

Pacers, Lakers into NBA in-season final



Pacers' Myles Turner (33) blocks a shot by Bucks forward Marjon Beauchamp in Las Vegas, NV, US, on Dec. 7, 2023.
● USA TODAY SPORTS

REUTERS – Bruce Brown gave Indiana the lead for good with 6:15 remaining, Tyrese Haliburton capped a monster performance with a back-breaking 3-pointer, and the Pacers surprised the top-seeded Milwaukee Bucks 128-119 Thursday in the semifinals of the NBA's inaugural in-season tournament in Las Vegas.

The victory places the Pacers in tonight's final against the Los Angeles Lakers, who beat the New Orleans Pelicans 133-89 in Thursday's other semifinal.

Haliburton finished with a team-high 27 points and a game-high 15 assists for the Pacers, who had beaten the Boston Celtics at home in Tuesday's quarterfinals to earn the trip to Las Vegas.

Myles Turner also notched a double-double for Indiana with 26 points and 10 rebounds, while Buddy Hield grabbed a team-high 11 rebounds to go with eight points.

Going 13-for-19 from the field and 11-for-13 from the free-throw line, Giannis Antetokounmpo scored a game-high 37 points to complement a team-high 10 rebounds for the Bucks, who earned a flight west by beating the New York Knicks at home in Tuesday's quarterfinals.

Meanwhile, LeBron James recorded 30 points and eight assists to lead the Lakers to a victory over the Pelicans.

Austin Reaves had 17 points and seven assists, and Anthony Davis added 16 points and 15 rebounds for the Lakers, who won for the 11th time in their past 15 games.

Trey Murphy III scored 14 points and Zion Williamson added 13 for the Pelicans. Herbert Jones added 10 points and seven rebounds as New Orleans lost for the fourth time in its past seven games.

Brandon Ingram had just nine points on 4-of-13 shooting for the Pelicans. New Orleans hit 35.8 percent of its shots and was 7-of-31 from behind the arc.

Taurean Prince scored 15 points, D'Angelo Russell had 14 and Rui Hachimura added 12 for the Lakers, who made 54.7 percent of their shots and 17 of 35 from 3-point range.

'He is the best choice': Golmohammadi unfazed by Ivankovic return rumors

Sports Desk

Yahya Golmohammadi shrugged off rumors of the Persepolis head coach being replaced by Branko Ivankovic in the near future, describing the Croatian as "the best choice for the club."

Tuesday's 2-1 loss to Qatari champion Al Duhail at the Azadi Stadium, which led to the group stage exit for the Reds in the AFC Champions League, piled the pressure on Golmohammadi, with sections of the crowd being vocal in their chants against the manager and club chairman Alireza Darvish after the final whistle.

Recent reports in the Iranian media have suggested that Ivankovic is being considered for a dramatic return to the Persian Gulf Pro League champion's bench, once his contract with the Oman Football Association comes to an end following the conclusion of the AFC Asian Cup in February.

An ex-manager of Iran national team in the early 2000s, Ivankovic has been widely regarded as the linchpin of the Tehran Reds' dominance over the Iranian top flight in recent years, which has seen the club lift six league trophies in the previous seven seasons.

Ivankovic steered Persepolis to three league titles and a Hazfi Cup triumph, as well as a runner-up finish in the AFC Champions League, before parting ways with the Reds in 2019.

Asked about the rumors during a press conference before today's league game against Havadar, Golmohammadi said: "Some people bring up his name to



Persepolis manager Yahya Golmohammadi reacts during a 2-1 defeat against Al Duhail in the AFC Champions League at the Azadi Stadium, Tehran, Iran, on December 5, 2023.
● MOHAMMADREZA ALIMADADI/IRNA

upset me, but I don't have a problem with his return to the club. Even if he were on his way to Tehran tonight, I would make way for him right away. He is the best choice for the club."

"He has been a master to me and Persepolis owes most of its achievements in recent years to him," added Golmohammadi, who played under the Croatian at the 2006 World Cup.

The Iranian coach has en-

joyed his own fair share of success since taking over at Persepolis in January 2020, winning triple league trophies – including last season's domestic double – while leading his team to the final showpiece of the Asian elite clubs competition in his first campaign, only to suffer a 2-1 defeat against Ulsan Hyundai.

However, Golmohammadi is enduring a worst spell on the Reds bench as the

setback against Al Duhail extended the club's winless streak to six matches across all competitions.

Some pundits and former Persepolis players argue that the manager's ongoing rift with the chairman has done little to help the Reds campaign, though Golmohammadi believes the poor run is down to injuries for key players.

Iranian international center-back Morteza Poura-

liganji and midfielder Yassin Salmani will likely be out for the rest of season with the anterior cruciate ligament injuries, while Vahid Amiri has been struggling with a hamstring problem.

"Untimely injuries have cost us dearly. Morteza and Yassin were essential players in the backline and up front. Vahid has also been out for a long time, with Omid A'alishah, [Mahdi] Torabi, and [Milad] Sarlak

also missing a number of games on different occasions. Their absence has surely had a negative impact on our performances," said Golmohammadi.

Persepolis will be chasing a first victory since October 2 when taking on Havadar today, with an eye on Thursday's clash with archrival Esteghlal in what already looks to be a season-defining derby for Golmohammadi and his men.

Saudi World Cup sportswashing claims 'very shallow', sports minister says

BBC – Saudi Arabia's sports minister says claims of 'sportswashing' against the country are "very shallow", as he defended its right to host the men's football World Cup.

Speaking to the BBC in Jeddah, Prince Abdulaziz bin Turki Al Faisal said: "A lot of the people that accuse us of that haven't been to Saudi, or seen what we are doing."

Critics say unprecedented spending on sport has been used to improve the oil-producing kingdom's reputation over its human rights record and its environmental impact.

But the Saudi government insists the investment is boosting the economy, opening it up to tourism and inspiring people to be more active.

Saudi Arabia has invested around £5bn in sports since 2021, when the country's Crown Prince made it a key part of his strategy to diversify the economy, with a host of major sporting events



● MOLLY DARLINGTON/REUTERS

brought to the kingdom, including high-profile boxing and Formula 1.

The country's Public Investment Fund has also launched the breakaway LIV golf series, taken control of four Saudi Pro League clubs and purchased Newcastle United.

But campaigners claim this vast state investment into sport is being used to distract from long-standing

reputation issues such as Saudi Arabia's human rights record, the 2018 murder of journalist Jamal Khashoggi, and the war in Yemen – a process known as 'sportswashing'.

"Twenty millions of our population are below the age of 30, so we need to get them engaged – we are playing our role to develop sports within the world and to be part

of the international community," Prince Abdulaziz said.

When asked if his country would be a suitable host of the 2034 World Cup, he added: "We've showcased that – we've hosted more than 85 global events and we've delivered on the highest level. We want to attract the world through sports. Hopefully, by 2034, people will have an ex-

traordinary World Cup." FIFA has been urged to secure commitments to improving human rights before formally confirming a Saudi World Cup next year. According to FIFA guidelines, countries bidding to host the event must commit to respect human rights.

"Any country has room for improvement, no-one's perfect. We acknowledge that and these events help us reform to a better future for everyone" claimed Prince Abdulaziz.

It is widely expected that the 2034 tournament will be in winter to avoid the country's extreme summer temperatures, as with the 2022 World Cup in Qatar.

But Prince Abdulaziz said organisers were "definitely studying" whether it could be staged in summer.

"Why not see what the possibilities are to do it in the summer? Whether it is summer or winter it doesn't matter for us, as

long as we make sure that we [deliver] the right atmosphere to host such an event," he said.

Saudi Arabia is already building three new stadia for the 2027 AFC Asian Cup, but must have 14 venues with capacities of 40,000 or more for the World Cup.

In October, human rights group Amnesty raised concerns over the treatment of migrant workers in the kingdom.

When asked if there could be similar issues to the controversy that dogged the Qatar World Cup over workers' rights, Prince Abdulaziz said: "I assure you it's not going to be repeated."

"We have 10 years to work on that, we already started in a lot of the venues, so we have a long time to do it in the right time, in the right process... We're already developing infrastructure... so we are not required to build a lot more to host such an event."