

Garrido desperate to turn Reds fortune around in crunch double-header

Sports Desk

Only a third of the Persian Gulf Pro League campaign has passed, yet the upcoming double fixtures are already poised to be season-defining occasions for defending champion Persepolis and head coach, Juan Carlos Garrido. Saturday's 1-0 defeat at home against Nassaji Mazandaran, which had been without a win in 10 outings prior to the contest, was the latest episode in a run of mediocre performances by the Tehran Reds, who are now five points adrift of Tractor on top of the table and four behind Sepahan with a game in hand.

With Tractor and Sepahan in impressive domestic form, further setbacks in the visit to fourth-place Malavan today and Monday's away game against Sepahan could only see Persepolis dealt a major blow in its title defense, and increase the pressure on the under-fire Spaniard.

The expectations were always going to be high of Garrido when he was appointed to the job in June, after Persepolis had lifted a seventh league trophy – second in succession – in eight years last season.

A 1-1 home draw against Zob Ahan saw the Spanish coach get off to a slow start to his reign, but the Reds offered a glimmer of hope by salvaging a point at Tractor with 10 men, and then went on to win five matches in a row without conceding a single goal – including a 1-0 triumph over archrival Esteghlal in the Tehran Derby – to sit atop the table. Even a run of three winless games in the AFC Champions

League Elite did little to raise doubts among Persepolis fans about the Spaniard being the right man for the job, as they believed their team was unlucky to leave the pitch empty-handed after missing numerous scoring chances in the 1-0 away losses to star-studded Al Ahli Saudi and Al Sadd.

However, scrutiny came Garrido's way when Persepolis was beaten 1-0 by Esteghlal Khuzestan in Ahvaz, and the lackluster displays in the 1-1 draws against Qatari outfits Al Gharafa and Al Rayyan only added to the criticism.

Persepolis has looked insipid and clueless in recent weeks, struggling to break through the opponents' solid backlines, while being defensively vulnerable, with Algerian goalkeeper Alexis Guendouz being Garrido's stand-out player for pulling off heroic performances to rescue the Reds on several occasions.

As fans have been growing frustrated by the under-par contributions of some of the regular starters, the Spaniard has been reluctant to give proper game time to certain players, most notably midfielder Yassin Salmani.

The Reds' form in the continent has also drawn major questions over Garrido's tactical acumen as the hard-fought 2-1 win against Al Shorta last time out – courtesy of Giorgi Gvelesiani's penalty deep into stoppage time – was only the club's first victory in six games in the competition.

The three points lifted Persepolis to sixth in the 12-team table, though Garrido's men will still face a daunting task to secure a



ALI SHARIFZADEH/IRNA

knockout place when taking on Saudi heavyweights Al Hilal and Al Nassr in the remaining fixtures of the league stage.

Still, some fans believe the criticism of Garrido has been somewhat unfair, arguing that the Reds have been forced away from their familiar home turf of Azadi Stadium this season – due to construction reasons – with the pitch of the Shahr-e Qods Stadi-

um being poor for a game of football, while their home games in Asia have been played in neutral venues overseas.

Additionally, their campaign has been hampered by several injury setbacks for instrumental Oston Uronov, Omid A'lishah, Ayoub El Amloud, and Milad Sarlak.

Rumors have been swirling around Garrido's future in recent days, with some reports suggest-

ing he has been given an ultimatum by the club hierarchy for the upcoming two league games. However, technical director Hossein Badamaki threw his full support behind the Spanish coach in an interview on Monday, saying: "Some of the criticism doesn't make sense at all. The team is still delivering a decent quality, according to our assessment, and we have been the better side

in terms of ball possession and scoring opportunities in all of our matches, except the Al Sadd game. Let's not forget Persepolis is playing with a whole new tactical approach this season." Stability on and off the pitch has been key to the Reds' dominance of the Iranian top flight over the past decade, and perhaps that is what Persepolis needs to see off the current storm.

Iranians win double chess golds in Asian schools meet

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Iranians bagged a couple of blitz gold medals at the Asian Schools Chess Championships, taking the country's haul to seven medals across different age groups at the 18th edition of the event in Bang-

kok, Thailand. Behnoud Delavari walked away with the ultimate prize of the boys' under-13 competitions, while schoolgirl Niusha Mohammadi came out victorious in the under-15 category. This was a second medal

for Mohammadi in Bangkok, following her bronze in the standard event. A third blitz medal for Iran came through Roshana Akbari's silver-winning run in the girls' under-13 contests. Akbari also took her personal tally to two med-

als, having settled for the standard bronze of her age class. Iranian prodigy and FIDE master Ramtin Kakavand, meanwhile, finished his campaign with double silver medals in the school-boys' under-11 standard and rapid competitions.



Premier League official Coote sacked after investigation

BBC – Premier League official David Coote has been sacked by referees' body the PGMOL following a "thorough investigation" into his conduct.

Coote, 42, was suspended by the PGMOL (the Professional Game Match Officials Limited) on 11 November pending a full investigation after a video allegedly showing him making derogatory comments about Liverpool and the club's former manager Jurgen Klopp was circulated on social media.

A further investigation was opened two days later after the Sun published photos it says were taken during this summer's European Championship, alleging that they appear to show Coote sniffing a white

powder through a rolled-up US bank note.

The PGMOL said Coote's actions made his position "untenable".

"David Coote's actions were found to be in serious breach of the provisions of his employment contract," the PGMOL said. "Supporting David Coote continues to be important to us and we remain committed to his welfare."

Coote has the right to appeal the decision to terminate his employment.

The PGMOL first took action against Coote on 11 November following the release of a video on social media, which allegedly showed him criticising Liverpool and their former manager Klopp.

The video appeared to refer a Premier League match that Coote officiated between Liverpool and Burnley in July 2020, which finished 1-1.

Klopp criticised Coote after the game, saying the referee failed to give fouls for challenges made on Liverpool's players.

The FA opened an investigation the following day.

On 13 November, the PGMOL said it was taking further allegations "very seriously" following the publication of images showing appearing to show Coote sniffing a white powder.

Coote was working at the Euros in his capacity as a match official and Uefa, European football's governing body, also suspended Coote as it launched

its own investigation.

On 27 November, the FA opened a new investigation following an allegation that Coote had discussed giving a yellow card before a Championship match between Leeds and West Brom in 2019.

A report in the Sun claimed Coote exchanged messages with a fan discussing giving a yellow card before and after the game. Coote denied any wrongdoing and said the allegation was "false and defamatory".

The exchange referred to a booking Leeds defender Ezgjan Alioski received in the match from Coote. There is no suggestion of any financial gain by Coote and the booking is regarded as entirely correct.



AFP