

AFC Champions League: Sepahan, Persepolis up for crunch group finales



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Sports Desk

Two last-16 spots will be up for grabs when Sepahan and Persepolis head into Matchday 6 of the group stage in the AFC Champions League today and tomorrow. Saudi Pro League giants Al Ittihad, Al Hilal, and Al Nassr plus Emirati club Al Ain have already secured a place in the knockouts, with eight other West Zone teams still fancying their chances of progress in the Asian elite clubs' competition. Sepahan visits Mecca's King Abdulaziz Sport City today to take on Group C leader Al Ittihad, knowing a single point will all but guarantee a first knockout berth in

11 years for the Persian Gulf Pro League side as one of the three best runner-up teams across the five West groups – thanks to a far superior goal difference. A victory will see Sepahan leapfrog the Saudi heavyweight into the top spot in the group, though Jose Morais's men have bigger reasons to go all out for maximum points, as they felt hard-done by when the AFC handed them a 3-0 loss – banning the club from playing at home for three matches – in the aftermath of the canceled reverse fixture in October, for what the Asian football governing body described as the Iranian side's failure to "act in a politically neutral manner" at Isfahan's Naqsh-e

Jahan Stadium. Sepahan bounced back from the verdict disappointment in style, demolishing Uzbekistan's AGMK 9-0 before edging out Air Force Club of Iraq 1-0 last week in Tehran, though the latter triumph proved costly for the Iranian team, as young international midfielder Mohammad-Javad Hosseinnejad and center-back Hadi Mohammadi received their marching orders and will miss today's encounter. Al Ittihad, meanwhile, will be without former Ballon d'Or winner Karim Benzema after the French talisman was forced out injured during a domestic league victory over Al Khaleej on Thursday.

Moroccan Abderrazak Hamdallah will lead the line for the host today, with the prolific striker in flying form this season, bagging 12 goals in 16 matches – including three in as many matches in the Asian club event.

Red-hot day at Azadi

Things will be more complicated when Persepolis welcomes Al Duhail to Tehran's Azadi Stadium in Group E on Tuesday. While even a win against the Qatari champion could be followed by the group-stage exit for the Tehran Reds, a draw might prove to be enough to see Yahya Golmohammadi's men go through, should the results in other groups

go their way. Plagued by injuries and a flu virus, Persepolis has been struggling with form in recent weeks as the goalless stalemate against Al Nassr in Riyadh last Monday was a fourth draw in a five-game winless run for the Reds. Midfielder Milad Sarlak and skipper Omid Aalishah remain doubts for the game after walking out injured against Al Nassr, while young striker Mohammad Omri will face a race against time to recover from a minor problem. Aalishah's second-half strike led his side a 1-0 victory over Al Duhail in October's game, in which Persepolis was by far the better of the two sides but wasteful in

the opposition box and Golmohammadi hopes his frontline, inspired by international winger Mahdi Torabi, will be more clinical on Tuesday. Persepolis boss, who steered his team to the 2020 final, will also be eager to see a raucous crowd at the Azadi Stadium play its part in pushing the Reds forward in the must-win contest. Persepolis fans have fond memories of the last time playing the Qatari side at home, when Branko Ivankovic's short-handed side, trailing a first-leg 1-0 loss and a halftime one-goal deficit, pulled off a brilliant comeback by scoring three in the second half to progress to the semifinals.

Germany v Scotland in Euro 2024 opener, Italy drawn with Spain

REUTERS – Hosts Germany will face Scotland in the opening match of Euro 2024 in Munich following the draw on Saturday and defending Champions Italy will be in the same group as Spain. The Germans, three-times winners, will kick off the one-month tournament in Munich on June 14, with the final on July 14 at Berlin's Olympic stadium. Germany will also play Hungary, who came through the qualifying campaign unbeaten, and Switzerland in Group A. "It's no group of death but a very strong group and we are looking forward to it," Germany manager Julian Nagelsmann said. The hosts appointed Nagelsmann as manager in September after parting ways with Hansi Flick following a 4-1 home defeat by Japan, their fourth loss in five games. They beat France under Rudi Voeller, but after Nagelsmann began with a win over the United States they lost to against Turkey and Austria. "I am optimistic that if we do some things in the coming few months then we will play a good Euro. The first game also has a special kind of pressure," said Voeller, the national team director. "We still have some problems but I am convinced that Julian Nagelsmann will do it," Voeller added. Italy faces a tough task to de-



The photo shows the groups during the Euro 2024 draw in Hamburg, Germany, on December 2, 2023.
KAI PFAFFENBACH/REUTERS

fend their title, drawn in Group B along with Spain, Croatia and Albania. Italy defeated Spain on penalties in the semi-finals on their way to winning Euro 2020, but lost 4-0 to the Spanish in the 2012 final. Croatia reached the semi-finals at the last World Cup. "Yes, it could have been better," Italy manager Luciano Spalletti said. "Being in the fourth pot makes

you realise that you have teams ahead of you but nothing should distract us from the fact we are Italy. "A tough group, Albania showed that they know how to stay on the pitch. Croatia is strong and experienced. Spain? Anyone who loves this sport must play it, the taste if challenge and comparison." Spalletti added. Spain's opening game is against Croatia, before they take on Italy.

"If it's not the toughest group, it's one of the toughest," Spain manager Luis de la Fuente said. "Italy are European champions, Croatia always reach the later stages and although they are not at their best, they are two historic teams. And don't forget Albania, top of their group." France and the Netherlands will meet again after coming through qualifying in the same group, drawn in Group D along-

side Austria and the winners of playoff A. France, who won both games against the Dutch on their way to topping the qualifying group, kick off their Euro 2024 campaign against Austria in Duesseldorf. "The Pot 3 team we'll be facing are The Netherlands... We won both our games against them but it makes our group harder. We also faced Austria during the lat-

est Nations League campaign and it was far from easy. It's a dense and difficult group," France coach Didier Deschamps said. England, runners-up at Euro 2020, are in Group C alongside Denmark, Slovenia and Serbia. England, who needed extra time to see off Denmark in the 2020 semi-finals, start the tournament against Serbia. "You look at Serbia with a centre forward like Aleksander Mitrovic and then you have to be careful not to assume anything when you see these draws, that's for certain," England manager Gareth Southgate said. "You can look at it on paper but the games aren't played on paper. There are some teams that you are glad to avoid in Pot 3 and Pot 4 but all of the teams that we play are more than capable." In Group E, Belgium faces Romania, Slovakia and the winners of playoff B, Israel, Bosnia, Ukraine or Iceland. Portugal are in Group F, alongside Turkey, Czech Republic and the playoff C winners, one of Georgia, Greece, Kazakhstan or Luxembourg, who finished third in Portugal's qualifying group. The top two in each of the six Euro 2024 groups proceed to the round of 16 along with the four best third-placed finishers. The draw was held at the Elbphilharmonie concert hall in Hamburg, one of the 10 host cities of the tournament.