase of the Asian elite club competition took place at the AFC House in Kuala Lumpur on Thursday, with 12 teams divided into four groups.

The Iranian top-flight champion will open its campaign

against INAC Kobe Leonessa at Thuwunna Stadium in Yangon, Myanmar, on November 1, before taking on Naegohyang at the same venue three days later. Khatoon will conclude its group campaign against the hosts on Nov. 7.

The top two teams from each of the three groups will be joined by the two best third-placed teams in the quarterfinals, which will be hosted by the three group winners and the best-ranked runner-up in single-leg ties in March.

Elsewhere, North Korean

debutant 4.25 SC was pitted against South Korea's Hwacheon KSPO WFC, Vietnam's Ho Chi Minh City Women's FC and Indian host East Bengal FC in Group B.

Australian Group C top seed Melbourne City FC will have to contend with China's Beijing Jingtan FC, Kaya FC-Iloilo of the Philippines and group host PFC Nasaf of Uzbekistan.

The semifinals and final – scheduled for May 2027 – will be played at a centralized venue.

Khatoon won the preliminary group in August to

secure a third successive appearance in the main-round group stage in as many editions.

Iranian international striker Sara Didar was on target either side of Maryam Dini's strike as Khatoon defeated CSKA Dushanbe in Hisor, Tajikistan, in its preliminary-stage opener. Didar then scored a 95th-minute equalizer to salvage a point for her side in a 1-1 stalemate against Saudi champion Al Nassr.

Didar was also the hero for Marziyeh Jafari's side in the must-win encounter against



Bam Khatoon players celebrate a goal during a 3-1 victory against Etihad Club at the AFC Women's Champions League preliminary stage in Hisor, Tajikistan, on Aug. 23, 2026.

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Etihad Club, scoring twice late in the game to help Khatoon come from behind to defeat the Jordanian outfit 3-1 and pip Al Nassr to the top spot in the group.

Khatoon enjoyed an impressive run in the inaugural 2024/25 season, reaching the quarterfinals before losing 1-0 to South Korea's Incheon Red Angels in Incheon.

The following season, however, was one to forget for Jafari's team, which suffered an early exit after finishing bottom of its group with three points.

Iran's Soltaninejad wins Strongman gold at World Nomad Games



Sports Desk

Iran's Sajjad Soltaninejad claimed the Strongman gold medal at the 2026 World Nomad Games in Kyrgyzstan.

The Iranian topped the standings after three days of grueling competition, successfully negotiating a series of demanding and heavy events to finish at the top of the podium.

His triumph marked a second gold medal for the country at the sixth edition of the multi-sport event, dedicated to traditional ethnic sports practiced across Central Asia.

Reza Qeitasi, Iran's flag bearer at the opening ceremony, won gold in the men's Tayak Tartysh on Wednesday, securing the first gold for the country's 130-athlete delegation.

Tayak Tartysh, also known as mas-wrestling, is a strength contest originating from the Sakha, or Yakut, tradition. Two athletes sit facing each other with their feet braced against a board and compete by pulling on opposite ends of a short wooden stick. The aim is to pull the opponent across the board or take the stick away. Qeitasi also represented Iran at the 2024 World Nomad Games in Kazakhstan, finishing runner-up in the Strongman competition behind the host representative.

Sadeq Azarang got Iran off the mark on the opening day of the showpiece on Tuesday, settling for silver in the men's +90kg kurash class, which featured 22 contestants, after suffering defeat to Uzbekistan's Nomonjon Radjabov in the final.

An Asian Games gold medalist at Hangzhou 2022, the Iranian defeated opponents from the host country, Russia and Georgia before beating his Turkmen opponent to reach the final.

Mohsen Mirzaei, meanwhile, won silver in right-arm wrestling, while Iran's four-man team, comprising Nader Kazemi, Sajjad Jafari Gohari, Abbas Azimi and Hamidreza Saeed, also finished runner-up in the tug-of-war event.

Maryam Farahaninia won bronze in Tayak Tartysh, while Abolfazl Heydarimehr took bronze in Atysh. Mohaddeseh Tabarok also claimed two bronze medals in right- and left-arm wrestling, with Amirreza Sahraei earning bronze in Sarym wrestling and Hassan Poladi finishing third in the men's 64kg sambo competition.