

Nadal to miss Australian Open following fresh hip injury



● JONO SEARLE/AAP

BBC – Rafael Nadal will miss the Australian Open and instead return to Spain for treatment on a hip injury he sustained at the Brisbane International.

Nadal, 37, made his long-awaited return after almost a year out with injury this week, winning his first two matches in Brisbane in straight sets. But he was injured in his quarter-final loss to Jordan Thompson on Friday. Nadal said a scan had shown a micro tear on a muscle but not in the same area as his previous long-term injury.

The Spaniard, who had not played a singles match for 349 days prior to his opening win over Dominic Thiem, said the result was “good news” but added he was “not ready to compete at the maximum level”.

“I have worked very hard during the year for this comeback and as I always mentioned my goal is to be at my best level in three months,” 22-time Grand Slam champion Nadal said on social media. “Within the sad news for me for not being able to play in front of the amazing Melbourne crowds, this is not very bad news and we all remain positive with the evolution for the season.”

“I really wanted to play in Australia and I have had the chance to play a few matches that made me very happy and positive. “Thanks all for the support and see you soon!”

The Australian Open, where Nadal has triumphed twice, starts in Melbourne on 14 January. Nadal will now focus on returning to fitness in time for the French Open, which begins on 20 May and where he is a record 14-time champion.

His most recent appearance at a Grand Slam was the 2023 Australian Open, when he struggled with injury in a second-round loss to Mackenzie McDonald.

He said in May, after being forced to miss the French Open for the first time in 19 years, that 2024 will “probably” be the final year of his career.

End of an era as Persepolis set to replace Golmohammadi



● AMIR KHOLOUSI/ISNA

Sports Desk

Persepolis is up for a new chapter in the Iranian club football as the Persian Gulf Pro League champion has begun the quest for a new head coach to replace Yahya Golmohammadi.

Golmohammadi stepped down from his role after a frustrating 1-1 draw away to Mes Rafsanjan last week for what he labeled as the club’s “financial and infrastructural problems”, and though Persepolis board was quick to reject his resignation, it now seems to be a matter of days before his departure is officially announced, bringing the Iranian’s trophy-laden reign on the Tehran Reds’ bench to an end.

Having joined the club midway through the 2019/20 season, the 52-year-old coach led Persepolis

to a fourth successive top-flight title by the end of the campaign and repeated the success the following season, while steering his team to the final showdown of the 2020 AFC Champions League, only to miss out on a maiden Asian silverware after a 2-1 defeat against Ulsan Hyundai.

The Reds’ title streak came to an end by archrival Esteghlal in the 2021/22 season but Golmohammadi’s side restored domestic dominance a year later, as seven wins in a row – including a victory in last April’s crunch Tehran Derby – helped Persepolis win the league and then a seal a memorable league and cup double in May, thanks to a second win against the Tehran Blues in a month.

However, Golmohammadi’s falling-out with the club CEO Reza Darvish, as well as long-term inju-

ries to Morteza Pouraliganji, Vahid Amiri, and Yassin Salmani – with star player Mahdi Torabi far from his best form – led to a run of inept results and performances in the new season.

The Reds only managed three wins in 12 outings across all competitions between late October and the Mes draw, while crashing out of the Asian elite clubs’ competition at the group stage, which was met by chants from sections of the stands against Golmohammadi in the aftermath of the 2-1 home defeat against Qatari club Al Duhail in December.

Branko to save the season?

In a statement late on Saturday, Persepolis said the club’s priority would be to continue with Golmohammadi but in case of his permanent departure, the Iranian would

be replaced by a “high-profile foreign head coach.”

With Esteghlal and Sepahan sitting above Persepolis in the league table and Tractor closing the gap on the top three at the mid-point of the season, Reds faithful have every reason to be concerned about the future of their team for the rest of the campaign.

However, they could still be treated to a return to good old days as former head coach Branko Ivanovic is reportedly the favorite to make a dramatic comeback to the Persepolis bench.

Now in charge of Oman for the upcoming AFC Asian Cup in Qatar, the 69-year-old Croatian is widely regarded as the linchpin of the Reds success over the past decade by leading the club to three successive league titles and a first-ev-

er AFC Champions League final in 2018.

Ivanovic, who ended his five-year stint following a domestic double in June 2019 to join Saudi club Al Ahli, told IRNA last week that he is yet to be approached by Persepolis but he would be “open to negotiate with any team” once he sees out his contract with the Persian Gulf country by the end of their Asian Cup campaign.

The other familiar face lined up for the role in the media is Ivanovic’s fellow countryman Dragan Skocic – the manager of Croatia’s under-21 side – who might have personal reasons to return to the Iranian club football after being harshly treated to be sacked as the national team coach only a couple of months before the 2022 World Cup despite a dominant run in the qualifiers.

Azmoun on Sevilla radar: Report

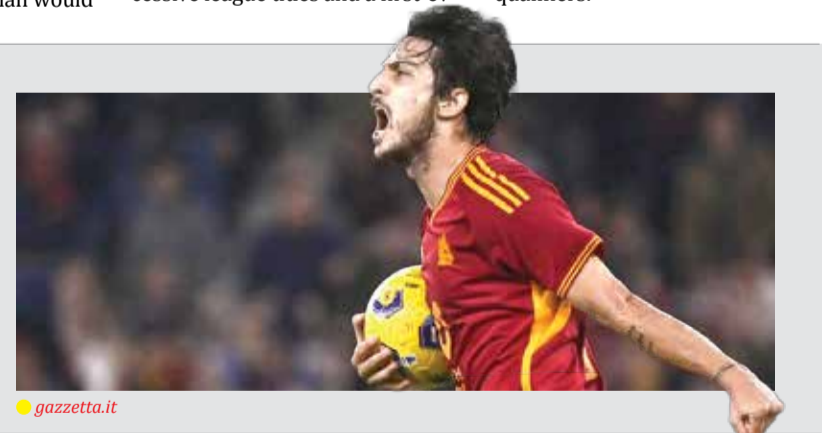
Sports Desk

La Liga club Sevilla is eyeing a move for Iranian striker Sardar Azmoun in the January transfer window, according to Italian journalist Fabrizio Romano.

Azmoun, who is set to join the national team ahead of next Sunday’s opening game in the AFC Asian Cup against Palestine, moved to Serie A club AS Roma on a season-long loan

deal from German side Leverkusen last June. The Iranian has bagged one goal and assist apiece in 14 cameo appearances for the Giallorossi across all competition.

Roma boss Jose Mourinho has been reportedly impressed by the Iranian’s contribution, though his €12 million price tag could keep the club from making his contract permanent in the summer, Rome-based website il Romanista wrote on Sunday.



● gazzetta.it



● EFE

Madrid will be patient with Guler after debut, Ancelotti says

REUTERS – Real Madrid will not rush things with Turkish attacking midfielder Arda Guler, manager Carlo Ancelotti said after the 18-year-old made his long-awaited debut for the Spanish giants in their 3-1 win over Arandina in the Copa del Rey on Saturday.

The Turkey international made an impressive first appearance at Aranda de Duero, nearly six months after his move to Santiago Bernabeu from Super Lig club Fenerbahce. Guler suffered a series of injuries since penning a six-year deal for a reported transfer fee of 20 million euros (\$21.88 million).

The LaLiga leaders cruised into the last 16 with the win against Arandina.

“Guler performed well for an hour. It was important for him to get used to playing with the team. He will gradually build up his fitness level and intensity,” Ancelotti told reporters.

“We have to be patient with him, but he showed his quality in the first half. It’s important that he’s back.

“He has personality and character, and that’s good. He has good quality with his left foot, but character is an important aspect to do well at Real Madrid.”