

## AFC Champions League Elite:

## Esteghlal boss Bozovic hails defensive resolve in Al Nassr draw

## Sports Desk

Esteghlal head coach Miodrag Bozovic praised his side's solid defensive performance in the goalless stalemate against Saudi heavyweight Al Nassr at home in the first leg of their AFC Champions League Elite last-16 tie. Despite missing Cristiano Ronaldo and Aymeric Laporte, Al Nassr dominated large spells in front of a packed crowd at Tehran's Azadi Stadium and created several clear-cut chances, but Esteghlal captain and goalkeeper Seyyed Hossein Hosseini delivered a man-of-the-match performance to leave the tie finely balanced ahead of next week's return leg at Riyadh's Al-Awwal Park. Colombian striker Jhon Duran went close to break the deadlock in the 20th minute but was denied from inside the box by Hosseini with Rouzbeh Cheshmi keeping out Aiman Yahyah's follow-up with a crucial headed clearance. A best chance for the visitors came right before the hour mark, when Duran's lob in a one-on-one situation was tipped away by the Blues keeper. Marcelo Brozovic created another chance two minutes later with a delightful through ball into the box for Duran, who beat Hosseini only to be denied by the right post from a tight angle. "It was a tough match for us against a team with quality players individually," said Bozovic,



who was in charge of the Blues' bench for only a second outing, following Thursday's defeat against city rival Persepolis in the Iranian top flight. "There were moments in the

match when they played better or tried to get into scoring positions. There were also moments when we played better and had scoring chances. "I think they were better than

us, but the draw was a deserved result for both teams. I think we are happy with the way the players and the fans performed. I am happy that we did not give up the result and even tried to

win. When our goalkeeper is the best player on the field, there is nothing left to say." Bozovic's Italian opposite number Stefano Pioli, meanwhile, was frustrated with his side's

Esteghlal midfielder Alireza Koushki (20) is seen in action against Al Nassr at the AFC Champions League Elite last 16 at the Azadi Stadium, Tehran, Iran, on March 3, 2025.

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inability to convert its chances, saying: "Although I'm very happy with the performance of my players, we could have scored but we did not manage to do so. We know that we have a second leg and we will prepare for that match and see what happens." "We have played six games in a short period and Ronaldo also had a minor injury so we could not bring him to Iran." The former Milan boss however, remained positive and is focused on getting the job done when the teams meet again on March 11. "We had more scoring opportunities than Esteghlal. I was happy with the performance of all my players. They played well and my team is not player-oriented. Our full focus is on the second leg and we will try to play our best game. "Our team had six 100 percent scoring opportunities but we were unable to use them. Esteghlal also had some opportunities. However, we are preparing ourselves for the return match. It is true that we have not had good results in the past matches, but we will continue to try to have better results."

## Ex-FIFA chief Blatter states his innocence on court return over fraud case

**REUTERS** – Former FIFA president Sepp Blatter said he was innocent when he appeared in a Swiss court on Monday alongside France soccer great Michel Platini, 2-1/2 years after they were both cleared of fraud. Blatter and Platini were acquitted in 2022 at a lower Swiss court following a seven-year investigation into a payment of 2 million Swiss francs (\$2.22 million) to Platini. The Swiss federal prosecutor has appealed against that decision, leading to a new hearing at the Extraordinary Appeals Chamber of the Swiss Criminal Court in Muttens, near Basel. The prosecutor asked for the judgment to be set aside in full. Blatter told the court on Monday he was not guilty of fraud. "When you talk about false-

hoods, lies and deception, that's not me. That didn't exist in my whole life," he said. "We had principles in my family - we take only money we have earned," he added. "I am innocent." The 2022 indictment accused Blatter and Platini of deceiving FIFA staff in 2010 and 2011 about an obligation for world soccer's ruling body to pay the Frenchman, who was president of the sport's European governing body UEFA at the time. "They falsely claimed that FIFA owed Platini, or that Platini was entitled to, the sum of 2 million Swiss francs for advisory work. This deception was achieved through repeated untruthful claims made by both accused parties," the indictment said. The case wrecked Platini's

hopes of eventually succeeding Blatter, who resigned from FIFA in 2015 following a separate corruption scandal. Blatter and Platini were suspended from football in 2015 by FIFA for ethics breaches, originally for eight years, although their exclusions were later reduced. The pair were cleared in the 2022 case after a judge accepted that their account of a "gentlemen's agreement" for the payment was credible. The judge also said serious doubts existed about the prosecution's allegation that it was fraudulent. The Swiss federal prosecutor is seeking a sentence of 20 months, suspended for two years, against Blatter and Platini, the former France soccer

captain and manager. Blatter, who was FIFA president for 17 years until 2015, said before the hearing that he felt he was the subject of a witch hunt. "We did nothing wrong, nothing," the frail-looking 88-year-old told reporters outside the court at the end of the first day's hearing. Platini, three times European Footballer of the Year, denied the accusation of fraud "100%," the 69-year-old's lawyer said. Platini told the court that he had a contract agreed to work for four years as an advisor to Blatter between 1998 and 2022. He was not paid immediately because Blatter said FIFA lacked the funds to pay him at that time. Platini invoiced FIFA for the 2 million francs payment in 2011.



● DENIS BALIBOUSE/REUTERS



● TINGSHU WANG/REUTERS

## Djokovic, Alcaraz on collision course in Indian Wells draw

**REUTERS** – Carlos Alcaraz could run into Novak Djokovic in the quarter-final stage in his quest for a rare Indian Wells "three-peat," while defending women's champion Iga Swiatek also faces a tough test, according to the draw released on Monday. Djokovic beat the Spaniard to reach the Australian Open semi-final in January and is hoping he can become only the third man to claim 100 career singles titles when the main draw of the tournament kicks off on Wednesday in the California desert. The Serb, who got a first-round bye, will

hope to have put recent injury concerns behind him as he kicks off his campaign at the 1000-level event against a qualifier or Australian firebrand Nick Kyrgios. The men's draw could also see German top seed Alexander Zverev play against rival Greek Stefanos Tsitsipas in a potential quarter-final meeting, while 2022 champion and home hope Taylor Fritz may run into Russian Andrey Rublev in the final eight. On the women's side, Polish second seed Swiatek was on a quarter-final collision course with Zheng Qinwen months after the Chinese seventh seed knocked her

out in the Olympic semi-final. Top seeded Aryna Sabalenka will hope to bounce back after a pair of early exits from Doha and Dubai last month with Italian Jasmine Paolini potentially standing between her and the semi-final stage. A tantalising all-American quarter-final clash could be in the cards after 2023 U.S. Open winner Coco Gauff and newly minted Australian Open champion Madison Keys were pulled into the same half of the draw. Each hope to end an American women's Indian Wells trophy drought, with 24 years since Serena Williams last won.