

Azmoun makes brace as Shabab Al Ahli beats Nasaf

Sardar Azmoun scored two goals in two minutes to lead Shabab Al Ahli to a 3-2 win over Uzbekistan's Nasaf in Dubai on Wednesday as the side from the United Arab Emirates claimed top spot in Group D of the AFC Champions League Two 2024/25. Azmoun's double came in the 32nd and 34th minutes after Nasaf's Akmal Mosgovoy had struck in the 30th minute to cancel out Mateusao's 23rd minute opener. Zoran Marusic was also on target for the visitors on the stroke of halftime in a goal-filled first period, The AFC reported. The win moves Shabab Al Ahli onto 13 points from their six games and confirms Paulo Sousa's side as winners of the group while Nasaf finish bottom of the standings on four points and are eliminated.

Marusic gave the hosts an early fright when he rattled the post after controlling Marko Stanojevic's pass into the area but Shabab Al Ahli went in front when Mateusao finished off a flowing attacking move, lifting the ball over Umidjon Ergashev after Azmoun's pass. The home should have doubled that advantage three minutes later but Yassine Boualam's weak header was off target and the lurking Mateusao was unable to apply a finishing touch from inside the six-yard box. By the half hour mark Nasaf had pulled level, Mosgovoy stroking home an unstoppable right-foot strike when he made a perfect connection with Walid Abbas' loose pass out of defence. But the goal provoked an immediate reaction from the hosts. It was Azmoun who did the dam-



age, working the ball onto his right foot inside the Nasaf penalty area after collecting Saeid Ezatollahi's pass from the right on his chest and hitting a powerful shot that took a decisive deflection to fly over Ergashev. The prolific Iranian pounced again two minutes later; this time calmly side-footing home when Ergashev had parried Yuri Cesar's centre from the left into the striker's path. Any thoughts Shabab Al Ahli had that they would cruise to victory from there were extinguished, however, as Marusic slotted in his side's second of the night after Murodbek Rahmatov's pass put him in position to convert from eight yards. After a goal-filled opening 45 minutes, chances were at a premium after the interval although Az-

moun almost played Boualam in for his side's fourth with 12 minutes remaining only for Ergashev to race out and block the Moroccan's attempt. That miss mattered little as Shabab Al Ahli completed the win that guaranteed they would do into the draw for the last 16 as Group D winners.

ACL Two knockout stage

Also, the lineup for the AFC Champions League Two 2024/25 Round of 16 was finalized following the conclusion of the group stage on Thursday. The 16 teams, including Tractor from Iran will now cast their eyes on the knockout stage draw which will be held at the AFC House in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia on December 12. The West Zone saw Tractor FC

of the Islamic Republic of Iran finishing as the Group A winners with Qatar's Al Wakrah SC the runners-up. Saudi Arabia's Al Taawoun FC were the runaway winners in Group B, finishing with 15 points - three ahead of Bahrain's Al Khaldiya SC. UAE's Sharjah FC were the Group C winners, finishing on 13 points with Jordan's Al Wehdah two adrift in second place. Shabab Al Ahli are the second team from UAE who will be in the draw after winning Group D with 13 points, three clear of Jordan's Al Hussein. Ion City Sailors were the final team to book their spot and the Singaporean outfit did it in style, defeating Port FC 5-2 to finish top of Group F ahead of the Thai side. Thailand's Muangthong Unit-

ed also advanced after beating beat two-time AFC Champions League winners Jeonbuk Hyundai 1-0 to finish second behind the Korea Republic side in Group H. Japan's Sanfrecce Hiroshima and Sydney FC of Australia, who had both already confirmed their spots from Group E, concluded their campaigns with victories over Hong Kong's Eastern and Kaya FC-Iloilo respectively on Thursday. Bangkok United topped Group G ahead of Nam Dinh with the Thai side accumulating 13 points, two more than the team from Vietnam. The Round of 16 will be played in February 2025, followed by the quarter-finals in March and semi-finals in April. The single-leg final is scheduled for May 17, 2025.

Kyrgios, Bencic return to Australian Open with protected rankings



Former Wimbledon finalist Nick Kyrgios and Tokyo Olympics gold medalist Belinda Bencic will play their first Grand Slam after long absences at next month's Australian Open with protected rankings, tournament organisers said on Friday.

Kyrgios, who will play with a protected ranking of 21st, has not played in a Grand Slam since 2022 due to knee, foot and wrist injuries. Bencic, who gave birth to a daughter in April, will return with a special ranking of 15th, Reuters reported. "Kyrgios and Bencic are among six men and six women competing... using protected rankings, setting the main-draw entry ranking cut-off for both fields at world No. 98," the organisers said in a statement. Former world number four Kei Nishikori will also play with a protected ranking, making his first appearance in the Australian Open men's singles since 2021, the statement added. Defending champions Jannik Sinner and Aryna Sabalenka, who are at the top of the men's and women's rankings, will be the top seeds at Melbourne Park, with 24-time Grand Slam champion Novak Djokovic eyeing a record 11th Australian Open title.

Iran U19, U21 teams learn rivals at FIVB Boys' World C'ship

The drawing of lots for the U19 and U21 events took place in Lausanne and the Iranian teams learned their rivals. The FIVB Volleyball Youth World Championships set to take place in 2025 started taking shape on Wednesday, when the drawing of lots for the tournaments were held in Lausanne, the Switzerland, determining the start of the journey of each of the 48 national teams set to compete for medals next year, reported Mehr News Agency. Each tournament will feature 24 national teams, which are now allocated into four pools of six. After the conclusion of pool play, the best four teams in each pool will move forward, advancing to the eighth-finals. Teams ranked fifth and sixth in their pools will continue in action, playing in the playoffs to determine the final positions



from 17th to 24th.

FIVB Volleyball Boys' U19 World Championship

The 2025 FIVB Volleyball Boys' U19 World Championship will be held from July 24 to August 3 in Tashkent, Uzbekistan.

Pool A: Uzbekistan, Belgium, Argentina, Puerto Rico, Paki-

stan, Turkey
Pool B: France, Bulgaria, Japan, China, Algeria, Canada
Pool C: Iran, Italy, Egypt, Tunisia, Poland, Spain
Pool D: USA, Korea, Brazil, Colombia, Cuba, Finland

FIVB Volleyball Men's U21 World Championship

The 2025 FIVB Volleyball

Men's U21 World Championship will be held from August 18 to 31 in Jiangmen, China.
Pool A: China, Egypt, USA, Thailand, Morocco, Turkey
Pool B: Iran, Poland, Canada, Korea, Puerto Rico, Kazakhstan
Pool C: Bulgaria, Brazil, Czech, Colombia, Japan, Cuba
Pool D: Italy, Argentina, Tunisia, France, Ukraine, Indonesia

Dabir says federation eyes upgrading of Iranian wrestling

Sports Desk

The president of the Wrestling Federation announced that the primary objective of holding competitions is to elevate Iranian wrestling. Alireza Dabir made the remarks during a coordination meeting for teams participating in the final stage of the Premier League Freestyle Wrestling in Tehran, IRNA reported. The coordination meeting for the final stage of the Premier League Freestyle Wrestling was held Thursday at the league's head-



quarters. "The goal of the league is to advance and elevate Iranian wrestling, so everyone must work together to ensure the sport thrives." The session was attended by Hamid Yari, President of the Wrestling League; Mahmoud Farhang-Ranjbar, the League's Secretary and Final Competition Supervisor; Mohammad Moslaei-pour, Head of the Referees' Commission; and representatives and coaches from the Saipa, Setaregan Pas Sari, and Mo'eni Pour Food

Industries teams. Yari opened the meeting by thanking the participating teams and stating, "Wrestling has given us honor and dignity, so we must strive to uphold its prestige during these final matches. The primary purpose of teams joining the league is to support the sport in the country, followed by winning the championship. We, too, are always pursuing the progress and elevation of wrestling." Yari pointed out that this year's league final is different from previous seasons, with all four teams having a chance to

win the championship. The participation of 12 foreign wrestlers, alongside prominent and national team wrestlers, has significantly elevated the level of competition. He added, "We aim to hold these matches in accordance with the latest standards of the United World Wrestling organization, resembling global competitions. Only wrestlers and two coaches per team are allowed near the mat." The final stage of the Iranian Freestyle Wrestling League commenced on Friday at the 12,000-seat Azadi Sports Complex.