

Iranian teams drawn in tough ACL groups

Tehran Times Sports Desk

KUALA LUMPUR — The four Iranian football teams were all given difficult assignments on Monday for the 2010 ACL competition.

The 2010 AFC Champions League draw was held at AFC House in Kuala Lumpur.

Champion Iran has been drawn in Group A along with Al Ahli of Saudi Arabia, Qatar's Al Gharafa and Al Jazira of the UAE.

Zob Ahan of Isfahan was thrown into what could be West Asia's Group of Death — Group B — with Saudi Arabia's Al Ittihad, the former two-time champions and 2009 runners-up, big-spending Bunyodkor of Uzbekistan, and the West play-off winners.

Sepahan of Isfahan is in Group C which

is one of the toughest of the competition, with inaugural ACL winners Al Ain of United Arab Emirates, Saudi Arabia's Al Shabab and Uzbek giants Pakhtakor.

Mes of Kerman has been drawn along with the UAE's Al Ahli, Qataris Al Sadd and Saudi runners-up Al Hilal in Group D.

THE GROUPINGS

West

Group A
Al Ahli (KSA), Al Gharafa (QAT), Al Jazira (UAE), Esteghlal (IRN)

Group B
Zob Ahan (IRN), Al Ittihad (KSA), Bunyodkor (UZB), Play-off Winner (West)

Group C



Al Ain (UAE), Sepahan (IRN), Al Shabab (KSA), Pakhtakor (UZB)
Group D Al Sadd (QAT), Al Ahli (UAE), Mes (IRN), Al Hilal (KSA)

East

Group E
Seongnam Ilhwa Chunma (KOR), Melbourne Victory (AUS), Beijing Guoan (CHN), Kawasaki Frontale (JPN)

Group F
Kashima Antlers (JPN), Jeonbuk Motors (KOR), Persipura Jayapura (IDN), Changchun Yatai (CHN)

Group G
Henan Jianye (CHN), Gamba Osaka (JPN), Suwon Bluewings (KOR), Play-off

East winners

Group H

Adelaide United (AUS), Shandong Luneng (CHN), Cup winners (JPN), Pohang Steelers (KOR)

Play-off draw

West SF1 - Al Karamah (SYR) v Al Wahda (UAE) SF2 - Churchill Brothers (IND) bye into play-off final Final - Winner (Al Karamah v Al Wahda) v Churchill Brothers West winner goes to ACL. The two losers go to AFC Cup.

East SF1 - Armed Forces (SIN) v Sriwijaya (IDN) SF2 - Da Nang (VIE) v Muangthong (THA) Final - Winner SF1 v Winner SF2 East winner goes to ACL. The three losers go to AFC Cup.



Desailly: Thierry Henry did not have to apologize



Marcel Desailly has told ESPN SoccerNet that if he was Thierry Henry, he would not have apologized for the deeply controversial handball that helped to extinguish Republic of Ireland's World Cup dreams.

FIFA is investigating the incident that saw Henry clearly handle the ball before squaring for William Gallas in the play-off second leg in Paris, and the Barcelona striker may yet face a possible ban at the World Cup finals.

Henry apologized for the incident and admitted that the fairest solution would be to replay the fixture - something that FIFA had already ruled out - but that has not stopped him from becoming the target of sustained criticism.

Castrol ambassador Desailly, who played alongside Henry when France won the 1998 World Cup on home turf, does not feel that the striker should have made his public show of contrition as the incident was just part of the game.

"I would not have apologized like Henry," said Desailly in an ESPN SoccerNet webchat. "He is a player who is a role model but it is football. There are rules, referees and it is good as a role model that he said he used his hand. But I would have not apologized."

"Ireland played very well against France, at a high level, but there is no need to answer if Ireland deserve it, because France have qualified. Only the victory is beautiful at the end of the day."

Desailly played a crucial role as France won the World Cup in 1998 and then again two years later as they followed up that success by emerging victorious at Euro 2000. As such, his is a voice of real authority when it comes to Les Bleus.

The suitability of Raymond Domenech for the head coach's role has been a major point of controversy amongst the French media and public since the country's disappointing performance at Euro 2008 was followed by an unconvincing qualifying campaign for the 2010 World Cup.

But Desailly does not think that the French Football Federation will opt to replace Domenech in the build-up to the finals in South Africa, no matter how low his popularity rating has sunk in recent months.

"They did not sack him after the Euros so they will not sack him now after he achieved the minimum of qualifying," Desailly said. "People don't like him but his team have huge potential."

"After '98 we struggled to qualify for the Euros. When you look individually, the players have to be aware of their possibilities and then France will be good."

(Source: ESPN)

NEWS IN BRIEF



Kaka ruled out for weeks



Kaka has been ruled out of Real Madrid CF's final Group C game at Olympique de Marseille on Tuesday after the 27-year-old aggravated a persistent groin injury.

Kaka has been ever-present in Madrid's UEFA Champions League campaign

this season but will sit out a match Los Merengues can afford to lose by two goals and still progress to the last 16. The former AC Milan forward suffered a relapse in the lead-up to Saturday's 4-2 victory over UD Almeria and there will be no quick return. Manuel Pellegrini will also be without Guti, Ruud van Nistelrooy (both high injuries) and Christoph Metzelder (hamstring) at the Stade Velodrome. Marseille need to win to have any chance of advancing.

(Source: UEFA.com)

Khan - this sends a message



Amir Khan believes his sensational 76-second stoppage of Dmitry Salita will help propel him to the forefront of world boxing.

The Bolton star retained his WBA light-welterweight world title in Newcastle on Saturday night against the unbeaten mandatory challenger in the best possible fashion.

Khan told Sky Sports News: "I'm sure it sent a good message across the world. This fight wasn't picked, I had to fight this guy because he was a mandatory (challenger). If I didn't fight him then the title would have been vacant, but I took this fight on."

(Source: Skysports)

Fisi eyes Sauber return



Giancarlo Fisichella has admitted he would like to rejoin Sauber if they offered him a race seat for next season.

The 36-year-old Italian has been confirmed as Ferrari's reserve driver for 2010 but has not given up hope of securing a race seat elsewhere.

With their future having been in jeopardy ever since BMW announced in July that it was pulling out of F1 at the end of the season, it was announced last week that the Swiss team had been granted the 13th and final place on next year's grid.

Wenger rules out Ruud move



Arsenal boss Arsene Wenger has laughed off talk linking him with a shock move for former Manchester United star Ruud van Nistelrooy.

Van Nistelrooy has been mentioned as a possible January transfer target for Wenger as he looks to bring

in a new striker to compensate for the loss of Robin van Persie to long-term injury. Real Madrid are believed to be willing to let van Nistelrooy leave the Bernabeu in January as he is well down the pecking order in the Spanish capital and the player could be interested in a move away as he looks to secure his place in the Holland squad for next summer's World Cup finals.

(Source: Skysports)

Shojaei scores as Osasuna ties with Malaga

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Masoud Shojaei's goal was cancelled out by Antonio Apono in Malaga - Osasuna match at the Estadio La Rosaleda on Sunday.

Malaga earned a late 1-1 draw at home against Osasuna. Shojaei scored from six yards after 47 minutes as Osasuna took the lead despite being second best in the first half. Antonio Apono equalized the match firing in from a set-piece after 82 minutes.

This draw leaves Malaga second from bottom, one point above hapless Xerez, who crashed 2-0 Saturday at home to Atletico Madrid.

Osasuna has now collected a highly creditable 16 points this season and remains eight points above Malaga.

Esteghlal set to sign up foreign striker: coach

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KUALA LUMPUR — Esteghlal football coach Samad Marfavi said on Monday that it is going to strengthen the team by buying a foreign striker for their 2010 AFC Champions League campaign.

The Iran Professional League champion has been drawn along with Saudi Arabia's Al Ahli, Qatar's Al Gharafa and UAE's Al Jazira in Group A.

"Winning the AFC Champions League is our target but we are in the toughest group," Marfavi told www.the-afc.com.

"I closely follow Arab leagues, but I know Al Jazira particularly well because we were in the same group last year."

"Changes are necessary to revive the team and we will do our best to strengthen the squad. I have suggested to the club management to recruit a foreign striker," he said.

Delage to lead Omega-Pharma at Tour Down Under

SYDNEY (AFP) — Frenchman Mickael Delage will lead the Belgian Omega-Pharma Lotto team at next month's Tour Down Under in Australia, organisers said.

Delage made his Giro D'Italia debut in 2006 and won the first stage of the Tour de l'Avenir the same year, while this year he finished third overall in the San Sebastian Classic.

The seven-man Omega-Pharma Lotto team, formerly Silence-Lotto, also includes Belgium's Olivier Kaisen and Sweden's Jonas Ljungblad.



Omega-Pharma Lottos team is: Mickael Delage (FRA), Olivier Kaisen (BEL), Jonas Ljungblad (SWE), Matthew Lloyd (AUS), Gerben Lowik (NED), Jurgen Roelandts (BEL) and Jurgen Van Goolen (BEL).

The Tour Down Under will be staged around Adelaide in South Australia from January 17-24 and is

headlined by seven-time Tour de France champion Lance Armstrong and Australia's world road cycling champion Cadel Evans.

McDowell shares Chevron lead

Northern Ireland's Graeme McDowell moved into a share of the lead at the Chevron World Challenge after a third round 66.

McDowell was only called into the 18-player field at Sherwood Country Club on Monday when Tiger Woods withdrew from the event the American hosts.

The Northern Irishman is tied for the 54-hole lead with US-PGA champion Y E Yang of Korea.

McDowell and Yang, who both flew in from China having played in last weekend's World Cup at Mission Hills, are one shot clear at 10 under par, the Korean - leader at halfway by two - battling to a 71 on Saturday.

Ireland's Padraig Harrington and European number one Lee Westwood of England are on nine under following respective rounds of 70 and 69, with American Jim Furyk (67) and England's Ian Poulter (71) a further shot back on eight under.

American duo Sean O'Hair (71) and Kenny Perry (72) made it seven players within three shots of the lead, finishing the day on seven under.

McDowell's round contained an eagle, seven birdies, one bogey and one double bogey as the Northern Irishman remained the only player in the 18-man field to improve on his score in every round.

"It was a funny one. I turned at one under par and was just cruising, nothing really happening and then I birdied 10, 11, 12 yesterday and did the same today," McDowell said.

"Then I hit a really good three-wood to 13 and made the putt for eagle and away we go."

"It was a fun day, I've been feeling really good about my game coming into this week and it was nice to continue playing well."

Nine of women's tennis top 10 to play at Sydney

SYDNEY (AFP) — Nine of the women's top 10 will compete at January's Sydney International in the lead-up to the Australian Open Grand Slam, according to organisers.

World No. 1 Serena Williams heads the line-up, which also includes Dina Safina, French Open champion Svetlana Kuznetsova, Caroline Wozniacki and Elena Dementieva.

Victoria Azarenka, Jelena Jankovic, Vera Zvonareva and Agnieszka Radwanska also join a field boosted by Australia's No. 13 Samantha Stosur and Italy's Flavia Pennetta and Francesca Schiavone.

The only top-10 player missing will be world No. 6 Venus Williams, who will warm up for the first Grand Slam of the year with an exhibition match in Thailand.



France's Gael Monfils, ranked 13, leads a men's field that includes Tomas Berdych, Australia's former No. 1 Lleyton Hewitt and one-time Australian Open finalist Marcos Baghdatis.

"We are delighted with our confirmed player line-ups, in particular our women's field, which is certainly the strongest in the event's history," tournament director Craig Watson said.

"To have nine of the top 10 women in the world playing in Sydney is incredible and tennis fans would be hard-pressed to find a more impressive line-up, outside the Grand Slams, anywhere in the world."

Organisers will leave open spots in both draws for wildcards and qualifiers for the January 10-16 tournament.