

## AFC Champions League Elite:

## Iranian clubs to make last-ditch bid for knockout spots

## Sports Desk

Three last-16 places in the AFC Champions League Elite will be up for grabs when the final round of the league phase fixtures takes place in the west zone on Monday and Tuesday.

Saudi Pro League heavyweights Al Hilal, Al Ahli, and Al Nassr, plus Al Sadd of Qatar and Emirati outfit Al Wasl have already secured their place in March's knockout round, and the battle for the remaining top-eight spots in the 12-team table will go down to the wire between Tehran archrivals Persepolis and Esteghlal as well as Al Rayyan, Al Gharafa and Pakhtakor. Sitting sixth in the table with eight points, Al Rayyan is in the driving seat to go through, with Al Gharafa (7pts), Esteghlal (6pts), Persepolis (6pts), and Pakhtakor (4pts) in the following spots.

A 4-1 humiliation at Al Hilal last time out in the competition saw Persepolis drop below Esteghlal on goal difference, meaning even a draw against Al Nassr at Tehran's Azadi Stadium on Monday could prove not enough for the Capital Reds to progress.

Persepolis will head into the game on the back of a 3-2 defeat against Sepahan in the domestic cup and head coach Ismail Kartal will hope his backline will improve on its miserable form of late, which has seen Persepolis concede seven goals in three games – a worst record for the club in seven years.

The good news for the Turkish coach is that his Italian opposite number Stefano Pioli is expected to field a weakened line-up for the final-day dead rubber; according to reports in the Saudi media, giving rest to Portuguese superstar Cristiano Ronaldo, and Spanish center-back Aymeric Laporte.



Al Gharafa will still be facing a daunting task to progress when playing away to Al Ahli, as its inferior goal difference means a defeat in Jeddah could see the Qatari team be overtaken by the two Iranian clubs in the table.

Pakhtakor is without a win in seven games

and will have to collect maximum points from Monday's home game against Al Sadd to stand a chance of a last-16 place. Esteghlal will know about other results when before playing at Al Rayyan on Tuesday.

Like their city rivals, the Tehran Blues

have managed one win in the competition this term – a 3-0 home victory over Al Gharafa on Day 1 – but even a draw will likely send both sides through, if the final outcome in preceding night's three games go their way.

Sohrab Bakhtiarizadeh's side failed to

capitalize on the home support against Al Shorta two weeks ago, sharing the spoils with the Iraqi champion 1-1. The interim coach, however, will be eager to see his men build on Friday's 2-1 cup win at Shams Azar, as a knockout spot could extend his time on the Blues bench.

## Petko Sirakov – Ivan Iliev wrestling tournament:

## Iranians grab triple Greco-Roman golds

## Sports Desk

Iranian wrestlers bagged four Greco-Roman medals, including three golds, at the Petko Sirakov – Ivan Iliev tournament in Sofia, Bulgaria, on Friday. Representing the country in the 55kg contests, Payam Ahmadi overcame opponents from Georgia and Bulgaria before out-

classing home-favorite Yordan Topalov by superiority (9-0) to walk away with the ultimate prize. Reigning world under-17 champion Amir-Mahdi Saeidi-Nava won a second gold medal for Iran, thanks to a 5-3 triumph over Georgian Anri Tavartkiladze in the 72kg showdown. In the 82kg contests,

Iranian Alireza Mohammad-Hosseini beat Georgia's Saba Mamaladze 7-1 in the semifinals and then was handed the gold medal after Data Chkhaidze of Georgia withdrew from the final showpiece with injury. Meanwhile, Seyyed Taha Masoudi bounced back from a last-four superiority setback against Japa-

nese Manato Nakamura to beat Kazakhstan's Nurgali Sagatov 7-1 and finish his campaign with a consolation bronze in the 63kg contests. Seyyed Reza Azarshab was the other Iranian in action on Friday night, finishing his 82kg empty-handed after a first-round defeat (5-0) against Mamaladze.



## CAFA Women's Futsal Championship:

## Iranian girls beat Turkmenistan to close in on title

## Sports Desk

Iranian girls eased to a third successive victory at the CAFA Women's Futsal Championship, beating Turkmenistan 5-1 in Dushanbe, Tajikistan, on Friday.

Maral Torkaman bagged a hat-trick, with Zahra Kianimanesh and Roqayeh Some'eh also on the scoresheet as Iran sat atop the tournament's table with nine points.

Kamila Mingazova scored Turkmenistan's sole goal in the second half.

Three-time defending champion Iran began its title defense in the tournament – featuring five Central Asian sides – with a 9-0 rout of Uzbekistan and then thrashed the Kyrgyz Republic 10-0 on Wednesday. The final round of fixtures will see Iran take on the host at the Dushanbe Indoor Hall today, with Uzbekistan – second in the table with six points – facing the Kyrgyz Republic. The event is part of the Iranian girls' preparation for May's AFC Women's Futsal Asian

Cup, which will resume after a seven-year hiatus in China. Chasing a third successive title in as many editions, Forouzan Soleimani's side will begin its campaign with a game against the Philippines on May 7, before squaring off against Vietnam and Hong Kong in Group B. The top three of the 12-team tournament will punch their tickets for the inaugural FIFA Futsal Women's World Cup – starting November 21 in the Philippines.