

# AFC Champions League Elite: Tractor's Hosseinzadeh pleased with strong league-stage finish



Tractor striker Amirhossein Hosseinzadeh (99) reacts after scoring during a 2-0 victory over Al Gharafa in the AFC Champions League Elite in Al Rayyan, Qatar, on February 17, 2026.

APC

## Sports Desk

Tractor FC striker Amirhossein Hosseinzadeh praised his side's "outstanding performance" after a 2-0 away victory over Al Gharafa on Tuesday, as the Persian Gulf Pro League champion wrapped up the league stage of the AFC Champions League Elite on a high note.

The result marked Tractor's fifth win in eight matches, lifting the Iranian side to third place in the West Zone's 12-team standings with 17 points – five behind leaders Al Hilal and level with Al Ahli Saudi.

Mahdi Hashemnejad broke the deadlock on the hour at Thani bin Jassim Stadium, sweeping home the rebound after goalkeeper Khalifa Ababacar parried Regi Lushkja's initial effort. Hosseinzadeh sealed the victory with 10 minutes remaining,

latching onto a cutback from Masoud Zaerkazemayn. The forward skipped past a challenge from Aron Gunnarsson before firing into the top corner to put the result beyond doubt.

"First of all, I have to say thanks to Dragan Skocic, our previous head coach who brought really bright days to the club and helped us reach our dreams," Hosseinzadeh said of the Croatian manager, who parted ways with the club on the eve of the match.

"We played a very good game and our performance was outstanding. We showed the best version of ourselves and I'm also very happy with my goal.

"We qualified with the best result possible, which is third, and now we turn our attention back to domestic matches before switching focus to the knockout stage."

The third-place finish sets up a round-of-16 clash with the United Arab Emirates' Shabab Al Ahli – a repeat of the sides' opening league-phase encounter, which ended in a 1-1 draw in Dubai last October.

Shabab Al Ahli suffered a 4-3 defeat to Al Ahli Saudi in a seven-goal thriller in Jeddah on Monday but still secured sixth place with 11 points to advance to the knockout rounds.

The Emirati side will host the first leg of the tie on March 2-3, with the return fixture scheduled for the following week.

Elsewhere in the last 16, Qatar's Al Sadd will take on Saudi heavyweights Al Hilal, with the first leg in Doha, while Al Duhail face Al Ahli Saudi in another Qatar-Saudi Arabia matchup. The UAE's Al Wahda will meet Saudi Pro League champion Al Ittihad.

## Teenage Esmali emerges as Iran's new wrestling prodigy

### Sports Desk

Amirhossein Esmali has become the latest teenage wrestler to capture national attention after achieving a rare double success in both freestyle and Greco-Roman superheavyweight categories at the Iranian Cadet Championships



Iranian wrestler Amirhossein Esmali has his hand raised as the winner in the 110kg final at the National U17 Freestyle Championships in Kerman, Iran, on February 13, 2026.

IAWF

within the span of seven days. The 16-year-old from East Azerbaijan Province claimed silver in the Greco-Roman 110kg division earlier this month, falling 3-1 to Aliakbar Akou in the final. He responded in emphatic fashion in freestyle, securing the national title with a 6-1 victory over Pouyan Esmaeilzadeh

last Friday. The achievement has marked Esmali as one of Iran's most promising young talents. Such a feat is uncommon in Iranian wrestling, where athletes typically specialize in one discipline. Excelling at national level in both freestyle and Greco-Roman underscores Esmali's versatility and technical maturity at a young age.

His rise comes amid a broader upswing in wrestling in East Azerbaijan, a province that has experienced notable progress over the past year. The emergence of new talents such as Esmali has fueled optimism about the region's future contribution to Iran's storied wrestling tradition. Following his performances, Esmali has earned call-ups to the training camps of both the national under-17 freestyle and Greco-Roman teams. However, after clinching the freestyle national title – and with major continental and world championships on the horizon – he is expected to focus on freestyle as he pursues a place on Iran's squad for the upcoming Asian and World Championships.

## AFC Champions League Two: Esteghlal coach Sa Pinto on the brink after last-16 exit



### Sports Desk

Esteghlal's Portuguese head coach, Ricardo Sa Pinto, is facing an uncertain future after his side was dramatically eliminated from the AFC Champions League Two by Jordan's Al Hussein.

The Jordanian Pro League champions mounted a late comeback at the Amman International Stadium, securing a 3-2 victory on the night and a 4-2 aggregate win to book their place in the quarterfinals of Asia's second-tier club competition.

Needing to overturn a one-goal deficit from the first leg, Esteghlal began brightly, applying early pressure. Saed Al Rosan was forced to clear a dangerous cross from Saleh Hardani, and their aggressive start paid off in the fourth minute when they were awarded a penalty.

Pedro Henrique brought down Mohammadhossein Eslami inside the box, and after a VAR review, Jasir Asani stepped up to convert the spot-kick and give the visitors the lead.

Al Hussein struggled to break down a resolute Esteghlal defense in the first half but came close in the 38th minute when Mahmoud Al Mardi drilled a shot into the side-netting from a tight angle.

The home side's pressure finally told two minutes later. Ali Hajabi rose highest to power home a header from Al Mardi's corner, leveling the night and putting Al Hussein ahead on aggregate heading into the interval.

Esteghlal hit back just four minutes after the restart. Asani grabbed his second of

the game, pouncing on a loose ball and curling a precise effort past goalkeeper Yazeed Abulaila to restore his team's advantage on the night.

The Iranian side pushed for a third goal that would have swung the tie back in their favor. In the 61st minute, Eslami's teasing cross from a set-piece found Rouzbeh Cheshmi, but his effort was straight at Abulaila.

The introduction of substitutes Obieda Al Namarnah and Yousef Abu Al Jazar proved decisive for Al Hussein. With 14 minutes remaining, Esteghlal's goalkeeper spilled a cross from Yousef Abu Jaboloush, and Abu Al Jazar reacted quickest to turn in Aref Al Haj's miscued shot.

Despite a late surge from Esteghlal, their hopes were extinguished in the fifth minute of added time when Obieda Al Namarnah scored a third for the hosts to seal the comeback and a place in the last eight.

The defeat has ignited intense speculation in the Iranian media regarding Sa Pinto's future. With the team struggling for consistency this season, several names, including former coaches Javad Nekounam and Sohrab Bakhtiarizadeh, have already been touted as potential replacements.

Esteghlal will still have all to play on the domestic front, sitting third in the Persian Gulf Pro League table with 35 points from 20 games – one point behind leaders Golgohar Sirjan with a game in hand and trailing Tractor on goal difference.

The Capital Blues are also in contention with a second successive Iranian Hazfi Cup trophy and will face Khaybar in the quarterfinals.

## Iranian Women's Volleyball Premier League:

### Malavan seals playoff spot as Majan stuns Saipa

#### Sports Desk

The latest round of fixtures at the Iranian Women's Volleyball Premier League delivered high drama on Tuesday, with key results shaping the playoff race across the two groups of the regular season. In Group B, Malavan Tehran clinched a playoff berth after edging Mehregan Shiraz 3-2 in a five-set thriller at Tehran's Volleyball House. After dropping the opening two sets, Malavan mounted an impressive comeback, winning 25-15, 25-21 and 15-8 to secure its fourth victory of

the campaign and confirm qualification as the group's fourth-placed side.

Elsewhere in Group A, Majan Mazandaran produced the standout result of the matchday by sweeping group leader and defending champion Saipa in straight sets (25-18, 25-15, 25-21). The victory marked Majan's seventh win of the season and lifted the team to 20 points, tightening the race at the top of the table. Naft Omidiyeh defeated Mes Rafsanjan 3-1 to keep their playoff hopes alive, with the final qualifying spot now set to be decided in the last round of the



league stage. Meanwhile, Shahr Arka Alborz maintained top spot in Group B after a dominant straight-sets victory over Shahin Bandar Ameri.

Two matches were awarded as forfeits after team withdrawals, further impacting the standings heading into the decisive final week.

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