



AFC Champions League:

Persepolis undone by Al Duhail; Sepahan into knockouts

Persepolis striker Shahab Zahedi is dejected after the final whistle of the 2-1 defeat against Al Duhail in the AFC Champions League at the Azadi Stadium, Tehran, Iran, on December 5, 2023.
● AMIR KHOLOUSI/ISNA

Sports Desk

Persepolis crashed out of the AFC Champions League after suffering a 2-1 home defeat against Qatari side Al Duhail on the final day of the group stage on Tuesday.

Sepahan, meanwhile, was the only Iranian top-flight club to book a place in the last-16 round despite a 2-1 loss to Saudi Pro League team Al Ittihad in Mecca on the preceding night.

Saleh Al-Amri and Jota netted either side of a Ramin Rezaeian's equalizer to lead Al Ittihad to a top-spot finish in Group C with 15 points – five clear of Sepahan. Sepahan had to wait for the final whistle of the Group A game between Pakhtakor and Al Fayha 24 hours later in Tashkent, where the Saudi team's 4-1 victory over the host saw the Persian Gulf Pro League giant

progress to the knockouts as one of the three best second-placed sides across the five West Zone groups.

Blues for Reds

However, the result in the Uzbek capital meant Persepolis stepped onto the pitch at the Azadi Stadium in Group E knowing that nothing but a win was enough for the Reds to overtake Al Fayha in the runners-up table. Yahya Golmohammadi's men kicked off the contest right on the front foot and were rewarded for their bright start early on through Shahab Zahedi, whose glancing header went past Qatari keeper Salah Zakaria in the seventh minute.

The rapturous home crowd was silenced a couple of minutes later, when Lotfi Madjer was denied by Alireza Beiranvand but Mohammed Muntari drew Al

Duhail level on the rebound. Persepolis kept digging in and came within inches of the all-important winner 10 minutes from normal time, only to see Giorgi Gvelesiani's effort from the spot-kick go out off the crossbar.

The Georgian center-back was at the center of further misery for the Reds later as he went down when challenged by substitute Michael Olunga near the touchline before the Kenyan striker went on to score with a composed finish with six minutes left on the clock.

The defeat extended the Reds' winless run to six matches across all competitions as Golmohammadi's side last came out victorious against Istiklol FC in the Asian elite clubs event on October 2.

Golmohammadi was left apologizing to the Reds faithful – a part of whom did not hesitate

to show their frustration at the manager and club CEO Reza Darvish at fulltime – though he believed his men were unlucky to miss out on the three points.

"I would like to thank the fans for their large and enthusiastic presence today and also apologize to them for the result, although it was not what we deserved in the end," said the Iranian, who steered the club to the final showpiece of the competition in 2020, as well as a domestic league and cup double in May.

"We still had the chance [to get what we wanted] after the missed penalty, but Al Duhail is a good team with counter-attacking and the buildup play. It was a difficult game for us, but we created enough [to win the game]," added Golmohammadi. Asked about sections of the stands being vocal in their

chants against the Persepolis players after the final whistle, Golmohammadi said: "My players deserve credit and praise for what they have achieved. They have proved their qualities to me and the fans before, but unfortunately there are bad days in football. The important thing for them is to recover mentally as soon as possible."

Golmohammadi and his side will be back in the Iranian league action against Havadar on Saturday, before taking on archrival Esteghlal next Thursday – in what already looks to be a season-defining derby for the Reds. Persepolis is the second Iranian team to leave the Asian competition in the group stage, following Nassaji Mazandaran, which finished its debut campaign with a 2-1 loss in a dead-rubber away to Group D winner Al Hilal on Monday.

Lakers edge Suns again, advance to NBA tourney semifinal

REUTERS – LeBron James scored 31 points and dished out 11 assists, Anthony Davis added 27 points and 15 rebounds and the Los Angeles Lakers advanced to the semifinals of the NBA in-season tournament with a 106-103 victory over the visiting Phoenix Suns on Tuesday.

Austin Reaves scored 20 points for the Lakers, who will face the New Orleans Pelicans in one semifinal game tonight at Las Vegas. The Milwaukee Bucks will face the Indiana Pacers in the other semifinal, with the final set for Saturday there.

Los Angeles improved to 5-0 during in-season tournament games.

Kevin Durant scored 31 points for the Suns, who lost for the third time in their past four games after a seven-game winning streak. Phoenix lost two of its five games in the in-season tournament, both against Los Angeles.

Devin Booker and Grayson Allen each scored 21 points for the Suns, with Booker grabbing 11 rebounds. Phoenix head coach Frank Vogel, who was the Lakers' coach when they won the 2020 NBA title, is 0-3 this season against his former team.

The Suns took a 95-94 lead on a 3-pointer from Durant with 5:45 remaining, but then they went more than four minutes without a field goal as the

Lakers took a 102-97 lead with 2:20 remaining after six consecutive L.A. points from James.

Durant ended the field-goal drought with a short jumper to bring Phoenix within 102-99 with 1:02 remaining, and Booker brought the Suns within a point at 102-101 on a layup with 30 seconds left.

After missing his first five shots of the fourth quarter, Reaves buried a 3-pointer with 15 seconds left for a 105-101 lead. Durant made a quick layup to get the Suns within 105-103, and Davis sank 1 of 2 free throws with 6.6 seconds remaining. Durant missed a 3-point attempt at the buzzer.



Lakers forward LeBron James gets the rebound against Suns guard Jordan Goodwin (0) during the NBA in-season tournament quarterfinal in Los Angeles, CA, US, on Dec. 5, 2023.
● USA TODAY SPORTS