

AFC Champions League:

Nekounam blames fatigue, disrupted preparations after Al Shamal stalemate

Sports Desk

Tractor head coach Javad Nekounam rued his team's disrupted preparations after the Persian Gulf Pro League outfit shared the spoils with Qatar's Al Shamal SC in a goalless draw on matchday two of the AFC Champions League Elite in Muscat, Oman, on Monday.

Amid restrictions on Iranian airlines, Tractor players stepped onto the pitch at the Sultan Qaboos Sports Complex, which served as the Iranian club's home venue for the day, following an exhausting multi-stage trip that included overland travel through Iraq. They had only one training session before the game.

Nekounam nevertheless believed his team, having suffered a 1-0 defeat against the UAE's Shabab Al Ahli in its opener, did enough to secure its first victory in the league phase of the continental club competition. "We had a good analysis of our opponents, but we had no time to train. I don't think we gave them many chances, and the one or two opportunities they created came in the final 15 minutes," he said.

"We knew we would struggle towards the end because of the fatigue caused by the lengthy trip. The substitutions did not work well, and the substitutes' poor performances put additional pressure on the team, preventing us from winning. "We should have taken the three points, and we are disappointed about that. Just as we performed brilliantly in our last league match [against Esteghlal], we played very well here despite spending 18 hours or perhaps even longer travelling."

Nekounam went on to praise his team's performance against an Al Shamal side featuring 11 foreign players. The Qatari club had come close to defeating Saudi Pro League side Al Ittihad Club on its competition debut before the international break, only to settle for a 1-1 home draw after conceding a stoppage-time equalizer.

"We controlled the game, performed well and created plenty of scoring chances. We gave everything, taking shots and attempting headers, but the ball just would not go into the net," he said. "The conditions were there for us to win, but unfortunately, it did not happen.



Tractor striker Shahriar Moghanlou (R) is challenged by Al Shamal's Federico Bais during a goalless draw in the AFC Champions League Elite in Muscat, Oman, on October 12, 2026.

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late on. Even so, the team played brilliantly," Nekounam concluded by thanking Tractor's supporters, many of whom had travelled long distances to back their team.

"I am grateful to our fans. Tractor have supporters all over the world, and today, fans came from distant cities and countries. I thank them for that. We are sorry that we could not win. They certainly understand our team's situation."

Tractor will be aiming to turn its fortunes around when it takes on in-form UAE side Al Ain FC away from home in a fortnight.

Brilliant Blues

The other Iranian club in the competition, Esteghlal, meanwhile, maintained its perfect record in the league phase, defeating Qatar's Al Gharafa 2-1 in Al Rayyan. Prolific winger Jasir Asani, who was a doubt for the game because of an injury

concern, started on the bench but was introduced in the 32nd minute after young midfielder Amirmohammad Razzaqinia was forced off injured. Asani needed just five minutes to make his mark with a sensational strike, unleashing a spectacular 20-yard shot that dipped beyond Ahmad Kone's fingertips and into the top corner.

In an eventful six minutes of first-half stoppage time, Kone made a superb save from Saeid Saharkhizan, while his opposite number, Habib Farabbasi, kept out Al Gharafa's Adam Ounas's effort before center-back Aref Aqasi made a timely interception to deny Abdulrahman Faiz Al Rashidi on the rebound.

The home side's strong start to the second half paid off three minutes in when Ferjani Sassi emerged from a pack of bodies inside the Esteghlal box to side-foot the ball past Farabbasi for the equalizer.

The visitors, however, took advantage of slack goalkeeping by Kone just past the hour mark to restore the lead. Fullback Hossein Goudarzi was given too much space on the left and struck from range, with his effort bouncing off the

goalkeeper's palms and rolling into the bottom-left corner.

"With all due respect to our opponents, I think the better team won today, and we could have scored more goals," said Esteghlal head coach Sohrab Bakhtiarzadeh, whose team had defeated Qatari side Al Sadd 3-0 in its opening game.

"Al Gharafa also had a few goalscoring opportunities, but we did well to keep them at bay.

"The three points were very important, and the effort and dedication of the Esteghlal players were commendable. I salute them all and thank them for their performance."

While pleased with his side's attacking display, Bakhtiarzadeh also acknowledged the challenges posed by the weather and injuries to Asani, who went off in the 67th minute, and Razzaqinia.

"The weather conditions were tough, and the injuries to two players also made our job difficult, but my players were able to defend and showed their dedication."

Esteghlal will be back in action against Shabab Al Ahli at Dubai's Rashid Stadium on October 27.

From Olympic glory to Grand Prix gold:
Salimi shines again in Paris

WORLD TAEKWONDO – Two years after becoming Olympic champion in the French capital, Iran's Arian Salimi returned to the top of the podium at the Paris 2026 World Taekwondo Grand Prix.

Iran's Arian Salimi celebrates after his victory in the men's +80kg final at the Paris 2026 World Taekwondo Grand Prix on October 10, 2026.

WORLD TAEKWONDO

His men's +80kg triumph came against a familiar opponent in Great Britain's Caden Cunningham, the silver medalist at Paris 2024. Once again, Salimi

Cerdan hosting the Grand Prix, but the challenge of overcoming Cunningham was just as demanding. Cunningham took a fiercely contested opening round 14-9, leaving Salimi needing a response to keep his hopes of gold alive. He delivered, winning the second round before sealing victory with an 11-7 success in the decider.

"I was a little surprised by how the final went. I landed a lot of kicks on his body protector that had scored points for me in previous matches, but in this fight, I was more tired and didn't have the same power I had shown earlier in the competition. Caden also fought very intelligently and with great concentration," he said.

For Salimi, the chance to face Cunningham in another final in Paris gave the occasion extra significance.

"I had always wanted to fight him again because I believe our Olympic final was one of the most beautiful fights in the history of Taekwondo. But I never imagined that we would meet again in Paris, in another final," he said. "I'm also really happy to see Caden back competing at this level again."

His success in Paris contributed to a double gold for Iran on the opening day, alongside Abolfazl Zandi's victory in the men's -58kg. For Salimi, it also offered another opportunity to embrace the challenges that continue to drive him

after reaching the sport's highest stage.

"Every athlete dreams of becoming an Olympic champion, but it really comes with a huge responsibility. People have high expectations of you, and you become a role model in everything you do: your behavior, the way you celebrate a victory, the way you fight, and even the way you maintain your motivation," he said.

Rather than focusing solely on results, Salimi draws motivation from the demands of competition itself. "But I focus on my journey. I don't spend too much time thinking about Olympic ranking points or tournament grades. I love challenges, I love fighting, and I love being able to control difficult situations," he said.

"When I compete, I feel alive. I love those moments when I have to breathe deeper, draw on everything I have, and push myself to the limit."

With another Paris gold secured, that appetite for competition remains central to his ambitions.

"My next goal is to keep improving and perform better in my next competition. I want to enjoy what I do even more than before," Salimi said.

"For me, it's not just about winning medals. I want to keep challenging myself, developing as a fighter, and enjoying every moment of this journey."

Jamshidi hopes
Asian Games bronze heralds
new era for Iranian padel

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Sports Desk

Iranian padel player Amir-mohammad Jamshidi hopes his historic bronze medal at the Aichi-Nagoya 2026 Asian Games will mark the beginning of a sustained run of international success for the sport in the country. Jamshidi teamed up with Farshid Shahi to defeat Hani Golestani and Arya Roghani in straight sets in an all-Iranian third-place match in the men's pairs event at the multi-sport event.

"Thanks to the strong support we received from the Iranian federation, we were able to compete in various tournaments before the Asian Games, which played a major role in improving our seeding and made our path somewhat easier," Jamshidi

told IRNA on Tuesday. Jamshidi and Shahi came within touching distance of a place in the final after winning the first set against the Malaysian pair in the semifinal, before ultimately losing 2-1 (1-6, 6-4, 6-1).

"We were so well prepared that we could see ourselves on the podium. Putting aside the unpredictable nature of sport, we should have reached the final," he said. "We started the semifinal well, but the match unfolded in a way that prevented us from achieving our goal, and we had to settle for the bronze-medal match."

"Iranian padel has embarked on a path that can lead to greater success, and we are at the beginning of a journey that can bring many achievements," he said.