

# Foolad left heartbroken by Al Hilal in ACL quarters

## Sports Desk

Foolad Khuzestan's inspiring journey at the AFC Champions League (ACL) came to an end at the hands of Saudi giant Al Hilal on Thursday as Malian Moussa Marega scored a last-gasp winner to fire the defending champion into the semifinals.

The 1-0 defeat in Al Janoub Stadium concluded a chaotic four days in Qatar for the Persian Gulf Pro League outfit, which had been hit by the abrupt, and somewhat unprofessional, departure of manager Javad Nekounam right after the final whistle of Monday's last-16 victory over Al Faisaly.

Foolad still has every reason to be proud of the brave performance against the Club World Cup finalist as the southern Iranian side had its fair share of chances and came within inches of a surprise lead in the 72nd minute, only to see Amin Hazbavi's towering header bounce off the crossbar, before former Porto striker's side-footed effort found the bottom corner with three minutes from normal time. Despite the setback, Ha-



Al Hilal's Moussa Marega (blue) scores during a 1-0 victory over Foolad Khuzestan in the AFC Champions League quarterfinals at Al Janoub Stadium, Al Wakrah, Qatar, on Feb. 23, 2023. ● AFC

midreza Rajabi – an assistant to Nekounam who took over for the game – hailed his men for the way they dealt with the four-time Asian champion. “We had analyzed Al Hi-

lal before the match and expected them to play in a certain way. However, they changed their tactics,” Rajabi said in the post-match press conference, adding: “I have to give credit to my

players though as they were able to adapt and were in control (in the first half).”

“Al Hilal are a powerful team with many quality players and they delivered

in the end. However, if we had concentrated, we could have won this match but I am proud as we fought till the end.”

Rajabi was also quick to praise his predecessor,

while he remained muted on his future at the club.

“Despite the result, we have shown Asia over the last two years how worthy we are as a team. We showed we are a very tough team and for this, I must say thank you to Javad Nekounam.

“It was his guidance which helped Foolad reach where we have. As for my future (as head coach), I leave it to the club to decide.”

The result means Al Hilal remains on course to play in a fifth final showpiece of the Asian elite clubs competition in nine years, but to that end the Blue Waves will have to see off Qatari heavyweight Al Duhail in Sunday's semifinal.

Earlier on Thursday, Kenyan international Michael Olunga bagged a late brace in the space of eight minutes to lead Al Duhail to a 2-1 victory of Al Shabab, with Saeed al-Rubaei's stoppage-time goal proving too little too late for the Saudi club.

The winner of Sunday's contest will square off against Japanese Urawa Red Diamonds in the two-legged final in April and May.

## If we can beat Barca, we can beat anyone: Ten Hag



Manchester United manager Erik ten Hag celebrates after the 2-1 victory over Barcelona in the UEFA Europa League playoffs at Old Trafford, Manchester, Britain, on Feb. 23, 2023. ● AP

After seeing his in-form side come from behind to beat Barcelona in a thrilling game at Old Trafford on Thursday, Manchester United manager Erik ten Hag insisted his team can beat anyone as they hunt for a first major trophy since 2017.

United remain in four competitions this season after earning a 2-1 victory in their Europa League playoff second leg to knock out the Spanish side 4-3 on aggregate, Reuters reported.

Getting the better of a team eight points clear at the top of LaLiga and playing with an intensity rarely seen at Old Trafford since Alex Ferguson was United manager filled Ten Hag with confidence.

“You need a strategy to build but also you need results to get that strong belief,” Ten Hag told reporters.

“This is another step because when you can beat Barcelona – one of the best teams in this moment in Europe – your belief can be really strong because then I think you are able to beat anyone.

“It was a magnificent night. I think it is brilliant when you can beat Barcelona, eight points ahead of Real Madrid in LaLiga and we have seen this week Real Madrid playing (against Liverpool). We did a magnificent performance.”

It is not the first time this season United have come from behind in a big match at home, having beaten Premier League champions Manchester City 2-1 last month after falling behind. Ten Hag praised the character of his players.

“We have great personalities in this team, starting with David (De Gea), Rapha (Varane), Licha (Martinez), Casemiro, Bruno (Fernandes), such winning types,” he said.

Brazilian forward Antony scored the winner against Barcelona after coming on as a substitute at halftime.

“Everyone has such a strong belief in this team and the fight in this team,” Ten Hag said. “You can see it with the subs, they are coming on and bringing energy and quality and a different dynamic in games.”

“I think all the subs, not only in this game but in many games before, did brilliantly.”

# Celtics escape Pacers in OT, Nuggets and 76ers claw out wins

NBA conference leaders Boston and Denver were pushed to the limit on Thursday, the Celtics escaping in a 142-138 overtime triumph over Indiana and the Nuggets edging the Cavaliers in Cleveland.

Boston star Jayson Tatum, coming off a record-setting 55-point performance in the All-Star Game, scored 31 points, including the Celtics' last four in overtime, AFP reported.

Denver, meanwhile, held off the tenacious Cavaliers 115-109, while the Philadelphia 76ers erased a 17-point deficit to beat the Memphis Grizzlies 110-105.

Tatum got off to a slow start as NBA action resumed after the All-Star break, but finished with a double-double that included 12 rebounds.

Jaylen Brown added 30 points for the Celtics, who improved their league-leading record to 43-17, but are just one game ahead of the surging Milwaukee Bucks atop the East.

The Pacers, led by 40 points and 10 rebounds from Myles Turner, erased a 10-point halftime deficit.

It was tied at 125-125 with 1:41 left in regulation. Both Tatum and Brown coughed up turnovers from there, but Indiana's Tyrese Haliburton missed a jump shot in the waning seconds as they went to overtime.



Celtics' Jayson Tatum (0) shoots during an NBA victory over the Pacers in Indianapolis, IN, US, on Feb. 23, 2023. ● AJ MAST/AP

It was knotted at 138-138 with 56.2 seconds left in the extra session, but Tatum drained two free throws and sealed the win with a tip-in with 10.4 seconds remaining.

In Cleveland, Michael Porter Jr., fed by Kentavious Caldwell-Pope, drained the Nuggets' 17th three-pointer of the night with 2:15 remaining to help Denver escape. Porter and Cald-

well-Pope combined for 10 three-pointers while Denver's two-time NBA Most Valuable Player Nikola Jokic delivered his league-leading 22nd triple-double of the season with 24 points, 18 rebounds and 13 assists.

Jamal Murray returned from a six-game injury absence to score 16 points for the Nuggets, who won their fourth straight.

The Cavs made them work for it, dominating inside in a game that featured 24 lead changes.

Cleveland were up by five when Reggie Jackson, making his Nuggets debut, drained a three-pointer from well beyond the half-court line to pull Denver within 91-89 heading into the final period.

Evan Mobley scored 31 points and Donovan Mitch-

ell and Darius Garland added 22 each for Cleveland, but Mobley didn't score in the fourth period and the Cavs didn't score again after Garland's basket pulled them within two with 2:38 to play.

In Philadelphia, Tobias Harris drained a three-pointer with 39.1 seconds remaining to put the 76ers up for the first time since the opening minutes, 106-105.

The Sixers, fueled by 31 points from James Harden and 27 points and 19 rebounds from Joel Embiid, pulled away from there.

The Grizzlies had set the tone early, out-scoring the Sixers 37-22 in the first quarter thanks largely to Desmond Bane's 19 points. Philadelphia trailed by 11 midway through the fourth, but Bane went cold, finishing with 25 points while Jaren Jackson Jr. added 18 and Ja Morant 15 for the Grizzlies.

Philadelphia closed the game with a 10-1 scoring run that included a thundering dunk from Embiid – who also blocked six shots. Elsewhere, The Los Angeles Lakers launched their final push for a playoff berth with a 124-111 victory over the reigning champion Golden State Warriors. LeBron James scored just 13 points and Anthony Davis added 12 for the Lakers, who were led by Malik Beasley's 25 and had a combined 68 from their bench in the comfortable win over a Warriors team missing Stephen Curry and Andrew Wiggins.

While James and Davis were able to get some welcome rest in the fourth quarter, there was bad news for the Lakers early as recent arrival D'Angelo Russell exited in the first quarter with a sprained ankle.