

AFC Champions League Elite:

Persepolis well beaten by Al Hilal, drops out of top eight

Sports Desk

Persepolis was dealt a major blow in its quest to progress to the AFC Champions League Elite last-16 after a 4-1 defeat against Saudi heavyweight Al Hilal in Riyadh on Tuesday. Brazilian Malcom put the home side in front with 10 minutes into the game at the jam-packed Kingdom Arena, picking the ball up from just inside his own half and surging unchallenged into the box before his dink went past the advancing goalkeeper Alexis Guendouz. The Algerian keeper then failed to deal with a low effort from Joao Cancelo from the edge of the box, as the Portuguese full-back doubled Al Hilal's lead in the 25th minute. Malcom slipped Salem Al Dawsari through with the skipper evading Guendouz to tuck away from a tight angle in the 39th minute, before the Saudi international got his second of the night with a stunning strike from outside the box in the first-half added time, delivering a damning verdict of the widening gap between the two nations' club football. Turkish head coach Ismail Kartal, who was in charge of the Tehran Reds' bench for only a second game, made three half-time changes to his surprising starting XI, bringing in Giorgio Gvlesiani, Saied Mehri and Farshad Ahmadzadeh for Mohammad Khodabandelou, Masoud



Persepolis defender Farshad Faraji is frustrated as Al Hilal players celebrate their first goal in a 4-1 win in the AFC Champions League Elite at the Kingdom Arena, Riyadh, Saudi Arabia, on Feb. 4, 2025.

Rigi, and Yassin Salmani, though it did little to change his side's fortune around. The home side took its foot off the gas in the second half, while the visitors kept fighting for their reputation and managed to reduce the damage through Gvlesiani's consolation goal from the spot in the 90th minute.

A sixth win in seven games helped Al Hilal move back atop the West Zone's 12-team table with 19 points, with Persepolis dropping to ninth place on six points, trailing city rival Esteghlal on goal difference ahead of the final round of the league phase fixtures. Kartal went on to admit after the game that his team strug-

gled against Al Hilal's quality, especially in the first half. "In the first half, we couldn't play as we wanted. Every ball that came into our area was dangerous, and we conceded goals. The team dropped mentally, and we had three, four players injured. "We made some changes and altered the system in the sec-

ond half. The players played with more confidence, and we didn't make as many individual mistakes," added the former Fenerbahce coach. Al Hilal boss Jorge Jesus, meanwhile, was all smiles after his team's first-half masterclass, saying: "After leading by four goals, we started playing at a lower pace in the second half,

and there is no team that plays 90 minutes at a high pace except on the PlayStation." "I remember that since I joined the team, we have only lost three matches. All the players are equally important to me," said the Portuguese. Earlier in the day, a first-half strike by Ferjani Sassi was enough to see Al Gharafa hand Pakhtakor a 1-0 defeat in Doha and move up to seventh in the table with seven points. With Saudi trio Al Hilal, Al Ahli, and Al Nassr, plus Al Sadd of Qatar and Emirati outfit Al Wasl having secured their place in the next round, the battle for the remaining three knockout spots in the West will go down to the wire between Al Rayyan (eight points), Al Gharafa (seven points), Esteghlal (six points), Persepolis (six points), and Pakhtakor (four points) in two weeks' time. Persepolis will be looking to bounce back from Tuesday's humiliation when welcoming Cristiano Ronaldo's Al Nassr to the Azadi Stadium on February 17. Pakhtakor will face Al Sadd in Tashkent on the same day, with Al Gharafa visiting Jeddah to take on Al Ahli. Esteghlal, which was held to a 1-1 draw against Al Shorta at home on Monday, will visit Al Rayyan on February 18, with even a single point – if other results on the preceding night go its way – likely to be enough to send the Tehran Blues through.

Doncic shocked by trade to Lakers but excited for new journey

REUTERS – Luka Doncic said on Tuesday he was as shocked as anyone by the blockbuster trade over the weekend that brought him to the Los Angeles Lakers but is excited to join forces with LeBron James in a move that could shape the franchise for years to come. The 25-year-old Slovenian guard and perennial MVP contender admitted he figured he would spend his entire NBA career with the Dallas Mavericks, which made the news of his trade late on Saturday all the more surprising. "I was almost asleep when I got the call, I had to check (if) it was April 1st. I didn't really

believe it at first. It was a big shock. It was hard a moment for me," said Doncic. "(Dallas) was home so it was a really hard moment for me, especially the first day, but as I said I get to play in the greatest club in the world and I am excited about this new journey." Doncic, who has not played since Christmas Day, opens new tab because of a calf strain but is considered close to returning, had been with Dallas ever since a draft-night trade with the Atlanta Hawks, who took him with the third overall pick in 2018. Last year, the five-times All-

Star reached the NBA Finals for the first time in his career but the Mavericks lost 4-1 to the Boston Celtics in the best-of-seven championship series. Now Doncic, who was wildly popular in Dallas, will chase a title alongside the NBA's all-time top scorer in James, who he said was quick to reach out when the trade was announced. "He called me right away," Doncic said of his new teammate. "We didn't talk much because he said I understand what you are feeling, but that was really nice of him just to call me right away and welcome me to LA."

During his press conference, Doncic recounted a memorable encounter he had in 2019 when Lakers great Kobe Bryant, who was sitting courtside with his daughter Gianna for a game in Los Angeles, playfully heckled him in Slovenian. "Well, first of all, I remember the exact moment that happened. It will always stay, you know, in my mind. It was an amazing moment," said Doncic. "Just for Kobe to know my name was amazing for me. You know, I just wish Kobe and (his daughter Gianna nicknamed) Gigi were here to see this moment. And, you know, I'm ex-



cited about this new journey and happy to be here." Bryant, an 18-times All Star and five-times NBA champi-

on, died in a January 2020 helicopter crash that also killed his daughter and seven others.



● ALEX NICODIM/REUTERS

Former world No. 1 Halep announces retirement

THE GUARDIAN – Former world No 1 Simona Halep has announced her retirement from tennis after enduring a resounding defeat in her first match of 2025. Halep belatedly got her season under way in her home event, the Transylvania Open, in Romania on Tuesday, after being handed a wildcard. But the two-time grand slam title winner secured just two games as Italy's Lucia Bronzetti powered to a 6-1, 6-1 victory in just 59 minutes. Speaking in an emotional on-

court interview, Halep said: "Tonight, I don't know if it's with joy or sadness, I think both feelings are trying me but I'm making this decision with my soul. "I've always been realistic with myself and with my body. Where I probably was, it's very hard to get there and I know what it means to get there. That's why I wanted to come here today in Cluj to play in front of you and say goodbye. "Even though my performance wasn't very good it was still my soul and I'm very glad you

came, and I'll wonder if I'll come back again. But for now it's the last time I've played here and I don't want to cry. "It's a beautiful thing. I became world No 1, I won grand slams, it's all I wanted. Life goes on, there is life after tennis and I hope that we will see each other again. I'll come to the tennis here as often as I can and of course I will continue to play – but to be competitive it requires much more and at this moment it is no longer." Halep, who was given a four-year doping ban that was re-

duced to nine months due to a contaminated supplement, last competed on the WTA Tour in October in Hong Kong. The 33-year-old also played in an exhibition event in Abu Dhabi in December, but subsequently pulled out of qualifying for the Australian Open, citing pain in her knee and shoulder. This week Halep admitted that retiring "goes through my mind very often". She told the Romanian website Golazo.ro: "I am old, I have injuries that I can't recover from. My knee is not recovering."