

## Iranian, Saudi clubs to may play in neutral venues



AFC

### Sports Desk

Iranian clubs might be forced to play their Saudi opponents in neutral venues when the group stage of the AFC Champions League gets underway in September.

A political standoff has seen the teams from the two countries square off on neutral grounds since 2016 and, despite the thaw in the Tehran-Riyadh relations in recent months, the situation will apparently remain unchanged for the upcoming competition after the Saudi newspaper Arriyadiyah reported on Saturday that Al Nassr has wrote to the Asian football governing body to name Dubai's Al Maktoum Stadium as the venue for the home game against Persian Gulf Pro League champion Persepolis on November 27.

Persepolis is to open its campaign in Group E – also featuring Qatar Stars League champion Al Duhail and Istiklol of Tajikistan – at home against Al Nassr on Sept. 19, though the AFC is yet to confirm the host stadium for the fixture, which will be a repeat of the last-four encounter in 2020, when the Tehran Reds came out victorious in the shootout before falling to a defeat to Ulsan Hyundai in the final. Cristiano Ronaldo's Iranian fans would be dismayed by the Arriyadiyah report as they were hoping to welcome Al Nassr's Portuguese superstar, as well as former Bayern Munich striker Sadio Mane and Croatian midfielder Marcelo Brozovic, to the Iranian capital.

Some of the big names in the European club football – including reigning Ballon D'Or winner Karim Benzema and Brazilian star Neymar – have been lured by lucrative contracts in the summer transfer window to follow in the footsteps of Ronaldo in moving to the Saudi Pro League.

Benzema and his fellow Frenchman N'Golo Kante are part of the Al Ittihad team that is drawn against Iranian club Sepahan, Iraq's Air Force Club and AGMK FC of Uzbekistan in Group C.

Iranian debutant Nassaji Mazandaran, meanwhile, will be facing a mammoth task in Group D, when taking on the 2019 and 2021 champion and last season's runner-up Al Hilal, which will pay Neymar £129.4m a year – six times the amount he earned at PSG. Indian Super League side Mumbai City FC and Uzbekistan's Navbahor are also in the group.

# Asian Volleyball Championship:

## Iran undone by Japan in final showdown



Japan players celebrate after the final victory over Iran in the Asian Men's Volleyball Championship at the Ghadir Arena, Urmia, Iran, on August 26, 2023.

● PAYAM SANI/volleyball.ir



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Japan again proved to be in a league of its own in the continent by cruising to an emphatic victory over host Iran in the highly-anticipated final showpiece of the Asian Men's Volleyball Championship in Urmia.

Having captured the bronze medal in July's Volleyball Nations League, the Japanese

came out on top in three sets (25-20, 25-18, 25-18) to avenge the final setback on home soil against Behrouz Ataei's men two years ago.

The formidable trio of opposite spiker Yuji Nishida, skipper Yuki Ishikawa, and outside hitter Ran Takahashi spearheaded the triumph in a jam-packed Ghadir Arena, with the former chipping in

a game-high 15 points. Ishikawa scored 14 points before lifting the tournament's Most Valuable Player (MVP) award, while Takahashi was named the joint Best Outside Hitter – alongside Qatar's Raimi Wadidie – after a 10-point contribution in the final as Japan claimed a 10th title in the Asia's flagship international volleyball event – first

since 2017. There were consolation prizes for the four-time champion Iran – which conceded only a single set against Iraq en route to the final – as Mohammad-Taher Vadi and Amin Esmaeilnejad picked up the Best Setter and Opposite Spiker awards respectively.

Meanwhile, Belal Nabel Abunabot of Qatar and Ja-

pan's Taishi Onodera shared the Best Middle Blocker prize, with China's Yang Yiming taking the award for Best Libero.

Earlier in the day, Qatar – the only team to win a set against Japan – rounded off a decent run in Urmia by beating China 3-0 (25-23, 25-19, 25-18) in the third-place contest.

Japan will be flying high

when hosting the USA, Slovenia, Serbia, Turkey, Tunisia, Egypt, and Finland in Pool B of the Olympic qualification tournament from September 30.

Iran, meanwhile, will be facing a daunting task against host Brazil, and reigning world champion Italy, as well as Cuba, Ukraine, Germany, the Czech Republic, and Qatar in Pool A.

## Swede Duplantis soars to second straight world pole vault title



Sweden's Armand Duplantis is in action during the men's pole vault final at the World Athletics Championships in Budapest, Hungary, on August 26, 2023.

● DYLAN MARTINEZ/REUTERS

**REUTERS** – Sweden's world record holder Armand Duplantis claimed his second consecutive world pole vault title on Saturday, but did not have a seventh world record in him on a steamy night in Budapest. The Olympic champion cleared 6.10 metres for gold and then – in what turned into the "Mondo show" – missed at three attempts to clear 6.23, which would have been world record number seven for the remarkable 23-year-old.

"I'm really happy about all these consecutive golds. I don't know where this one ranks but I'm happy to keep winning," Duplantis said.

"This was maybe the craziest atmosphere I've ever competed in so it meant a lot to be able to turn on a pole vault show for them. It almost felt like I was in the Stockholm stadium there were so many Swedish supporters here. It's heart-warming and gets you fired up."

Ernest John Obiena of the Philippines won silver with a jump of 6.00m.

Three days after American Katie Moon and Australia's Nina Kennedy decided to share the women's pole vault gold, there was a tie for bronze between Kurtis Marschall of Australia and Christopher Nilsen of the U.S., who both posted 5.95m.

Duplantis has won 12 of 13 competitions this season, and has cleared 6.00m in a remarkable 50 different events. His most recent world record was 6.22 set in France in February.

His three record attempts enthralled the National Athletics Centre crowd, who clapped in time during his run-ups.

"I try not to set limits and barriers on myself and once I started to realise a world record was possible I tried not to see it as a record just as another height I can achieve," Duplantis said.

"But today never really felt like a world record competition. It was more a pure competition and that's how it can be. It was great fun. I'd spent a lot of energy by the time it got up to 6.23 metres."

The Swede's third attempt was the closest, with his body just grazing the bar, which clung tantalisingly to the standards before wobbling and falling.

## Spain coach Vilda criticises Rubiales over 'inappropriate' behavior

**BBC** – Spain's Women's World Cup-winning head coach Jorge Vilda has criticised suspended football federation president Luis Rubiales, calling the moment he kissed squad member Jennifer Hermoso "inappropriate and unacceptable".

Rubiales was suspended for an initial 90 days by FIFA on Saturday after Hermoso said the kiss prior to the team lifting the trophy was not consensual.

Vilda's entire coaching staff have resigned in protests against Rubiales, but Vilda himself has not stepped down despite his latest comments.

The coach was spotted applauding at the Spanish federation's extraordinary general assembly on Friday, when Rubiales gave an emphatic speech in which he repeatedly insisted he would not resign and claimed to be the victim of "social assassination". The two had been allies after Rubiales stood by Vilda in September 2022 when 15 national-team players pulled



● GETTY IMAGES

out of the squad, saying that the manager's management was affecting their emotional state and health.

Of those 15, only three opted to return to the Spain squad which went on to beat England in the final in Sydney.

Vilda released a statement on Saturday night, saying: "I regret deeply that the victory of Spanish women's football has been harmed by the inappropriate behaviour that our until now top leader, Luis Rubiales, has carried out and that he himself has recognised."

"There is no doubt that it is unacceptable and

does not reflect at all the principles and values that I defend in my life, in sport in general and in football in particular." Vilda is now the only coach from the women's national team who remains in place, with assistant managers Montse Tome, Javier Lerga and Eugenio Gonzalo Martin, physio Blanca Romero Moraleda and goalkeeping coach Carlos Sanchez all having quit their posts earlier on Saturday.

Some 81 Spain players, including all 23 World Cup winners, said they would not play for the team again while Rubiales was in charge.