

AFC Champions League Elite: Last eight on the horizon as Esteghlal visits Al Nassr

Sports Desk

A place in the AFC Champions League Elite quarter-finals will be up for grabs when Saudi heavyweight Al Nassr hosts Persian Gulf Pro League club Esteghlal in Riyadh today.

The tie is finely balanced after the two sides played to a goalless stalemate in the first leg in Tehran last week, and Esteghlal will be looking to build on the solid defensive performance, spearheaded by goalkeeper Seyyed Hossein Hosseini, when taking on the formidable, star-studded front-line of the home side at Al Awwal Park.

With Al Nassr dominating at the iconic Azadi Stadium, the Blues keeper pulled off a string of superb saves to keep Sadio Mane and Jhon Durán at bay, but the good news for the Saudi side and

Italian head coach Stefano Pioli is that Portuguese superstar Cristiano Ronaldo is available for selection again after missing the first leg with what was reported to be a fitness issue.

Ronaldo scored on return to Al Nassr lineup in a 2-2 draw against Al Shabab in the Saudi Pro League on Friday, taking his domestic tally to 18 goals, and will be chasing a seventh goal in sixth Asian outing this season.

History, however, is against Ronaldo as the Portuguese skipper has failed to find the back of the net in the previous three meetings with the Iranian clubs – including the league phase encounter with today's opponent last October – though his team will draw inspiration from a 12-game unbeaten run against Persian Gulf Pro League outfits.

Pioli will be without Portuguese midfielder Otavio and Spanish center-back Aymeric Laporte, as well as Saudi internationals Abdullah Al-Khaibari and Sultan Al-Ghannam, who are all ruled out of the contest with injury.

Esteghlal has been unbeaten in five games in the Asian Champions League, but Miodrag Bozovic's men will need to adopt a more attacking outlook if they are to reach the quarter-finals for the first time since the 2018 campaign, having bagged eight goals in nine games in the competition this season.

Esteghlal center-back Rouzbeh Cheshmi and midfielder Arash Rezavand will be facing a race against time to make it to the game after suffering minor injuries during a training session in Riyadh.



● AFC

FIBA West Asia Super League:

Tabiat beats Amman United for strong finish in first round



FIBA – Tabiat Basketball exemplified how important short-term memory could be in a quick tournament as the Iranian champion sent Amman United Club skidding 79-64 at the at the Nouhad Naufal Stadium on Saturday night to finish its first-round campaign in the FIBA West Asia Super League strongly. Coming off a tough 110-100 overtime loss to reigning champion Al Riyadi barely 24 hours ago, the wards of Iranian head coach Mehran Shahintab swiftly moved on and instead vented their frustrations toward the Jordanian crew on the way to netting a third victory in four outings in Group A – indeed a confidence booster for the second round on home soil in April.

Sina Vahedi starred for Tabiat, contributing with 28 points, 9 rebounds, and 9 assists. He also had 4 steals and a block, chalking up an efficiency of 37.

Ivan Buva came through with a double-double with 20 points and 13 rebounds, while Stedmon Lemon added 16 points as the trio showed how much they wanted to bounce back after losing to the Yellow Castle.

Lemon, who missed what could've been the game-winning jumper against Al Riyadi late in regulation, was responsible for kick-starting their third-quarter pullaway toward the W.

As Freddy Ibrahim cut the gap to three, Lemon responded with a jam, and that started a 9-0 run – capped by a Vahedi three-pointer – to push their lead to 12 points, 49-37, with under six minutes remaining.

Tabiat would follow up that solid third quarter with a strong fourth-quarter push, which inflated their lead to two decades' worth, 70-50, thanks to another outside shot courtesy of Vahedi with

3:55 left to play.

The defending Iran Basketball League champion drained a total of 10 threes, six of which came from Vahedi himself. His 9 assists, furthermore, nearly matched their foes' output (12).

"We had a short time from last night because we played a tough game ... maybe between these two games we only had maybe around 15 hours. I knew that my players are tired, but they made the decision to have a good game. And today, they managed to organize everything from offense to defense. I appreciate also that they shared the ball very well," Shahintab said after the game.

Tabiat's Ivan Buva (25) goes up for a basket during a victory over Amman United Club at the FIBA West Asia Super League first round in Zouk Mosbeh, Lebanon, on March 8, 2025. ● FIBA

Iran edges out Afghanistan in futsal friendly

Sports Desk

Iran held off a second-half fightback by Afghanistan to win 4-3 at the friendly futsal tournament in Curitiba, Brazil. Hossein Tayyebi put Iran in front with three minutes into the contest, before Moslem Oladqobad doubled the lead for the Asian powerhouse two minutes later.

Abolfazl Afzali extended the lead for Iran in the 15th minute, only to see Akbar Kazemi reduce the deficit to two seconds later as it finished 3-1 in the first half.

Vahid Shamsaei's men again started on the front foot after the break and bagged a fourth goal through Mahdi Karimi in the early stages of the second period.

Afghan keeper Javad Safari produced some fine saves to deny Iran a fifth goal, while Afghanistan had a couple chances

on the counter-attacks. Kazemi again found the net for Afghanistan with a sublime lob, but was shown his marching orders after his foul denied Iran a clear goal opportunity. Afghanistan still managed to find a third goal when Iran's Ali Akrami was dispossessed by Hossein Mohammadi, who tackled the ball into the back of the net.

This was a third outing for Iran in Brazil, after a 5-2 loss to the host was followed by a 11-2 demolishing of Greenland on Friday.

Iran will have the chance to avenge the first-day defeat against the reigning world champion when the two sides square off in the final showpiece of the event today.



● FFIRI

Djokovic again stunned by a lucky loser at Indian Wells

REUTERS – Novak Djokovic was shocked by Botic van de Zandschulp 6-2 3-6 6-1 in the second round of Indian Wells on Saturday as the Serbian suffered an early exit at the hands of a tournament lucky loser for a second consecutive year. Djokovic fell to lucky loser Luca Nardi of Italy in the California desert last year and history repeated itself on Stadium One court a day after top seed Alexander Zverev also went out.

The twenty-four time Grand Slam champion got off to a horrid start, hitting 14 unforced errors and being broken twice in the opening set. He regrouped to race out to a 3-0 lead in the second, levelling the contest with a mighty forehand winner and pumping his fist in front of the packed, sun-soaked crowd.

But giant killer van de Zandschulp ran away with the decider, breaking Djokovic for a fourth time with a perfectly executed lob for a 3-1 lead and sealing the stunning upset

when Djokovic's shot went wide on match point.

"I started really well and then of course Novak came back," said van de Zandschulp, who secured a berth to the tournament upon the withdrawal of 47th ranked Facundo Diaz Acosta.

"In the end I was happy to get my level back."

Djokovic, 37, retired from his Australian Open semi-final against Zverev with a hamstring injury and

lost in the Qatar Open first round last month.

He said the leg injury was behind him coming into the tournament and did not look hampered by it in his match of Saturday, where he was accompanied by coach Andy Murray. "No excuses for a poor performance," Djokovic said.

"It doesn't feel great when you play this way on the court, but congratulations to my opponent.

"Just a bad day in the office."



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