

# Iranians steal the show in Emirati top flight



L-R: Al Wahda skipper Ahmad Nourollahi, Ittihad Kalba winger Mahdi Qayedi, Shabab Al Ahli striker Sardar Azmoun, and Al Bataeh head coach Farhad Majidi had decent UAE Pro League campaigns with their respective clubs.

## Sports Desk

The recently-concluded Emirati ADNOC Pro League season was one to remember for Iranian players, who delivered impressive stats, and title-winning contributions for their clubs. While Sardar Azmoun and Saeid Ezzatollahi played pivotal roles in leading Shabab Al Ahli to a second top-flight title in three years, Mahdi Qayedi enjoyed a prolific campaign in Ittihad Kalba's colors.

## Glittering debut

When Azmoun left Bayer

Leverkusen for Shabab Al Ahli last summer, his move was deemed by many as the beginning of the end for the 30-year-old striker, who had spent all of his career in the European leagues. However, it proved to be a statement debut in the Asian club football for Azmoun, with 26 goals and 10 assists in 39 appearances in all competitions. The Iranian talisman netted 11 goals in 21 league outings, while another nine strikes in as many games saw him finish as the top scorer at the in-

augural AFC Champions League Two, though his team was knocked out by fellow-Emirati club and ultimate champion Sharjah FC in the quarterfinals. There was further contribution by Azmoun and Ezzatollahi – who finished the season with seven goals and two assists in 36 outings – in the cup competitions, as the Team Melli duo also lifted the UAE President's Cup and Qatar-UAE Challenge Shield trophies with Shabab Al Ahli.

## Integral trio

Wizard winger Qayedi will be among the most sought-after

players in the Emirati top-flight in the upcoming summer transfer window following a goal-laden loan season at Kalba. Qayedi found the net on 16 occasions, including six in the final five games of the campaign, in 23 games to stand second in the Emirati league's leading marksmen chart – a massive feat for a minnow club player. The 26-year-old added another two cup goals to his tally to finish the season with 18 goals and eight assists in 26 outings. Meanwhile, International midfielder Saman Qod-

dous – also making his Asian club debut – registered four goals and three assists in 18 league appearances and striker Shahriar Moghanlou had eight goals, plus two assists, as the Iranian trio took credit for 28 of Kalba's 39 league goals this season. Elsewhere, Ahmad Nourollahi – who joined the ADNOC Pro League form Persepolis in the summer of 2021 – relished another successful campaign on the southern coast of the Persian Gulf. Wearing the Al Wahda armband, the Iranian mid-

fielder contributed with six goals and assists apiece in 26 appearances to lead the club to a third-place finish in the 14-team table and direct qualification for the league phase of the AFC Champions League Elite next season. Mohammad Qorbani was the other Iranian to play for Al Wahda this season. Having joined from Russian club Orenburg in February, the defensive midfielder played the full 90 minutes in 11 matches, contributing with one goal and one assist. Meanwhile, former Es-

teghlal head coach Farhad Majidi made an impressive return to a managerial role in the UAE Pro League midway through the campaign. The 48-year-old Iranian, who had been without a job since parting ways with Kalba in March 2024, took charge of the bench at relegation-threatened Al Bataeh in January. Majidi steered the club to five victories – including massive wins against Sharjah and Al Wahda – and four draws in 15 games as Al Bataeh managed to finish 11 points clear of the drop zone.

## Asian Athletics Championships:

# Iran's Kamran reaches 110m hurdles final

## Sports Desk

Iran's Masoud Kamran progressed to the men's 110m hurdles final on the second day of the Asian Athletics Championships in Gumi, South Korea. The Iranian sprinter registered a personal fastest record of 13.62 seconds to finish runner-up to Qatari Oumar Doudai Aba-

kar (13.39) in Wednesday's seminal, joining the Asian under-20 champion in today's final showdown at the Gumi Civic Stadium. Meanwhile, Reihaneh Mobini will vie for a women's long jump medal in today's final after an impressive qualification campaign on Wednesday. The Iranian girl registered

a best attempt of 6.33m to beat China's Guo Sijia (6.17) and Kazakhstan's Anastasiya Rypakova (6.15) to the top spot in the qualification jumps. The second day of the event in Gumi, however, was one to forget for other Iranians in action. Mahdi Haft-Cheshmeh settled for the eighth place in the men's hammer throw

event with 65.30 attempt. China's Wang Qi grabbed the gold with 74.50m, followed by Japanese duo Tatsuto Nakagawa (71.97m) and Shota Fukuda (71.89m). Iran's Ali Amirian and Amir Zamanpour missed out on the podium in the men's 1500m event, finishing fourth and seventh, respectively, in the final race.



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## Pacers one win from NBA Finals after beating Knicks

**BBC** – Tyrese Haliburton produced an electric first-half performance as the Indiana Pacers beat the New York Knicks to move to within one win of reaching the NBA Finals. Haliburton registered 20 points, 10 assists and eight rebounds in the first half of a 130-121 win at Gainbridge Fieldhouse in Indiana. Haliburton finished with 32 points, 15 assists and 12 rebounds without a turnover, making him the first player to record stats of 30-15-10-0 in

an NBA post-season game. The Pacers lead 3-1 in the Eastern Conference play-off finals. Victory in game five at Madison Square Garden in New York at 01:00 BST on Friday will secure their place in the Finals for the first time since 2000. "I felt like I let the team down in game three [a 106-100 home defeat], so it was important for me to just come out here and make plays," Haliburton said. "Guys put me in position to

make plays and play my game. It was a big win for us." Pascal Siakam scored 30 points and Bennedict Mathurin 20 off the bench for fourth-seeded Indiana. Jalen Brunson scored 31 points for New York, while Karl-Anthony Towns, who injured his left knee for the second consecutive game and was hobbling at the finish, scored 24 points and OG Anunoby 22. "We scored 120 points but our defence wasn't good enough," Knicks coach Tom Thibodeau

said. "Haliburton's a great player. You don't guard great players in this league individually. It's your entire team. And if one guy is not doing their job, everyone is going to look bad." The winners of the best-of-seven series will play the Minnesota Timberwolves or the Oklahoma City Thunder in the Finals, which begin on 5 June. The Thunder lead 3-1 in the Western Conference play-off finals.