

Iranian Hazfi Cup: Esteghlal stunned by Mes; Persepolis, Sepahan ease into last-16

Sports Desk

Three rescheduled fixtures in the Iranian Hazfi Cup were staged on Monday, with defending champion Persepolis and Sepahan claiming comfortable victories over their opponents to march into last 16.

Meanwhile, the biggest upset of the third round saw Esteghlal crash out of the domestic cup after a 2-0 defeat at Mes Rafsanjan. Esteghlal defender Saleh Hardani could have given the Blues an early lead from the spot, only to see his effort well saved by former Persepolis keeper Hamed Lak in the 12th minute.

Mohammad-Mahdi Mohebbi put Moharram Navidkia's revived Mes in front with a composed finish in the 24th minute, before Iraqi midfielder Muntadher Mohammed's sublime lob doubled the home side's advantage midway through the second half.

This was only a second defeat for Javad Nekounam since he took charge of the Blues bench last summer, though it also meant that his side has now failed to win its last seven away games across all competitions.

Leading the Iranian top-flight table, Esteghlal will return to league action on Friday, visiting Esteghlal Khuzestan in Ahvaz.

Elsewhere, Persepolis continued its impressive run under Brazilian



Esteghlal's Jaloliddin Masharipov (blue) is tackled by Mes Rafsanjan midfielder Farshid Baqeri during an Iranian Hazfi Cup match in Kerman, Iran, on March 4, 2024.

Osmar Vieira – an ex-number two to his predecessor Yahya Golmohammadi – walking away with a

3-0 win against second-tier club Naft Gachsaran in Tehran's Azadi Stadium.

Mahdi Torabi broke the deadlock late in the first half, with Danial Esmaeilifar and Issa Alekasir on

the scoresheet in the second period as the Reds eased to a third successive victory after the Asian

Cup pause and will hope to repeat the success in the league when taking on Foolad Khuzestan on Friday ahead of next week's crunch Tehran Derby.

In Isfahan's Naqsh-e Jahan Stadium, Portuguese manager Jose Morais was thrilled to see his Sepahan team end a seven-game losing streak with a commanding 3-0 triumph over Shams Azar, which had beaten the Isfahan-based outfit by one goal in the league on the first of the new year.

Reza Asadi, the second top scorer in the league, scored his first goal since late December, flicking in a Ramin Rezaeian's effort into the roof of the net.

Omid Nourafkan's sizzling strike doubled Sepahan's lead on the hour mark, and substitute Reza Shekari sealed the victory with 20 minutes left on the clock.

Sitting third in the league table – eight points off the top with two games in hand – Morais will be eager to have his men keep up the momentum at home against Paykan on Friday.

Monday's winners will be joined by fellow top-flight sides Malavan, Irasco, Havadar, Golgozar, Paykan, Zob Ahan, and Tractor as well as second-division clubs Chadormalu SC, Fajr Sepasi, Saipa, Mes Kerman, Esteghlal Mollasani, and Mes Sungun in the next round of the Hazfi Cup.

Fazza 2024 Para Powerlifting World Cup: Gharibshahi wins heavyweight gold

Sports Desk

Iranians grabbed three medals at the Fazza 2024 Para Powerlifting World Cup in Dubai on Monday, including an Aliakbar Gharibshahi's gold in the heavyweight class.

Representing the country in the 107kg contests, Gharibshahi picked up where he had left off in last October's Asian Para Games as a best

lift of 250kg saw the Iranian claim the ultimate prize.

This was a third gold for Iran in Dubai, following Ahmad Aminzadeh's superheavyweight triumph as well as Mohsen Bakhtiar's Asian record-breaking performance in the 59kg event. Gharibshahi was joined by teammate Saman Razi – a Paralympic bronze medalist three years ago – in Monday's event but the Iranian

was unfortunate to miss out on the podium as he registered 215kg to end in the fourth place.

Elsewhere, Seyyed Hamed Solhipour – a silver winner in Tokyo – had to settle for the runner-up spot in the 97kg class, courtesy of a 221kg lift.

Reigning Paralympic champion Rouhollah Rostami took Iran's medal count to five later in day, when

he lifted 214kg to finish second in the 88kg weight class – a second major silver for the Iranian in five months after his runner-up finish in the Asian Para Games.

More than 180 athletes from 32 countries took part at the 13th edition of the competition, which also served as a qualification event for this summer's Paralympic Games in Paris.



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Chelsea identify Amorim, De Zerbi as potential Pochettino replacements



ANDREW COULDRIDGE/ACTION IMAGES

THE GUARDIAN – Chelsea's desire to wait until the end of the season before reviewing Mauricio Pochettino's position has not stopped the club from identifying Rúben Amorim and Roberto De Zerbi as potential replacements for the Argentinian.

Pochettino, who was handed a two-year deal after arriving at Stamford Bridge last summer, faces an uncertain future after a mixed run of results. Supporters turned on the head coach during Chelsea's 2-2 draw with Brentford last Saturday and there are doubts over whether the 52-year-old will be in charge next season.

Chelsea, who are 11th in the Premier League, remain determined not to make any kneejerk decisions and key figures within the hierarchy are still supportive of Pochettino. Although results and performances have been inconsistent,

there is a view that the side is moving in the right direction under the former Tottenham manager. Pochettino has not lost a youthful dressing room and has had to contend with injuries to influential players all season.

However the pressure on the former Southampton coach grew after Chelsea lost the Carabao Cup final to an injury-hit and inexperienced Liverpool side in extra time last month. Pochettino's future is likely to depend on whether Chelsea, who host Leicester in the FA Cup quarter-finals on 17 March, secure European football.

Chelsea are taking a long-term view and hope to be ready should they decide to go in a different direction. They are assessing both Amorim, who has impressed at Sporting, and De Zerbi, who could leave Brighton at the end of the

season. De Zerbi is on Liverpool's shortlist to replace Jürgen Klopp and is of interest to Manchester United should they sack Erik ten Hag.

Liverpool are also looking at Amorim. The 39-year-old led Sporting to the Portuguese title in 2021 and he hopes to help them win the league again this season. Chelsea considered Amorim before appointing Pochettino last year.

Any manager who takes the Chelsea job would need to be willing to work beneath the club's sporting structure. Pochettino is not in charge of recruitment. The co-sporting directors, Laurence Stewart and Paul Winstanley, have largely been behind a spending spree on a host of young players. Joe Shields, the co-director of recruitment and talent, has also played a part and Behdad Eghbali, the co-controlling owner, is highly influential.