

Nekounam announces shock resignation as Foolad gets Al Hilal test in ACL



of the match which secured a first-ever spot in the last-eight round of the Asian elite clubs' competition for the Iranian club.

"I am happy for this win. I am also happy that my team is one of the best four teams in West Asia," said Nekounam.

"I should congratulate my players as they played with the gameplan we had. We didn't give any chance to our rivals and our players had the passion to win and they did."

Foolad spokesman Armin Moradi told Iranian IRIB TV3 later in the day that the club "firmly opposes Nekounam's decision."

"Nekounam has been working tirelessly every day and I'm sure he will be in charge of our next training sessions. He and the rest of the team have been under immense pressure lately, but we made history today and will try to keep up the momentum," said the club official.

Also on Monday, goals from Odion Ighalo, Jang Hyun-soo and Luciano Vietto led Al Hilal to a 3-1 victory over UAE's Shabab Al Ahli, with Syrian striker Omar Khribin bagging a late consolation for the Emirati club.

Qatari giant Al Duhail and Al Shabab - the other Saudi team left in the competition - will also square off in the quarterfinals on Thursday.

The four West Asian clubs will decide who will face Japanese Urawa Red Diamonds in the two-legged final in April and May.

Sports Desk

Foolad Khuzestan head coach Javad Nekounam said the 1-0 victory over Saudi side Al Faisaly in the AFC Champions League (ACL) round of 16 was his last game in charge of the Persian Gulf Pro League outfit.

A cagy affair in Doha's Al Thumama Stadium was settled by a Sasan Ansari's

64th-minute strike, when Foolad skipper capitalized on a poor back-pass header by Saleh al-Qumaizi, snatching the ball in the box before his low drive went past goalkeeper Ahmed al-Kassar into the bottom-right corner.

Foolad held off a late Al Faisaly push for an equalizer to seal a place in Thursday's quarterfinal fixture against Saudi giant and

defending champion Al Hilal, which recently made it to the final showpiece at the FIFA Club World Cup in Morocco, only to suffer a 5-3 defeat against Real Madrid.

However, Foolad players and supporters were stunned by Nekounam's shock announcement in the post-match press conference.

"I'm a professional and

I've dedicated my time and life to football. I know this might not be the right time to say this but the game was my last on Foolad's bench and I won't be here for the match against whoever the next opponent is going to be as I've been through a lot over the past month," said Nekounam, whose team went into Monday's contest on the back of three successive

defeats in the Iranian top flight.

The Iranian did not open up further on his decision, though he added: "I've won two trophies [with Foolad] and led the team to the Champions League twice, which is why I believe my players deserve more respect for what they have achieved."

Nekounam was still thrilled with the outcome

UK, 30 other nations vow support for Olympic ban on Russian, Belarusian athletes

More than 30 countries, including the United States, Britain and France, on Monday pledged their support for banning Russian and Belarusian athletes from competing in international sporting events, a British government statement said.

The move increases the pressure on the International Olympic Committee (IOC), which is desperate to avoid the 2024 Paris Olympics being torn asunder by Russia's invasion of Ukraine, Reuters reported.

Monday's statement follows recent proposals from the IOC which suggest a pathway is being explored to allow Russian and Belarusian athletes to return to competition as neutrals, including at next year's Olympics.

"There are serious concerns about how feasible it is for Russian and Belarusian athletes to compete on a neutral basis given they are directly funded and supported by their states," added the British government statement.

Paris 2024 organisers insisted at the beginning of the month that they would abide by the IOC



decision on Russian and Belarusian athletes' participation in the Games.

However, Paris Mayor Anne Hidalgo said there should be no

Russian delegation at the Paris Olympics as long as the Ukraine war, which Moscow calls a 'special operation' is ongoing. Ukraine has threatened to boy-

cott the Games if Russian and Belarusian athletes compete and Ukrainian world and 2012 Olympic heavyweight champion boxer Oleksandr Usyk has said Rus-

sians will win "medals of blood, deaths and tears" if allowed to take part.

Such threats have revived memories of boycotts in the 1970s and 1980s during the Cold War era that still haunt the global Olympic body today, and it has called on Ukraine to drop them.

The IOC has said a boycott would violate the Olympic Charter and its inclusion of Russians and Belarusians is based on a UN resolution against discrimination within the Olympic Movement.

Since the invasion of Ukraine many sports bodies have moved events and suspended Russian and Belarusian teams or athletes, while sponsors ended contracts in protest against the war. The British government added on Monday that Russia and Belarus can "pave the way for their athletes' full return to the international sports community by ending the war they started."

Earlier this month, Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy took part in an online meeting attended by 35 ministers and chaired by the UK to discuss the call for a ban.

Sky's the limit for Djokovic after matching Graf, say younger rivals



● HANNAH MCKAY/REUTERS

Novak Djokovic has shown that age is not a barrier and the 35-year-old will continue to break records, his younger rivals on the ATP tour said as the Serbian star looks to overtake Steffi Graf as the player with the most weeks at world number one.

Djokovic won a record-extending 10th Australian Open title last month to draw level with his great rival Rafa Nadal on 22 Grand Slam victories and leapfrog Carlos Alcaraz into top spot in the ATP rankings, Reuters reported.

He already holds the record for the most weeks as the men's number one after surpassing Roger Federer's mark of 310 weeks in March 2021 and began his 377th week at the top on Monday to go level with 22-times major champion Graf.

Russian world number five Andrey Rublev said Djokovic had shown that anything is possible.

"And at the age of 35, he still can be the best player in the world and break records," Rublev, 25, who lost to Djokovic in the Australian Open quarter-finals, told reporters in Doha.

"If you do the things right, you can perform at the highest level ... age doesn't matter. That's what it means to me."

Former world number two Alexander Zverev said Djokovic had shown how consistent he can be by dominating his rivals in the last decade.

However, Zverev said that watching Graf being overtaken would be bitter-sweet for him.

"He's surpassing Steffi, so as a German, obviously I always loved her having that record. But credit to Novak, I think that shows how great he is," the 25-year-old Zverev said.

"I'm sure that he's going to break a few more records. I'm not sure there are many left, but the ones that are left, maybe he will."

Djokovic first became world number one in 2011 and his longest continuous run at the top was 122 weeks between July 2014 and November 2016. For that record, he trails Roger Federer (237 weeks), Jimmy Connors (160) and Ivan Lendl (157).