

## Guardiola hints at extending City contract



● ADAM DAVY/PA

**THE GUARDIAN** – Pep Guardiola has revealed he could extend his tenure as the Manchester City manager when his contract ends in the summer of 2025.

City beat Internazionale in the Champions League final in June to seal the treble last season and it was thought that Guardiola was almost certain to leave at the end of his current deal.

That contract was signed a year ago after those close to him had been unsure if he would do so. This followed the strong expectation that, on arriving at City in the summer 2016, he would not extend his stay beyond the three-year term agreed at the time.

After Ilkay Gündogan and Riyad Mahrez departed, and with Kevin De Bruyne out since the opening game of the season with a hamstring injury, Guardiola is evolving City having recruited Jérémy Doku, Josko Gvardiol and Matheus Nunes in the summer window. Asked before RB Leipzig's visit in the Champions League on Tuesday if this process might entice him to prolong his time at the club, Guardiola suggested he was open to that possibility.

"I have energy. I'm not going to answer," he said. "One year and a half is a lot of time in football. I arrived here with long hair and look what happened." Pressed if remaining in situ beyond his current deal was a possibility, Guardiola said: "Yeah of course – I can leave tomorrow [too]. I would have loved the team that won 100 points [in the 2017-18 season] to stay eternally. At all the clubs this happens."

If Guardiola does agree fresh terms it would allow him the chance to continue an already supremely successful era at City. In his seven full seasons at the club, they have claimed five Premier Leagues, two FA Cups, four League Cups, the Champions League and the Super Cup.

De Bruyne said on Sunday that he hopes to return from surgery on his hamstring injury "close after the new year". Asked about this, Guardiola said: "If he [De Bruyne] said 'January' it will be January. If he said 'end of December or the new year' it will be a happy new year for everyone."

# AFC Champions League: Reds rue missed opportunity; Sepahan staves off late Air Force scare

Sports Desk

*The penultimate round of the group stage at the AFC Champions League saw Persepolis share the points with Al Nassr in a goalless stalemate in Riyadh.*

*Sepahan, meanwhile, held off a late pressure from Iraq's Air Force Club, despite going down to nine men, to claim a massive 1-0 victory at Tehran's Azadi Stadium.*

## Reds regret

Perhaps Persepolis players would have been more than satisfied with a fourth draw in a five-game winless streak prior to the kickoff against their formidable host, which stepped onto the pitch at Al Awwal Park on the back of a 19-game unbeaten run.

However, the Tehran Reds were eventually left ruing the chance to walk away with maximum points after Al Nassr was reduced to 10 men with 17 minutes into the contest, when Saudi center-back Ali Lajami was sent off for a harsh tackle on Reds midfielder Milad Sarlak, who was on the receiving end of a red card in the reverse fixture in September.

Yahya Golmohammadi's men delivered a brave performance throughout the 90 minutes but failed to capitalize on long spells of the ball possession and find a way through Al Nassr backline, despite testing goalkeeper Nawaf Al-Aqidi on a couple of occasions. Al Nassr superstar Cristiano Ronaldo was kept at bay for the best part of the game but had the opportunity to break the duck in a third head-to-head with Iranian international keeper Alireza Beiranvand in the second half, only to see his low drive from the edge of the box go just wide.

The Portuguese was substituted late in the game after suffering a neck injury earlier in the second period, but his performance will be remembered by the sportsmanship he showed in the early stages of the contest. Chinese referee Ma Ning pointed to spot when Ronaldo appeared to have been

brought down in the box by Soroush Rafiei in the second minute, before the 38-year-old approached the ref, wagging his finger, to tell him that it was 'no penalty.'

The official still had to review the incident on the pitch-side VAR monitor to be convinced to overturn his decision. Persepolis boss Golmohammadi was frustrated with his side's lack of penetration afterwards, saying: "We were able to create opportunities but we had problems with the final pass and the buildup play when going forward."

"We played against a really professional and strong team. Any team playing against Al Nassr will face problems even if they have 10 players," added Golmohammadi.

The result secured a place in the last-16 round for the Saudi club as the Group E winner with 13 points, while second-placed Persepolis – on eight points – will be looking to beat Qatari champion Al Duhail at the Azadi Stadium next week to qualify as one of the three best runners-up across the five West Zone groups.

"A draw at Al Nassr's stadium is valuable. We have to prepare ourselves for Al Duhail. We have only one way to progress and that is by winning," said Golmohammadi, who steered the Reds to the final showpiece of the Asian elite clubs competition in 2020.



Persepolis fullback Ali Ne'mati (4) is seen in action against Al Nassr's Cristiano Ronaldo during a goalless draw in the AFC Champions League at Al Awwal Park, Riyadh, Saudi Arabia, on November 27, 2023.

● AFC

## Sepahan avoids setback

When Farshad Ahmadzadeh gave Sepahan a fourth-minute lead at the Azadi Stadium, it looked to be an easy afternoon for the Isfahan-based club, but the following incidents forced Jose Morais's men to make a hard work of the much-needed victory. Iranian prodigy Mohammad-Javad Hosseinejad was shown a straight red right before the interval after a late challenge on Mustafa Saadoun.

Sepahan defender Hadi Mohammadi also received his marching orders in the 90th minute due to a physical altercation with Shareef Abdulkadhim but the Iranian team managed to hold out against Air Force's desperate push for an equalizer during an edgy 10 minutes of stoppage time to move three points clear of the Iraqi side in Group C.

"Congratulations to my players and the team because it was not an easy game. The players performed with quality. Their focus was on the field," Portuguese Morais said. "When you run with one less player, it be-

comes difficult, and when you run with two less players, it becomes more difficult. The players knew how to focus and what to do. I am grateful to the players for their concentration, calmness and good knowledge, and in the end they got their reward which was winning the game," added the Portuguese.

The victory means Sepahan – now on 10 points – is in pole position to progress as one of the three runners-up, though Morais and his men will even fancy their chances of winning the group next week, when playing away to Al Ittihad. The Saudi club defeated Uzbekistan's AGMK 2-1, thanks to Moroccan Abderrazak Hamdallah's first-half brace, to stay atop the table with 12 points.

"Today's game is over. Ittihad is another game and another team. They have an advantage over us and we need to organize, analyze and be able to give our best.

"If we give our best and that's enough, I'm happy. If it is not enough, I am still happy."



## LeBron suffers worst defeat in NBA career as Embiid, 76ers rout Lakers

AP – LeBron James never endured a lopsided basketball defeat like the one he suffered with Los Angeles in Philadelphia.

James has lost big before. His Miami Heat once got trounced by 36 points in the NBA Finals. The Indiana Pacers beat James and the Lakers by 42 in 2019.

But this blowout was an all-timer: By the time Joel Embiid clinched a triple-double in the third quarter, the 76ers were on their way to a 138-94 win over the Lakers on Monday night, the 44-point loss now the worst in James' career that dates to 2003.

"What needs to change in order for that to not happen again? A lot," James said, without elaboration.

The miserable milestones piled up for the Lakers. It was their worst loss to the 76ers in 290 games in the series.

It was so bad, James didn't even grab a rebound.

OK, one more: The 76ers beat the Lakers for the seventh straight time.

"That's my favorite team," Embiid said, again noting he learned of basketball

through Kobe Bryant. "Any time I play against them, you want to get the win. But I do it every night anyways against every other team."

The box score tells part of the story. The 76ers hit 22 3-pointers to just seven for the Lakers, and even when Embiid sat out the entire fourth quarter, the 76ers still outscored them 40-14.

The reigning NBA MVP, Embiid finished with 30 points, 11 rebounds and 11 assists for his sixth career triple-double. It was Embiid's first of the season and his seventh career game with 10-plus assists.

Embiid's anticipated showdown with James never really materialized. James scored 18 points in 29 minutes but nothing he did could make a dent in the 76ers' lead. He has now played more minutes than any player in NBA history, with playoff time included.

"That doesn't mean much to me," James said.

Tyrese Maxey scored 31 points for the 76ers. Anthony Davis had 17 points and 11 rebounds for the Lakers.

76ers' Joel Embiid (21) goes up for a basket during an NBA victory over the Lakers in Philadelphia, PA, US, on November 27, 2023.

● MATT SLOCUM/AP