

Ten Hag bullish he can lead new United era despite poor run



● REUTERS

THE GUARDIAN – Erik ten Hag said it is clear Manchester United are underperforming after falling to a ninth Premier League defeat of the season but he is confident he will convince Sir Jim Ratcliffe he is the best manager to lead the club in the long term. Defeat at Nottingham Forest means United have lost five of their past eight games in all competitions and 14 before the turn of the year for the first time since the 1930-31 season.

Ten Hag previously said he was looking forward to working with Ratcliffe, who has taken control of football operations after acquiring a 25% stake in the club. The United manager said he and Ratcliffe will set “high targets” when they meet. Sir Dave Brailsford, the Ineos director of sport who is poised to take a prominent role on United’s football board and report to Ratcliffe, was in the directors’ box at the City Ground alongside legendary former manager, Sir Alex Ferguson.

“They know me and they know when I have the squad what is available then the results will be there,” Ten Hag said. “We have already proved against the top teams that we can go head to head. I am convinced and I have strong belief that we can get progress in this team and get more consistency than this moment. It is part of a project. We were overperforming last year, this year – so far – we are underperforming and we have to do better. We have to step up. I have to lead the process.”

Asked if he believes United’s fortunes will improve, Ten Hag replied: “Of course I believe that. I know when [injured] players return, I’m sure this side will be stronger.”

Ten Hag bemoaned the absence of the striker Rasmus Højlund, who missed the match through illness, and said needing to change the team that overcame Aston Villa on Boxing Day disrupted their rhythm. “One thing is for sure, if every time you have to swap [the team] the routines are not there,” the Dutchman said. “Top footballers go quick so you need communication in split-moments. There was one counterattack [for Forest’s winning goal] where we probably were not too good defending as a team. He [Brailsford] will see we have our problems. You want to build on Tuesday but you have to replace your striker.”

Iran names 27-man squad in hunt of Asian Cup glory

Sports Desk

Iran head coach Amir Qalenoeei on Sunday announced the 27-man squad for the upcoming AFC Asian Cup – starting January 12 in Qatar. AS Roma striker Sardar Azmoun has been named in the squad but could still be Iran’s major absentee in Qatar due to his commitments in the one-year loan contract with the Serie A club.

However, the Iranian Football Federation said it is in talks with the Giallorossi to convince Portuguese manager Jose Mourinho to release the national team’s talisman for the four-week tournament.

All 24 Asian teams will have until Tuesday to announce 26 players for the tournament.

Al Wahda midfielder Ahmad Nourollahi has been ignored for the event after he was axed from the squad for disciplinary reasons during a visit to Tashkent for a World Cup qualifier against Uzbekistan in November.

Ali Karimi, playing for Turkish top-flight club Kayserispor, is also absent in the list despite having a regular place in the squad in recent months.

Mahdi Qayedi, whose last international appearance came in the CAFA Nations Cup final against Uzbekistan in June, was rewarded with a surprise spot in the list follow-

ing an impressive run of late with Farhad Majidi’s Ittihad Kalba in the UAE Pro League. Iran will play Burkina Faso during a training camp in the Kish Island on Friday before facing Indonesia in a final friendly before the tournament in Qatar.

Chasing a first trophy in the continent’s flagship international event since 1976, the three-time champion Iran

will begin its campaign with a game against Palestine in Al Rayyan’s Education City Stadium on Jan. 14.

Iran will take on Hong Kong at the Khalifa International Stadium five days later before playing the United Arab Emirates in the final round of Group B fixtures on Jan. 23.

For Qalenoeei – the most decorated coach in the Persian Gulf Pro League history with

five titles, who replaced Portuguese Carlos Queiroz on Iran bench last March – the upcoming event will provide the opportunity to accomplish an unfinished mission.

The 60-year-old Iranian has always felt hard done by to see his previous 11-month spell in charge of the national team come to an end following a shootout defeat against South Korea in the

2007 Asian Cup quarter-finals and will be eager to steer his team to the final showpiece, which will be staged at the Lusail Stadium on February 10, this time around.

The following is the full Iranian squad for the AFC Asian Cup:

Goalkeepers: Alireza Beiranvand (Persepolis), Payam Niazmand (Sepahan), Seyyed Hossein Hosseini (Esteghlal)

Defenders: Seyyed Majid Hosseini (Kayserispor), Saman Fallah (Golgozar Sirjan), Hossein Kan’anizadegan (Persepolis), Shoja Khalilzadeh (Tractor), Sadeq Moharami (Dinamo Zagreb), Ramin Rezaeian (Sepahan), Arya Yousefi (Sepahan), Ehsan Hajsafi (AEK Athens), Milad Mohammadi (AEK Athens)

Midfielders: Saeed Ezzatollahi (Vejele BK), Rouzbeh Cheshmi (Esteghlal), Omid Ebrahimi (Al Shamal SC), Mohammad-Javad Hosseinejad (Sepahan), Saman Qoddous (Brentford), Alireza Jahanbakhsh (Feyenoord), Mohammad Mohebbi (FC Rostov), Mahdi Qayedi (Ittihad Kalba), Mahdi Torabi (Persepolis), Ali Qolizadeh (Lech Poznan)

Strikers: Mahdi Taremi (FC Porto), Sardar Azmoun (AS Roma), Reza Asadi (Sepahan), Shahriar Moghanlou (Sepahan), Karim Ansarifard (Omonia FC).



● FFIRI

Pistons end 28-match NBA losing streak with win over Raptors

BBC – The Detroit Pistons narrowly avoided unwanted history as they ended their 28-match losing streak with victory over the Toronto Raptors.

Cade Cunningham scored 30 points and made 12 assists as the Pistons edged a 129-127 win – their first in the NBA since 28 October.

Their 28th defeat had equalled the longest losing run in NBA history.

A loss to the Raptors would have matched the longest losing streak in major US professional sports history.

That record is held by NFL team the Chicago Cardinals – now the Arizona Cardinals – who fell to 29 successive losses between 1942 and 1945.

In Saturday’s match, Bojan Bogdanovic added 19 points for hosts the Pistons, while Jalen Duran contributed 18 points and 17 rebounds and Kevin Knox II made 17 points.

“We just kept battling,” said 2021 NBA draft number one pick Cunningham. “It’s been a long, long stretch – all these losses – but I’m just happy to be a part of a group of guys that don’t quit and bring it every day



Pistons forward Bojan Bogdanovic and guard Cade Cunningham celebrates during an NBA victory over the Raptors at Little Caesars Arena, Detroit, MI, US, on December 30, 2023.

● RICK OSENTOSKI/USA TODAY SPORTS

and still stay positive and uplift each other.”

He added: “It’s been weighing on us heavy everywhere we go

for two months, which is unreal, for it to have been that long.

“It was a long time coming, something that we’ve been

pushing for for so long and to finally get over that hump, we’re not trying to go back. Now it really begins where we see who

we’re going to be and if we’re going to continue to play with that same fire that we’ve been playing with.”

No birthday win for LeBron

Elsewhere, it was not a happy birthday for LeBron James, whose Los Angeles Lakers lost 108-106 to the Minnesota Timberwolves.

James, who turned 39, scored 26 points, with the Timberwolves’ Anthony Edwards scoring 31 points in 38 minutes for the hosts.

In Indianapolis, Tyrese Haliburton became the first player in 33 years to score at least 20 points and 20 assists in consecutive games as he led the Indiana Pacers to a 140-126 win over the New York Knicks.

With his 22 points and 23 assists, he joined Hall of Famers Magic Johnson and John Stockton as only the third player in NBA history to achieve the feat.

Luka Doncic led the Dallas Mavericks to a 132-122 victory over Stephen Curry’s Golden State Warriors, while there were wins too for the Chicago Bulls and Utah Jazz.