

Iranian clubs learn draw in Asian competitions

Sports Desk

Persian Gulf Pro League clubs Persepolis and Esteghlal discovered which teams they will face in the inaugural AFC Champions League Elite group stage, while Sepahan and Tractor learned about their opponents in the AFC Champions League Two group stage.

The draw for the two continental club tournaments took place in the AFC headquarters in Kuala Lumpur on Friday, with the rebranded ACL Elite featuring two leagues of 12 teams across the West and East regions, where each side will play four home and away games apiece.

the ACL Two draw, meanwhile, saw 32 clubs separated into eight groups. Iranian football fans will get to see Portuguese superstar Cristiano Ronaldo from the stands twice as he and his Saudi Al Nassr club will have to play away to Tehran archrivals Persepolis and Esteghlal.

The top two in the Iranian league last season were handed the same fixtures list in the West region, as both will also have to welcome Uzbekistan Super League champion Pakhtakor FC, Iraqi side Al Shorta, and Al Gharafa, which finished third in the Qatar Stars League last term and defeated Emirati club Shabab Al Ahli 1-0 in Tuesday's playoff for a place in group phase.

The Iranian capital's Reds and Blues will visit Saudi Arabia and Qatar to take on Al Hilal and fellow-Saudi Pro League side Al Ahli, as well as QSL outfits Al Sadd and Al Rayyan.

The league stage will be played between September 16 and February 19 next year, with the full schedule yet to be released.

The top eight finishers of each League progress to next March's round of 16, which will be followed by a unique centralized Finals that sees all matches from the quarterfinals onwards being contested in Saudi Arabia between April 25 and May 4, 2025.

ACL Two

Meanwhile, Iranian domestic cup champion Sepahan – beaten by Shabab Al Ahli in the ACL Elite preliminary round – was pitted against Emirati Sharjah FC, FC Istiklol of Tajikistan and Jordan's Al Wehdat in ACL Two Group C.

Tractor, which finished fourth in the Iranian top flight last term and has former national team coach Dragan Skocic on the bench for the new campaign, was drawn in Group A, alongside Al Wakrah of Qatar, Indian debutant Mohun Bagan Super Giant, and Tajikistan's FC Ravshan.

The group stage will kick off on September 17, with the top two of each eight West and East groups heading into the knockout round.



Al Nassr's Cristiano Ronaldo, pictured in an away game against Persepolis in September 2023, will again visit Iran for the two AFC Champions League Elite fixtures against Persepolis and Esteghlal.
● PAYAM SANI/IRNA

Iran confirms kumite lineup for Asian Karate Championships



● AKF

Sports Desk

Iran confirmed the men's and women's teams for the AKF Senior Championships – starting September 19 in Hangzhou, China.

The national kumite team trials took place in Tehran on Wednesday and Thursday as 11 karatekas (six men and five women) were given a shot at continental glory after coming out on top in their respective weight classes.

Iran is keen to improve on the third place in last year's event in Malacca, Malaysia, where a haul of 12 medals – including three golds – saw the country finish behind Kazakhstan and Japan.

Behnam Dehqanzadeh will

take part in the men's -55kg contests as the defending champion, while Pouria Aqdasi will be looking to add to two Asian bronzes in the -60kg class.

A four-time world team and individual champion, Bahman Askari will aim to grab a fifth Asian gold and make up for last year's final setback in the -75kg event.

Mahdi Khodabakhshi will be the Iranian representative in the -84kg class, with Saleh Abazari going after a second +84kg gold after his 2018 triumph.

Meanwhile, Atousa Golshadnejad will headline the Iranian women's squad as the reigning Asian -61kg champion. She will be joined by Sara

Bahmanyar, who will be eager for a more colorful medal in the -50kg competitions, having settled for back-to-back bronzes in the previous two editions.

Two-time gold medalist, Taravat Khaksar will chase a fifth Asian medal on his return to the national team when participating in the -55kg bouts. The 2021 silver medalist Mobina Heidari and Leila Borj-Ali, who were part of the Iranian silver-winning kumite team in Malacca, will represent the country in the -68kg and +68kg weight classes respectively.

This year's Asian Championships will serve as crucial qualifier for November's Karate World Cup in Pamplona, Spain.

Pochettino agrees to become United States coach: Sources

ESPN – Mauricio Pochettino has agreed to become the new United States men's national team coach with the responsibility of leading the team into the 2026 World Cup, sources told ESPN on Thursday.

Pochettino, 52, has been out of work since leaving Chelsea by mutual consent earlier this summer after just one season in charge at Stamford Bridge. A source told ESPN that the former Tottenham and Paris Saint-Germain coach agreed to succeed Gregg Berhalter as USMNT head coach following lengthy discussions with Matt Crocker, the USSF technical director.

No final agreement has been signed between the two parties, the sources added, and the USSF board of directors is yet to sign off on any deal. A regular board meeting is scheduled for Aug. 23, though a special meeting could be called before then to finalize the appointment, a source added. No special meeting has yet been scheduled.

Crocker, who previously worked with Premier League team Southampton and the English Football Association, had been charged with recruiting a world-class coach to ensure the USMNT goes into the 2026 World Cup – the U.S. are joint hosts with Canada and Mexico – as a competitive nation, capable of running into the latter stages of the competition.

Efforts to recruit Jürgen Klopp following his summer exit from Liverpool failed to get off the ground, but Pochettino agreeing to take on the role is a major coup for the USSF.

A separate source told ESPN

that Pochettino's situation with Chelsea remains unresolved. He is owed money by the Premier League club and until a resolution is found he cannot sign a contract to take over the USMNT.

Pochettino is expected to be installed in time to take charge of the USMNT game against Canada in Kansas City, Kansas,

on Sept. 7.

Pochettino would be able to keep a European base and not move to the U.S. full time, a source told ESPN, as he could watch bulk of the national team players in major European leagues.

Sources told ESPN that Pochettino had been under consideration as a possible candidate to replace Gareth Southgate as England manager.



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