

AFC Champions League Elite: Esteghlal knockout hopes hanging by thread after Al Shorta draw

Sports Desk

Esteghlal's hopes of advancing to the AFC Champions League Elite last-16 were left in jeopardy after a frustrating 1-1 draw against Iraqi champion Al Shorta on Monday.

The Tehran Blues got off to a flying start to a first Asian home game at the iconic Azadi Stadium in nearly six years, finding the net through new signing Joel Kojo four minutes into the contest.

Esteghlal wing-back Abolfazl Jalali found the Kyrgyz international on the near post with a low cross, before Kojo's sliding effort found the bottom corner. The home side was on the back foot for the best part of the first half but could have still doubled the lead right before the break, when Mohammadreza Azadi's sizzling strike from the edge of the box came off the crossbar and then Ramin Rezaeian's header on the rebound went just wide. Substitute Rewan Amin drew the visitors level four minutes after the restart.

Ameer Saba's corner was flicked across the goal by Ayoub Moudane's header and, after Mahmoud Al Mawas directed the ball back into the six-yard box from the far post, Amin hooked a goal-bound effort over his shoulder.

Esteghlal desperately pushed for a second goal afterwards and Rezaeian and Masoud Juma



Esteghlal wing-back Ramin Rezaeian is dejected during a 1-1 draw against Al Shorta in the AFC Champions League Elite at the Azadi Stadium, Tehran, Iran, on February 3, 2025.

● MARZIEH SOLEIMANI/IRNA

thought their sublime finishes had restored the lead, before both were denied by the offside flag.

The result kept the Blues in the eighth place of the West's 12-team table with six points but

they will likely have to beat Al Rayyan in Qatar on the final day of the league phase in two weeks to secure a top-eight finish.

Earlier in the day, second half goals from Mahmoud Trezeguet and Roger Guedes saw Al

Rayyan come from behind to beat defending champion Al Ain 2-1 and move up to sixth in the standings on eight points.

Al Shorta, meanwhile, is on the cusp of elimination, sitting second from bottom with three points.

'Fair result'

Esteghlal's Interim coach Sohrab Bakhtiarzadeh thought the final outcome was a "fair result."

"We pressed more in the second half and were looking to win but were not in our regular

form. We could have scored the second goal at the end of the first half, but it didn't happen," said the Iranian, who took charge of the Blues bench for a second spell this season after South African Pitso Mosimane walked away from his job last week.

"We took risks in the final minutes and made changes to put pressure and score. We had players on both wings who did what we wanted but despite these advantages, we were unable to score," Bakhtiarzadeh added.

Al Shorta boss Salah Alwan, meanwhile, was positive despite the result almost surely ending his team's campaign.

"Our team came to get three points, but this one point is good for us, and I'm happy with the result we got at Azadi Stadium. Esteghlal are a great team but we were better and controlled the entire pitch," said Alwan.

"It doesn't matter where we are in the standings or what our conditions are. We only think about getting better game by game in every league and every match, and we don't think about the table, and the table had no effect on our game."

Iran names 23-man squad for U20 Asian Cup

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Iran head coach Hossein Abdi announced the 23-man squad for the upcoming AFC U20 Asian Cup in China.

A winner of four successive titles in the 70s, Iran will begin its Group C campaign against Indonesia in Shenzhen on February 13.

Abdi's boys will then take on Yemen three days later before squaring off against defending champion Uzbekistan on February 19.

The top two of the group will

progress to the last-eight round, with the four semifinalists qualifying for the FIFA U20 World Cup in Chile in September.

Australia and Kyrgyzstan will go head-to-head in the opening match of the competition on Feb. 12 in Group A – also featuring the host and Qatar. Five-time champion Iraq, was beaten by Uzbekistan in the 2023 final, heads the Group B cast with Jordan, Saudi Arabia and North Korea also vying for the two quarterfinal spots. South Korea, the most deco-

rated team in the event with 12 titles, is in Group D alongside Japan, Syria, and Thailand.

The following is Iran's full squad for the tournament:

Goalkeepers: Arsha Shakouri (Havadar), Mohammad Gandomi (Persepolis), Armin Abbasi (Persepolis)

Defenders: Alireza Homaeifard (Persepolis), Hesam Nafari (Zob Ahan), Erfan Darivish-A'ali (Foolad Khuzestan), Ali Hassani (Foolad Khuzestan), Nima Andarz

(CD Leganes), Yaqoub Baraje'eh (Persepolis), Sina Mo'azamitabar (Fajr Sepasi), Mobin Dehqani (Khaybar), Abolfazl Zoleikhaei (Esteghlal)

Midfielders: Samir Hoboubati (Persepolis), Abolfazl Zamani (Esteghlal), Mahan Sadeqi (Malavan FC), Esmaeil Qolizadeh (Sepahan), Yousef Mzaraeh (Foolad Khuzestan), Abbas Kahrizi (Paykan), Amirmohammad Razaqinia (Golgozar)

Strikers: Mohammad Dindar (Havadar), Pouria Shahrabadi (Golgozar), Abolfazl Moredi (Foolad Khuzestan), Reza Ghandipour (Malavan FC).



● FFIRI



Devin Booker (L) shoots the ball to become the Suns' all-time leading scorer during an NBA game against the Trail Blazers in Portland, OR, US, on Feb. 3, 2025.

● IMAGN IMAGES

Booker breaks Suns scoring record in loss to Portland

BBC – Devin Booker became the Phoenix Suns' all-time leading points scorer against the Portland Trail Blazers on Monday – but it was not enough to earn victory. Booker topped the game's scoring charts with 34 points to surpass Suns legend Walter Davis' total of 15,666. However, he missed a free throw at the end of overtime that would have levelled the game, with Portland claiming a narrow 121-119 win. Booker reached the milestone with a three-pointer in the

third quarter, sparking a warm reception from the Portland crowd, before hugging his family on the sidelines at the next timeout.

The four-time All-Star has spent his entire career at the Suns, making 642 appearances since being 13th overall pick in the 2015 draft.

Davis, a six-time All-Star, played in 766 games for Phoenix between 1977 and 1988. Elsewhere, Jalen Brunson scored 42 points as the New York Knicks overturned an 11-point deficit in the fourth

quarter to beat the Houston Rockets 124-118.

The Oklahoma City Thunder extended their lead at the top of the Western Conference with a 125-96 victory over the Milwaukee Bucks.

Shai Gilgeous-Alexander top-scored with 34 points for the Thunder, who led by 44 points at one stage in the third quarter. A depleted Bucks side were without Giannis Antetokounmpo, Damian Lillard, Brook Lopez, Khris Middleton and Bobby Portis.

The second-placed Memphis

Grizzlies beat the San Antonio Spurs 128-109, with Jaren Jackson Jr top-scoring with 31 points.

Trae Young scored the game-winning basket with 1.6 seconds left as the Atlanta Hawks won 132-130 at the Detroit Pistons to end their eight-game losing streak.

Nikola Jokic scored 27 points with 14 rebounds and 10 assists as the Denver Nuggets beat the New Orleans Pelicans 125-113, while the Golden State Warriors beat the Orlando Magic 104-99.