

Persepolis, Sepahan among four Iranian clubs in AFC Champions League

Sports Desk

Persian Gulf Pro League champion Persepolis will be joined by Sepahan, Nassaji Mazandaran, and Tractor in the next AFC Champions League (ACL) season.

The Asian Football Federation on Thursday unveiled the eligible teams for the continent's elite clubs competition and the four Iranian sides as well as Golgozar Sirjan and Foolad Khuzestan were "licensed with sanctions." Two-time Asian champion Esteghlal, which lifted the Iranian top-flight trophy in the 2021/22 season, was excluded from the prestigious tournament after failing to meet the AFC's club licensing requirements.

Persepolis, Sepahan, and Nassaji are awarded a direct slot in the group stage of the event, while Tractor will have to secure a group berth through the playoff round.

A run of seven successive wins saw Persepolis pip Sepahan to the league title by a single point in May – the Reds' sixth Pro League crown in seven years – before Yahya Golmohammadi's men defeated archrival Esteghlal 2-1 in extra time for the Iranian Hazfi Cup trophy, completing a second domestic league and cup double in four years. The Tehran Reds – ACL fi-



● ALI SHARIFZADE/IRNA

nalist in 2018 and 2020 – will be back in the competition after missing out on the last edition due to club licensing shortcomings. Sepahan, beaten in the 2007 final, represented the country last season, only to see its campaign come to an end in the group stage.

Minnaw side Nassaji, which only won promotion to the domestic top-tier league in 2018, is gearing up for a maiden international appearance, thanks to a Hazfi Cup triumph in 2022 – a first trophy in the 64-year history of the northern Iranian club.

Tractor, meanwhile, will replace Esteghlal at the event courtesy of a fourth-spot finish in the league, which came after an impressive run under Spanish head coach Paco Jémez in the second half of the campaign.

The Tabriz-based club will host the winner of the pre-

liminary-round encounter between the Emirati club Sharjah and Bangladesh's Bashundhara Kings in a west region playoff on August 22.

The new season of the AFC Champions League will be staged across dual calendar years for the first time, with the group stage tak-

ing place from September 18 to December 13.

The expanded event will see 40 teams being divided across 10 groups in the west and east regions.

The knockout stage will be held from February 12 to April 24, 2024, before the two-legged final is staged on May 11 and 18, 2024.

Hamilton backs Verstappen to beat his F1 race win record



● XPB IMAGES

THE GUARDIAN – Lewis Hamilton believes Max Verstappen could eclipse his Formula One record of 103 race wins.

The British driver acknowledged that Verstappen and his Red Bull team are in a position to chase down his remarkable tally but said he hoped to be able to further extend his lead, perhaps even at the British Grand Prix at Silverstone in three races time.

Hamilton was speaking before this weekend's Canadian Grand Prix, where Verstappen is odds-on to secure his 41st victory, matching Ayrton Senna's wins. When asked if the Dutchman could yet equal or surpass his own record, Hamilton was unequivocal.

"He has got a very long career ahead of him so absolutely," he said. "Records are there to be broken and he has got an amazing team." However the seven-time champion also insisted he and his Mercedes team would be unstinting in their efforts to return to the top step of the podium. "We have to work harder to try and continue to extend [the win record]," he added. "I hope that at least within the last period of time in my career we get to have some close racing."

After a very strong result at the last round in Spain, Hamilton indicated that he was optimistic regarding further upgrades, so much so that Mercedes could challenge the Red Bulls at Silverstone on 9 July. "I am really, really hopeful," he said. "The performance we had in Spain, each lap I was only about three-tenths off Max, which is the closest we have been this year. I am hoping by Silverstone we would have taken another step so I am hopeful maybe that will be a race where we can actually race them."

Hamilton also played down expectations of an announcement of a renewal of his contract with Mercedes, which ends this year, but did indicate his intent was very much that it was to be concluded. "It will get done when it is done, if that's next week or a month's time as long as it gets done I am not really bothered," he said.

Verstappen has five wins already this year, in what is proving to be an utterly dominant Red Bull car and leads the world championship by 53 points from his teammate Sergio Pérez. Hamilton is in fourth, 83 points back.

Man United negotiating exclusivity with Qatari bidder in \$6B-plus sale talks

REUTERS – English football club Manchester United is negotiating granting exclusivity to the consortium led by Qatar's Sheikh Jassim bin Hamad Al Thani in talks to sell itself for more than \$6 billion, people familiar with the matter said on Thursday.

While a deal remains uncertain, the development represents a major milestone in the efforts of Sheikh Jassim – the son of Qatar's former prime minister who is one of the richest men in the Persian Gulf state – to take over the iconic sports brand.

Members of the Glazer family, who own minority stakes in Manchester United and control it thanks to a dual-class share structure, would be cashing out as part of the proposed deal, one of the sources said.

The Qatari offer is currently viewed by the Glazers more favorably than a bid from British billionaire Jim Ratcliffe, founder of chemicals producer INEOS, the sources added. Ratcliffe's offer envisions that the Glazers would keep some interest in Manchester

United.

Manchester United would not be allowed to negotiate with any bidder other than Sheikh Jassim for the exclusivity period. It could not be learned how long this period may last. The sources cautioned that the situation remained fluid and a new bid from Ratcliffe could prevent Sheikh Jassim from securing exclusivity.

The sources requested anonymity because the matter is confidential. Representatives for Manchester United and Sheikh Jassim did not immediately respond to requests for comment.

Shares of Manchester United jumped as much as 15% on the news and ended trading in New York on Thursday up 6.8% at \$24.81.

A \$6 billion-plus deal for Manchester United would be one of the biggest ever in the sports world, following a similarly sized sale of the National Football League's Washington Commanders earlier this year.

It would also represent



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a significant premium to other soccer deals. Last year, the \$3.1 billion acquisition of Chelsea Football Club by an investment group led by Todd Boehly and Clearlake Capital valued it at 5.7 times revenue for its last financial year. A sale for more than \$6 billion would value Manchester United at more than 10 times last year's annual revenue, according to Refinitiv data.

The Glazer family, which made its fortune in real estate, retail and healthcare and also owns the NFL's Tampa Bay Buccaneers, bought the team for 790 million pounds (\$1 billion) in 2005.

Record 20-time English champions, Manchester United has over 650 million fans worldwide, according to market research firm Kantar. A large number of them have been

clamoring for a change of ownership.

That is because the Glazers have overseen a significant downturn in the club's fortunes, with the club winning just the last of their 20 top-flight titles in former manager Alex Ferguson's final season in charge in 2012-13.

Manchester United won the League Cup under Erik ten Hag this season, but

their third-place finish in the league, 14 points behind local rivals and treble winners Manchester City, underscores the scale of the turnaround required. While a section of supporters may view the deep pockets of a new Qatari owner as the quickest way to shrink the gap between United and Abu Dhabi-backed Manchester City, others have expressed "deep concern" at Qatar's human rights record.

Several Middle Eastern nations have made huge investments in sport in recent years, leading to criticism that they are trying to "sportswash" their images.

Qatar hosted football's showpiece event, the World Cup, in 2022, while state-run Qatar Sport Investments (QSI) owns Ligue 1 club Paris St Germain.

Saudi Arabia's Public Investment Fund (PIF) bankrolls the breakaway LIV Golf Series, which recently agreed to merge with the PGA Tour, as well as Premier League team Newcastle United.