

Persian Gulf Pro League:

Depleted Sepahan sunk by Golgothar; Persepolis edges Nassaji

Sports Desk

A rescheduled double header at the Persian Gulf Pro League saw short-handed Sepahan fall to a 3-1 defeat at Golgothar Sirjan on Thursday, with Persepolis laboring to a 1-0 victory over Nassaji Mazandaran at home.

Alireza Alizadeh headed home a Roberto Torres' corner-kick to give Golgothar the lead 14 minutes into the game before things went from bad to worse for Sepahan two minutes after the break when fullback Arshia Sarshoq received his marching orders for a second bookable offense.

Torres doubled the advantage for the home side with a 52nd-minute stunner from the edge of the box but Shahriar Moghanlou pulled one back for the visitors from the penalty spot seven minutes later – a ninth goal of the campaign for the leading marksman of the Iranian top flight.

Masih Zahedi's header secured maximum points for the host two minutes from normal time as Golgothar moved up to seventh in the table with 22 points, while Sepahan remained on top with 31 points despite suffering a second league loss in four days.

Tuesday's ruling by the Appeal Committee of the Iranian Football Federation to overturn a Disciplinary Committee's decision to deduct four points from Sepahan over breaching the new transfer rules had seen the club overtake Esteghlal on top of table.

However, Portuguese manager Jose Morais had to do without a number of key players for the visit to Sirjan after Payam Niazmand, Reza Shekari, Kaveh Rezaei, Ehsan Pahlevan, Hadi Mohammadi, and Reza Asadi were banned for the wrongdoings in their contracts while the latter had already been suspended for a red



Golgothar players celebrate a goal during a 3-1 victory over Sepahan in the Persian Gulf Pro League in Sirjan, Iran, on December 28, 2023.
● JAVAD NADERIPOUR/FFIRI

card in the previous game against Iralco – alongside Bryan Dabo and Mohammad Karimi – and in-form fullback Ramin Rezaei was ruled out of the contest with a muscle injury. At Tehran's Azadi Stadium, Yahya Golmohammadi's Persepolis again had to make a hard work of the three points at home as the win against Nassaji meant the

Reds will reach the midway point of the season on Monday – away to Mes Rafsanjan – with five one-goal victories in eight home fixtures, while sharing the spoils with Zob Ahan, San'at Naft, and Esteghlal. Having last found the net against Paykan in mid-October, Shahab Zahedi headed in Mahdi Torabi's pinpoint cross on the half-hour mark on his return to the starting

XI to take his tally to five for the season. As integral winger Torabi ran out of steam in the second period, Golmohammadi's men looked out of clues in the opposition half and had to hold off a late surge by the visiting side, which had new head coach Lucas Alcaraz on the bench for the first time since the Spaniard replaced Mahdi Rahmati.

The hard-fought victory was still enough to see Persepolis, who also had a point restored by the Appeal Committee, move level on 29 points with archrival Esteghlal in the table – sitting third on goal difference – but more work needs to be done for the second part of the campaign if the Reds fancy a seventh league crown in eight seasons.

Al Hilal test

Meanwhile, Sepahan was given probably the hardest task in the knockout phase of the AFC Champions League in Thursday's draw, as the Iranian club will face Saudi giant Al Hilal – the most decorated club in the history of the competition with four titles – in the two-legged last-16 fixture.

Sepahan will be the only Iranian side in the knockouts, thanks to a second-place finish behind Al Ittihad in Group C of the Asian elite clubs' competition, while Al Hilal will head into the first leg on February 12 – hosted by Sepahan – on the back of winning Group D.

The second leg will be played in Riyadh seven days later.

A summer of spending spree saw Al Hilal secure the services of Neymar and his fellow Brazilian Malcom, Serbian internationals Aleksandar Mitrovic and Sergej Milinkovic-Savic, as well as Kalidou Koulibaly, Rúben Neves, and Moroccan keeper Yassine Bounou and is yet to concede a defeat across all competitions this season – sitting comprehensively atop the Saudi Pro League table with 16 wins in 18 matches.

Elsewhere in the West Zone last-16 round, Cristiano Ronaldo's Al Nassr will square off against Al Fayha in an all-Saudi tie, with Nasaf FC of Uzbekistan playing the UAE's Al Ain.

Navbahor vs. Al Ittihad completes the last-16 lineup in the West.

Son leads squad as South Korea 'ready' to win Asian Cup

Tottenham Hotspur's Son Heung-min was named in South Korea's Asian Cup squad on Thursday and coach Jurgen Klinsmann said it was "about time" they ended their 64-year continental title drought.

Wolves forward Hwang Hee-chan, who scored his 10th Premier League goal of the season against Brentford on Wednesday, was also among Klinsmann's 26-man selection for the tournament, which kicks off in Qatar on January 12.

Son will captain a squad that includes Bayern Munich defender Kim Min-jae and 22-year-old Paris Saint-Germain attacking midfielder Lee Kang-in. South Korea have not won the

Asian Cup since 1960 and Klinsmann said: "It's all about timing now and I think we are ready for this big, big competition."

South Korea have been drawn in Group E and will face Malaysia, Jordan and Bahrain in the first round.

They lost 1-0 to eventual champions Qatar in the quarter-finals of the 2019 Asian Cup in the United Arab Emirates.

Klinsmann, a World Cup winner with Germany in 1990, will have one of the strongest squads in the tournament in Qatar and he said he could "see it in their eyes that they are hungry for it".

"I have a good feeling because they're doing well at their clubs," he said.



● YONHAP

"They're healthy, they're fit, they're ambitious and they're very hungry. This is the foundation for playing a good tournament."

Son will be appearing at his fourth Asian Cup and was part of the South Korea team that lost to hosts Australia in the

2015 final.

PSG's Lee is also making a splash after moving to Paris from Mallorca in the summer, and Klinsmann described him as "a flower that starts to bloom".

"We have a lot of different pieces in that roster and that makes us one of the favourites for the Asian Cup," said Klinsmann.

"We have to fine tune these elements over the next couple of weeks and then go into the tournament with confidence."

South Korea squad:

Goalkeepers: Kim Seung-gyu (Al Shabab/KSA), Jo Hyeon-woo (Ulsan), Song Bum-keun (Shonan Bellmare/JPN)

Defenders: Kim Young-gwon (Ulsan), Kim Min-jae (Bayern Mu-

nich/GER), Jung Seung-hyun (Ulsan), Kim Ju-sung (FC Seoul), Kim Ji-soo (Brentford/ENG), Seol Young-woo (Ulsan), Kim Tae-hwan (Ulsan), Lee Ki-je (Suwon), Kim Jin-su (Jeonbuk)

Midfielders: Park Yong-woo (Al Ain/UAE), Hwang In-beom (Red Star Belgrade/SRB), Hong Hyun-seok (Gent/BEL), Lee Soon-min (Gwangju), Lee Jae-sung (Mainz/GER), Lee Kang-in (Paris Saint-Germain/FRA), Son Heung-min (Tottenham/ENG), Jeong Woo-yeong (Stuttgart/GER), Hwang Hee-chan (Wolves/ENG), Moon Seon-min (Jeonbuk), Park Jin-seob (Jeonbuk), Yang Hyun-jun (Celtic/SCO)

Strikers: Cho Gue-sung (Midtjylland/DEN), Oh Hyeon-gyu (Celtic/SCO)

Nadal plays down AO hopes but vows to enjoy comeback



● BRADLEY KANARIS/GETTY IMAGES

AAP – Rafael Nadal has attempted to play down his "impossible" Australian Open title hopes in what shapes as the first stop on his 2024 farewell world tour. But for the 37-year-old Spaniard, who is set to return at the Brisbane International after almost a year out with injury, Australia is a place where the impossible happens.

The 22-time major champi-

on's last match was a round-two loss at the Australian Open in January earlier this year, with Nadal eventually opting for surgery to fix his troublesome hip in June.

"It's impossible to think about winning tournaments today," he said when told Australian world No 40 Alexei Popyrin had tipped him to win in Brisbane. "What's really possible is to enjoy the comeback. I don't expect

much; one year without being on the court."

Nadal, who missed last year's French Open after winning it for a staggering 14th time a year earlier, has said 2024 is "probably going to be my last year on the professional tour". But he said he was encouraged by his fitness, confessing he feels "much better than what I expected a month ago".

"I can't have super long-term

goals because I don't see myself playing a super long time," he said.

"I don't know how things are going to keep going. I'm not a player who tries to predict what can happen in the short term, and it's even tougher in the medium period of time. I need to accept the adversity and that it's not going to be perfect, just come with the right spirit every day."