

Piazza: We Continue on Julio Velasco's Path



TEHRAN – Newly appointed head coach of the Iran volleyball team, Roberto Piazza, said on Tuesday that he will continue to follow the path of former Team Melli coach Julio Velasco. The Italian coach has signed a two-year contract with the Islamic Republic of Iran Volleyball Federation (IRIVF), with an option to extend the deal for an additional two years, Tehran Times reported.

In a meeting attended by the president of the volleyball federation, Milad Taghavi, and members of the media at the federation's headquarters in Tehran, Piazza expressed his hope for success in his new position.

"First of all, I would like to thank the federation for giving me the opportunity to work as Iran's coach. I want to rebuild many aspects of the team, which is why I am here. I will continue on Julio Velasco's path with the national team. Velasco changed the way the world viewed volleyball and did the same for Italy. I want to undertake this important task with Iran," Piazza said.

"I will do my best to elevate the level of Iranian volleyball, and my assistant, Tomaso Totolo, will help me achieve that. Iran has many quality players, some of whom have the potential to play in the best volleyball leagues. We will begin our work in May, and then we will determine our direction."

"The door to the national team is always open, and all players can

contribute. There is no predetermined list, and the same applies to coaching. All Iranian coaches can cooperate with the national team."

When asked about certain players attempting to exert undue influence over the group, he responded, "Players must play, just as trainers must coach. I am the coach of the team, and the president's role is to lead the federation. What is important for us is to all work toward the same goal."

"Definitely, my goal with my technical staff is to raise the level of Iranian volleyball. We need to progress together," Piazza concluded.

Piazza was named Team Melli coach in early September and arrived in Iran on Monday to finalize his contract, replacing Brazilian coach Mauricio Motta Paes.

Trail Blazers Beat Bulls 113-102 to End 5-Game Skid

PORTLAND, Ore. (AP) — Scoot Henderson had 25 points and the Portland Trail Blazers snapped five-game losing streak with a 113-102 victory over the Chicago Bulls on Sunday night.

Zach LaVine had 27 points for the Bulls. They have lost five straight.

Portland stretched its lead to 97-82 on Shaedon Sharpe's 3-pointer with 7:36 left. Patrick Williams' dunk got the Bulls within single digits at 110-102 with 1:26 left. Deni Avdija answered with a layup for Portland to end the threat.

Sharpe came off the bench for the Blazers after coach Chauncey Billups told him his defense



Chicago Bulls guard Zach LaVine (8) looks to pass the ball around Portland Trail Blazers guard Shaedon Sharpe, left, during the first half of an NBA basketball game Sunday, Jan. 19, 2025, in Portland, Ore.

needed to improve to return to a starting role. Sharpe finished with 23 points.

The Bulls led by as 15 points in the first half. Henderson made back-to-back 3-pointers that got the Blazers to 43-42.

Portland tied it at 45 on Jerami Grant's 3 and it was even at 53 going into the break.

Portland, playing the second of a back-to-back, pulled ahead early in the second half, leading by as much as 65-57 on Avdija's 3-pointer. Ayo Dosunmu made a 3 for the Bulls that tied it at 75 but Chicago wasn't able to pull in front.

Avdija finished with 20 points and 12 rebounds.

Bundesliga Titleholders Leverkusen Eying International Glory



BERLIN (Xinhua) -- Concerns about the loss of Victor Boniface have quickly faded for Bayer Leverkusen, the reigning Bundesliga champions.

The Nigerian forward, sidelined since mid-November 2024 due to injury, is making a promising recovery. In his absence, Czech international Patrik Schick has stepped up, thriving in the striker position and solidifying his role as a key player.

Schick, 28, has seen a resurgence in form, contributing 16 goals across all competitions this season. He credits his turnaround to discussions with head coach Xabi Alonso, who encouraged him to make adjustments to his game.

"Things work well, and I am happy," said Schick, who had considered leaving the club earlier this season to secure more playing time. Instead, he has become a vital asset

for Bayer Leverkusen, just in time for Tuesday's UEFA Champions League clash with Atletico Madrid.

Leverkusen is riding high on an 11-match winning streak across all competitions, fueling hopes of retaining their Bundesliga title and achieving European success. While the Bundesliga title race with Bayern Munich remains fiercely contested, Leverkusen's Champions League campaign has been particularly impressive. They currently lead German clubs in the competition, sitting at the top of their group with 13 points.

"The right mentality is back," said team captain and Swiss international Granit Xhaka, reflecting on the team's improved focus and determination.

Despite the strong performances, Alonso has maintained high expectations for his squad. Following a dominant 3-1 league win over Borussia Moenchengladbach, the Spanish coach expressed dissatis-

faction with the team conceding a late goal. "That was the moment we failed to keep up the mentality," Alonso said, urging his players to sustain their intensity.

With crucial matches against Atletico Madrid and Sparta Prague looming, Leverkusen has set its sights on making a deep run in the Champions League. After securing domestic glory last season, the team is eager to add international achievements to their resume.

Xhaka emphasized the importance of mental fortitude in their upcoming match against Atletico. "The upcoming duel is a mentality issue," he said, highlighting the team's commitment to staying focused under pressure.

As Bayer Leverkusen pushes forward with renewed determination, the club's ambitions extend beyond domestic success, aiming to leave a lasting mark on European football this season.

Chelsea Get Back to Winning Ways With 3-1 Defeat of Wolves



Chelsea's Marc Cucurella (left) scores his side's second goal during the English Premier League soccer match.

LONDON (Reuters) - Chelsea won for the first time in six Premier League matches when they beat relegation-threatened Wolverhampton Wanderers 3-1 at home on Monday with goals from defenders Tosin Adarabioyo and Marc Cucurella and a third from winger Noni Madueke.

The win pushed Chelsea - who had been second as recently as last month - above Manchester City and Newcastle United into fourth place, while Wolves remained out of the bottom three only on goal difference ahead of Ipswich Town.

The hosts, seeking to get back on track for a place in next season's Champions League, went ahead in the 24th minute when Tosin sidefooted home from close range.

But goalkeeper Robert Sanchez gifted Wolves an equalizer in first-half stoppage time when he dropped a corner and Matt Doherty stabbed the ball in.

The home fans were fearing a repeat of recent games when Chelsea threw away leads until Cucurella popped up in attack to score after Kiernan Dews-

bury-Hall - in his first league start for the Blues - flicked on a Madueke cross on the hour.

Five minutes later, Madueke nodded in to make sure a header from Trevoh Chalobah - returning to Stamford Bridge after being recalled from a loan spell at Crystal Palace - crossed the line.

Chelsea have 40 points from 22 games, 10 adrift of leaders Liverpool and four behind second-placed Arsenal and Nottingham Forest. They are two points above Manchester City and Newcastle.

Chelsea coach Enzo Maresca was boosted by the return of club captain Reece James who made his first start after the latest in a string of injury absences.

Chalobah also gave the Blues' defense a stronger shape after the loss of Wesley Fofana and Benoît Badiashile due to injuries.

Defender Levi Colwill and midfielders Romeo Lavia and Enzo Fernandez were all absent from the squad ahead of Chelsea's trip to champions Manchester City on Saturday.

Zverev Earns Hard-Fought Win Over Paul to Reach Semis



Germany's Alexander Zverev serves against USA's Tommy Paul during their men's singles quarterfinal match.

MELBOURNE (Reuters) - Alexander Zverev played his best tennis when it mattered most to down Tommy Paul 7-6(1) 7-6(0) 2-6 6-1 on Tuesday and reach his third Australian Open semifinal in five years, keeping alive his dream of finally landing a Grand Slam title.

The 27-year-old German was unable to find his peak level for much of a match played in the stifling afternoon heat on Rod Laver Arena but dominated his American opponent in tiebreaks to lock up the first two sets.

Paul bagged the third set but second seed Zverev upped his intensity to whip through the fourth and set up a meeting with the winner of the later blockbuster clash between Novak Djokovic and Carlos Alcaraz.

Paul, also 27, had beaten Zverev in their two previous meetings and worked assiduously to gain the upper hand in the first two sets only for the German to raise his game to drag him back into a dog fight.

The 2023 semifinalist converted his fourth break point to take a 6-5 lead in the opening set but Zverev returned the favor in the next game before rac-

ing away with the tiebreak 7-1.

Paul broke again early in the second set with a backhand pass as Zverev charged the net and this time he was able to consolidate for a 3-0 lead.

Zverev had break points at 4-2 and blew up at umpire Nacho Forcadell, who had already handed him a code violation for an audible obscenity, after a let was called mid-rally on a deuce point when a feather drifted down onto the court.

Paul held but a riled-up Zverev broke him to love on his next service game to put the set back on serve at 5-4. The German then fended off another break point to hold for 5-5 before denying the 12th seed a single point in the tiebreak.

Zverev gave up his opening service game in the third stanza and Paul doubled his advantage when he crushed a forehand winner for a 5-2 lead before holding to love to clinch the set.

It was a false dawn for the American, though, and the final set was a one-sided affair with Paul not getting on the board until he was 5-0 down, and that only after four deuces.

Injured Vlhova to Miss Alpine Skiing Worlds

BRATISLAVA (AFP) - Reigning Olympic slalom champion Petra Vlhova will miss the skiing world championships in Austria next month as she continues her recovery from a serious knee injury, her coach said on Monday.

The 29-year-old tore her knee ligament as she fell during a World Cup giant slalom at Jasna in her native Slovakia

exactly a year ago, on January 20, 2024.

In December, Vlhova's team said her rehabilitation had been slowed by cartilage problems.

"Petra's knee rehabilitation finally seems to be on the right track, showing encouraging progress day by day," Vlhova's Italian coach Mauro Pini said on Monday.

"However, the setbacks expe-

rienced in December and January have unfortunately compromised the chance to participate in the World Championships in Saalbach," he added.

The world championships will be held at Saalbach-Hinterglemm on February 4-16.

"We had hoped to be in top form to compete for the medals, but sadly that won't be possible," said Pini.

"For Petra, a new chapter begins now, with eyes already set on the Olympics in Cortina 2026."

Besides winning the slalom gold at the Beijing Olympics in 2022, Vlhova topped the World Cup rankings in 2020/2021 and won six medals at world championships including a giant slalom gold at Are in 2019.