

# Iran to take on Poland in VNL Finals opener



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**Sports Desk**

Iran will start its campaign at the 2019 FIVB Volleyball Nations League (VNL) Finals tonight with an eagerly-awaited clash against Poland in Chicago's Credit Union 1 Arena.

The two sides plus Brazil are pitted in Pool B of the finals with the host USA, Russia and France squaring off in Pool A.

The Asian powerhouse finished the preliminary round with an impressive 12-3 record to be the first team to book a place in Chicago and claim the second spot in the standing, following Brazil, whose only defeat came against Serbia (3-2).

Poland finished fifth with 11 victories.

When Iran and Poland met in the

previous round it was Igor Kolakovic's men who came out victorious in a five-set thriller at Al Ghadir Sports Complex in Urmia, northwest Iran, in mid-June.

"We come here to fight against everybody, but we have to think about the first step and the first match, not about the title," Kolakovic said in Chicago.

"We have to take it step by step. It doesn't make sense to think about the distant future."

Iran's captain Saied Ma'rouf echoed his coach's thoughts, saying it was important for the team to get off to a good start and play two weeks in front of the home crowd.

"Actually we didn't think about the finals when we first started the league," Ma'rouf said.

"We're going to try our best. We made it to the finals game by game, point by point. It was important to play

two weeks in front of our fans. Now our main goal is to play our maximum best here, but all the teams here are so strong. Nobody can predict who will win the tournament. We will try our best. Our goal is to play in the final."

Kolakovic feels the team's chance to train together ahead of the VNL preliminary round and avoid injuries played a big part in Iran's run.

"I think after the club season, some players had a really good rest and that really helped," Kolakovic said.

"We started training about one month ahead of the league without any problems or injuries," added the Montenegrin.

In an even tougher challenge, Iran will face Brazil on Friday night.

The top two of each group will head into the semifinals with the final show-piece scheduled for July 14.

# Iran lifts Asian junior GR wrestling trophy

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Iran's Greco-Roman team claimed the top spot at the 2019 Asian Junior Wrestling Championships in Chon Buri, Thailand.

On Wednesday, Iranians added another four golds and a bronze to the country's tally for an overall nine.

Bahman Ma'roufkhanli opened the account for Iran on the day with a 6-0 victory over Nurzhigit Keneshbek in the 67kg final.

Mohammad-Reza Rostami, representing Iran in the 72kg weight division, clinched Iran's fifth gold after he outmuscled Uzbekistan's Alijon Khuseynov 13-5.

Hossein Forouzandeh (82kg) and Hamed Abdevali (97kg) overcame Japan's Teshin Higuchi (10-0) and South Korean Jeon Gyuil-kwon (4-2), respectively, to take Iran's gold count to seven.

Milad Rezaejad, meanwhile, settled for a 60kg bronze with an 11-2 victory over Yun Bin-shin of South Korea in the third-place bout.

Mohammad Naousi (77kg), Hassan Forouzandeh (87kg) and Ali-Akbar Yousefi (130kg) had grabbed three gold medals on Tuesday with Saied Arjmandi taking a 63kg silver.



Iran's Greco-Roman wrestling team members and officials pose for a photo with the 2019 Asian Junior Wrestling Championships trophy in Chon Buri, Thailand, on July 10, 2019.

Iran stood atop the overall standing with 218 points, followed by Kazakhstan (146pts) and India (145pts).

# Clinical Djokovic destroys Goffin to reach Wimbledon semis

Top seed Novak Djokovic recovered from an edgy start to deliver a devastating display that crushed the spirit of 21st-seeded Belgian David Goffin in straight sets on Wednesday and sent the defending champion surging into the Wimbledon semifinals.

Goffin will wonder just what happened after he looked the better player in the early stages and broke for a 4-3 lead in the first set, Reuters reported.

Half an hour later he had lost 10 games in a row and the match was effectively over as Djokovic, relentless with his accuracy, went on to triumph 6-4, 6-0, 6-2. It was a display of Djokovic at his clinical best as the Serb soaked up the early punches without panic then slowly but surely imposed himself in every aspect of the contest to such an extent that Goffin was left flailing.

Djokovic, who has lost only once at a Grand Slam in the last 12 months, is into his ninth Wimbledon semifinal – only Jimmy Connors and Roger Federer have been in more.

Defending champion Novak Djokovic is the first man to reach the Wimbledon semi-finals after breezing



Serbia's Novak Djokovic is in action during his quarter final match against Belgium's David Goffin at All England Lawn Tennis and Croquet Club in London, Britain, on July 10, 2019.

past David Goffin in straight sets.

"He started well. He was dictating the play from the baseline," Djokovic told the BBC.

"Things could have gone a different way, who knows what the match would have looked like if I had lost the first set but I was very pleased with the

second and third.

"I had a tough match in the third round. Other than that, I've won in straight sets and played really well throughout the tournament.

"It's exactly what I wanted and hopefully I can go in the right direction in the semis as well."

# Media have an 'agenda' against Pogba, Solskjaer says



CATHERINE IVILL/GETTY IMAGES

Manchester United boss Ole Gunnar Solskjaer moved to hose down speculation that Paul Pogba is unhappy and set to leave the club, declaring the media have an "agenda" against the French World Cup winner.

Pogba's agent recently told The Times that the troubled 26-year-old intends to leave United, while the player, himself, said in Tokyo last month that he thought it might be time for a "new challenge somewhere else," Reuters reported.

Serie A club Juventus and La Liga giant Real

Madrid have been linked with Pogba, and the speculation has followed United to Australia on its preseason tour ahead of a match against A-League side Perth Glory on Saturday.

Pogba has two years left on his contract, with the option for a third, however, and Solskjaer hit out at media for indulging in the transfer talk.

"Agents talk all the time. As I said, we've not had any bids from any clubs," he told reporters in Perth on Wednesday. "That's all I can say about this matter."

"There is an agenda against Paul, he's a top, top bloke. A great professional, there's never been any problems and he's got a heart of gold."

Pogba, who moved to Old Trafford from Juventus for a then-world-record transfer fee of £89.3 million in August 2016, was named in last season's PFA Premier League Team of the Year and has scored 31 goals in 142 appearances in all competitions.

But he has frustrated fans with his inconsistency, and a series of low-key performances last season culminated in

clashes with angry supporters in the final-day home defeat by relegated Cardiff.

Manchester United posted a video of the team taking a stroll through Perth on its social media accounts earlier in the week but the upbeat soundtrack of electronic music could not disguise what appeared to be a heated exchange between Pogba and teammate Jesse Lingard.

Grimming defender Victor Lindelof came between the pair and threw an arm around Pogba as they continued walking but the moment sparked speculation of a rift in the camp.

Solskjaer said there was nothing in it. "For example, Jesse and Paul walking around and it's been portrayed as a fight between the two boys," he said.

"I know you're here to sell papers and sell stories but that's nothing, no problems between the boys at all. They're all professional. Preseason has been very, very good so far."

United kicked off its new league campaign against Chelsea at Old Trafford on August 11.



GLYN KIRK/APP

# Serena in 'good place and pain-free' at Wimbledon, says coach

Serena Williams is in a good place and pain-free at last and 100 percent focused on winning Wimbledon, her coach Patrick Mouratoglou said Wednesday.

Williams, 37, has worked incredibly hard to come back from giving birth, and multiple injury problems, in order to target Margaret Court's all-time record of 24 Grand Slam titles, he said, AFP reported.

Crucially, the American's trademark ability to raise her game to another level is back – and she has found her rhythm once more, the coach said.

Williams, the 11th seed, takes on the Czech world number 54 Barbora Strycova today in the semifinals.

"She's in a good place at the moment. She's happy," Mouratoglou told reporters.

"Her husband is here, her daughter is here, and she's pain-free now for three weeks."

"When you focus on your pain every day, it's very difficult to prepare well for tournaments. You compete with pain, so it's difficult to focus on the match because you're suffering."

"Now things are different. And when she's playing, she's 100 percent focused on the game and on winning."

"She's raised her level when it was necessary, which is one of her trademarks, and this is back, so everything's positive."

**Chasing 24**

The Greek-French tennis coach, 49, has been working with Williams since 2012 – a partnership that has produced 10 of the American's 23 Grand Slam singles titles.

Australian great Court, 76, won her record 24 majors between 1960 and 1973.

Mouratoglou said Williams was intensely focused on overtaking Court – starting by drawing level by winning Wimbledon.

"That's why she came back to playing tennis after having a baby and so many medical complications," he said. "The effort she's put in, I've never seen something like this."

"You have no idea how hard she worked to come back to that level, and she came back for that, so it will prob-

ably mean a lot if she makes it."

**'Better and better'**

Williams, a seven-time Wimbledon champion, had a knee problem that held her back at the French Open but worked with a Paris doctor to fix it.

Mouratoglou could then work on preparing her for Wimbledon, even if she was lacking match practice.

"If she's well prepared, even though she's not playing her best tennis in the first matches, she's most of the time able to find a way through," he said.

And in a warning to her rivals left in the tournament, he said, "I knew that match after match, she will get better and better."

In today's other semifinal, seventh seed Simona Halep plays eighth seed Elena Svitolina.

"Serena is not only serve and return. She is able to do a lot of other things. They are two of her bigger assets," the coach said.

"And on grass, when you're very good on those two things, you have a big advantage."