

AFC Champions League Elite:

Duran, Ronaldo send 10-man Esteghlal packing, fire Al Nassr into last eight

Sports Desk

Colombian striker Jhon Duran struck twice and Cristiano Ronaldo found the net from the spot as Al Nassr defeated Persian Gulf Pro League club Esteghlal 3-0 in the second leg of their AFC Champions League Elite last-16 tie in Riyadh's Al-Awwal Park on Monday. The victory saw the Saudi heavyweight join Al Sadd, which beat Al Wasl 4-2 on aggregate, in progressing to April's quarterfinals in Jeddah.

Having missed the first-leg goalless draw in Tehran, Ronaldo returned to the starting lineup with Duran and Sadio Mane providing support from the flanks.

But it was Esteghlal who had the first shot on target in the second minute when Mehran Ahmadi cut into the box from the right, but his tame effort was comfortably gathered by Al Nassr keeper Bento.

Al Nassr gradually took control, repeatedly targeting Ronaldo with crosses into the box. The breakthrough came in the ninth minute when Duran capitalized on Seyyed Hossein Hosseini's careless pass, calmly lobbing the ball over Esteghlal's keeper.

Hosseini denied Ronaldo's 18th-minute free-kick, but the five-time Ballon d'Or winner's persistence paid off when he intercepted Raphael Silva's poor back pass and found Mane inside the box with a sublime back-hill touch, before the former Liverpool striker was brought down



Al Nassr's Cristiano Ronaldo celebrates his goal during a 3-0 victory over Esteghlal at the AFC Champions League Elite last 16 at Al-Awwal Park, Riyadh, Saudi Arabia, on March 10, 2025.

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six-yard-box to strike home into the bottom left corner.

"There is not much to say, we conceded two goals at the beginning of the match, then one of the players was sent off which made the match difficult for us, and Al Nassr deserved to win," head coach Miodrag Bozovic, who was in charge of the Blues bench for only a third game, said after the game.

"Al Nassr handled this match correctly, and the match ended early after the two goals and the red card.

"We had a negative thing in this match, which was losing tackles, and whoever loses tackles always loses the match," added the Montenegrin.

The result wrapped up a dreadful campaign for the two Tehran archrivals at the revamped Asian elite clubs' competition, underlining the widening gulf between the Iranian club football and its Middle East rivals.

Persepolis – the dominant force of the Iranian top flight for nearly a decade – failed to progress to the knockout phase after finishing ninth in the west zone's 12-team table in the league stage. The two Iranian clubs managed a combined three victories across 18 games in the competition, suffering eight defeats in total.

by Zobeir Niknafs, with the Portuguese captain slotting home the spot-kick for his seventh goal in this year's competition.

Things went from worse to worst for

the Tehran Blues in the closing stages of the first half when Ahmadi elbowed Mohammed Al Fatil and was sent off for a second booking after a VAR review.

Esteghlal had Hosseini and the wood-

work, on a couple of occasions, to thank for avoiding a humiliating scoreline in the second half, but Duran still settled the tie in the 84th minute after collecting substitute Angelo's pass inside the

'I was destroyed': Qasempour on painful loss to Sadulaev at World Championships

UWW – "I've thought about it a lot. Of course, it's in the past and thinking about it won't change anything. But I've thought a lot about why I made a mistake in those four seconds and I could have managed the wrestling differently and finished it very easily."

Kamran Qasempour stares at the empty walls of the interview room as he recalls the heartbreaking and shocking 5-3 loss to Abdurashid Sadulaev in the semifinal of the World Championships last October.

The images of Qasempour holding his head in hands after the loss went viral on social media. Sadulaev was praised for his champion mindset and his ability to script a remarkable late turnaround. Qasempour was consoled by his fans, who urged him to not lose heart.

Those comforting words felt hollow at that point and Qasempour felt "lost."

"The reality is that the fighting spirit and the feeling I had on the first day of the competition caused all those feelings to disappear and I was destroyed. I couldn't control myself and I just wanted the competition to end and go back," Qasempour says, with his voice

breaking as he recollects his thoughts. For five minutes and 55 seconds, Qasempour controlled the 92kg semifinal against Sadulaev, a two-time Olympic champion known for his must-win attitude. A loss would have reinforced the belief that the Sauldaev aura was fading. A win for Qasempour, a two-time world champion at 92kg, would make him only the third wrestler to beat Sadulaev.

But with five seconds remaining, Sadulaev snapped the Iranian down, spun behind, then managed to fling him to the mat for a 4-point takedown.

"It was also very difficult for me to come to terms with the loss," Qasempour recalls. "After the match, I felt very bad and didn't sleep all night. I was awake from the intensity of thought and pressure, and it was very difficult for me. Due to the pressure I was under, I took four painkillers after the match." A few hours of sleep was never going to be enough for Qasempour to return for his bronze-medal bout against American David Taylor, which he lost 6-2.

Four months have passed since that day in Tirana, a city Qasempour returned for the

Muhamet Malo Ranking Series last week and captured the gold medal. Though not the World Championships and there was no Sadulaev in the field, Qasempour managed to bring a smile on his face as he stood on the podium. However, memories flashed back.

"When I was going up to the podium [after winning gold], I thought again that I could have been standing on the Worlds podium a few months ago, not this tournament," he said. "But that's how sports are, and if professional athletes want to continue their path, they must know that winning and losing are part of sports."

Qasempour did take comfort from the messages he received. Yet, he is unable to move on from those five seconds of lapse in concentration.

"People gave me a lot of good energy and praised me constantly, which shows the kindness of the people," he says. "But what I wanted didn't happen and the result wasn't as I wanted. It would have been better if it ended with a good result."

As the new Olympic cycle begins, Qasempour wants to make amends. There will be many pit stops before he can be at



Iranian Kamran Qasempour (front) concedes a late takedown against Russian Abdurashid Sadulaev during their 92kg semifinal at the World Championships in Tirana, Albania, on Oct. 30, 2024.

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his first Olympics and he wants to capture every gold medal that comes his way.

"There are three more World Championships left before the Olympics [in 2028]," he says. "The World Championships are very important to me, and

after that, it's the Olympic medal that I want to have in my medal showcase. In the year leading up to the Olympics, I will make the decision and compete in a weight class so that I can participate in the Olympics."



● MARZIEH SOLEIMANI/IRNA

Iranians head to Karate 1 PL in Hangzhou

Sports Desk

Iranian men's and women's teams left Tehran on Monday night for the second series of the 2025 Karate 1 Premier League – starting Friday in Hangzhou, China.

Former world bronze medalist Sara Bahmanyar will head-

line the Iranian female kumite squad, chasing a second -50kg gold medal at this year's event following her triumph in January's season opener in Paris. Joining Bahmanyar in the women's team are Fatemeh Sa'adati (-55kg), former Asian champion Atousa Golshadnejad (-61kg),

and Mobina Heidari (-68kg), with Fatemeh Sadeqi looking to add the female kata prize to her Series A gold in Tbilisi in January. In the men's draw, Ali Meskini (-60kg) Mahdi Khodabakhshi (-84kg), reigning Asian gold medalist Saleh Abazari (+84kg) will represent Iran across different kumite events.