

Iranian Knockout Cup: Moghanlou at the double as Sepahan ends title drought



Sports Desk

Shahriar Moghanlou scored twice as Sepahan defeated Mes Rafsanjan 2-0 in the Iranian Hazfi Cup (knockout) final on Thursday. The leading marksman in the newly-finished Persian Gulf Pro League season with 16 strikes, Moghanlou found the net with eight minutes into the game at Tehran's Azadi Stadium, intercepting a back pass by Mes full-back Meysam Teymouri before beating wrongfooted keeper Hamed Lak from close range. Referee Bijan Heidari blow in whistle for a spot kick after a VAR review showed Mes forward Mohammad-Mahdi Mohebbi handling the ball in his own box as Moghanlou sent his

former Persepolis teammate the wrong way to double Sepahan's lead midway through the first half.

A fifth Hazfi Cup crown handed Sepahan a playoff spot in the inaugural AFC Champions League Elite in August while it ended a nine-year trophy for the Isfahan-based club, which had last lifted the Iranian top-flight trophy in the 2014/15 season. It also came as a relief at the end of a season packed with twists and turns for Jose Morais's men, who at one stage looked to be the clear favorites to win the Iranian league but eventually had to settle for a third-spot finish behind Tehran archrivals Persepolis and Esteghlal. Sepahan chairman Mahdi Azer-

↑ Sepahan players celebrate lifting the Iranian Hazfi Cup trophy after a 2-0 win against Mes Rafsanjan in the final at the Azadi Stadium, Tehran, Iran, on June 20, 2024.
● PAYAM SANI/IRNA

baijani brought an end to weeks of speculation over the future of the club's bench, saying the Portuguese manager "has already given us his wish list of new players and planned for next season." Meanwhile, fullback Ramin Rezaeian said the game marked his last appearance in a Sepahan shirt after two seasons with the club, during which he bagged 21 goals, providing his teammates with 20 assists, in 70 outings.

Volleyball Nations League: Iran's surge halted by Olympic champion France

Sports Desk

Iran's winning run in Week 3 of the Volleyball Nations League came to an end by a straight-set defeat (25-21, 25-17, 25-20) against France on Friday.

Inspired by back-to-back 3-2 victories over USA and the Netherlands in Manila, Iran was chasing only a third win in 11 outings in this year's VNL but the reigning Olympic champion proved too strong for Payman Akbari's men, who remained second from bottom in the 16-team table.

French opposite spiker Jean Patry led the European powerhouse to a seventh win in the preliminary round with a game-high 16 points, while outside hitter Trevor Clevenson chipped in 12. Skipper Milad Ebadipour was the top scorer for Iran with 10 points, followed by Amin Esmaeilnejad, whose quiet night finished with seven points.

"France is the Olympic champion and their tactics and gameplan is much different to other teams in the tournament. Iranian players tried so hard to put in a de-

cent performance but they were clearly worn out after playing 10 sets over the past two days. I hope the team will have a proper recovery for the final game against Germany," said Akbari, who took over from Mauricio Motta Paes after the Brazilian coach was sacked following a loss to Bulgaria in the second week of the competition.

The top eight in the preliminary round will head to the Polish city of Lodz for the VNL Finals, starting with the last-eight round on Thursday.



French outside hitter Yacine Louati (19) hits a spike during a straight-set win against Iran in Week 3 of the Volleyball Nations League preliminary round in Manila, Philippines, on June 21, 2024.
● FIVB



New-look Spain make Euro 2024 statement



↑ Spanish players celebrate their goal in a 1-0 victory over Italy in the Euro 2024 group stage in Gelsenkirchen, Germany, on June 20, 2024.
● GEORGI LICOVSKI/EPA

REUTERS - Spain have produced footballing masterclasses to clear two big hurdles impressively at the start of their Euro 2024 campaign, sending a statement to their fellow title challengers.

After hammering Croatia 3-0, they subjected defending champions Italy to a 1-0 defeat on Thursday that would have been a thrashing were it not for goalkeeper Gianluigi Donnarumma who made several stunning saves to save his team from humiliation.

Spain enjoyed themselves while toying with a team who had given the impression they were making progress under manager Luciano Spalletti after coming from behind to beat Albania 2-1 in their opening game of the tournament.

Superb performances against high-level opponents are reviving memories of the all-conquering Spain who dominated world football for several years, winning back-to-back European Championships in 2008 and 2012 and the 2010 World Cup. But Luis de la Fuente's Spain play another game, far from the possession-based "tiki-taka" style which became a trademark of the Xavi Hernandez, Xabi Alonso and Andres Iniesta generation of over a decade ago. De la Fuente was a hard-work-

ing full back for Athletic Bilbao in the 1980s and after becoming head coach of Spain's academy system, he was given the chance to take charge of the senior squad with the unique advantage of knowing most of his players from a very young age.

A tough character with strong work ethic balanced by a good understanding of his players, De la Fuente has shown tactical nous and excellent man management skills in just over a year in the job.

The first step was seen when they won last year's UEFA Nations League with a much-changed squad from the one that disappointed under Luis Enrique at the 2022 World Cup in Qatar.

Now, however, his team seem to have reached another level.

Their relentless high pressure combines with lightning fast one-touch moves and precise passes that give the impression of a squad in which each player has an almost instinctive feel for the positioning of his team mates.

"I know footballers very well, that's my best virtue. I know what they want, what they need to be happy and what I do is give it to them," De la Fuente told a press conference.

If he can keep his squad happy, Spain could be set for another golden era.