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AFC CHAMPIONS LEAGUE

Boundedjah misses penalty as Al Sadd held by Sharjah

Sadd were the better side but Boundedjah's miss cost them dearly



Al Sadd's midfielder Boualem Khoukhi (right) and Sharjah's defender Hamad Fahad vie for the ball during the AFC Champions League Group B match at Jassim Bin Hamad Stadium yesterday. (AFP)

By Sports Reporter
Doha

Qatar's Al Sadd were held to a frustrating goalless draw by Sharjah FC of the United Arab Emirates in their AFC Champions League opener at the Jassim Bin Hamad Stadium yesterday.

Al Sadd were the better side but Baghdad Boundedjah's missed penalty in the second half cost them dearly as Sharjah grabbed a valuable point in Group B clash. Having Cosmin Olariu's side pinned in their own half, Al Sadd should have gone ahead in the third minute when Boundedjah teed up Akram Afif, who wasted his effort from just above the box.

Just minutes later, Afif once again found space in a similar position only for the forward to blast his curling effort high over the bar.

Sharjah barely troubled the Al Sadd backline with Miralem Pjanic the most threatening when he fed Ousmane Camara through on goal only for the Guinean to be flagged offside before trying it again with Firas Ben Arbi, garnering the same result. Al Sadd came close to scoring just after the half-hour mark when Afif sent a delightful ball off a set-piece situation into the path of Mohamed Waad, who flicked his header just above the bar.

Afif kept Sharjah on their toes with his dangerous run-ins and set up Hassan al-Haydos nicely at the top of the six-yard box in the 39th minute, only for the Al Sadd captain to strike his effort straight into the arms of Sharjah keeper Adel al-Hosani.

Both sides continued to toil in front of goal with Sharjah's Caio Lucas coming within range when he angled his effort from distance over the bar, while Boundedjah failed to find the target from inside the box in first half added time.

Sharjah started the second half with more aggression and came close to breaking the deadlock in the 48th minute when Lucas steered his header just wide off Pjanic's corner. Al Sadd wasted a golden opportunity to snatch the lead with Boundedjah smashing his spot-kick against the left post just before the hour-mark.

Sharjah should have scored three minutes later when Ben Arbi sent a delightful ball into the box off a set-piece situation only for Konstantinos Manolas to miss his header from close range as both sides had to be content with a share of the points. Sadd's next match is against Uzbek side Nasaf on October 2. Yesterday, a late Zafarmurod Abdurahmatov strike handed Nasaf a valuable 1-0 win over Jordan's Al Faisaly.

FOCUS

German star Draxler joins Ahli from PSG

By Sports Reporter
Doha

Qatar Stars League side Al Ahli have made a major signing after German international Julian Draxler joined them from Paris Saint-Germain yesterday. The midfielder, who has signed a two-year contract, was unveiled at the Al Thumama Stadium yesterday. "We welcome Julian Draxler, who is a great addition to our club," said Chairman of the Board of Directors of Al Ahli Club Abdullah Yousef al-Mulla after signing the contract.

He hoped the new recruit would boost Al Ahli's campaign in the ongoing season. The Brigradiers have had an abysmal start losing all their first three games in Qatar's top flight.

"Draxler's inclusion means a lot for Al Ahli as we are looking for best results to make our fans happy. I would like to thank the authorities who helped in his transfer," al-Mulla added.

Draxler thanked the club for a warm welcome, hoping to give his best for the side. "I will make all-out effort to add quality in our performance and help my team achieve the desirable results," said Draxler, who will turn 30 tomorrow.

Draxler still had a year to run

on his contract at PSG. "The club would like to wish Julian all the best for the rest of his career," PSG said in a statement.

Draxler's move to Qatar from PSG follows that of Italy midfielder Marco Verratti, who joined Al Arabi last week for a fee of close to 50mn euros (\$53.3mmn). Senegal defender Abdou Diallo also left PSG for Al Arabi last month.

Draxler came through the youth ranks and made his professional debut at Schalke 04 before joining VfL Wolfsburg. In January 2017, the midfielder signed for Paris Saint-Germain for a reported 36mn euros plus bonuses. However, he had fallen out of favour before spending last season on loan at Benfica.

At PSG he would rack up 26 goals and 41 assists in 198 appearances. The Gladbeck native won 12 trophies with Les Rouge et Bleu: four Ligue 1 titles (in 2018, 2019, 2020 and 2022), four Coupes de France (in 2017, 2018, 2020 and 2021), three Coupes de la Ligue (in 2017, 2018 and 2020) and one Trophée des Champions (in 2020). Draxler, who won the 2014 FIFA World Cup in Brazil with Germany, also boasts a total of 58 caps and seven goals for Die Mannschaft.

Al Ahli will face Umm Salal in their next QSL match on September 23.



Julian Draxler poses with Chairman of the Board of Directors of Al Ahli Club Abdullah Yousef al-Mulla after signing the contract at the Al Thumama Stadium yesterday.

PREVIEW

Crespo expects tough test for Duhail against Tajikistan's Istiklol

By Sports Reporter
Doha

Tajikistan champions Istiklol will have to be at their best to stop Qatar Stars League giants Al Duhail in their opening AFC Champions League Group E match in Dushanbe today.

Both know a win is important if they are to challenge Group E's other teams - Persepolis of Iran and Saudi Arabia's Al Nassr. Istiklol, appearing in the tournament for the third consecutive edition, will not be lacking confidence after a stellar domestic season which saw them achieving the treble.

Their 2022 challenge ended in the group stage and the Dushanbe-based side will be determined to impress despite the daunting task they face. Al Duhail, who have started their 2023/24 season on a good note with two wins and a draw in the Qatar Stars League, will be on a mission to go all the way after suffering an agonising defeat in last year's AFC Champions League.

Jubilance at qualifying for the semi-finals for the first time was replaced by a 7-0 defeat to Saudi Arabia's Al Hilal SFC and



Al Duhail coach Hernan Crespo speaks to his players during a training session in Dushanbe, Tajikistan, yesterday.

Al Duhail will be determined to redeem themselves despite being drawn in a tough group.

Al Duhail coach Hernan Crespo said it

will be a tough encounter against the hosts, but was confident of a positive result. "We are here at the start of our campaign in the Champions League and we know that we

will face a difficult opponent who will be armed with the presence of their fans and support from the stands, but my team is ready for this match and we will work to

emerge from it with a positive result," Crespo said at pre-match press conference held at the Central Republican Stadium in Dushanbe yesterday.

Argentinian confirmed former Barcelona and Liverpool star Philippe Coutinho will not make his debut for the club today. "Coutinho joined us recently and he is happy to join the team. We are also happy, but he will not be with us in the match. There is more than one player who will be absent due to injury, but I have confidence in the players and in their ability to provide what is required of them," Crespo said.

"In the last edition, we reached the semi-final round and succeeded in performing well after topping our group, and this time we will go into the matches with increased ambitions, despite the loss of a number of players including Edmilson.

"The competition is strong, and it is for the champion clubs, and there will be no easy match. We, for our part, will work to provide what is required to qualify to the next round of the competition. The team has a diverse group of players who can cover any absence, and our collective performance method will make the task easier for us," Duhail coach added.

ICC President praises Qatar Cricket Association



Sheikh Abdulaziz bin Saud al-Thani, President of the Qatar Cricket Association (QCA), met with Greg Barclay, President of the International Cricket Council (ICC), and CEO Geoffrey Allardice. Development of cricket in Qatar and the Gulf region was extensively discussed during the meeting. Barclay praised the development he saw in Qatar, including hosting international competitions and local tournaments. Barclay said Qatar has made great strides to develop and spread the sport and form a large base of players. Barclay praised Qatar's success in organising international cricket tournaments and its distinguished role in the emergence of the Gulf Championship as the first competition for regional countries. Barclay also confirmed that ICC is looking forward to moving its events and competitions to new regions, such as the Gulf region, which houses top quality stadiums, pointing out that this matter will be discussed during the tournament calendar for the next ICC session.

CRICKET

Qatar beat Kuwait in Gulf T20 thriller



Qatar players celebrate a dismissal during their Gulf T20I match against Kuwait in Doha yesterday. Qatar won the match by 1 run.

By Sports Reporter
Doha

Adnan Mirza displayed an all-round show to help hosts Qatar secure a thrilling one-run victory over Kuwait in T20I Gulf Cricket Championship at West End International Cricket Sta-

dium yesterday. After being put into bat first, Qatar scored 156-3 with wicketkeeper Imal Liyanage being the top scorer, hitting 49 from 36 balls.

Mirza smashed 30 from 23 balls and put up 52 runs opening-wicket partnership with Saqlain Arshad, who scored 32 runs off 25 deliveries. Mohamed Tanveer (39) also played a handy 35-ball

knock. Mirza returned to the field grabbing three wickets as Qatar restricted Kuwait for a tight win with captain Mohamed Murad defending 12 runs in the final over.

In their next match, Qatar meet the UAE on Sept 20.

Qatar won the first match against Bahrain and lost the second against Oman.

ATHLETICS

World records for Duplantis, Tsegay as DL final concludes

'This venue has absolutely everything. It has the history, it has the modern touch. The track is really fast'



Armand Duplantis of Sweden reacts after setting a new world record in the men's pole vault during the 2023 Prefontaine Classic and Wanda Diamond League Final at Hayward Field in Eugene, Oregon. (AFP)

AFP
Eugene, United States

World and Olympic pole vault champion Armand Duplantis improved his world record with a leap of 6.23m at the Diamond League finals on Sunday, as Gudaf Tsegay shattered the women's 5,000m world record.

Swedish superstar Duplantis added a centimetre to the world record of 6.22m he recorded in France in February.

He has now re-set the world record seven times. Five of those marks were set indoors, with both of his outdoor world marks coming at Hayward Field in Eugene, where he won the world title last year.

"I'm two for two right now on world records coming here to

Hayward," Duplantis said. "This venue has absolutely everything. It has the history, it has the modern touch. The track is really fast, the crowd and energy is fantastic."

Duplantis retained his world title in Budapest last month with a clearance of 6.10m and cleared 6.12 in Ostrava in June.

He'd failed in a string of attempts at 6.23 since February, including at Brussels last weekend, but said the smaller field in the finals was more conducive to a record attempt.

"I think that it's a lot easier to be fresh at that world record height," he said.

Duplantis had already secured victory with a height of 6.02 - the 73rd clearance of his career of more than six meters.

In his first effort at 6.23, with the crowd chanting, he raced up the runway and sailed over.

"I just try to jump high," said Duplantis, who believes he can continue to improve the record.

"The limit is very high, and I hope that I can continue to jump well and keep jumping higher than I did today."

Ethiopia's Tsegay had electrified the crowd with her spectacular 5,000m win in 14min 00.21sec.

The reigning 10,000m world champion carved almost five seconds off the previous 5,000m record of 14:05.20, set by Kenyan Faith Kipyegon in Paris on June 9.

Kenyan Beatrice Chebet was second to Tsegay in 14:05.92, the third-fastest time ever. "My focus today was the world record," said Tsegay, who won the 2022 5,000m world title in Eugene and was disappointed with a 13th place finish in that event in Budapest that left her "very hungry in my mind."



Gudaf Tsegay of Ethiopia reacts after winning the Women's 5000m. (AFP)

Jackson sprint double
Shericka Jackson couldn't break Florence Griffith-Joyner's 35-year-old 200m world record, but the Jamaican's 21.57sec was enough to complete a sprint double after her 100m victory on Saturday.

Jackson concluded a season that included a 200m world title and the second-fastest time ever of 21.41.

Sunday's time was the eighth-fastest ever - and of those eight Jackson owns five and will be poised to renew her pursuit of Griffith-Joyner's record of 21.34 from 1988 in 2024.

"The end of the season," Jackson said. "I'm healthy and I ran some fast times, so I'm definitely grateful."

Marie-Josée Ta Lou of Ivory Coast finished second in 22.10 and

Anthonique Strachan of the Bahamas placed third in 22.16.

Canadian Andre de Grasse won the men's 200m in 19.76sec. Kenneth Bednarek was second in 19.95 and Erryon Knighton third in 19.97.

Emmanuel Wanyonyi clocked a world-leading 1min 42.80sec to edge Marco Arop - the man who beat him to World Championships gold last month - in the 800m.

It marked the second time in two weeks that Kenya's Wanyonyi had gotten the better of the Canadian world champion after his victory at Xiamen on September 2 in a then world-leading 1:43.20.

Yaroslava Mahuchikh edged Nicola Olyslagers in the women's high jump, both clearing 2.03m to improve on the world lead of 2.02 they shared coming into the meeting.

Tokyo Olympic champion Hansle Parchment of Jamaica pulled away late to beat world champion Grant Holloway in the 110m hurdles in a world-leading 12.93sec.

Olympic champion Athing Mu, who settled for bronze in Brussels, won an 800m thriller in an American record of 1:54.97.

Britain's Keely Hodgkinson was second in a British record of 1:55.19 and Natoya Goule-Toppin was third in a Jamaican record of 1:55.92.

World champion Mary Moraa, undone by the fast early pace, finished fourth.

Norway's Jakob Ingebrigtsen followed up his sensational 3:43.73 mile on Saturday with a victory in the 3,000m, leaning to beat Ethiopia's Yomif Kejelcha at the tape in a European record 7:23.63.

FOCUS

Rohit, Kohli rested for first two ties as India tests bench for Australia ODIs

AFP
New Delhi

Indian selectors yesterday rested captain Rohit Sharma and batting superstar Virat Kohli from the 15-member squad for the first two ODIs against visitors Australia.

Veteran R Ashwin and Washington Sundar, both off-spinners and handy lower-order batters, have been included in the squad in a sign that they may be back in contention for the home World Cup in October. India have also rested left-arm spinner Kuldeep Yadav and all-rounder Axar Patel, who is recovering after an injury

scare in the recently concluded Asia Cup tournament in Sri Lanka. Both Patel and Yadav, who are part of the Indian squad for the World Cup, will return along with all other regulars for the third and final ODI against Australia.

Sharma told journalists that it was important to test their bench strength in the bilateral series starting before the all-important World Cup when they will have to travel extensively across India. KL Rahul, who recently returned from a long injury layoff, will lead the Indian side against Australia in Sharma's absence.

India begin their World Cup campaign with an October 8 contest against Australia in Chennai.

India squad (first two ODIs): KL Rahul (captain), Shubman Gill, Ruturaj Gaikwad, Shreyas Iyer, Ishan Kishan, Suryakumar Yadav, Ravindra Jadeja, Shardul Thakur, Jasprit Bumrah, Mohamed Siraj, Mohamed Shami, Tilak Varma, Prasidh Krishna, R Ashwin, Washington Sundar

Squad (third ODI): Rohit Sharma (captain), Shubman Gill, Shreyas Iyer, KL Rahul, Ishan Kishan, Suryakumar Yadav, Ravindra Jadeja, Shardul Thakur, Jasprit Bumrah, Mohamed Siraj, Mohamed Shami, Hardik Pandya, Virat Kohli, Kuldeep Yadav, Axar Patel (subject to fitness), R Ashwin, Washington Sundar.

Bangladeshi bowler under fire over misogynist remarks

A Bangladeshi cricketer was embroiled in controversy yesterday over misogynistic social media posts condemning working women, just days after making a brilliant international debut.

Bowler **Tanzim Hasan Sakib** took the wicket of India captain Rohit Sharma with only his fourth delivery in international cricket when the neighbours met in the Asia Cup on Friday, before holding his nerve in the final over to secure victory for Bangladesh.

The resulting adulation for the 20-year-old, though, turned to scorn from women's rights activists and feminists after his misogynist social media posts came to light.

"If the wife works, the husband's rights are not ensured," Tanzim posted on Facebook last year. "If the wife works, the child's rights are not ensured. If the wife works, her elegance is damaged. If the wife works, the family is ruined. If the wife works, the veil is ruined. If the wife works, society is ruined."

Women form the vast majority of the workforce of the garment factories that have driven much of Bangladesh's economic growth in recent years.

In another post, Tanzim warned men that

their sons would not have a "modest" mother if they married "a woman who is accustomed to free mixing with her male friends in a university".

The comments provoked a backlash, with Paris-based feminist writer Jannatun Nayeem Prity pointing out that the Bangladesh team jerseys were made in factories mostly staffed by women.

"I feel sorry for you that you don't consider your mother a normal human being," she added.

Writer Swakrito Noman described the comments as "deeply offensive" in a widely-shared Facebook post, demanding the Bangladesh Cricket Board (BCB) question Tanzim and the player apologise.

Journalist Mejbaul Haque added yesterday: "The status of such a distorted form of misogyny is unacceptable. No matter how big a star he is!"

The BCB said it was investigating.

"The issue came to our attention. We are looking into the matter," its cricket operations chief Jalal Yunus told AFP. Tanzim has played 12 first-class matches in his short senior career, after helping Bangladesh win the Under-19 World Cup in 2020. (AFP)



Qatar Stars League and Ooredoo launch #WelcomeToTheStadium initiative

Doha: The Qatar Stars League (QSL) and Ooredoo, a leading telecom company, announced the launch of 'Welcome to the Stadium' initiative at a press conference yesterday at the company's headquarters in the presence of a number of officials and representatives from both entities. The initiative comes in line with the joint efforts between QSL and Ooredoo, and in accordance with the previous announcement about the development of combined strategy. The initiative includes working on marketing, promotion and development of a plan to motivate fans to come to the stadium, improve match-day experience through many competitions and events, in addition to allocating a number

of prizes and gifts to the fans. A number of matches have been identified to activate the unique initiative. On the occasion, Hassan Rabiah al-Kuwari, Executive Director of Sales, Marketing & Communication at QSL, said, "As previously announced and in continuation of our joint efforts work with Ooredoo company, we're pleased to announce the 'Welcome to the Stadium' initiative, which includes a number of events for fans in accordance with a specific plan. In this regard, I would like to extend my sincere thanks and appreciation to Ooredoo for the continued support and co-operation in our endeavour to develop the work pattern at various levels." On his part, Sabah Rabiah al-



Kuwari, Director PR, Sponsorship and CSR at Ooredoo, said: "We're proud of our participation in the 'Welcome to the Stadium' initiative with QSL." He added: "This is considered as a continuation of our joint co-operation and consolidation of our strong partnership that began years ago. "It's also an affirmation from our side to the importance of supporting sports and athletes as well as motivating fans to attend league matches through a number of distinguished initiatives with which we seek to enhance the league matches. "We also thank QSL for its confidence in Ooredoo as a leading communications company in supporting sports in Qatar."

FOCUS

Fiji's progress at Rugby World Cup mighty impressive

Their win over Wallabies leaves pundits shaking heads in disbelief

AFP
Lyon

Fiji ended a 69-year hoodoo by securing a crucial World Cup win over Australia on Sunday, confirming their status as many people's dark horses for the tournament in France.

In beating England in a pre-tournament warm-up and now putting in back-to-back dominant performances against Tier 1 nations Wales and Australia in their World Cup pool, Fiji have demonstrated an ability to add forward steel to their traditional backline flair.

And one major reason for that improvement is their Super Rugby franchise, the Fijian Drua.

Having a fully-professional club side taking part in top level competition to complement the star players playing overseas has removed one of the team's historic weaknesses in which their domestic-based players were essentially amateurs.

"With Drua, you see not only do they try and educate them around being professional, they also give them quality game time at the Super (Rugby) level," said Fiji's kicking coach Seremaia Bai after Sunday's emotional 22-15 victory over the Wallabies.

"I think it's massively positive for the development of rugby and you can see the way most of the boys who played in the Drua, it's really improved the performance of the team."

That was something not lost of Australia's head coach Eddie Jones, who described the creation of the Drua as "really positive."

Fiji have always had talented stars that have played in Australia, New Zealand or Europe, but they never had back-up players of a similar level, meaning their performance would inevitably tail off deep into matches against Tier 1 nations.



Fiji's Josua Tuisova scores their first try during their Rugby World Cup 2023 Pool C match at Stade Geoffroy-Guichard, Saint-Etienne, France. (Reuters)

In 2019 they led Australia 14-12 at half-time in their World Cup pool stage match in Japan, only to be swept aside after the break to lose 39-21.

But not this time. Leading 12-8 after 40 minutes, Fiji had stretched their lead from four to seven points by full-time.

Rugby Championship dream
Jones pointed to Fiji's replacement hooker Tevita Ikanivere as an example of how the Super Rugby franchise is benefitting the national team.

"He's a quality player and he's become a quality player through training full-time with the Drua and also playing with the Drua at a high level," said Jones after his side's defeat to Fiji.

"I think that's the real benefit for Fiji Rugby and if they can keep growing that and keep growing that system, there's no reason why they can't be in the Rugby Championship."

That is a dream for Fiji's New Zealand-born coach Simon Raiwalui, who insisted after the match that the only way to keep improving is for Fiji to play more matches against Tier 1 nations.

"I'm always about being included in those sort of competitions," he said. "If those matches become available to us, we've got our hand up, we're ready to play those games."

A lack of games is a major issue for Fiji, who have played fewer than half the number of internationals since the last World Cup than Tier 1 nations.

"I'll give you an example, I played for Fiji for probably 14 years but I only played 53 Test matches," said Bai.

"As guys from Australia and New Zealand, they may only play six years and manage to play 100 Test matches."

"You can see the difference between gaining that experience

versus the tier-two nation where we always struggle to be competing sustainably at the highest level."

That is where the Drua has been invaluable.

Created in 2017, the team initially played in the Australian domestic National Rugby Championship, winning it in one of the three years they participated.

Then in 2022, the Drua were invited to take part in the Super Rugby competition.

They won two out of 12 matches and finished second from bottom, but this year they won six matches and reached the play-offs, where they lost to eventual champions the Crusaders, who boast All Blacks stars such as Richie Mo'unga and Sam Whitelock.

"For all the young kids growing up, they can look at Fijian Drua players. That's their team so they can aspire to be someone that's closer to home for them and they can relate to."

Kuss victory can boost US road racing, says Horner

London: Sepp Kuss's unlikely victory in La Vuelta a Espana could provide a timely boost for a flagging road cycle racing scene in the United States, according to Chris Horner whose 2013 triumph Kuss emulated on Sunday.

The 29-year-old Kuss entered the race as a 'domestique' for more illustrious Jumbo-Visma teammates Jonas Vingegaard and Primož Roglič. But after taking the red jersey on stage eight he never let it go, despite attacks from within his own team. Kuss ended a 10-year wait for an American Grand Tour win and will go down as one of the most popular winners in recent times - disproving the theory that nice guys don't win. Whether he can become a regular GC contender depends very much on the strategists at Jumbo-Visma but in winning a race more brutal than the Tour de France and Giro d'Italia he proved that he is far more than a loyal servant to so-called big names. Horner, whose victory at the 2013 Vuelta made him the first official US rider to win a three-week race since Greg LeMond in 1990, hopes Kuss's heroics have an impact back home in a country still scarred by Lance Armstrong's doping notoriety.

The road race scene is hardly booming in the US with few stage-racing opportunities for up-and-coming riders after the demise of the Tour of California, Colorado and Utah.

"I hope to see that this gives US racing a kick and that we see sponsors come back," Horner told cycling platform GCN.

"You can get more US teams finding sponsorship instead of having just Lidl-Trek and EF Education-EasyPost, who don't have that many Americans on the team, and it could possibly bring in more sponsors and help the sport grow." The racing

scene in the US is drowning or at best its nose is over the water. Hopefully this brings out the exposure but it does take a few years, it doesn't happen immediately."

Kuss's victory was all the more remarkable as until the last few days it appeared unclear whether Giro d'Italia champion or Tour de France winner Vingegaard were helping him or trying to seize the red jersey from him. Vingegaard attacked on stage 16 and took one minute out of Kuss's lead and on stage 17, ending on the infamous Angliru climb, Kuss was again left by his illustrious teammates but hung on grimly to finish third and stay in the lead.

Jumbo-Visma's tactics were criticised after that, with many believing Kuss should have been protected - given all the years he has spent helping Vingegaard and Roglič win multiple Grand Tours, including at this year's Tour de France and Giro.

"The management at Jumbo only turned the page because there was an outcry from fans and a PR nightmare that Jumbo were going through," Horner told GCN. "That's why they turned the page. They didn't turn the page because Angliru was done. It was a nightmare scenario. They were having meetings before the race, during the race, after the race, and then before everyone went to bed. They were probably having their alarm clocks go off at 2am for another meeting. There was a lot of pressure there for Sepp (to win) and the team eventually came around."

Dutch outfit Jumbo-Visma became the first team to win all three Grand Tours in a season, culminating in a sweep of the podium in Madrid.

"Winning together is not only our slogan but also our trademark," CEO Richard Plugge said.



Overall leader Team Jumbo-Visma's US rider Sepp Kuss celebrates on the podium after winning the 2023 La Vuelta cycling tour of Spain, in Madrid. (AFP)

TENNIS

Britain win doubles thriller against France to reach Davis Cup quarter-finals

Reuters
Manchester

British doubles duo Dan Evans and Neal Skupski saved four match points on the way to a thrilling 1-6 7-6(4) 7-6(6) victory over France's Nicolas Mahut and Edouard Roger-Vasselin to secure their country's place in the Davis Cup Finals on Sunday.

In front of a raucous Manchester crowd, Evans had earlier beaten Arthur Fils 3-6 6-3 6-4 in the opening singles only for Cameron Norrie to lose to Ugo Humbert 7-6(5) 3-6 7-5.

That meant the doubles rubber would decide who would join Australia for the finals in Malaga after they had already secured one of the top two places in Group B.

The French pair strolled through the opening set but Britain levelled the match by winning

the second-set tiebreak to set up what turned out to be a deciding set cliffhanger.

Britain looked down and out when Evans double-faulted at 4-5 to trail 0-40 but France were unable to take any of their match points as a fired-up Evans hung on.

France had yet another match point when Skupski served at 5-6 but he stayed ice cool to fire down an ace to keep Britain alive and send the match into another tie-breaker.

Again France had the edge early on and led 4-2 but Britain stormed back to win some mind-boggling net exchanges and they won the match on their second match point to top Group B.

"I don't know how we've won that fight, sheer fight. Incredible effort from Dan to come out and win this match with me. First set it wasn't too good," Skupski said.

"Dan saving three points in the third set. The rest is history and



Britain's Andy Murray (left) celebrates with Daniel Evans after the latter and teammate Neal Skupski beat France's Edouard Roger-Vasselin and Nicolas Mahut in their doubles Davis Cup match at the AO Arena in Manchester, northern England, on Sunday. (Reuters)

we're off to Malaga."

Evans looked close to self-combustion at times as he whipped the 13,000 crowd into a frenzy and exchanged 'pleasantries' with the

French bench.

Britain, who last won the Davis Cup in 2015, will now go forward to the eight-nation knockout rounds to be played in the Spanish city

from Nov 21-26. Italy also clinched their place in the last eight as they beat already-eliminated Sweden to grab runners-up spot behind holders Canada in Group A.

The other nations qualified are Novak Djokovic's Serbia, Canada, Czech Republic, Finland and Netherlands.

Group stage results on Sunday:

Group A

In Bologna, Italy
Italy 2 Sweden 1
Matteo Arnaldi (ITA) bt Leo Borg (SWE) 6-4, 6-3
Lorenzo Sonego (ITA) bt Elias Ymer (SWE) 6-4, 6-4
Filip Bergevi/Andre Goransson (SWE) bt Simone Bolelli/Lorenzo Musetti 4-6, 7-6 (7/4), 10-8

Group B

In Manchester, Britain
Great Britain 2 France 1
Dan Evans (GBR) bt Arthur Fils (FRA) 6-3, 3-6, 6-4

Ugo Humbert (FRA) bt Cameron Norrie 7-6 (7/5), 3-6, 7-5
Dan Evans/Neal Skupski (GBR) bt Nicolas Mahut/Edouard Roger-Vasselin (FRA) 1-6, 7-6 (7/4), 7-6 (8-6)

Group C

In Valencia, Spain
Spain 2 South Korea 1
Bernabe Zapata Miralles (ESP) bt Hong Seongchan (KOR) 6-4, 7-5
Alejandro Davidovich Fokina (ESP) bt Kwon Soonwoo (KOR) 6-4, 6-4
Nam Ji Sung/Song Min-Kyu (KOR) bt Marcel Granollers-Pujo/Albert Ramos-Vinolas (ESP) 6-7 (2/7), 7-6 (8/6), 10-8

Group D

In Split, Croatia
Croatia 2 Netherlands 1
Botic Van de Zandschulp (NED) bt Duje Ajdukovic (CRO) 6-3, 3-6, 7-5
Borna Gojo (CRO) bt Tallon Griekspoor (NED) 4-6, 7-6 (7/2), 6-4
Duje Ajdukovic/Mate Pavic (CRO) bt Wesley Koolhof/Matwe Middelkoop (NED) 3-6, 6-4, 10-8

SPOTLIGHT

Iranians give Ronaldo rapturous welcome in Tehran

AFP
Tehran

Crowds of Iranian football fans gave Cristiano Ronaldo an excited welcome yesterday as his Saudi team arrived in Tehran for the first home-and-away club tie since the two countries resumed diplomatic relations. Fans chanted the name of the Portuguese five-time world player of the year as he arrived with his Al Nassr teammates to face Iran's leading club Persepolis in the Asian Champions League today. The match will be the first since Tehran and Riyadh reached a China-brokered deal that was announced in March.

Teams from both countries had only played matches on neutral grounds since 2016 when Saudi Arabia and Iran severed ties. In Tehran, excitement filled the air as fans eagerly waited to catch a glimpse of 38-year-old Ronaldo as he left Iran's Imam Khomeini's airport with his teammates.

"It was a very good feeling, and we all enjoyed it," Al Nassr manager Luis Castro said in his press conference. "We saw a series of scenes and many Iranian fans were even holding Al Nassr team shirts, which was a pleasant event for us."



Al Nassr's Cristiano Ronaldo arrives in Tehran yesterday, a day ahead of the AFC Champions League Group E match against Persepolis. (AFP)

Large crowds of cheering fans lined the streets as Ronaldo arrived at a hotel in Tehran on board the team bus. Others chanting "Ronaldo, Ronaldo!" even flooded into the hotel lobby. Posters of the former

Manchester United, Real Madrid and Juventus star with "Welcome", written in Arabic, English and Farsi sprung up in the Iranian capital's main streets.

Ahead of the match, Persepolis manager

Yahya Golmohammadi expressed his happiness at hosting the "great team" of Al Nassr, but said his team was equal to the challenge of taking on the Saudi club. "I think it will be a beautiful game and will have a lot of excitement," said 28-year-old Navid Borhanifar, a Ronaldo fan. "It's very exciting for me."

Sadly for the fans, none will be allowed to attend the match which will be held at the gigantic Azadi stadium, which can host up to 90,000 people. The Asian Football Confederation has ruled that the game be played behind closed doors as punishment for a controversial 2021 online post by Persepolis before a match against an Indian team.

Both managers have lamented the absence of the fans. "An empty stadium does not give the taste of real football," Castro said. "We are sad that this great game is without spectators," Golmohammadi said.

Ronaldo and his teammates have been placed under the protection of an "elite unit", specialised in securing presidential visits, according to sports website Varzesh 3. The unit will be in charge of "preventing any contact between fans and players of the Saudi team," it added.

Ronaldo's arrival has also sparked a debate over Iran's internet restrictions. Iran has imposed strict curbs - includ-

ing on WhatsApp and Instagram - since last year's mass protests triggered by the death in custody of Mahsa Amini. Amini, a 22-year-old Iranian Kurd, had been arrested for allegedly violating the Islamic republic's dress code for women.

Last week, Persepolis's general manager Reza Darvish proposed that the Saudi team be given SIM cards with unfiltered internet access. "I have talked to the CEO of Iran-cell (a local provider and sponsor to Persepolis) and asked for SIM cards for... players and those who accompany them with unfiltered Internet," he said.

Ronaldo himself has more than 604mn Instagram followers. The 2023-2024 Asian Champions League officially begins this week with the spotlight on Saudi Arabia which alongside Ronaldo has lured a host of stars including Karim Benzema, Neymar and Sadio Mane. Persepolis are one of Iran and the region's most successful clubs and reached the final of the Asian Champions League in 2018 and 2020, while Al Nassr won the tournament in 1995.

Other matches between the two countries will take place in the coming weeks. Saudi's Al Ittihad are scheduled to play Iran's Sepahan on October 2, and Saudi club Al Hilal will meet Iran's Nassaji Mazandaran on October 3.

FOOTBALL

PSG in relaxed mood ahead of latest title bid

'There is no added pressure in Champions League. It is not an obsession'

AFP
Paris

Paris Saint-Germain have undergone sweeping changes over the summer ahead of their latest bid for Champions League glory, but new coach Luis Enrique insists the Qatar-owned club will not make winning European football's biggest prize an obsession this season. PSG host Borussia Dortmund today in their first match in a heavyweight Champions League group which also features AC Milan and Newcastle United. The French title-holders have endured one frustration after another in the competition in recent years, with a defeat by Bayern Munich last season seeing them go out of the Champions League in the last 16 for the fifth time in seven years.

Beaten finalists in 2020, PSG went backwards after that, the decision to sign Lionel Messi ultimately backfiring. Messi and Neymar have now left the Parc des Princes after a close-season clear-out which continued up to last week, when Marco Verratti was sold to Qatari side Al Arabi for a reported 50mn euros. Verratti spent 11 years in Paris and was, at his peak, one of the finest midfielders in the world.

But PSG president Nasser al-Khelaifi decided it was time to move on and the club accelerated the reconstruction of their squad in recent months, while keeping hold of Kylian Mbappe following a contract dispute that threatened to end his time in the French capital. They spent an estimated 350mn euros on new players, with the biggest outlay coming to sign France forward Randal Kolo Muani from Eintracht Frankfurt for a reported 75mn euros plus bonuses.

Barcelona winger Ousmane Dembele, Uruguay midfielder Manuel Ugarte, defensive duo Milan Skriniar and Lucas Hernandez, Real Madrid's Marco Asensio, Benfica striker Goncalo Ramos and promising Lyon winger Bradley Barcola are just some of the other new faces brought in. But Luis Enrique and his captain Marquinhos on Monday both sought to play down expectations about the new-look team's prospects in Europe this season.



Paris Saint-Germain's Kylian Mbappe (right) during a training session with his brother Ethan Mbappe (left) and Achraf Hakimi at Poissy, west of Paris yesterday, on the eve of their UEFA Champions League match against Borussia Dortmund. (AFP)

"There is no added pressure when it comes to the Champions League. It is not an obsession," Brazil defender Marquinhos said at the club's new training ground in the distant Paris suburbs. "We are competitors and that is the mentality of the club too. They want to win every trophy possible, but those of us in the dressing room, the coach, and the management above him, are not obsessed with the Champions League. We want to get to the very top but we know the path that we have to take. It is long, so we have to work hard and go one step at a time."

Luis Enrique, appointed on a two-year deal to succeed the sacked Christophe Galtier, certainly knows what it takes having won the Champions League with Barcelona in 2015. "When any person, or any club, becomes obsessed with something, it is not a good sign. We need to be hopeful, ambitious too, but becoming obsessed does not work in any area of life," said the Spaniard.

He will be well aware that Pep Guardiola's Manchester City will take some beating, while the likes of Madrid and Bayern will hope to go far in Europe once again. "Football is a marvellous sport in which any outcome is possible," he said. "You can play really well and lose or play badly and win, but our objective is to go as far as possible and try to win everything."

It has been a slow start for PSG domestically, as they lie fifth in Ligue 1 having won just two of their first five outings. On Friday they lost 3-2 at home to Nice despite Mbappe scoring twice to move on to seven goals in four appearances this season.

"It has not been a great start but it never has been for me wherever I have coached," added Luis Enrique. "There is a lot of information to give to the players, lots of concepts to take on board. Luckily the players have been really receptive. In that sense I am delighted with the attitude of the team.

It is all a process and experience tells me you need time. Not that I am asking for time because I know how this industry works, but in that sense I am calm. The good football and good results will come, I am sure."

TODAY'S FIXTURES (KICK-OFFS 1900 GMT UNLESS STATED)

- Group E:** In Rotterdam, Netherlands: Feyenoord (NED) v Celtic (SCO); In Rome: Lazio (ITA) v Atletico Madrid (ESP)
- Group F:** In Milan, Italy (1645 GMT): AC Milan (ITA) v Newcastle United (ENG); In Paris: Paris Saint-Germain (FRA) v Borussia Dortmund (GER)
- Group G:** In Bern (1645 GMT): Young Boys (SUI) v RB Leipzig (GER); In Manchester, England: Manchester City (ENG) v Red Star Belgrade (SRB)
- Group H:** In Barcelona, Spain: Barcelona (ESP) v Antwerp (BEL); In Hamburg, Germany: Shakhtar Donetsk (UKR) v Porto (POR)

Man City boss Guardiola says single Champions League trophy 'nothing special'

Manchester: Pep Guardiola said Manchester City have not done "anything special" by winning just one Champions League as the holders prepare to launch the defence of their crown.

City won the top prize in European club football for the first time in June, beating Inter Milan 1-0 in the final in Istanbul to complete a historic treble. Guardiola's men, who have won all five of their Premier League matches this season, face former champions Red Star Belgrade at the Etihad today.

"For our club to win the Champions League is something incredible," the City boss told reporters. "But how many teams have won just one Champions League? A lot. But there are a lot to win two, three, four, five. In perspective, we didn't do anything special, just one. For us the club didn't have it, to be part of that (makes me) proud."

Real Madrid lead the way with 14 Champions League titles, followed by AC Milan on seven. Liverpool and Bayern Munich have six each. Guardiola said his team might find it easier to defend their trophy than win it for the first time - their recent triumph came after years of agonising near-misses.

"The hardest thing is to win the first one," he said. The Champions League final this season will be held at Wembley, but Guardiola said that was not in his thoughts. "We didn't think about that," he said. "Win the first one. You have to think of the final when you are in the quarters and semis. The first game in these months, it's a long time. Still a long, long, long time. "Let's try to win tomorrow (against) a team who is so aggressive and fast upfront."

Defender Kyle Walker, who signed a contract extension last week, said the City players were hungry for more success despite winning multiple trophies in recent years.

City will again be without John Stones, Jack Grealish and Mateo Kovacic for the match against Red Star, who were European champions in 1991.

FOCUS

Spain call up majority of WC winners, not Hermoso

AFP
Barcelona

New Spain coach Montse Tome called up the majority of the Women's World Cup winning players into her squad for upcoming Nations League matches, but left out Jenni Hermoso yesterday - despite the fact many of them have not ended their strike. Midfielder Hermoso was in the eye of the storm that shook Spanish football over the past month after former Spanish football federation president Luis Rubiales forcibly kissed her, with 39 players striking from the national team despite his resignation and coach Jorge Vilda's sacking.

Spanish media reported earlier yesterday that most of the World Cup winning players would not be included in the squad because they still demanded more changes, with the Spanish federation (RFEF) publishing a statement urging the players to return on Monday afternoon. Two-time Ballon d'Or winner Alexia Putellas was named in the squad by Tome, along with Barcelona teammates Mapi



Leon and Patri Guijarro, a duo who were not at the World Cup because of another protest against the RFEF and Vilda.

Tome named 15 players who were part of the World Cup squad in the list for the Nations League qualifiers against Sweden and Switzerland on September 22 and 26 respectively, saying she had spoken to the players before doing so. "I trust in that the players are professionals, they have just become champions of the world, they love the national team, and I know they will be here with us tomorrow," Tome told a news conference. "Today we start a new era

in the national team, that's something good, beautiful, all players have the chance to be here and all have the same opportunities."

Tome said she left Hermoso out of the squad to protect her. "We are with Jenni on everything, and with all the players," added the new coach. "The best way to protect her is like this, I have worked five years with her."

It is not clear whether the striking players called up by Tome want to be part of the Spain squad. Previously, while Rubiales was still in charge, the RFEF reminded the striking players that they would be obliged to come if called up, regardless of their strike. Rubiales kissed Hermoso during the medal ceremony after Spain beat England in Sydney on August 20, provoking a fierce worldwide backlash. Expected to resign at an emergency RFEF meeting, Rubiales railed against false feminism and said he was going nowhere. Vilda, Tome and Spain's men's coach Luis de la Fuente were criticised for applauding Rubiales's fiery discourse.

Rubiales' speech led to 81 women's players going on strike and most of Vilda's coaching staff, including his assistant Tome, offering their resignations to the RFEF.

Qatar go down to Japan



Hosts Qatar lost to Japan 93-68 in their Group B game of the FIBA U-16 Asian Championship 2023 at Al Gharafa Indoor Hall yesterday. The hosts will take on Iran, who defeated Saudi Arabia 106-45, in their last group outing today.