AFC Champions League Elite:

Bakhtiarizadeh praises 'excellent' Esteghlal after Al Ain draw

Sports Desk

Esteghlal head coach Sohrab Bakhtiarizadeh was full of praise for his players' "excellent" performance after the Persian Gulf Pro League club played out a 1-1 draw against Emirati heavyweight Al Ain in the AFC Champions League Elite on Monday.

Iranian international defender Saman Fallah gave the visiting Blues the lead six minutes into the second half, heading home Jasir Asani's set-piece delivery past Al Ain goalkeeper Khalid Eissa.

Esteghlal's lead was short-lived, however, as Matías Palacios' low drive from inside the box took a deflection off Roozbeh Cheshmi and slipped past a sprawling Saleh Hardani into the bottom corner seven minutes later.

Despite the home side enjoying more possession, Esteghlal had a couple of chances to restore its lead, while also having goalkeeper Habib Farabbasi to thank for producing a couple of heroic saves late on, as the Blues ended Al Ain's perfect run in the West Zone league stage.

"I think anyone who watched the game will have enjoyed the football both teams played," Bakhtiarizadeh said at the post-match press conference.



Esteghlal players and coaching staff salute the away supporters after a 1-1 draw against Al Ain in the AFC Champions League Elite in Al Ain, UAE, on November 23, 2026.
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"My players were excellent. We had some good chances and could have come away with a win.

"As I said yesterday, we respect every opponent but fear no one. Al Ain are a quality side and it's always difficult to play them at home, but my players stuck together and showed what Esteghlal are capable of.

"Our goalkeeper played well, we defended as a unit and we created plenty of chances. With a little more luck, we could have won," added the Iranian.

The result saw both sides move closer to securing a place in the last 16, with Al Ain leading the 16-team table on 13 points after five rounds, while Esteghlal sit third on 10 points, level with second-placed Al Hilal.

Esteghlal will return to action in a fortnight, hosting Uzbekistan's PFC Neftchi at Basra International Stadium, which serves as the Blues' home venue.

Neftchi pulled off an impressive second-half fightback at home against Al Hilal, coming from two goals down to hold the Saudi Pro League giants to a 2-2 draw in Fergana.

Tractor thrashed

Iranian top-flight side Tractor SC, meanwhile, endured another disastrous night in the continental competition, suffering a 5-1 thrashing at the hands of UAE Pro League side Al Wasl in Muscat.

Iranian international striker Mahdi Taremi was the star of the show for Al Wasl, scoring twice and providing an assist as Tractor remained winless and third from bottom in the table with two points.

Tractor had to play the best part of the match with 10 men after center-back Mohammad Daneshgar was sent off following a VAR review for denying Taremi a clear goal-scoring opportunity.

The Iranian side was dealt a further blow in the second half as Amirhossein Hosseinzadeh, who scored a 72nd-minute consolation goal, was stretchered off in stoppage time, raising fears that the prolific striker could be sidelined for an extended period.

"I apologize to our fans for the result. The scoreline doesn't reflect the difference between the two teams," Tractor head coach Javad Nekounam said after the game.

"We went down to 10 men almost as soon as the game started.

"The players worked hard and played well for about an hour. We had a one-on-one chance early in the second half, but as the game wore on, the fatigue from the journey caught up with us," added the Iranian, whose team took to the pitch at Sultan Qaboos Stadium following an exhausting, multi-stage journey amid a U.S.-imposed ban on Iranian airlines.

"The trip took 18 hours, including a seven-hour delay at the airport. We missed a day of training and could only manage a light session before the match. I can't fault the players. They gave everything they had."

Trailing the eighth and final knockout spot by five points, Tractor are on the verge of missing out on the round of 16 but will still look to salvage some pride in their remaining three matches, starting with a trip to Tashkent to face Pakhtakor on December 7.

2026 World Taekwondo Gala Awards:

Salimi in three-way race for Male Athlete prize

Sports Desk

Iran's Arian Salimi will be part of a three-horse race for the Male Athlete of the Year prize at the upcoming World Taekwondo Gala Awards.

The annual ceremony will be staged in Astana on Sunday, coinciding with the final day of the World Taekwondo Grand Prix Final in the Kazakh capital.

Arguably the best heavyweight practitioner in the world, reigning Olympic champion Salimi will face competition from Brazil's Henrique Marques and South Korea's Moon Jin-ho, both of whom have enjoyed impressive campaigns this year.

A world champion in 2025, Marques leads the men's -80kg world rankings with 148.4 points. The Brazilian claimed bronze, silver and gold medals at the Rome, Muju and Paris Grand Prix events, respectively, and also won gold at the Pan American Championships and the U.S. Open.

Moon, meanwhile, tops the -68kg rankings with 150 points after collecting gold medals at the Muju and Paris Grand Prix events, the Asian Championships and the Korea Open, as well as bronze at the Aichi-Nagoya Asian Games in October.

Salimi has been a consistent medal winner since the start of the year, collecting 131 ranking points to top the men's +80kg standings.

The Iranian has claimed five gold medals at the Asian Championships, Korea Open, Paris Grand Prix, Aichi-Nagoya Asian Games and World Taekwondo President's Cup. He also picked up bronze at the Muju Grand Prix.

Given his impressive record and results, Salimi is among the leading contenders for the men's award.

However, the upcoming competition in Kazakhstan could prove decisive in determining the ultimate winner of the prestigious prize.

The star-studded Iranian squad at the season finale will feature six representatives in the men's divisions and three in the women's events.

Salimi will be joined by world champion Abolfazl Zandi (-58kg), Asian champion Mahdi Haji-Mousaei (-68kg), Amir Sina Bakhtiari and Radin Zeinali (-80kg), as well as Mohammad Hossein Yazdani (+80kg) in the men's competition.

Olympic silver medalist Nahid Kiani (-57kg), Saghar Moradi (-67kg), who won gold at September's Aichi-Nagoya Asian Games, and two-time world junior champion Hana Zarrinkamar (+67kg) will represent the country in the women's competi- tion.



WORLD TAEKWONDO

AFC Beach Soccer Asian Cup:

'We're here to win the title':

Mohammadpour confident ahead of Saudi clash

Sports Desk

Iran's Movahed Mohammadpour has insisted that the defending champions would settle for nothing less than a third successive crown at the AFC Beach Soccer Asian Cup.

The Iranian made the remarks ahead of Wednesday's quarterfinal clash against Saudi Arabia at the Memories Beach Arena in Phang Nga, Thailand.

Mohammadpour said Iran would not need to make any major adjustments for the knockout match, stressing that the team was focused solely on retaining its crown.

"We don't need to make any changes for the quarterfinals," Mohammadpour said. "We are Iran, and we came here to win the championship."

Mohammadpour was among the scorers as Iran comprehensively defeated two-time semi-finalists Lebanon 7-2 on Monday to conclude the group stage with a perfect record, having defeated Afghanistan (9-2) and Vietnam (10-2) earlier in Group B.

The four-time champions have faced Saudi Arabia before, and while Mohammadpour has nothing but respect for his opponents, the defender is confident his side has what it takes to prevail.



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"We will improve from match to match as long as we follow our game plan," Mohammadpour said. "So it doesn't matter who our opponents are because we are Iran and we are going forward with full power and a strong game," added the Iranian, whose team is chasing a record-extending fifth title in 12 editions of the flagship continental showpiece.

Saudi Arabia left it late to secure a place in the last eight, advancing as Group C runners-up with a 7-3 win against Uzbekistan, and midfielder Waleed Mohamed believes hard work will be the key to further progress.

"We qualified from a group that included very strong teams, and this was the result of long-term preparation," he said. "The team aspires to go even further, as nothing is impossible with hard work and perseverance.

"Iran are considered one of the leading contenders, but we have the ambition and determination to win and the resolve to represent Saudi football with honor."

The Saudis opened their campaign with a shootout victory over the United Arab Emirates after the two sides played out a 3-3 draw, before suffering a 9-1 thrashing against 2015 champion Oman, which was beaten 8-1 by Iran in last year's final.

The winner of Wednesday's game will take on either three-time champion Japan or the UAE in the semifinals on Friday.

The other last-eight matches will see host Thailand square off against Oman, with Bahrain facing Lebanon.