

Iran Volleyballers to Compete in Pool A for Paris Olympic Games



TEHRAN – The drawing of lots for the Intl. Volleyball Federation (FIVB) qualifying tournament for next year's Olympic Games in Paris was held at a ceremony in Lausanne, which revealed three pools of national teams for men and women.

For the men's section, in pool A, due to take place in Brazil, the hosts will face off against world champions Italy, Iran, Cuba, Ukraine, Germany, Czech Republic and Qatar.

Pool B, scheduled for Japan, will see the hosts face the U.S., Slovenia, Serbia, Turkey, Tunisia, Egypt and Finland.

Pool C, set to be held in China, will be featuring the home country, Poland, Argentina, The Netherlands, Canada, Mexico, Belgium and Bulgaria.

France is defending Olympic champion after defeating Russia in Tokyo 2020 in the final and qualify as the host country.

The men's qualifiers are scheduled to take place from September 30 to October 8.

Verstappen on Top as Alonso Splits Red Bulls

BERLIN (Reuters) - Max Verstappen led both practice sessions for the Saudi Arabian Grand Prix on Friday while Aston Martin's Fernando Alonso prevented a Red Bull one-two at the top of the timesheets.

Double Formula One champion Verstappen picked up where he left off in winning the Bahrain season-opener, lapping the Jeddah Corniche circuit with a best time of one minute 29.603 seconds on the fastest soft tyres in the evening session.

Last year's winner in Jeddah had lapped in 1:29.617 in a hot practice one, when Mexican team mate Sergio Perez was second fastest and Alonso third.

Alonso, also a double champion and third in the March 5 opener behind Verstappen and Perez, was again in the mix throughout the day.

Verstappen had delayed his arrival in the kingdom as he recovered from a stomach bug but he got straight up to speed, with the only drama being a close shave with the wall at the final corner in the more representative practice two.

"We had a positive day but I think there's still quite a few things we can do better," said Verstappen.

"In the long runs I think we all stood fairly close to each other, but it's more because of managing the tyres...I think the



lap times are all very close so its definitely not like Bahrain."

Perez was 0.483 slower than Verstappen in session one and Alonso 0.208 adrift in the cooler evening floodlit running on the fast street circuit

and with soft tyres.

"In Bahrain we were like P1 on Friday and then we were P5, nearly P6, in qualifying," said Alonso. "So you never know until you go to qualifying."

Djokovic to Miss Miami Open Over Vaccine Status



Serbia's Novak Djokovic during a quarter final match of the Dubai Duty Free Tennis Championships in Dubai, United Arab Emirates, March 1, 2023.

PARIS (Reuters) - Novak Djokovic will miss next week's Miami Open after the Serbian was denied an exemption that would have

allowed him to enter the U.S. despite not being vaccinated against COVID-19, tournament director James Blake said on Friday.

"We tried to get Novak Djokovic to be allowed to get an exemption, but that wasn't able to happen," Blake told Tennis Channel.

"Obviously, we're one of the premier tournaments in the world, we'd like to have the best players that can play. We did all that we could. We tried to talk to the government, but that's out of our hands."

Florida Governor Ron DeSantis and the state's two US senators were among those calling on the Biden administration to allow world number one Djokovic to

enter the U.S. and compete at the tournament he has won six times.

Djokovic, 35, is also missing the ongoing Masters tournament in Indian Wells, California due to his inability to secure the exemption.

The U.S. currently bars unvaccinated foreigners from entry into the country, a policy that is expected to be lifted when the government ends its COVID-19 emergency declarations on May 11.

Djokovic, who missed last year's Australian Open after being deported from that country due to his vaccination status, has said he would skip Grand Slams rather than have a COVID shot.

Lappi Fends Off Serial Winner Ogier to Lead in Mexico Rally

MEXICO CITY (AFP) - Esapekka Lappi held off Sebastian Ogier to lead the Mexico Rally after Friday's stages as championship leader Ott Tanak was among the drivers to hit problems at altitude in the rugged mountains.

Tanak had led overnight after winning the opening two stages but lost power on Friday's opening stage, known as El Chocolate.

Lappi, a Finn who drives for Hyundai, grabbed the race lead as Tanak limped in 7mins 47sec behind.

Frenchman Ogier, in a Toyota, who has won the rally six times, took the next stage but the Finn hit back to take the morning's final stage by 0.6sec and stretch his lead to 1.4sec.

"Seb has won this rally so



many times and we can match his pace, so I need to be very pleased with that," said Lappi.

In the afternoon back-to-back stage wins in Las Minas and Las Dunas gave Lappi some breathing space, and he ended the day 5.3sec up on Ogier who took the Distrito Leon super

special.

Welshman Elfyn Evans was third in a Toyota at 24.8sec.

Reigning champion Kalle Rovanpera, who trails Tanak by three points in the world rally championship standings after two events, ended the second day in fifth after suffering me-

chanical problems following a big slide at the end of the opening stage.

Tanak goes into Saturday's stages 14 minutes adrift after a nightmare time for the M-Sport Ford team.

Ford's Frenchman Pierre-Louis Loubet hit a rock on stage three.

Racing was briefly stopped on the stage after private driver Jordan Serderidis, 59, in the third Ford, stopped, facing the wrong way, in the middle of the road.

Tanak can still pick up bonus points on Sunday's Power Stage.

Japanese driver Takamoto Katsuta went off the road and down a steep embankment in his Toyota on stage five - no way to celebrate his 30th birthday.

Odermatt Breaks Maier's Men's World Cup Ski Points Record



Switzerland's Marco Odermatt speeds down the course during a men's World Cup giant slalom race, in Soldeu, Andorra, Saturday, March 18, 2023.

SOLDEU, Andorra (AFP) - Switzerland's Marco Odermatt broke Hermann Maier's men's World Cup ski points record on Saturday after dominating the giant slalom at the season finals in Andorra.

Odermatt's 13th win of the elite circuit season took his points tally to 2,000 that had stood for 23 years.

Already guaranteed the overall World Cup crystal globe for the second year running, Odermatt, 25, only needed to finish third to surpass the points haul set by the now-retired Austrian legend.

But the reigning Olympic giant slalom champion made history in style taking 100 points for a win by more than two seconds from

Norway's Henrik Kristoffersen with Austrian Marco Schwarz at 2.29 in third.

The 13th World Cup win (seven giant slaloms and six super-Gs) of the campaign drew him level with three ski greats - Sweden's Ingemar Stenmark, who reached that tally in 1979, Maier (2001) and Marcel Hirscher (2018).

On top of a superb World Cup campaign - he also took the giant slalom and super-G titles - Odermatt last month picked up gold medals in the giant slalom and downhill at the World Ski Championships in France.

The all-time World Cup points record is held by Slovenia's Tina Maze, who ended the 2013 women's season with a haul of 2,414.

Mavericks Stun Lakers 111-110



Dallas Mavericks forward Maxi Kleber (42) makes the game-winning 3-point basket over Los Angeles Lakers forward Anthony Davis (3) as time expires during the fourth quarter of an NBA basketball game Friday, March 17, 2023, in Los Angeles.

LOS ANGELES (AP) — Maxi Kleber drilled the winning 3-pointer at the buzzer on a crosscourt pass from Kyrie Irving, who scored 38 points in the Dallas Mavericks' stunning 111-110 victory over the Los Angeles Lakers on Friday night.

With Luka Doncic sidelined, Kleber did a remarkable imitation of the injured superstar who has repeatedly beaten the Lakers with big shots over the years. The German big man's teammates piled on him in celebration after he silenced the Lakers' crowd with his only 3-pointer of the night.

"I never had a shot like that before," said a grinning Kleber, who scored six of his 10 points in the final 7.2 seconds.

Kleber first hit three free throws after Anthony Davis unwisely fouled him on a 3-point attempt, and Davis made just one of two for Los Angeles with 6.7 seconds left after getting fouled on the ensuing inbounds pass. Dallas got the ball to Irving, who drew a double-team and found Kleber for an open 3-pointer released over Davis' outstretched arm just before the horn. The play also was redemption

for Kleber, who threw away an inbounds pass with 1.8 seconds left in regulation against San Antonio on Wednesday night. The Spurs subsequently tied it and went on to win in overtime.

"Knowing Ky, he wanted to go for the win," Mavs coach Jason Kidd said about the final play. "With the double team, he had to give the ball up. That's just trust with his teammates, and Maxi was at the right place at the right time."

Irving scored 13 points in the fourth quarter of his return from a three-game injury absence for the Mavs, who avoided falling into a three-way tie with the Lakers and the Timberwolves in the tight Western Conference standings.

Davis had 26 points and 10 rebounds before making a handful of enormous last-minute mistakes for the Lakers, who missed 12 of their 31 free throw attempts and couldn't make a field goal in the final 3:16 of another blow to their playoff hopes. Los Angeles led by four points and had the ball with less than 20 seconds to play, but still lost for the third time in four games.