



## AFC U20 Asian Cup: Shootout heartbreak sends Iran packing

Sports Desk

Iran's bid for a first AFC U20 Asian Cup trophy since 1976 came to an end following a last-eight shootout defeat against Japan in Shenzhen, China, on Sunday. The quarterfinal setback also saw Hossein Abdi's boys miss out on a place in September's FIFA U20 World Cup in Chile.

Having made a clean sweep of three victories, including a 2-1 beating of defending champion Uzbekistan, to win Group C, Iran started right on the front foot against the Blue Samurai – runner-up in Group D – and took an early lead through Reza Ghandipour, who squeezed the ball into bottom corner five minutes into the game.

However, Japan – semifinalist in the past two editions and champion in 2016 – fought back to restore parity on the hour

mark, when Kosei Ogura's tame effort from outside the box found the back of the net.

Both sides had opportunities to score a second goal, with Japan coming close in the closing stages of normal time, before Iran pushed for the winner in the second half of extra time.

Iran got off to dreadful start in the shootout as Erfan Darivsh-Aali hit the crossbar before Pouria Shahrabadi's effort went wide, while Yotaro Nakajima and Rento Takaoka converted from the spot.

Goalkeeper Arsha Shakouri gave Iran a lifeline as he took on the third attempt and scored and then denied Niko Takahashi.

Shakouri's heroics, however, did little to turn the tide for Iran as Rion Ichihara's successful effort sent the Japanese into Wednesday's semifinal against Australia.

### Persian Gulf Pro League:

## Persepolis coach Kartal rues narrow squad after Iralco stalemate

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Persepolis head coach Ismail Kartal complained about the lack of depth in his squad after the Tehran Reds were held to a 1-1 draw at Iralco in the Persian Gulf Pro League on Saturday.

Aref Haji-Eidi headed home Amin Jahankohan's corner kick in the 67th minute – the ninth set-piece goal conceded by Persepolis this season – before Ali Alipour secured a point for the visitors with his eighth goal of the campaign two minutes from normal time.

The stalemate extended the Reds' winless run to three games in all competitions, with the club managing a single win in six outings since Kartal took over on the bench in late January.

With Persepolis skipper Omid A'alishah joining Oston Urunov, Vahid Amiri, and Saeid Sadeqi in the injury list before the game, Farshad Ahmadzadeh was the only recognized winger available for selection, as Kartal opted for Yassin Salmani and Mohammad Khodabandelou on the flanks.

"We are missing five or six players with injury. I had to pick midfielders, who play as a number six or eight, for the wide areas. I'm sure an established winger would have done better with carrying the ball into box and feeding the strikers," Kartal said after the game.

"There is nothing we can do about the situation and we'll have to continue with the players at our disposal until the end of the season. We'll stick with our philosophy and keep fighting for the title.

"I knew Persepolis is vulnerable on set pieces before I took the job, though today's goal was the first we have conceded on corner-kicks since I came here. As I said, we are short of players in certain positions, and cannot cope with the physical burden of playing

every four or five days," added the former Fenerbahce boss. Saturday's draw, coupled with victories for Tractor and Sepahan, left Persepolis drifting further away from the top two in the table.

The defending champion is now third with 38 points – trailing Tractor and Sepahan by six and five points respectively – with 10 games remaining.

With Persepolis having already crashed out of the AFC Champions League Elite and the Iranian Hazfi Cup within the past 10 days, the Reds faithful fear the end of an era for their team's golden, yet ageing, generation – a group which have dominated the Iranian top flight with seven titles in eight years.

"A lot of things will definitely have to change at the club when the right time comes," said Kartal, hinting at a massive shakeup in the squad in the summer transfer window.

### Two-horse race

Elsewhere on Saturday, Croatian winter signing Tractor Domagoj Drozdek bagged his second goal in four league games to help Tractor edge out Khaybar 1-0 in Tabriz's Yadegar-e Imam Stadium.

The narrow victory was enough to send Tractor back on top the league table 44 points, while Khaybar remained 12th in the 16-team table with 20 points – four clear of the relegation zone. Sepahan had temporarily taken the lead in the title race on Friday, thanks to a 4-1 hammering of Zob Ahan at home in the Isfahan Derby.

French striker Aboubakar Kamara and Javad Aqaeipour found the net either side of a Sobhan Khaqani's

equalizer for the visiting side, before Reza Asadi and Mahdi Limouchi scored a couple of late goals to seal an emphatic triumph for Sepahan at the Naqsh-e Jahan Stadium.

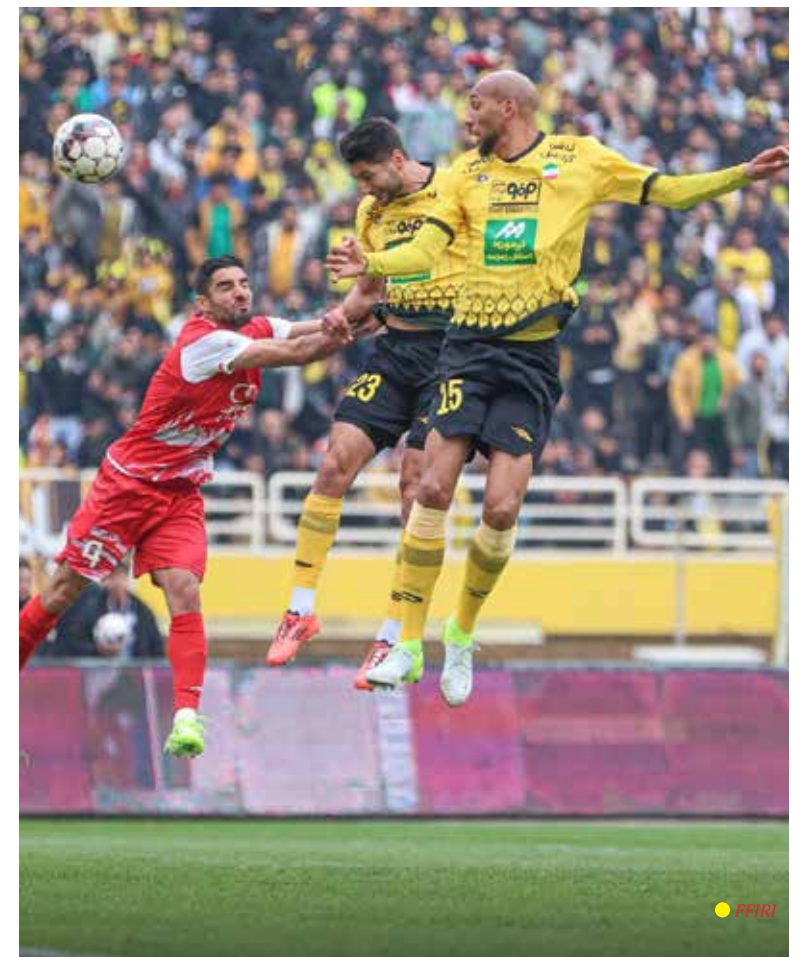
Meanwhile, Esteghlal – fresh from progress to the knock-out phase in the Asian elite clubs' competition – defeated relegation struggler Nassaji Mazandaran 1-0 at the Azadi Stadium.

Alireza Koushki, who stole the show with a goal and an assist in a 2-0 win against Al Rayyan last time out, built on the performance to head home the decisive goal in the 56th minute – five minutes after Blues captain and goalkeeper Seyyed Hossein Hosseini had kept out Mo Eisa's spot-kick.

Esteghlal moved up to seventh with 26 points, with Nassaji remaining second from bottom with 16 points. In Ahvaz, Mohammad Nemat, Mohammadreza Soleimani, and Ali-Asghar A'arabi were on the scoresheet as Foolad Khuzestan defeated Havadar 3-0 on Friday.

Foolad sits fourth in the table – equal on points with Persepolis – while a 12th defeat of the campaign kept Havadar rock bottom with 12 points. Malavan FC walked away with a 1-0 victory at Shams Azar on Friday – courtesy of a Qaem Eslamikhah's 50th-minute spot-kick – to end a nine-game winless streak in the league.

On Thursday, Golgozar Sirjan was held to a goalless draw at home by Mes Rafsanjan, while goals from Ali Khodadai, Victor Matheus, and Hadi Habibinejad led Chadormalou to an impressive 3-0 victory over Esteghlal Khuzestan.



### Iranian Hazfi Cup:

## Sepahan draws Malavan, Esteghlal to face Paykan in quarters

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Defending champion Sepahan will have to visit Malavan for their last-eight clash in the Iranian Hazfi Cup.

Eight teams, including three second-tier clubs, learned their fate for the remainder of the Iranian domestic cup competition – the Memorial of Khorramshahr Liberation – during Sunday's draw in Tehran. Trailing Tractor by a single point on top of the Iranian top-flight table, Sepahan defeated Persepolis 3-2 in extra time in a thrilling last-16 tie on Feb. 12 to remain on course for a league and cup double.

Meanwhile, league struggler Nassaji Mazandaran was drawn against

Golgozar Sirjan at home, with the winner taking on Sepahan or Malavan.

Seven-time champion Esteghlal – seventh in the league table – will continue its only realistic bid for silverware this season when hosting second division leader Paykan at Tehran's Azadi Stadium.

The Tehran Blues will fancy an easy route to the final showpiece in Kerman as a last-eight win will see them face another second-tier opposition in San'at Naft Abadan or Shahrdari Nowshahr – which will square off in Abadan – in the semifinals.

The quarterfinal fixtures will be played in the last week of April, with the exact date yet to be confirmed by the Iranian League Organization.

