

# AFC Champions League Two: Shootout defeat shatters Tractor's Asian dream



## Sports Desk

Tractor's bid for a maiden Asian crown ended in vain after the Persian Gulf Pro League club suffered a 4-2 shootout defeat against Saudi side Al Taawoun in the AFC Champions League Two quarterfinals on Tuesday.

With the tie finely balanced after a first-leg goalless stalemate in Tabriz last week, Tractor drew first blood through Brazilian Ricardo Alves from the spot in the 50th minute, only to see Musa Barrow restore parity four minutes later to force the game into extra time at Buraidah's Wolves Park. Substitute Sultan Mandash gave the home side the lead right at the start of extra time, when he latched onto a free-kick from Aschraf El Mahdioui, went past the goalkeeper Alireza Beiranvand and slammed the ball into the back of the net. The visitors equalized in the 105th minute via Domagoj Drozdek, who headed in from close range off a cross by Danial Esmaeilifar.

The shootout drama mirrored numerous Iran-Saudi encounters throughout the years.

Tractor's Mahdi Shiri sent his effort over the bar and Sajjad Ashouri was denied by goalkeeper Abdulquddus Atiay, while Al Taawoun penalty takers sent Beiranvand the wrong way on four occasions to convert all their attempts.

Tractor head coach Dragan Skocic felt his side deserved to go through but admitted

their failure to finish chances in the first leg cost them.

"Our home match is the reason we are eliminated, as we had six chances but failed to score," said Skocic.

"This match was even, with both teams exchanging scoring opportunities, and there were good moments for each team throughout the match."

Skocic's opposite number Mohammed Al Abdali, meanwhile, applauded his players incredible fitness and vigor throughout the 120 minutes of action.

"Everything that happened to us had a positive impact. Maybe Tractor having the weekend off to prepare for this game affected them negatively.

"We worked hard to prepare all the players to avoid fatigue. We made sure that they were ready for every match, and this helped us a lot."

Tuesday's setback wrapped up a dreadful campaign for the Iranian top-flight sides on the continental stage.

Persepolis crashed out of the league stage of the ACL Elite, before Esteghlal suffered a 3-0 aggregate loss to Saudi heavyweight Al Nassr in the round of 16, while Sepahan failed to progress beyond the group phase of the Asian second-tier competition.

Tractor center-back Shoja Khalilzadeh (R) challenges Al Taawoun's Roger Martínez for a header during an AFC Champions League Two quarterfinal second leg in Buraidah, Saudi Arabia, on March 11, 2025.

IRNA

## Luis Enrique hails PSG character at Anfield

REUTERS – Paris St Germain boss Luis Enrique said both his team and Liverpool deserved a berth in the Champions League quarter-finals, such as the terrific, nail-biting battle between the two sides in the competition's last-16.

The Spaniard beamed with pride about how his squad rallied from being a goal down after last week's first leg to dispatch Premier League-leading Liverpool 4-1 in a penalty shootout at Anfield on Tuesday.

"Both of the teams deserved to go to the next phase, they play better than us here, but I think my team at Anfield, in a special stadium, showed great personality and character," he said.

"We tried to play our best, but it was difficult as they're so intense. Both teams deserved to qualify. The character and personality, even when we shoot at the penalty shootout they showed great character. I think it shows clearly the team we are."

Ligue 1 leaders PSG have never won the Champions League, losing to Bayern Munich in the 2020 final, while 2019 winners Liverpool were considered the favourites to advance after topping the table through the eight-game league phase.

"When the draw told us about the match against Liverpool and PSG, both managers thought the same -- one of the best matches you can watch in Europe," Luis Enrique said.

"I think both teams were great.

"We are happy and confident to go to the next phase."

PSG earned huge praise from pundits for their hard-fought victory.

"You've seen four perfect penalties under extreme pressure, you've got to give PSG big credit," former England striker Alan Shearer said on the Amazon Prime broadcast.

"The disappointment of losing that first game and playing really, really well and coming back to Anfield and soaking up pressure and then taking it to extra time and penalties and seeing those four perfect penalties, they've really put in a magnificent effort over the two games and they'll say they deserve to go through."



RPSL

## Hamilton to make Ferrari debut at Australian GP



Lewis Hamilton will launch his bid to win the drivers' championship at a third Formula One team when he makes his much-anticipated debut for Ferrari in the season-opening Australian Grand Prix on Sunday.

Formula One's most successful team have not won a championship since the 2008 constructors' title and Hamilton, moving from Mercedes to Maranello, arrives chasing a record eighth.

Hamilton's switch has already sent fans into a frenzy in Italy and Melbourne's big Italian community will be out in force at Albert Park as the lakeside circuit hosts the opener for the first time since 2019.

Ferrari, runners-up to McLaren in the 2024 constructors' championship, celebrated a 1-2 in Melbourne last year when Carlos Sainz, who has since moved to Williams, won the race ahead of teammate Charles Leclerc. McLaren, however, may be set to

steal Hamilton's thunder after encouraging performances in winter testing with F1 data showing they were quickest on low fuel in Bahrain and had an advantage over Ferrari on race pace.

That would have been music to the ears of Australian fans cheering for McLaren's Oscar Piastri as he looks to become the first home driver to win the race since it was added to the F1 world championship calendar in 1985.

The Melbourne native finished fourth last year at Albert Park behind third-placed teammate Lando Norris. Briton Norris, the bookmakers' pre-season favourite for the championship, may well be Piastri's biggest obstacle to a drought-breaking win for Australia.

Though Hamilton's Ferrari debut and McLaren's pre-season form have dominated the buildup, Red Bull's defending champion Max Verstappen will

launch his bid to become the second man to win five drivers' titles in a row following Michael Schumacher.

Red Bull finished only third in the constructors' championship last season and after doing the least amount of laps at winter testing the pace of the car remains to be seen.

"We learnt a lot from testing but there is still a lot more work to be done," Verstappen said in a race preview issued by Red Bull on Tuesday.

"We have ideas about what we can do and how we can take on what we learnt at testing, so we will see how we go when we start driving on the track."

Verstappen has a new teammate in New Zealander Liam Lawson, who Red Bull hope will offer better support for the Dutch driver than the discarded Sergio Perez.

Lawson is among six drivers at Albert Park who will race in an F1 season-opener for the first time.

CLAUDIA GRECO/REUTERS