

## Australia outclass Finland in Davis Cup semis



● JORGE GUERRERO/AFP

**THE GUARDIAN** – Australia eased into the Davis Cup final for the second successive year with a ruthless, efficient 2-0 win over Finland on Friday evening in Málaga.

In the opening rubber, Alexei Popyrin produced his first live Davis Cup win, steadying his nerves through an extremely tense opening set before beating Otto Virtanen 7-6 (5), 6-2. Alex de Minaur then closed out the tie with an excellent performance, defeating Emil Ruusuvuori 6-4, 6-3 to take Australia back to the final.

"You don't take anything for granted in Davis Cup," said Lleyton Hewitt, Australia's Davis Cup captain. "It doesn't matter the format. So we knew coming here every match was going to be extremely tough. You only have a day to prepare for your next opponents, as well, which isn't easy."

As was the case in Finland's opening tie, the large Finnish expat community in the surrounding area ensured that their presence was felt in the José María Martín Carpena Arena as they filled out the stands in their thousands, belting their chants right until the end. Their energy was particularly effective against Popyrin as he struggled to control his nerves in the opening set. When it mattered, though, the Australian found his powerful first serve and subdued Virtanen with his greater weaponry, earning the landmark win under immense pressure.

"It's nerves that I have never experienced before in my life, the nerves playing the first tie, the first rubber of a Davis Cup, winning my first live rubber of a Davis Cup," said Popyrin. "I just had to keep my head steady and just really focus on my serve and try to capitalise on opportunities when they came."

Finland's presence in the semi-finals has been a shock in itself, but an even greater surprise was the team upsetting defending champions Canada without their No 1 player, Ruusuvuori, who sat out the tie with a shoulder injury. It was clear that against Australia, though, a win would be nearly impossible without their only top-150 singles player. Ruusuvuori's shoulder had recovered enough for him to compete but he could not serve at full power.

Over their 95 minutes, De Minaur worked Ruusuvuori around the court with his depth, defence and willingness to take on short balls and control the point from inside the baseline.

## AFC Champions League preview:

# Persepolis looking to resurge at Al Nassr; Sepahan facing Air Force test

### Sports Desk

Three Persian Gulf Pro League clubs will be in action on Matchday 5 when the AFC Champions League returns after the international break.

Having already missed out on a top-two finish in Group D with a couple of games to spare, Nassaji Mazandaran will only fight for its reputation against Mumbai City – bottom of the group without a point – at Tehran's Azadi Stadium on Tuesday.

However, there will be all to play for on the preceding night for the other two Iranian top-flight giants, with Persepolis visiting Riyadh to take on Al Nassr and Sepahan hosting Iraqi side Air Force Club in Tehran.

Plagued by injuries and a flu virus in recent weeks, Yahya Golmohammadi's Persepolis will be chasing a first victory across all competitions since the 2-0 home win against Tajikistan's on October 24, though the game against the star-studded Saudi club and in-form Cristiano Ronaldo will arguably provide the most demanding test for the Tehran Reds in months.

The Portuguese superstar was on target twice as Al Nassr eased to a 3-0 victory over Al Akhdoud in the Saudi Pro League on Friday – an eighth successive win in all competitions for Ronaldo and co.

The Reds' last outing came before the international break in Isfahan, where Persepolis suffered a first domestic defeat since March – a 1-0 loss at Sepahan in the so-called 'Iranian Clasico' – which was the latest episode in a frustrating four-game winless streak, following league draws against Malavan (0-0) and San'at Naft Abadan (2-2) as well as the 1-1 stalemate away



● MOHAMMADREZA ALIMADADI/IRNA

to Istiklol.

Al Nassr is top of the table in Group E and is favorite to progress as the group winner – having a five-point lead over Persepolis with two games remaining – but the Reds, despite being all but guaranteed a runner-up finish, are far from securing a place in the knockouts as only three of the second-placed teams across five West Zone groups will head into the last-16.

Persepolis is currently fourth among the five runners-up due to an inferior goal difference against Sepahan and Uzbekistan's FC Nasaf, while Navbahor – sec-

ond in Group D – is the most likely to go through thanks to a three-point advantage over the chasing three.

The Iranian champion will be without international center-back Morteza Pouraliganji and Yasin Salmani, both out for the rest of the season with ligament injuries, and integral midfielder Vahid Amiri is not expected to be back on the pitch before mid-December.

With the home game against Al Duhail on the final day of the group stage, Golmohammadi and his men might believe even a draw at Al Awwal Park will be enough

to keep the Reds' hopes for a knockout berth alive.

### Tricky test

Sepahan will be looking to build on a decent run of late when squaring off against Air Force Club earlier on Monday.

When Sepahan was handed a 3-0 loss against Al Ittihad after their October fixture at the Naqsh-e Jahan Stadium was called off minutes before the kickoff – for what the Asian football governing body labeled as the Iranian side's failure to act "in a politically neutral manner" – few fancied the Isfahan-based club recovering

from the setback.

Jose Morais's men, however, bounced back in style, running riot against AGMK with an emphatic 9-0 win in Tehran before the 1-0 victory over Persepolis was followed by Thursday's 3-1 away triumph over Esteghlal Khuzestan.

Group C remains incredibly tight with just two points separating leader Al Ittihad and third-placed Air Force Club, who sits level with Sepahan ahead of Monday's game.

A win for either side would see them go into the final day with a chance of topping the table, while defeat could signal the end of their quali-

fication hopes.

Portuguese head coach Morais will be desperate to see international trio of Morteza Asadi – who has bagged nine goals and three assists in 12 matches this season – Ramin Rezaeian and Mohammad-Javad Hosseinnejad contribute with yet another impressive performance.

Iraqi teenage sensation Ali Jasim will be the one watch in the Air Force outfit after scoring four in the competition – including one in the stunning 2-0 victory over Al Ittihad three weeks ago and a double in the 2-2 draw with Sepahan.

## NBA roundup:

# Balanced scoring lifts Bucks past Wizards

**REUTERS** – Brook Lopez, Giannis Antetokounmpo and Damian Lillard each eclipsed 30 points as the Milwaukee Bucks improved to 3-0 in in-season tournament play with a 131-128 win over the visiting Washington Wizards.

It's the first game in Bucks franchise history in which three players had 30 points or more. Lopez tied his career high with 39, while Antetokounmpo (nine rebounds) and Lillard (10 assists) each had 31.

Washington had four 20-point scorers, led by Milwaukee native Jordan Poole with 26 and seven assists. Kyle Kuzma and Tyus Jones each added 22 while Corey Kispert scored 20.

In the final seconds, Antetokounmpo made two free throws before Wash-



● Bucks center Brook Lopez (11) shoots during the second half against the Boston Celtics at TD Garden, Boston, MA, US, on November 24, 2023.

● PAUL RUTHERFORD/USA TODAY SPORTS

ington's Landry Shamet air-balled a wide-open, po-

tential game-tying 3-point attempt.

Elsewhere, Jalen Green scored a team-high 25

points while Alperen Sengun and two more teammates added double-doubles as Houston Rockets extended their homecourt winning streak to eight by beating Denver Nuggets 105-86 in an NBA in-season tournament game.

Orlando Magic turned in a dominant second half and extended its winning streak to six games by beating visiting Boston Celtics 113-96.

Devin Booker scored a season-high 40 points to fuel visiting Phoenix Suns to a 110-89 victory over Memphis Grizzlies.

Booker made 15 of 21 shots from the floor and added four steals. RJ Barrett converted a go-ahead, three-point play with 1:59 left for hosts New York Knicks, who stormed back from a 21-point, third-quarter deficit to beat Miami Heat 100-98.

OG Anunoby scored 26 points and Toronto Raptors

defeated visiting Chicago Bulls 121-108.

Tyrese Haliburton had 26 points and 10 assists and Indiana Pacers finished the game on a 19-1 run in Indianapolis to hand Detroit Pistons a 13th consecutive loss – 136-113.

De'Aaron Fox scored 36 points and dished 12 assists as Sacramento Kings pulled away for a 124-111 win over Minnesota in Minneapolis.

Stephen Curry hit seven 3-pointers while scoring 35 points and Golden State Warriors improved its chances of advancement in the NBA in-season tournament by edging San Antonio Spurs 118-112 in San Francisco.

Zion Williamson scored 32 points and Brandon Ingram added 30 as visiting New Orleans Pelicans defeated Los Angeles Clippers 116-106 to finish group play of the in-season tournament with a 3-1 record.