



Persepolis chasing the double, Esteghlal seeking solace in Hazfi Cup final

Sports Desk

The stage is set for a fitting finale to the Iranian club football season when Tehran archrivals Persepolis and Esteghlal square off in the Hazfi Cup final at the capital's Azadi Stadium today. Newly-crowned Persian Gulf Pro League champion Persepolis will be after a second trophy in less than a fortnight, while Esteghlal will be chasing a consoling end to a campaign that has been overwhelmed by controversy and

chaos off the pitch. A derby victory for Persepolis will mean a second domestic double in four years, with the opposite outcome seeing Esteghlal lift a record-extending eighth Hazfi Cup trophy – first since 2018. The Reds have been in flying form since the Persian New Year break in late March and head into the game on the back of a remarkable nine successive victories in all competitions, which helped Yahya Golmohammadi's men overcome a four-point

deficit on top of the league table and pip Sepahan to the title before securing a place in today's encounter thanks to a 3-1 win at Havadar last Thursday. Esteghlal was probably the most formidable side in the second half of the Iranian top flight as Ricardo Sa Pinto's men won 11 in 14 league outings since the 2-1 defeat against Sepahan in January, losing only one – though it proved to be a season-defining setback for the Blues. Persepolis striker Issa Al-

Kassir came off the bench at the break to score as Esteghlal suffered a 1-0 defeat against its city rival in April, and was then held to a 1-1 draw at home by relegation-threatening San'at Naft Abadan in the following game to fall off the pace in the title race. Sa Pinto still praised his players for staying in the mix until the closing stages of the title run-in, despite the club having to deal with numerous issues throughout the campaign, which saw three chairmen in charge in the

space of nine months, while the team was expelled from next season's AFC Champions League after failing to meet the Asian football governing body's club licensing regulations. The recent history in the Hazfi Cup is on the Blues' side as they came out victorious twice in the shootout against today's opponents en route to the final showpieces in 2020 and 2021, but the bad news for Sa Pinto is that his side left the pitch empty-handed on both occasions.

Iran's Rezaei wins world taekwondo bronze



varzesh3.com

Sports Desk

Matin Rezaei won a first medal for Iran at the 2023 World Taekwondo Championships in Baku, Azerbaijan – bagging a joint-bronze in the men's -68kg weight class. On Monday, Rezaei fell to a 15-13, 21-5 defeat against the British No. 1 seed Bradley Sinden in the semifinals to share the third podium with Tokyo Olympic gold medalist Ulugbek Rashitov of Uzbekistan. Sinden – beaten by Rashitov in the Olympic final – went on to beat South Korean Jin Ho-jun (3-2, 16-9) in the final showpiece – a second world gold for the Briton. Rezaei had beaten India's Prithvi Raj Chauhan in three rounds before coming out victorious against João Victor Diniz of Brazil. The Iranian then defeated Spain's Javier Pérez – a world silver winner in 2019 – to progress to the last-eight round, where he came out on top against China's Xiao Chenming. Elsewhere on the first day of the event, Hungarian Luana Marton beat Lo Chia-ling of the Chinese Taipei 2-1, 4-3 for the women's -57kg gold, with Turkey's Hatice Kübra İlgün and Maria Clara Pacheco of Brazil settling for bronze medals. Iranian Tina Modanloo's campaign finished early after a first-round defeat against Uzbekistan's Madina Mirabzalova.

Heat rout Celtics to book NBA Finals showdown with Nuggets

AFP – The Miami Heat advanced to the NBA Finals on Monday by routing Boston 103-84 and denying the Celtics a historic comeback from 3-0 down in the series. Jimmy Butler had 28 points, seven rebounds and six assists while Caleb Martin added 26 points and 10 rebounds to spark Miami, which will visit Denver on Thursday to begin the best-of-seven championship final. Taking full advantage of an injury to Boston star Jayson Tatum in the opening seconds and a cold-shooting start by the host Celtics, the Heat avoided becoming the first team in NBA history to lose a playoff series after taking a 3-0 lead. Miami recovered from a gut-punch of a game-six defeat, falling on a last-second tip-in, to win the Eastern Conference final 4-3, silencing a loud Boston crowd after the opening minutes. "We stayed together as a group and as a team," Butler said. "We talked about going to get a tough

one on the road and we did just that. "But we're not satisfied. We're happy. We're ecstatic. But we've got one more to get." The Heat, seeking a fourth NBA title and first since 2013, last reached the NBA Finals in 2020, losing to the Lakers. The Nuggets, into the NBA Finals for the first time, swept the Los Angeles Lakers in the Western Conference final and have not played since May 22. Miami stretched the lead as high as 17 points in the second quarter – a margin the Heat hadn't squandered to lose a game all season – but Boston pulled within 52-41 at half-time. With Tatum hurting, Derrick White scored eight straight points to lift the Celtics within 59-51. But Martin sank a baseline jumper just before the third-quarter buzzer, giving him nine in the period, to put Miami ahead 76-66 entering the fourth. Martin sank a three-pointer to ig-



Heat's Jimmy Butler (22) dunks the ball during a victory over the Celtics in Game 7 of the NBA Eastern Conference finals at the TD Garden, Boston, MA, US, on May 29, 2023. nba.com

nite a 7-0 Miami run to open the fourth quarter for an 83-66 edge, matching the Heat's largest lead to that point.

The Celtics went nearly four minutes without scoring and never again threatened, finishing a woeful 9-of-42 from three-point

range. "We shot 21 percent from three," Celtics coach Joe Mazzulla said. "The defense was still there."

"They gave it everything they had. That's the most important thing to take from this. We failed, but it's not because the guys didn't have a sense of togetherness and character." Tatum, who finished with 14 points on 5-of-13 shooting, turned his left ankle landing awkwardly after a baseline jumper in the game's opening seconds. He stayed in the contest but grimaced often and the prolific scorer took only one shot in the first 17 minutes. "He just tried to play through it as best he could," Mazzulla said. An 18-6 Heat run to close the first quarter gave Miami a 22-15 lead with the Celtics matching their season low for first-quarter points. Boston went 0-for-10 from three-point range in the first quarter, missing the first 12 from beyond the arc overall, and made only 6-of-23 from the floor in the opening period.



Serbia's Novak Djokovic is in action during his French Open first-round victory over Aleksandar Kovacevic of the US in Roland Garros, Paris, France, on May 29, 2023. CLODAGH KILCOYNE/REUTERS

'Kosovo is the heart of Serbia', Djokovic writes at French Open

Sports Desk

REUTERS – Serbian world number three Novak Djokovic risked stirring up a political controversy at the French Open on Monday after writing a message about Kosovo following his first-round victory over American Aleksandar Kovacevic. "Kosovo is the heart of Serbia. Stop the violence," 22-time Grand Slam champion Djokovic wrote on a camera lens in Serbian. Around 25 NATO peacekeeping soldiers defending three town halls

in northern Kosovo were injured in clashes with Serb protesters on Monday, while Serbia's president put the army on the highest level of combat alert. The incidents came a day after NATO chief Jens Stoltenberg called on Kosovo to tone down tensions with Serbia following clashes between Kosovan police and protesters who are opposed to Albanian mayors taking office in ethnic Serbian areas. Serbian President Aleksandar Vucic said that 52 Serbs were injured on Monday, three of them

seriously, while Kosovo President Vjosa Osmani accused his Serbian counterpart of destabilising Kosovo. Serbia and its traditional ally Russia do not recognise Kosovo's independence, and Moscow has blocked the country's bid to become a member of the United Nations. Serbia still considers Kosovo part of its territory. "Kosovo is our cradle, our stronghold, centre of the most important things for our country... There are many reasons why I wrote that on the camera," RFI radio quoted the

36-year-old Djokovic as saying to Serbian media. The French tennis federation (FFT), which organises the event, told Reuters that there were "no official Grand Slam rules on what players can or cannot say. The FFT will not be making any statement or taking any stance on this matter." Djokovic will hope to avoid another political distraction at a Grand Slam after he defended his father at the Australian Open in January when a video emerged showing him posing with some fans holding Russian flags amid the war in Ukraine.