

Foolad, Sepahan handed ACL group berths after Persepolis, Esteghlal omission

Sports Desk

The new seeding for the 2022 AFC Champions League (ACL) will see Iranian clubs Foolad Khuzestan and Sepahan being secured a place in the group stage of the competition, kicking off in May, according to Footy Rankings, a website dedicated to AFC club competitions rankings.

The new West Zone seeding comes after Persian Gulf Pro League giants Persepolis and Esteghlal on Friday were omitted from the new season of the Asian elite clubs' competition due to failure in meeting all of the mandatory criteria of the AFC Club Licensing Regulations.

Javad Nekounam's Foolad had already booked its place in the group phase as the Iranian Hazfi Cup champion, but is now seeded in Pot 1 of the January 17 draw, alongside defending champion Al Hilal, Qatari giants Al Duhail and Al Sadd, and Emirati champion Al Jazira.

Sepahan, which was initially to play in the playoffs as the league runner-up, will now en-

joy a direct qualification for the group stage and will be placed in Pot 2 – also featuring Saudi sides Al Faisaly and Al Shabab, Qatar's Al Rayyan and Shabab Al Ahli of the UAE.

'Black Friday'

'Black Friday of Iranian football', headlined the front page of Iran newspaper after Tehran-based archrivals Persepolis and Esteghlal – as well as Gol Gohar Sirjan – were declared ineligible by the AFC's independent Entry Control Body (ECB) to participate in the new ACL season.

Persepolis manager Yahya Golmohammadi, whose team was beaten in the final of competition by Ulsan Hyundai in 2020, described the news as "historic disgrace for our football."

"This was really shocking for a team that has played in the final twice in recent years. It is truly hard for me to bear the fact and those responsible for the situation will have to be held accountable," added the Iranian head coach.

The AFC had first issued a petition to the

ECB last month, calling for the omission of the three Iranian clubs, as they were given five days – until December 27 – to provide the AFC body with the required documentations.

Darius Mostafavi, the head of the Iranian Professional Licensing Appeals Committee, had underlined "the governmental ownership of Persepolis and Esteghlal, as well as their debts to former players and coaches," as the main reasons behind the AFC's decision.

Majid Sadri, the acting general manager of Persepolis, put the blame on Iranian federation's Professional Licensing Primary Committee for the situation, while also criticizing the Asian football governing body itself.

"The AFC has underscored our debts for the decision, while \$3.4 million of our assets has been frozen by the organization [due to sanctions] and numerous letters by us to receive the sum have remained unanswered," Sadri said.



SEYED KHALIL MOUSAVIMINA

Lewandowski, Messi, Salah shortlisted for FIFA Best award



AFP

Robert Lewandowski (L), Lionel Messi (C) and Mohamed Salah

Robert Lewandowski, Lionel Messi and Mohamed Salah were named as the three finalists for the FIFA Best Men's Player award, while Ballon d'Or winner Alexia Putellas was nominated for the women's prize.

Poland star Lewandowski won last year's FIFA award but had to settle for second in the 2021 Ballon d'Or voting behind Messi, winner of the accolade for a record seventh time, AFP reported.

The awards ceremony will be held virtually from FIFA's headquarters in Zurich on January 17.

Putellas, Barcelona team-mate Jennifer Hermoso and Chelsea's Australian striker Sam Kerr are the finalists for the FIFA Best Women's Player award. The trio were also the top three vote-getters for the Ballon d'Or.

The winner will succeed England's Lucy Bronze, who

took home the previous award.

The prizes for the best men's and women's player, coach and goalkeeper are voted for by the captains and coaches of all national teams around the world, as well as an online ballot of fans and a select number of journalists.

Voting closed on December 10.

Manuel Neuer, Gianluigi Donnarumma and Edouard Mendy are in the running for Best Men's Goalkeeper honours, while Roberto Mancini, Thomas Tuchel and Pep Guardiola are the three nominees for Best Men's Coach.

Lluis Cortes, who led Barcelona's women to a treble last season, is up against Chelsea coach Emma Hayes and Sarina Wiegman, the former Netherlands boss now in charge of England, for top women's coach.

Giannis returns, Bucks blow out Nets 121-109 in Brooklyn

Back at the site of an overtime thriller in the playoffs, the Milwaukee Bucks quickly made clear this one wasn't going down to the wire.

Giannis Antetokounmpo scored 31 points in his return from a one-game absence, Khris Middleton added 15 of his 20 in the third quarter and the Bucks blew out the Brooklyn Nets 121-109 on Friday night, The Associated Press reported.

Bobby Portis scored 20 of his 25 in the first half to help the Bucks snap a two-game skid. The last loss came without Antetokounmpo, who didn't play Wednesday night against Toronto because of an illness unrelated to COVID-19.

He added nine rebounds and seven assists in his return.

"He comes with the killer knockout blow," acting coach Darvin Ham said. "Once he sees us in position, he knows what spots he wants to get to."

The Bucks are without coach Mike Budenholzer, point guard Jrue Holiday and a number of other key players because of coronavirus health and safety protocols.

"But at the end of the day, guys are ready to step up," Antetokounmpo said.

Kevin Durant had 29 points, nine rebounds and seven assists for the Nets, who have lost five straight home games. James Harden finished with 16 points, nine rebounds and seven assists.

Brooklyn won Wednesday night in Indiana with Kyrie Irving making his season debut. He wasn't in the building Friday, ineligible to play home games because he hasn't been vaccinated

against COVID-19 as mandated for New York City's professional athletes.

Harden said having Irving on Wednesday felt like having new life.

"But we got to live with what we're dealt with, and that's home games we've got to figure ways and even road games," he said. "Just because Ky's on the road with us doesn't mean it's going to be easy for us as well. So we've got to mesh and we've got to find ways to win games each individual time we play."

The Bucks won Game 7 of the Eastern Conference semifinals here in overtime.

This time, Portis scored 10 points in the first quarter, though it should have been 12. He missed a breakaway dunk with no Nets player anywhere near.

He had 10 more in the second, sending Milwaukee to the half with a 60-49 lead even though Antetokounmpo played just 2 1/2 minutes of the period before going to the bench with



NATHANIEL S. BUTLER/GETTY IMAGES

Bucks forward Giannis Antetokounmpo (34) goes up for a basket during an NBA victory over the Nets at Barclays Center, Brooklyn, NY, US, on January 7, 2022.

a third foul.

Middleton took over from there, making three 3-pointers - one while being fouled - during a 19-4 spurt in the third that extended a nine-point lead to 87-63 at the midway point of the period.

The Bucks scored 77 points in the first half Wednesday but then had just 11 in the third.

"Last two games specifically where we gave up leads," Middleton said. "This one we were able to extend our lead, which was huge."

COVID infection gave Djokovic Australia's vaccine exemption, lawyers say

Tennis star Novak Djokovic had a vaccine exemption to enter Australia due to a recent COVID infection, his lawyers say in court documents.

"The date of the first positive COVID PCR test was recorded on 16 December 2021," they said, according to BBC Sport.

Djokovic was denied entry to Australia after landing in Melbourne this week to play in the Australian Open.

He is currently in immigration detention with a court challenge due on Monday.

The case involving the world's top ranked tennis player has caused a huge outcry in Australia and made waves around the world.

Djokovic, who has said he is opposed to vaccination, had been granted a medical exemption to play in the tournament in a decision that infuriated many ordinary Australians.

But the Serbian was dramatically denied entry on landing. On Wednesday, Australian Border Force (ABF) officials said the 34-year-old player had "failed to provide appropriate evi-

dence" at Melbourne Airport.

In court documents released on Saturday, Djokovic's lawyers said that 14 days after testing positive in December, the player "had not had a fever or respiratory symptoms of COVID-19 in the last 72 hours".

There had been no prior announcement of his infection.

'Unbelievable job'

The boss of Tennis Australia has privately told his staff the organisation has done "an unbelievable job" in handling the Djokovic affair despite refusing to explain to the public why players were told a prior COVID-19 infection would exempt them from vaccine travel requirements.

The scandal surrounding Djokovic deepened on Saturday, following revelations that Tennis Australia informed players that a prior infection would be a reason to exempt them from Australia's tough border restrictions. That ad-

vice was given despite the health department telling Tennis Australia on two occasions that exemptions did not exist for those recently infected with COVID, the Guardian reported.

The organisation has largely gone to ground, not answering media queries or responding to calls or emails. But a leaked video of Tennis Australia boss Craig Tiley addressing his staff has been obtained and published by News Corp, in which he tells staff the organisation has performed well.

"We've chosen at this point not to be very public with it and simply because there is a pending lawsuit related to entry into Australia. Once that has run its course, we'll be able to share more with you," he said.

"There's a lot of finger-pointing going on and a lot of blaming going on, but I can assure you our team has done an unbelievable job and have done everything they possibly could according to all the instructions that they have been provided."

Tennis Australia has maintained a deliberate

silence on the affair, save for a statement issued on Friday night denying that it "misled" anyone by providing such advice.

"We reject completely that the playing group was knowingly misled," Tennis Australia said. "Informing players they could get into the country on a medical exemption was taken from the Smart Traveller website that Greg Hunt directly referred us to."

Further details have also emerged about Tiley's interactions with the Australian Technical Advisory Group on Immunisation (ATAGI) about exemptions for players either recently infected with COVID or who had only received one dose. The Age reported that Tiley had told ATAGI the treatment of such players "goes to the heart of the viability of the Australian Open".

