

Turkish Kartal on Reds rescue mission

Sports Desk

Persepolis supporters will be hoping to see new head coach Ismail Kartal make an instant impact to save the Persian Gulf Pro League champion's domestic and continental campaigns ahead a hectic, season-defining fixtures list over the next month.

The former Fenerbahce boss was unveiled as the Tehran Reds' manager on Friday, bringing an end to weeks of speculation swirling around their bench.

Kartal, 63, replaces Juan Carlos Garrido, who was appointed to the job in June but parted ways with the club following a fourth defeat in six league outings – a 3-1 home loss to Mes Rafsanjan – on December 21, with the Spaniard's assistant Karim Baqeri serving as the interim coach for four games.

Numerous high-profile coaches, including ex-Napoli boss Walter Mazzarri, Spanish Rafa Benitez, and Croatian Niko Kovac, had been brought up in the Iranian media for the Reds' role, before Persepolis signed a contract with Kartal, which will run until the end of the next season.

Kartal had been without a job since leav-

ing Fenerbahce last June, making way for Portuguese Jose Mourinho ahead of the ongoing Turkish Süper Lig season.

A Turkish Super Cup champion with Fenerbahce in 2014, Kartal returned to the Istanbul-based club for a third spell for the start of the 2023/24 season and led his team to 31 wins in 38 outings as the Yellow Canaries finished second to city rival Galatasaray in the league despite a remarkable 99-point tally.

His team scored 149 goals in 58 games across all competitions last season, reaching the Europa Conference League last eight before being knocked out by eventual champion Olympiacos.

The second Turkish manager in Persepolis history, following Mustafa Denizli more than a decade ago, Kartal was accompanied by his coaching staff in arriving in Tehran on Saturday, but is unlikely to sit on the bench for today's crunch league encounter with Tractor at the Azadi Stadium, with Baqeri making instructions from the touchline for a fifth successive game.

Sitting fourth in the table with 30 points after 16 games, Persepolis is five points adrift of the top two Tractor and Sepahan and a defeat against today's formida-

ble opponent will all but finish the Reds' bid for an eighth league crown in nine years.

Kartal's first game in charge will come against third-place Foolad Khuzestan and ex-Persepolis boss Yahya Golmohammadi in Ahvaz on Friday.

Persepolis will resume AFC Champions League Elite action on February 4 with a visit to Saudi heavyweight Al Hilal. The Reds have endured a below-par run in the revamped Asian elite clubs' event, managing a single victory – a 2-1 win against bottom-club Al Shorta last time out in the competition – in six games to stand sixth in the West Zone's 12-team table with six points.

An Asian finalist in 2018 and 2020, Persepolis will be hoping to remain on course for a top-eight finish, and a knockout spot, when taking on Cristiano Ronaldo's Al Nassr at home on the final day of the league phase on February 17. Kartal's men will play away to defending champion Sepahan in the Iranian Hazfi Cup last 16 on February 12, with tricky league tests against Golgozar Sirjan, Iralco, and archrival Esteghlal also coming their way over the next 30 days.



● fc-perspolis.com

Ice climber Safdarian continues World Cup gold-winning run



● UAAA

Sports Desk

There was further glory for Mohammadreza Safdarian in the UAAA Ice Climbing World Cup season as the Iranian bagged a second gold medal in this year's competitions on Friday.

Safdarian clocked 7.67 seconds in final race in Saas-Fee,

Switzerland, to beat Mongolian Mandakhbayar Chuluunbaatar to the ultimate prize in the men's speed event.

Friday's triumph came after Safdarian – also an Asian champion earlier in the month – had walked away with the speed gold, as well as the lead silver, in the World Cup season opener in

Cheongsong, South Korea, a fortnight ago.

Meanwhile, Safdarian's fellow-Iranian Mohsen Beheshi-Rad, who had won a speed bronze in Cheongsong, missed out on the podium this time around, finishing fourth despite registering a best qualification time of 7.75 seconds in in Saas-Fee.

Iranian Safarpour takes charge of Kazakhstan's female taekwondo team

Sports Desk

Iranian taekwondo coach Fatemeh Safarpour signed a one-year contract to lead Kazakhstan women's team. Safarpour steered Iran to the

women's title in the World Taekwondo Junior Championships in Chuncheon, South Korea, last October.

Ghazal Houshmand, Parnian Nouri, Aynaz Nasiri, and Hana Zarrinkamar all walked away with

the gold medals of their respective weight classes, with Saghar Moradi settling for a silver, as Iran beat the host to the top spot in the team table, while Safarpour was named the Best Women Team Coach of the competition.



● WORLD TAEKWONDO

Defiant Djokovic still targeting Grand Slam wins after Australia setback



● REUTERS

REUTERS – Novak Djokovic pledged to continue his hunt for a record 25th Grand Slam title as he processed the disappointment of retiring from Friday's Australian Open semi-final due to a muscle injury. Djokovic retired injured after losing the first set 7-6(5) to Alexander Zverev and the 10-times champion made a pained exit from Rod Laver Arena amid booing from sections of the crowd.

It was his second injury setback at the Grand Slams in a year, having pulled out of the French Open with a knee problem before his quarter-final against Casper Ruud. Four months before his 38th birthday, time may be catching up on the Serbian great but he remained adamant he had more to give in the twilight of an extraordinary career. "It's not like I'm worrying approaching every Grand

Slam now whether I'm going to get injured or not, but statistics are against me in a way in the last couple of years," he told reporters. "So it is true that (I am) getting injured quite a bit the last few years. "I don't know what exactly is the reason for that. Maybe several different factors. "But I'll keep going. You know, I'll keep striving to win more Slams. And as

long as I feel that I want to put up with all of this, I'll be around." The Serb said he might have continued to battle on if he had won the first set but questioned whether it would have been worth it. Though "upset and disappointed", Djokovic was ultimately philosophical, saying he would cheer for Zverev as the German bids for his first Grand Slam title after defeats in two finals.