

AVC Men's Volleyball Continental Championship:

Japan proves too hard to beat as Iran's Olympic quest drags on



Japanese outside hitter Ran Takahashi (12) hits a spike during the final victory over Iran at the AVC Men's Volleyball Continental Championship in Fukuoka, Japan, on Sept. 13, 2026.

● PAYAM SANI/IRIVF

Sports Desk

Iran's bid for an Olympic berth was left hanging in the balance following a 3-0 (25-21, 26-24, 25-23) defeat against host Japan in the AVC Men's Volleyball Continental Championship final in Fukuoka on Sunday.

A second successive final setback against Japan means Italian head coach Roberto Piazza's men will now have to go through next year's FIVB World Cup in Poland – where the top three teams not yet qualified in the final standings will secure Olympic spots – or the FIVB World Ranking, which will also offer three quotas, to punch their tickets for the Los Angeles 2028 Olympics.

The final result on Sunday hardly reflected the tight nature of the contest, with narrow margins ultimately making the difference between the two sides, who went toe to toe across the three sets.

While Japan was superior in attack, scoring 41 points against Iran's 36, Piazza's side outscored its opponents with 10 blocks, twice as many as the Japanese managed.

Japan was also the better team on the service line, hitting seven aces against Iran's three, while benefiting from 23 opponent errors, with Iran capitalizing on 19.

Yuji Nishida was the Japanese driving force in front of more than 6,500 home fans at the Kitakyushu City Gymnasium. The world-class opposite spearheaded the victory with three kill blocks, two aces and a 65% success rate in attack, finishing as the joint top scorer alongside Iranian counterpart Ali Hajipour.

Hajipour put away four kill blocks and an ace on his way to a match-high 18 points. Outside hitter Ran Takahashi fired three aces and 14 spike kills at a 61% success rate to finish with 17 points for the hosts. His 22-year-old Iranian counterpart Pouriya Hosseinkhan-

zadeh also reached double figures with 13 points, including two aces and a block.

Despite Iran's winless run against its familiar foe extending to five games, Piazza still took positives from the latest setback.

"I'm really proud of my guys. In volleyball, you have to deserve every single ball in each game. We have to focus on our own game rather than the opponent, and that is something the players will have to learn.

"We are playing with a little bit more stability, and the players are starting to understand what they have to do [on the court]. They are not always capable of doing it, but sooner or later, we will reach the goal," said the Italian.

"The most important thing is that we never gave up today. We were in the game from the beginning. We lost the first set because of our mistakes and not because they did an amazing job. Our mistakes were an important part of the first set.

"And then we were able to fight until the end in the second and third sets. We were leading in both sets but again in the crucial moments, when you need to find one special ball, they found it and we didn't. That's my final conclusion. Some mistakes are acceptable but some are simply not," added Piazza, whose team also fell short in a five-set thriller against Japan when the two teams met in the Volleyball Nations League preliminaries in June.

When asked what has contributed to the growing gap between Iran and Japan in recent years, the Italian said: "There are a lot of foreign coaches working in Japan. The Japanese players are learning from different cultures, and each coach is totally dedicated to their club while also helping the head coach of the national team.

"It doesn't mean that Iranian coaches are not good enough, but we still need support from

coaches from elsewhere. That's why in other countries, a lot of foreigners are working in different coaching staffs."

There was, however, a bit of consolation for three Iranian players, who received individual recognition at the awarding ceremony. Hajipour picked up the prize for Best Opposite Spiker, while Hosseinkhanzadeh and Seyyed Issa Nasserini won the Best Outside Hitter and Best Middle Blocker awards, respectively.

"Honestly speaking, this award doesn't really mean anything to me because when the team loses, it means we have all lost together," said Hajipour, who was "willing to swap this individual award with the championship trophy."

"We just have to forget about this setback and get ready for the next tournament. I hope that, just as Japan was able to secure the Olympic berth today, we too can open our path to the Olympics going forward."

Hosseinkhanzadeh, meanwhile, praised his teammates for "giving their all throughout the tournament," while urging them "to work more on ourselves to reach our ultimate goal."

"As you saw, we had a very difficult match against a team that is truly one of the best teams in the world. This match was very important for us and all the guys gave their hundred percent and spared no effort. Everyone played with grit and hats off to them," said the Iranian.

"We still need to work a bit more on our team and have better planning. Once again, I apologize to the dear people of Iran for not achieving what they wanted. Just seeing them smile for a moment is very valuable to us. I know they were upset by our loss, but, God willing, we can achieve good results going forward, and we need their positive energy for the rest of the way."

Aichi-Nagoya Asian Games:
Iran eyes six-medal sweep in weightlifting

Sports Desk

All six members of Iran's weightlifting team "have a chance to win medals" at the upcoming Aichi-Nagoya Asian Games, according to federation secretary Vahid Rabiei, who expressed hope that the lifters can reproduce their personal bests to finish on the podium. The weightlifting competition at the multi-sport event will open on September 23 at the Nagoya City Trade and Industry Centre.

Former world and Olympic silver medalist Ali Davoudi (+110kg) will spearhead the Iranian roster in the men's event, which also features five-time world medalist Mirmostafa Javadi (85kg), Ali Aalipour (95kg) – a world snatch silver medalist last year – as well as Alireza Nasiri, who will enter the 110kg contest as the world junior record holder in the clean & jerk and total.

Iran will also be represented by teenage sensation Mahsa Beheshti (86kg), who won a remarkable six golds at the Asian Youth & Junior Championships last month, and Reihaneh Karimi (69kg) in the women's event.

Iran managed just a single silver medal through Davoudi at the previous edition of the Asian Games in Hangzhou, but Rabiei believes the team is in far better shape this time around.

"We failed to achieve the result we wanted in Hangzhou, but the conditions of the athletes are better this time, and we hope we can make up for that result," he said.



Iranian weightlifter Ali Davoudi (front) will compete in the men's +110kg class at the Aichi-Nagoya Asian Games.

● IWFIIR

"The competition at the Asian Games is very tough and, in some cases, can even be considered more difficult than the World Championships, because all countries come with the aim of winning medals and Asian Games medals are very important to different countries. Therefore, we have a tough competition ahead of us."

"All the weightlifters who have been selected for the team have a chance of winning a medal. From the beginning, our discussions with the National Olympic Committee were based on sending a quality-focused team and selecting athletes who had medal chances, which is why we did not send a lifter in the men's 75kg category.

"Although all the weightlifters are among the favorites in their respective events, they have to compete and we have to see how things develop there," he

said. "We are also constantly monitoring their rivals. Through social media and the information available to us, we are keeping track of their conditions."

Rabiei was particularly hopeful about Iran's two female lifters, who will be seeking to make history at the multi-sport event.

"Our girls also have a good chance, and we hope to win a medal in the women's section at the Asian Games for the first time," he said.

"Both of Iran's female weightlifters have medal chances and can be counted on, though, as I said, the competition is very tough in both the men's and women's events.

"If it is our weightlifters' day and they can reproduce their own records, all of them will return from the Asian Games with medals."

Changwon 2026 WSPS World Championships:

Iran wins bronze in mixed 50m pistol, wraps up with four medals



● NATIONAL PARALYMPIC COMMITTEE

Sports Desk

Iranian shooters won a bronze medal in the mixed 50m pistol team SH1 event on the final day of the WSPS World Championships in Changwon, South Korea, on Monday, taking the country's medal tally at the competition to four.

The Iranian trio of Nasrin Shahi, Seyed Mohammadreza Mirshafiei and Sareh Javanmardi scored 1,596 points to finish third behind hosts South Korea and China.

In the individual event, Shahi advanced to the final after ranking second in qualifying with a score of 543, but ultimately missed out on the podium, finishing sixth with 139.6 points. Mirshafiei scored 530 points, while Javanmardi and Mostafa Khadem recorded 523 and 510, respectively, with all three failing to advance to the final.

Faezah Ahmadi headlined the country's four-medal haul in Changwon by winning gold in the women's 10m air pistol SH1 event, also securing

a quota place for the 2028 Paralympic Games.

Shahi completed an all-Iranian one-two in the discipline, winning silver behind her compatriot with 233.7 points. Four-time Paralympic champion Javanmardi, however, missed out on the podium, placing fourth with 194.1 points.

The three shooters also teamed up to win team gold in the event, setting a new world record of 1,707 points in the final.

The men's competition, however, proved disappointing for the Iranians, as Mirshafiei, Khadem and Ali Golouei all failed to advance to the final in the men's 10m air pistol event.

Featuring 595 athletes from 53 countries, the six-day World Championships served as part of the qualification pathway for the LA 2028 Paralympic Games. Iran had previously secured its first team quota for the multi-sport event through the men's sitting volleyball team, which earned its place by winning the world title in July.