

Ten Hag rejects talk of United crisis



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THE GUARDIAN - Erik ten Hag denied Manchester United are in crisis despite the 3-1 loss to Brighton at Old Trafford being their third of the season and leaves them with six points from five matches and a goal difference of minus four.

The defeats is United's worst run in the Premier League era, though five points is their lowest return after five games, under Louis van Gaal in the 2014-15 season.

Ten Hag rejected that his side were in crisis on the pitch after a turbulent fortnight off it. Jadon Sancho has been banished from the first-team squad and Antony given a leave of absence after assault allegations.

"We have to be very disappointed and annoyed at ourselves," he said. "We will turn this around. But there is a demand on us to win games."

"Definitely that is something that bothers me [form] but also I have to see the way we play [which was good] but it's about character. Now we have to see how strong we are and how the team sticks together."

On Wednesday, United travel to Munich for the start of their Champions League campaign.

"Bayern Munich is one of the favourites to win the Champions League so we have to be good there and I already explained we need character, belief, resilience, determination," said Ten Hag.

Wrestling World Championships: Ruthless Rahman chasing statement gold ahead of Paris Olympics



● iwf.ir

Sports Desk

For Iranian wrestling prodigy Rahman Amouzad there will be more to the World Championships campaign than the title defense as he will be looking to throw down the gauntlet to all his major rivals ahead of next year's Paris Olympics.

With five berths for the Games up for grabs, Amouzad and Japanese Takuto Otoguro will headline a star-studded freestyle 65kg contests in Belgrade today.

In the absence of Otoguro on the global stage since his gold-winning run at the Tokyo Olympics, Amouzad has emerged as the dominant force of the weight class.

Nicknamed 'Ruthless Rahman', the 22-year-old Iranian stormed to the world

gold in the Serbian capital last year but the scale of today's campaign is in stark contrast with the previous one as 45 wrestlers will hope to have a decent finish - compared to 27 participating a year ago.

"I've worked my socks off in the training camps in recent months and will head to the World Championships in top form," the Iranian, who won the Asian gold in April despite being far from his best, said last week.

"I'm thrilled to see all major contenders of the division coming to Belgrade. I don't care who I will face as I'm in the peak of my physical and mental conditions," added the Iranian.

Otoguro and Amouzad are in the same half of the draw and are likely to go head-to-

head in the quarterfinals, a bout described as a "must-watch battle" by the United World Wrestling.

"Otoguro has been the weight's most dangerous offensive threat since 2018 when he became the youngest Japanese male to win world gold. He's a guy with cat-like reflexes, is highly elusive, and isn't afraid to give up a point to get a point. His counter-offensive abilities make him super dangerous. He gets to his angles better than anyone in the weight. Though he has changed his style a little, Otoguro will need his old-school run-and-gun mentality to take out Amouzad," UWW wrote of the Japanese. "Amouzad is a tactician when it comes to breaking down his opponents - men-

tally and physically. He's a guy with relentless forward pressure and a bottomless gas tank. He uses that patented Iranian underhook to close the distance on his opponents and control the mat area. He's only 22 years old but remains poised like a veteran in close matches. He's confident wrestling in a phone booth but can attack from space, and that makes him a nightmare to wrestle. "This match comes down to Otoguro's ability to solve Amouzad's underhook and put six consecutive minutes together. On the other side, Amouzad has to be methodical when picking his shots and anticipate where and when Otoguro's going to reattack."

Also in the 65kg mix are three-time world champi-

on Haji Aliyev of Azerbaijan and Russian-born Hungarian Iszmail Muszukajev, a winner of double world bronzes, including last year. Beaten by Otoguro in the Olympic final two years ago, Aliyev, 32, will hope to finish an illustrious career with a third successive medal in the Games next year, though he was thoroughly the second best against the young Iranian at the world event last year, falling to a 9-2 defeat before missing out on the bronze against Muszukajev.

The other contestant fancying his chances of glory in Belgrade is Russian Shamil Mamedov, taking part as a neutral athlete, who will step onto the mat on the back of a world junior gold in 2021 and the ultimate

prize at Yasar Dogu Tournament last year in Istanbul. Mongolian Tulga Tumor Ochir, who won the bronze in 2021, and reigning European and world under-23 champion Vazgen Tevanyan of Armenia, as well as American Nicholas Lee - victorious over last year's silver winner John Diakomihalis in the domestic qualifiers - will also be the ones to watch in the 65kg class today.

Amouzad has insisted on several occasions that he has already set his sights of joining the long list of the decorated Iranians in the history of the sport and today's event in Belgrade, the city in which he made his senior breakthrough, seems like a fitting challenge toward that stature.

Sepahan, Nassaji to kickstart ACL campaigns



● RASOUL SHOJAEI/IRNA

Sports Desk

The first day of the AFC Champions League (ACL) group stage will see Persian Gulf Pro League giant Sepahan begin its campaign away to Iraq's Air Force Club in Group C today.

Nassaji Mazandaran will also be in action, making its debut at the Asian elite clubs competition with a visit to Pune, India, to take on Mumbai City in Group D. Having made a clean sweep of four victories in the start of the new domestic top-flight season, Sepahan will step onto the pitch at Erbil's Franso Hariri Stadium in top form, though the Isfahan-based club was devastated last week after being deducted four points by the Iranian federation's Disciplinary Committee for

the "wage cap violation" in the contracts of six summer signings.

Portuguese head coach Jose Morais will hope to have instrumental fullback Ramin Rezaeian available for today's encounter after he suffered an injury while on international duty with Iran against Bulgaria.

With Saudi side Al Ittihad - inspired by French striker Karim Benzema - and AGMK FC of Uzbekistan also in the group, Sepahan knows a winning start will be crucial if Morais's team is to progress to the knockout round.

Meanwhile, Nassaji, which was handed a maiden place in the group stage after lifting the Iranian Hazfi Cup trophy last year, has had a mixed start to the season. Seyyed Mehdi Rahmati's

men have only managed a single victory in four outings - a 3-1 triumph against San'at Naft Abadan at home before the international break - and sit seventh in the table with five points.

Saudi giant Al Hilal, the most decorated team in the history of the competition with four titles, is the ultimate favorite to win the group - also featuring Uzbekistan's Navbahor - and the other three teams will likely battle it out for a runner-up finish and a possible spot in the last 16.

In a memorable debut last year, Mumbai City became the first Indian team to win an AFC Champions League match en route to a second-place finish in the group, despite missing out on qualification for the next round.