

AFC Champions League Two: Sepahan's knockout hopes hanging by a thread after Al Wehdat stalemate

Sports Desk

Sepahan is on the verge of an early exit from the AFC Champions League Two following a 1-1 draw against Al Wehdat of Jordan in Group C of the competition.

The stalemate left the Persian Gulf Pro League club in the third place of the group table with seven points – four adrift of the Jordanian side, and three behind second-placed Sharjah FC, which defeated Istiklol 3-1 at home later on Tuesday – with one game to spare in the group stage.

Desperate for maximum points, Sepahan started on the front foot in Doha's Grand Hamad Stadium – the neutral venue for the Iranian side's home fixture – with Mahdi Limouchi, Bryan Dabo, Steven Nzonzi being denied by Al Wehdat keeper Abdallah Al Fakhouri.

Al Wehdat was rewarded with a controversial penalty in the 43rd minute, after the referee deemed Nzonzi's challenge on Mohannad Semreen in the box to be a foul, and Feras Shilbaya sent Payam Niazmand the wrong way from the spot to put his team in front against the run of play.

Nzonzi drew Sepahan level with a towering header on Mohammad Karimi's corner-kick delivery in 62nd minute, but the Iranian league leader barely found a way through afterwards as the draw secured Al Wehdat's prog-



Sepahan's Bryan Dabo (R) is seen in action against Amer Jamous of Al Wehdat during a 1-1 draw in the AFC Champions League Two in Doha, Qatar, on Nov. 26, 2024.

● AFC

ress to the round of 16. Jalal Omidian, a number two to French head coach Patrice Carteron, expressed frustration over Sepahan's poor finishing, saying: "I'm really upset about what happened. We deserved to win the game. The job is not over. We need to perform at our best in the next game to qualify into the knockout round." Sepahan faces a must-win situation against Istiklol in Dushanbe on Tuesday, though its fate still

remains out of its hands, as any result other than Al Wehdat's victory over Sharjah in Amman will see the Iranian league leader crash out of the Asia's second-tier club competition.

Iranians' woes continue

Sepahan's stalemate summed up a frustrating week for the Iranian clubs on the continental stage, coming after Tehran archrivals Persepolis and Esteghlal also failed to win their

games in the AFC Champions League Elite on the preceding night.

Farshad Faraji gave Persepolis a well-deserved lead against its host Al Rayyan, only to see his first-half goal canceled out by Achraf Bencharki's header right before the hour mark as it finished 1-1 at the Ahmad bin Ali Stadium.

Without a win in five outings in the competition, Persepolis is ninth in the 12-team table of

the West Zone with three points, and, with the top eight going through, Juan Carlos Garrido's men will now be facing an uphill battle to book a knockout place with three games remaining. The Capital Reds will play Iraq's Al Shorta in Doha on Monday, with Saudi heavyweights Al Hilal and Al Nassr also coming their way.

Esteghlal, meanwhile, shared the points with Pakhtakor in a goalless encounter in Dubai, though

it was still enough to end the Blues' three-game losing streak following a first-day 3-0 win against Al Gharafa.

"A little bit disappointed because we didn't get the full points," said Esteghlal head coach Pitso Mosimane, whose team is seventh in the table with four points – thanks to a superior goal difference over Al Gharafa.

"I feel this game was in our hands, especially in the second half, but we did not take the chances. I can never say I'm not happy with my team. They gave a good fight but the fight was a little bit late. We should have shown this fight a little bit earlier and put more pressure on Pakhtakor. Still, I'm very proud of my team." added the South African.

Next for Esteghlal is a vital visit to Al Ahli Saudi, which tops the standings with a perfect run, before the Blues square off against Al Shorta and Al Rayyan.

"In Jeddah (against Al Ahli Saudi), we're going to need the biggest fight. If we can bring that fight, maybe we can get something but it's going to be difficult, this one was the one we should have won."

ITTF World Youth Championships:

Iran's Faraji into boys' U15 last eight

Sports Desk

Iranian table tennis prodigy Benjamin Faraji progressed to the boys' singles under-15 quarterfinals at the ITTF World Youth Championships in Helsingborg, Sweden, thanks to 4-2 victory over Shunto Iwaida of Japan.

Having beaten the host's Adam Wallin 4-1 on the preceding night, the Iranian teenager had

to come from behind twice to defeat the Japanese player (9-11, 16-14, 4-11, 13-11, 11-9, 14-12).

Awaiting the Iranian – fourth in the under-15 category of the ITTF World Ranking – in the last-eight round is Lin Ching-Ting of the Chinese Taipei.

World No. 17 Lin came out victorious in straight games against Uzbekistan's Khurshid Akhmedov in the round of 32, before beating Steven More-

no of Puerto Rico by the same scoreline earlier on Wednesday. The winner of the tie will face either Chinese world number one Li Hechen or South Korea's Ma Yeongmin for a place in the final showdown.

Faraji, 14, stole all the headlines in October's Asian Championships in Astana, Kazakhstan, where he rallied from behind to stun world seniors' No. 1 Wang Chuqin 3-2 (11-8,

3-11, 9-11, 13-11, 11-9) during a 3-1 loss to China in the men's teams quarterfinals.

Faraji then came within touching distance of another major upset in Astana, going neck-and-neck with China's Lin Shidong – second to Wang in the World Ranking – before relinquishing a six-point lead in the deciding game to suffer a 3-2 defeat in the men's singles competitions.



● ITTF

Lillard hoists banged-up Bucks over Heat



● SAM NAVARRO/REUTERS

REUTERS – Damian Lillard scored 37 points and dished out 12 assists as the short-handed Milwaukee Bucks defeated the host Miami Heat 106-103 in an NBA Cup game on Tuesday night. Lillard made 10 of 17 shots from the floor, including 8 of 13 from 3-point range, as Milwaukee won a fifth straight game. Bucks star Giannis Antetokounmpo, who leads the NBA in scoring (32.4 points per game), missed the contest due to swelling in his left knee. In addition, three-time All-Star Khris Middleton has yet to play this season for Milwaukee due to surgery on both of his ankles.

Miami, 1-2 in East Group B, was led by Jimmy Butler's 23 points. Tyler Herro added 18. Terry Rozier returned after missing two

games due to an injury to his right foot. He finished with 17 points on 7-of-9 shooting, going 3-for-4 from deep.

Elsewhere, Devin Booker recorded 26 points and 10 assists as Phoenix Suns halted a five-game losing streak with a convincing 127-100 victory over visiting Los Angeles Lakers.

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list with Kyle Korver (2,450 threes). Victor Wembanyama poured in 34 points, 24 of them in the first half, as the San Antonio Spurs won its season-best fourth straight game by beating Utah Jazz in Salt Lake City in West Group B action of the NBA Cup.

San Antonio improved to 2-1 in Group B play, staying alive for a chance to advance to the West quarterfinals. Both the Spurs and Utah have one group game to play. Stephon Castle added 23 points for San Antonio to tie his career high.

Keyonte George led the Jazz with 26 points. John Collins and Collin Sexton added 20 apiece as Utah fell for the fifth time in six games overall and dropped to 0-3 in the group.