

AFC Champions League Elite:

Garrido hails 'fighting spirit' as Persepolis pulls off dramatic comeback

Sports Desk

Persepolis head coach Juan Carlos Garrido had said in his pre-match press conference that his team would need a touch of fortune against Al Shorta in their AFC Champions League Elite encounter.

And that was exactly what came the Iranian Reds' way as they fought back to beat the Iraqi side 2-1 in the most dramatic fashion for their first victory in the continent's flagship club competition.

Persepolis looked drab and lackluster for the best part of what was a must-win contest in Doha's Hamad bin Khalifa Stadium, and just when the Reds fans thought their team was heading for yet another frustrating Champions League result, substitute Oston Urunov gave Garrido's side a lifeline by bagging an 89th-minute equalizer to cancel out Mohanad Ali's first-half opener.

It could have still been a third defeat of the campaign for Persepolis when referee Kim Dae-yong blew his whistle for an Al Shorta spot-kick, courtesy of Mohammad Khodabandelou handling the ball on the line to block Hussein Ali's goal-bound shot in the 97th minute.

Mahmoud Al Mawas' penalty kick came back off the post and, in a roller-coaster of events, the ref pointed to the spot at the other end, after a VAR review deemed Salomon Bindjeme to have cleared a cross with the help of his hand.

Georgian center-back Giorgi Gvelesiani held his nerve to send Al Shorta keeper Ahmed Basil the wrong way in the 13th minute of added time and put a lid on the Reds' 405-day winless



Persepolis players and coaching staff celebrate after the 2-1 victory over Al Shorta in the AFC Champions League Elite in Doha, Qatar, on December 2, 2024. ● PAYAM PARSAEI/FFIRI

run in the continent.

"This victory was the result of the efforts of the players and our analysis of the opponents and until the last moment, we fought to win," said Garrido, who celebrated a first Champions League victory in 12 outings in charge of Persepolis and Emirati club Al Ain - back in the 2019 season. "This game was full of events, but we tried until the last minute. We knew that this game was important and when a penalty was awarded to Al Shorta, the goalkeeper and players believed

they would not score.

"We had opportunities during the game, but we had to work until the last moment to win and we reached our goal," added the Spaniard. Garrido was also full praise for Uzbekistan international Urunov, who marked his long-awaited return from a groin injury with a vital goal. "Urunov showed today that he is working hard for the success of the team and scored a goal at a very important moment for Persepolis.

"It was very difficult to make a comeback and get back into the game and I congratulate the team and the players for their fighting spirit."

The victory lifted Persepolis into sixth in the West's 12-team table with six points, leaving the club in contention for a knockout spot ahead of February's crunch encounters with Saudi heavyweights Al Hilal and Al Nassr.

Brave Blues

Meanwhile, 10-man Esteghlal looked destined for a sen-

sational victory over Al Ahli Saudi, only to be denied maximum points by an Ivan Toney's 86-minute penalty in a 2-2 draw in Jeddah.

Brazilian defender Raphael Silva gave the Tehran Blues a 42nd-minute lead, before Didier Ndong's challenge on Fahad Al Rashidi convinced referee Ma Ning to point to the penalty spot with seconds left in the first-half added time.

Toney's cool touch from the spot drew the home side level, but Mohammad-Hossein Esлами

restored the visitors' advantage with a sumptuous left-footed volley from behind the box seven minutes after the break.

With Al Ahli digging deep for a second equalizer, Esteghlal went down to 10 men with nine minutes left on the clock after Esلامي was shown his marching orders for stamping Saad Yaslam's leg.

Al Ahli was awarded with a second penalty, in controversial manner though, minutes later as the ref ruled that Esteghlal keeper Seyyed Hossein Hosseini had clipped Toney while punching the ball away.

The Englishman's second penalty ensured that the host retained its unbeaten run in the competition.

Despite his team letting victory slip away, Esteghlal head coach Pitso Mosimane was pleased with his men's display, saying: "My team took the lead twice and we caused problems for the opposition, forcing them to come back twice. I am completely satisfied with the players' performance."

"The match was as challenging as we had anticipated. We faced a big team like Al Ahli in their home stadium in Jeddah. My team believed in their abilities and showed great composure by taking the lead twice."

The draw took the Blues to five points, though they still fancy their chances of progress when taking on Al Shorta and Qatari side Al Rayyan in their remaining fixtures in the league stage.



● IRNA

Chess quadruple wins Iran's first gold in Asia Pacific Deaf Games

Sports Desk

Iran bagged a first gold medal at the Asia Pacific Deaf Games, walking away with the ultimate prize in the chess team event in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia.

Nayyereh Golizadeh, Zeinab Golshani, Armin Rahmatpour, and Pouria Jamali teamed up on Tuesday to take the country's haul to five medals at the 10th

edition of the Games.

Rahmatpour had won a men's chess bronze on the preceding night in the Malaysian capital, with Alireza Kermani standing third in the men's bowling contest.

Karim Khodabandeh and the Iranian four-man poomsae team had also settled for a couple of bronze medals in the taekwondo event.

Elsewhere on Tuesday, Hossein Mesbahi, Sina Saber, Ali-Akbar Ahmadvand, and Ali Salimi were all on the scoresheet as the Iranian men's football team defeated Uzbekistan 4-1.

This was a second victory for the Iran in the Games - following the first-day 3-1 win against Japan - ahead of Thursday's game against Oman in the final round of the group fixtures.

LeBron's jumper is off, Lakers struggling on offense

AP - LeBron James is in quite the shooting slump - especially from long distance. James missed all four of his 3-point attempts for the Los Angeles Lakers in a 109-80 loss at Minnesota on Monday night, stretching his skid to 0 for 19 from deep over the last four games.

After going 4 for 16 from the floor overall with six of his team's 20 turnovers for a season-low 10 points against the Timberwolves, James was asked to reflect on the Lakers reaching the quarter mark of their 2024-25 schedule under rookie coach J.J. Redick at 12-9.

"I wouldn't say I'll take it. I would never want to say that," James said. "It is what it is. This is our record. We've just got to continue to get better at both ends of the floor."

Particularly offensively, and it's not only James, the four-time NBA MVP whose average of 22 points per game is his lowest since he was a rookie 21 years ago.

"We're just not good offensively right now. I think we spent so much time trying to get our defense corrected that our offense took a toll and took a back seat to that," he said. James hasn't made a 3-pointer since he tied

Kyle Korver for seventh on the league's career list (2,450) last week. His fourth attempt against the Timberwolves from behind the arc was an air ball, causing an audible gasp from the crowd at Target Center.

The long ball isn't the only shot he's struggling with. The mid-range is on his list, too. "Just period, just everything," James said. "Just a rhythm. I just feel off rhythm the last few games."

His stated goal of playing in all 82 games this season is still intact, but his recent performances have raised the question about whether such a quest would be wise.



Lakers forward LeBron James walks downcourt during the second half of an NBA basketball game against the Timberwolves in Minneapolis, MN, US, on Dec. 2, 2024. ● ABBIE PARR/AP