

Turkish leagues halted after club president punches ref in face



MKE Ankaragucu president Faruk Koca reacts as the referee Halil Umut Meler lies on the ground at the end of their Super Lig home match against Caykur Rizespor in Ankara, Turkey, on December 11, 2023.
● REUTERS

REUTERS – The Turkish Football Federation (TFF) has suspended all leagues on a night of “shame” for the nation’s soccer after Ankaragucu’s president Faruk Koca punched the referee in the face at the end of their Super Lig home match against Rizespor. Koca entered the field and hit referee Halil Umut Meler when the final whistle blew after Rizespor scored a 97th minute equaliser in the 1-1 draw at Eryaman Stadium on Monday, footage from state broadcaster TRT showed.

Ankaragucu fans invaded the pitch after the game and Meler was also kicked when he fell, though it was unclear who his assailants were. Meler eventually made it to the dressing room with the help of the police.

“The Turkish Football Federation has decided to suspend all games in all leagues indefinitely,” the federation posted on X, formerly known as Twitter.

“The related club, the club chairman, club officials and all those guilty of attacking referee Umut Meler will be punished in the strongest terms possible.”

A detention order has been issued for Koca, Interior Minister Ali Yerlikaya said in a post on X, adding that two people have already been detained as part of a judicial investigation into the incident.

“Turkish football has been punched shamefully tonight. Everyone involved in this incident will pay the price,” TFF Chairman Mehmet Buyukeksi said, according to TRT.

A FIFA referee since 2017, 37-year-old Meler took charge of Lazio’s Champions League group game with Celtic on Nov. 28.

Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan tweeted: “Sport means peace and brotherhood. Sport is incompatible with violence. We will never allow violence to take place in Turkish sports.”

Referees in Turkey are often criticised by club managers and presidents for their decisions but are rarely the target of violent attacks.

Ankaragucu are 11th in the standings on 18 points, three places below Rizespor on 22 points after 15 matches.

Will Persepolis, Esteghlal go all out for bragging rights in Tehran derby?



By Amirhadi Arsalanpour
Staff writer

When Tehran archrivals Persepolis and Esteghlal squared off in the Persian Gulf Pro League back in April, the result turned out to set the tone for the remainder of last season’s title race.

Issa Alekasir’s second-half strike was enough for Persepolis to walk away with the maximum points, which saw the Reds overtake their fierce rivals and Sepahan on the same matchday before winning the next three games for a sixth Iranian top-flight trophy in seven years.

The result also proved to be the beginning of the end for Portuguese manager Ricardo Sa Pinto, who parted ways with the Blues after a season in charge following another derby defeat in the Hazfi Cup final in May.

However, with the ongoing league campaign yet to reach the halfway mark, the outcome of the 102nd capital derby on Thursday is hardly going to be a season-defining result for either of the two sides, but the two head coaches, Yahya Golmohammadi and Javad Nekounam, could still have their own reasons to give it their best shot for the bragging rights.

Saturday’s narrow one-goal win against Havadar gave Persepolis a first victory in six matches across all competitions, bringing relief for the Reds boss Golmohammadi, who had sections of



● PAYAM SANI/IRNA

the home crowd chanting against him after the final whistle of the 2-1 home defeat against Al Duhail last week, one that saw the club crash out of the AFC Champions League group stage. The mood on stands on Saturday was in stark contrast with the one against the Qatari champion, but Golmohammadi, whose team has been plagued by injuries in recent weeks, knows a defeat on Thursday could easily lead to the fans turning against their head coach again.

For all the success Golmohammadi has enjoyed over the past four years with – featuring three league titles, a Hazfi Cup trophy, and a runner-up finish in the Asian elite clubs competition – Golmohammadi has thoroughly been blamed by the supporters and ex-Persepolis players for his ongoing rift with club chairman Alireza Darvish dominating the Reds campaign. On the opposite bench, meanwhile, Nekounam will be hoping to cement his sta-

tes as the right man for the Blues job with a first derby triumph in the league for Esteghlal since March 2018. The former Iranian skipper has beaten the odds to steer his team to the top spot of the table, despite a rather quiet transfer window in the summer as well as his own version of falling-out with the club hierarchy. Still, barely producing convincing performances, Esteghlal has been struggling with creating chances over the course of the 90 min-

utes – most reflected in Saturday’s goalless stalemate at Foolad Khuzestan, which saw Sepahan close the gap on top thanks to 4-1 thrashing of Mes Rafsanjan. Boasting the most formidable squad in the league, Sepahan did a great job to bounce back from a four-point deduction – due to a ‘budget cap violation’ – earlier in the season and is widely regarded as the favorite to lift the ultimate prize by the end of the campaign, but Nekounam

will be looking to build on a statement win on Thursday to establish his side as the only threat to the Isfahan-based side’s title quest. Persepolis and Esteghlal have occasionally received criticism for adopting a conservative approach in the Tehran derby over the years, but the prospect of what a massive victory could mean for both this time around could be tempting enough for the two managers to go all out for it on Thursday.

Duplantis, Kipyegon among six named Athletes of the Year



BBC – World-record pole vaulter Armand Duplantis was named one of six World Athletes of the Year for 2023.

This year’s edition of the World Athletics Awards changed from crowning a sole male and female winner to issuing awards across six categories.

World and Olympic champion Duplantis, Athlete of the Year in 2020 and 2022, took the inaugural men’s field award.

Other winners announced on Monday were Tigist Assefa, Faith Kipyegon, Yulimar Rojas, Noah Lyles and Kelvin Kiptum.

Following feedback during the voting process, in a year in which 23 world records were set, the awards were divided into three event categories for men and women: track, field and out of stadia.

Duplantis, Kiptum, Assefa and Kipyegon set world records in their respective events in 2023, while all six award winners secured world titles or major marathon wins.

“The depth of talent and the outstanding performances in our sport this year more than justify the expansion of the World Athletics Awards to recognise the accomplishments by these six athletes across a range of disciplines,” said World Athletics president Sebastian Coe.

“Our World Athletes of the Year

alone have achieved seven world records between them in 2023, as well as a host of world titles and major wins, so it is only fitting that they be recognised as the athletes of the year in their respective fields.”

Sweden’s Duplantis, 24, broke the world record twice in 2023 and defended his world title. Ethiopia’s Assefa, 27, was awarded the women’s out of stadia trophy after winning the Berlin marathon with the biggest single improvement of the women’s world record for 40 years.

Women’s track winner Kipyegon set world records at three distances – 1500m, 5,000m and the mile – during a season in which the 29-year-old Kenyan achieved a golden double at the World Athletics Championships.

Women’s field winner Rojas claimed her fourth world triple jump title and the 28-year-old Venezuelan won her third consecutive Diamond League trophy.

American Lyles, 26, took the men’s track award after winning the 100m-200m double at the World Championships, as well as adding a 4x100m gold.

And finally, Kenya’s Kiptum, 24, claimed the men’s out of stadia award after becoming the first athlete to break two hours one minute in a record-eligible marathon in Chicago.