

AFC Champions League Elite:

Esteghlal beats Al Rayyan to advance, lands Al Nassr in last 16

Sports Desk

Mohammadreza Azadi and substitute Alireza Koushki were on the scoresheet as Esteghlal walked away with a 2-0 win at Al Rayyan to progress to the round of 16 at the AFC Champions League Elite.

The Tehran Blues, who needed a draw in their final game in the league phase to secure a top-eight spot in the west zone's 12-team table, finished sixth with nine points and will face third-placed Saudi heavyweight Al Nassr in the two-legged knockout tie.

Esteghlal will welcome Cristiano Ronaldo and co. to Tehran's Azadi Stadium on March 3, before the two sides meet at Al-Awwal Park in Riyadh a week later. Koushki, who replaced injured Masoud Juma in the first half, was the star of the show at the Ahmad bin Ali Stadium, setting up Azadi's opener right after the break before doubling the scoreline on the counter-attack in the 69th minute.

As if Esteghlal fans needed more reason to celebrate only a second victory in eight outings at the competition, Tuesday's result saw their city rival Persepolis – eighth in the table prior to the game – drop to ninth and miss out on the knockout stage, joining Al Gharafa, Al Shorta and defending champion Al Ain in crashing out at the league phase.

Having managed a single victory across seven



Esteghlal players celebrate their second goal during a 2-0 victory over Al Rayyan in the AFC Champions League Elite in Al Rayyan, Qatar, on February 18, 2025.

● FFIRI

rounds of fixtures, Persepolis had the opportunity to seal a last-16 place with a win against a depleted Al Nassr side at home on the preceding night, but ultimately settled for a goalless stalemate in front of 70,000 supporters at the Azadi Stadium to finish on seven points, standing behind eight-placed Pakhtakor on goal difference.

Elsewhere on Tuesday,

Al Hilal defeated Emirati club Al Wasl in Dubai to overtake fellow-Saudi club Al Ahli on top of the west standings with a superior goal difference.

Marcos Leonardo scored from close range in the 13th minute and Saudi skipper Salem Al-Dawsari added the second four minutes into the second half after a return pass from Abdullah Al-Hamddan to lead Jorge Jesus' star-studded

side to a seventh win in the competition.

One of the two unbeaten sides in the league phase alongside Al Ahli, Al Hilal will take on Pakhtakor in the next round, with the two sides going head-to-head in Tashkent in the first leg.

Three points at home would have helped Al Rayyan avoid a last-16 date with the three Saudi giants, but the Qatari club will

now have to host Al Ahli in the first leg after finishing seventh in table. Fourth-placed Al Sadd will visit Dubai for the first-leg encounter with fifth-placed Al Wasl.

The quarterfinals, semis and the final showpiece of the revamped competition will be played in a centralized format featuring clubs from west and east Asia in Saudi Arabia in late April and early May.

Blues up for 'big things'

Esteghlal interim coach Sohrab Bakhtiarizadeh tipped his side to build on the brave performance against Al Rayyan when facing Al Nassr next.

Bakhtiarizadeh, who took over on the Blues bench for a second time this season when South African Pitso Mosimane walked away from his job in January, also hoped the club hierarchy

would unveil the new head coach ahead of the hectic fixtures' list – also featuring a Tehran Derby against Persepolis next Thursday.

"I'm really thrilled by the players' effort in such a massive game. We truly deserved the victory," said the Iranian, adding: "Esteghlal's future is most important to me and I think now is the right time for the club to bring in a decent manager and coaching staff"

Esteghlal has reportedly been in talks with former Napoli boss Walter Mazzarri for the club's permanent role in recent weeks.

Asked about the prospect of Esteghlal's success in the next round, Bakhtiarizadeh said: "We were only thinking about Al Rayyan up until today. Al Nassr is a formidable side with world-class players in the squad, but that doesn't mean we won't fancy our chances against them."

"Star players and proper infrastructure definitely contribute to a team's success, but, in football, what ultimately makes the difference is dedication and determination, and that is what Esteghlal players showed today. I'm sure they are capable of doing big things against Al Nassr," added Bakhtiarizadeh.

AFC Champions League Two:

Tractor holds off Al Khaldiya fightback to head into quarters



Sports Desk

Persian Gulf Pro League club Tractor FC survived a late surge by Al Khaldiya to beat the Bahraini top-flight champion 5-4 on aggregate and advance to the AFC Champions League Two quarterfinals.

Stepping into the game on the back of a first-leg 2-1 away win, Tractor looked to be marching through after a two-goal lead at the break in a jam-packed Yadegar-e Imam Stadium in Tabriz. However, a shaky performance by Iranian international keeper Alireza Beiranvand helped the visitors come from behind twice late in the game as it finished in a 3-3 stalemate.

Al Khaldiya had to endure pressure from the start with Tractor's Ricardo Alves threatening with a header in the fourth minute following Danial Esmailifar's cross into the box.

The Bahraini side continued to repel Tractor's ad-

vances following attempts from Igor Postonjski and Tomislav Strkalj.

However, Tractor found a way through in the 15th minute after Mahdi Torabi released Amirhossein Hosseinzadeh, who muscled his way past his marker before slotting home the opener to take his tally to eight goals in the competition this season. Al Khaldiya had its first sight on goal in the 19th minute after Jovan Marinkovic angled his headed attempt just wide off the left post following Dhurgham Ismail's corner. The home side doubled its advantage in the 32nd minute with Strkalj volleying home on the rebound after Hosseinzadeh's close-range attempt had been kept out by Al Khaldiya keeper Mohammad Al Gharably.

Al Khaldiya made a triple substitution just before the half-time break, bringing on Nizar Al Rashdan, Saalah Al Yahyaei, and Mahdi Abduljabbar.

The decision paid off handsomely, as Abduljabbar reduced the deficit in the 57th minute, converting Al Yahyaei's cutback, before the striker drew the visiting side level with a simple tap-in in the six-yard box, capitalizing on a blunder by Beiranvand, who failed to control a goal-kick pass from Tractor captain Shoja Khalilzadeh.

Tractor came back fighting and retook the lead in the 71st minute after Al Gharably blocked Strkalj's shot from inside the box, only for Torabi to convert the rebound.

Al Khaldiya, however, equalized for the second time after Mohamed Al Romaihi headed in Al Yahyaei's cross in the third minute of added time.

The Bahraini club came close to forcing the game into extra time, but Beiranvand produced a double save to deny Al Romaihi and Abduljabbar on a corner kick.

Tractor players celebrate a goal during a 3-3 draw against Al Khaldiya of Bahrain in the AFC Champions League Two at the Yadegar-e Imam Stadium, Tabriz, Iran, on February 18, 2025.

● MOJTABA SALEH/AFC