

AFC Champions League group stage: Iranian clubs drawn against global stars of Saudi Pro League

Sports Desk

The Iranian football fans will be treated to some mouthwatering contests in the upcoming group stage of the AFC Champions League as the Persian Gulf Pro League clubs are pitted against the Saudi sides and their newly-signed superstars of the sport.

The big story of the ongoing summer transfer window has been the rise of the Saudi Pro League as a favorite destination for some of the big names in the European football, who have been lured by lucrative contracts to follow in the footsteps of Portuguese sensation Cristiano Ronaldo in moving to the Middle East – a major boost for the game in Asia which will see their presence bring more publicity and worldwide attention to the continent's elite clubs competition.

Group of death

The draw for the ACL group phase took place at the AFC House in Kuala Lumpur on Thursday, where 40 teams were divided into 10 groups across the West and East Zones.

Iranian league and cup champion Persepolis will square off against some familiar foes in the so-called 'group of death' in the West. ACL runners-up in 2018 and 2020, the Tehran Reds are in Group E alongside Saudi side Al Nassr, Qatar Stars League champion Al Duhail, and Istiklol of Tajikistan.

Yahya Golmohammadi's men, whose run of 12 successive domestic wins since



● REUTERS



● EPA



● IMAGO

late March came to an end with a 1-1 draw against Zob Ahan at Tehran's Azadi Stadium on Thursday, will begin their campaign with a home game against Al Nassr on September 19.

However, with the Iranian stadiums yet to be equipped with the video assistant referee (VAR) technology, the Reds and the country's other two teams – Sepahan and Nassaji Mazandaran – may be forced to host their opponents in neutral venues

overseas.

In an interview with AFP after the draw, AFC Secretary-General Windsor John insisted that the VAR system "will be introduced from the group stage."

Persepolis has fond memories of the previous encounter against Al Nassr in the Champions League – a shootout victory in the semifinals in Qatar in the 2020 edition.

Spanish center-back Aymeric Laporte is the latest

high-profile footballer to leave the English Premier League for the Saudi top flight, leaving Manchester City for Al Nassr in a deal worth £25m to join Ronaldo and his fellow Portuguese fullback Alex Telles, as well as ex-Bayern Munich striker Sadio Mane and Croatian midfielder Marcelo Brozovic – a UEFA Champions League finalist with Inter in June.

The match in Doha's Abdullah Bin Khalifa Stadium on October 2 will be an eighth

meeting between Al Duhail and Persepolis at the tournament since 2015, with both sides winning three games apiece.

Persepolis will finish the first round of the group fixtures against Istiklol on Oct. 24, in a repeat of the last-16 clash in Dushanbe two years ago, which the Iranian side won 1-0, thanks to a Mehdi Torabi's 90th-minute strike. Iranian league leader Sepahan, which finished behind Persepolis last season, will

go head-to-head with Iraq's Air Force Club on Sep. 18 in the opening game in Group C, also featuring Saudi champion Al Ittihad and AGMK FC – currently fifth in the Uzbekistan Super League.

Al Ittihad stole the headlines in July when it signed French talisman and reigning Ballon D'Or winner Karim Benzema as a free agent for a reported wage of £172m per year. The Saudi giant also secured

deals for former Chelsea midfielder N'Golo Kante and Portuguese striker Jota, who bagged 15 goals to help Celtic win a domestic treble last season.

Sepahan will play host to Al Ittihad on Oct. 2 before visiting Olmaliq to take on AGMK three weeks later.

Group D will see Nassaji Mazandaran – the Iranian Hazfi Cup winner in 2022 – face Al Hilal, Indian Super League side Mumbai City FC and Navbahor – runner-up to Pakhtakor in Uzbekistan in the previous campaign.

The 2019 and 2021 ACL champion and last season's runner-up, Al Hilal brought an end to a summer-long transfer saga surrounding Neymar, signing the Brazilian on a two-year £86.3m contract, which will see the 31-year-old be paid £129.4m a year – six times the amount he earned at PSG.

Portuguese international Ruben Neves, Senegalese defender Kalidou Koulibaly, ex-Lazio midfielder Sergej Milinkovic-Savic and his Serbian teammate Aleksandar Mitrovic, as well as Brazilian Malcom, and Morocco goalkeeper Yassine Bounou are Al Hilal's other marquee signings in the summer.

Nassaji's maiden outing in the AFC Champions League history will come away to Mumbai City on Sep. 18, before the home game against Al Hilal on Oct. 3 is followed by a fixture at Navbahor on Oct. 23.

The five group winners in the West Zone will be joined by best three runners-up in the region in progressing to February's round of 16.

World Athletics Championships:

Olympic champion Tentoglou wins long jump gold after more late drama

REUTERS – Olympic champion Miltiadis Tentoglou of Greece was involved in yet another last-round drama as he won long jump gold at the World Athletics Championships in Budapest when his final leap of 8.52 metres edged him ahead of Jamaica's Wayne Pinnock by two centimetres on Thursday. Tentoglou is no stranger to such things, having won Olympic gold with his final jump in Tokyo after being out of the medals after five rounds.

It went the other way in Eugene last year when he was leading after five, only for Wang Jianan of China to come from nowhere, take gold and demote the Greek to silver.

Tentoglou got Thursday's final off to a flier as he produced a huge season's best 8.50 with his opening jump, only for Pinnock to match it in the second round.

That put Pinnock, who flew to a world-leading 8.54 metres on his opening jump in Wednesday's qualifying and a personal best by 17cm, in the lead on the back of having the best second jump by one centimetre.

In the final round, though, Tentoglou hit the board perfectly to soar ahead and Pinnock was unable to improve on his final attempt.

"This competition may have been the toughest I have taken part in," Tentoglou said. "Last year it was a bad competition for me but this year I had no excuses.

"But I was not comfortable. After my third jump I started to feel my legs cramping. That's why it took so long to get the big jump. I had to test my legs to see that I was fine and then I went for it in the final jump after having felt no pain.

Pinnock was stunned by the turnaround but soon found

the positives after a week he will never forget.

"When he pulled that off I couldn't believe it but then I could, of course, I know what he's capable of," he said.

"I just knew he had it but I just didn't know he would do it, that he would pull it off at that moment.

"But this is still a silver medal. It's really a dream come true. Watching people like Tentoglou gave me the motivation as a youngster to reach the top. And now I'm there, nearly there."

Jamaica's Tajay Gayle snatched bronze with his final leap of 8.27, matching compatriot Carey McLeod but edging him on count-back.

McLeod was lucky to escape injury after slipping on take-off on his third jump, spiraling spectacularly into the air and landing face-first in the pit.



Miltiadis Tentoglou of Greece competes in the men's long jump final at the World Athletics Championships in Budapest, Hungary, on August 24, 2023. ● KIRBY LEE/USA TODAY SPORTS