FIVE OLYMPIC VACANCIES AT STAKE AS FIVE CONTINENTAL QUALIFIERS SET FOR KICK-OFF

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The five vacancies in the men's volleyball tournament of the 2020 Olympic Games that are still available are about to be contested at various venues on all five continents over the next few days and the line-up for Tokyo 2020 should be finalized by January 12.

The winners of the five continental qualification tournaments will claim the last five tickets (one per continental confederation) to Tokyo and will join hosts Japan, as well as the teams of Argentina, Brazil, Italy, Poland, Russia and USA who advanced through the intercontinental qualifiers in August, in the quest for the most coveted medals in the sports world.

? Europe: January 5 - 10 in Berlin, Germany
? Asia: January 7 - 12 in Jiangmen, China
? Africa: January 7 - 11 in Cairo, Egypt
? South America: January 10 - 12 in Santiago, Chile
? North America: January 10 - 12 in Vancouver, Canada

CEV qualification tournament

European squads will be the first to get into action, as their eight-team qualifier gets underway on Sunday, January 5, at the Max-Schmeling-Halle in Berlin. The participants are split into two round-robin pools to be played over four consecutive days on the way to the January 9 semifinals, matching the pool winners against the pool runners-up, and the big final on January 10 to decide the quota.

Hosts Germany have played at the Olympics twice as East Germany, once as Germany and another two times after the reunification, most recently finishing fifth at London 2012. Their best result is the Munich 1972 silver for GDR. Germany's toughest opposition in Pool A is likely to be presented by Slovenia, a team that never made it to the Olympics, but claimed silver medals at two of the three most recent European Championships, in 2015 and 2019. Also in that pool are Belgium, looking for their second Olympic appearance, after the eighth place way back in 1968, and the Czech Republic, who have never been to the Olympics as such, but showcase one silver (1964) and one bronze (1968) medals out of their five appearances in the first five Olympic tournaments through 1980 as Czechoslovakia.

Reigning 2019 European champions Serbia, gold medallists at Sydney 2000 and bronze medallists at Atlanta 1996 as Serbia and Montenegro, are aiming at their seventh Olympic participation overall. They and the team of France, who played at four editions of the Games and finished ninth in 2016, seem to be the big favourites to make the semis from Pool B, but they will have to face the strong challenge of Bulgaria, silver medallists at Moscow 1980 and looking for their ninth trip to the Olympics, and the Netherlands, Atlanta 1996 champions and Barcelona 1992 runners-up, attempting to register their seventh appearance at the Games.

AVC qualification tournament

Asian teams will be the next to join the race to Tokyo 2020, as the AVC qualification tournament kicks off in Jiangmen on January 7 in the same format as the one of CEV – eight teams, divided into two round-robin pools leading up to crossed semifinals and a final – to stamp one Olympic visa on January 12.

In Pool A, hosts China, most recently finishing fifth at home at Beijing 2008, are targeting their third Olympic appearance, in the company of reigning 2019 Asian champions Iran, who finished fifth at Rio 2016, their only Olympic participation so far, as well as Kazakhstan and Chinese Taipei, who have never made it to the Games as such.

2019 Asian Championship runners-up Australia, who ranked eighth at home at Sydney 2000 and played at two more editions of the Games afterwards, lead the way in Pool B, with eight-time Olympic participants Korea as their main contender. India and Qatar will also start the Jiangmen tournament in Pool B, hoping to book Olympic tickets for the first time in history.

CAVB qualification tournament

A single round-robin tournament with five participating teams will produce the single African representative at Tokyo 2020. Egyptian capital Cairo will host the CAVB qualification battles over five consecutive days, from January 7 through 11.

Tournament hosts Egypt represented their continent at the most recent edition of the Games, in Rio, where they placed ninth. It was their best result out of four Olympic appearances. Tunisia, the African nation with most Olympic experience and reigning 2019 continental champion, have a good shot at booking their seventh trip to the Games. The ninth place at Los Angeles 1984 is their best standing so far. In 1992, Algeria crossed the Mediterranean to finish 12th at the Barcelona Olympics. Now they are aiming at their second Olympic appearance. The squads of Ghana and African championship runners-up Cameroon will also take their chances at claiming

their first ever Olympic visa.

CSV qualification tournament

With both South American standouts, Brazil and Argentina, having already booked their Tokyo 2020 tickets, this year's edition of the Olympic Games will mark the first time in history when the continent will be represented by three men's teams. In a single round-robin qualifier from January 10 through 12 in Santiago, Chile, four teams will compete for the rare honour to accompany the two South American powerhouses to the Olympics.

Venezuela are, in fact, the only other team from the continent that have ever appeared at the Games. They did so in 2008 when they finished ninth in Beijing and will try to do it again in 2020 in Tokyo. None of their three opponents in Santiago – Colombia, Peru and hosts Chile – have ever qualified for the Olympics, so the fans may expect fierce battles at Arena Monticello.

NORCECA qualification tournament

The North American qualifier is the last of the five to get underway, also as a single round-robin tournament with four teams from January 10 through 12. Vancouver, Canada will host the event with the iconic Pacific Coliseum as the arena of the matches.

Hosts Canada will aim to secure their fifth Olympic appearance. At Rio 2016, the Maple Leafs ranked fifth, while their best result came at Los Angeles 1984, when they finished fourth. Montreal 1976 bronze medallists Cuba, who are after their eighth trip to the Olympics and hoping to do better than the 11th place in the Rio 2016 final standings, are another serious contender for a spot at Tokyo 2020. Mexico, who shared that 11th position with Cuba at their second participation in the Games, and Puerto Rico, who are targeting their first appearance at the Olympics, are the other two squads in the line-up for the NORCECA vacancy.