

Iran Asks AFC for Hosting World Cup Qualifiers



TEHRAN (Dispatches) – Iran Football Federation has sent its request to the Asian Football Confederation (AFC) to host the 2022 World Cup qualifiers matches in Group C.

According to AFC's decision, the

qualifiers have been postponed to June. Iran will play Hong Kong and Cambodia on June 3 and 7.

The matches against Bahrain and Iraq will be held on June 11 and 15.

Due to the coronavirus concerns, the

remaining matches will be held at the centralized venue and Iran submitted its request to host the four remaining matches in this group.

The Asian Football Confederation has reportedly decided to stage all matches of the 2022 World Cup qualifiers in Qatar.

Arabic service of Goal quoted informed sources as saying last month that the Confederation has opted for staging matches in a centralized manner in 2021 due to the COVID-19 pandemic, and also because of Qatar's successful hosting of the 2020 AFC Champions League.

According to the report, the 2022 World Cup qualifiers which also act as a qualification for the 2023 AFC Asian Cup will be held in Qatar from late-May to mid-June, 2021.

The report also claims that the 2021 AFC Champions League would also start in May or April.

If realized, the new schedule will be bad news for the Iranian National Football Team that sits third in Group C of Qualifiers behind Iraq and Bahrain.

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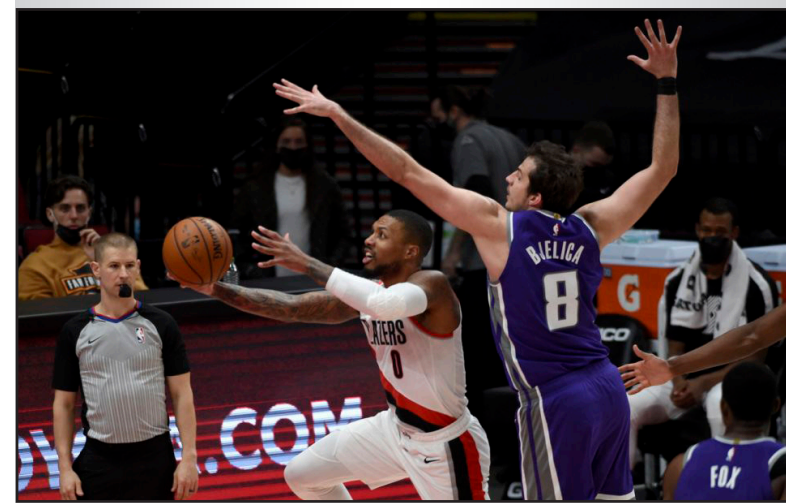
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Blazers Down Kings 123-119 in NBA



Portland Trail Blazers guard Damian Lillard, left, dives to the basket as Sacramento Kings forward Nemanja Bjelica defends during the first half of an NBA basketball game in Portland, Ore., Thursday, March 4, 2021.

PORTLAND, Ore. (AP) - Damian Lillard had 44 points, including 10 straight at a key moment down the stretch, to give the Portland Trail Blazers a 123-119 victory over the Sacramento Kings on Thursday night.

Enes Kanter added 22 points and 21 rebounds for the Blazers, who have won three straight and are 21-14 heading into the All-Star break. It's the Blazers' best start through 35 games since 2015.

Lillard said the difference in the first half was that the team never got down after CJ McCollum and Jusuf Nurkic were injured.

De'Aaron Fox had 32 points, 12 assists and eight rebounds for Sacramento, which had six players score in double figures.

Richaun Holmes dunked to give the Kings a 103-98 lead with 5:41 left, but Lillard answered with a 3-pointer and Kanter's layup tied it at 103.

Sacramento went up 108-103 with 3:49 to go on Harrison Barnes' layup and Buddy Hield's 3. Lillard responded with a pull-up jumper, a layup and a pair of

3-pointers in quick succession to put the Blazers ahead 115-108 with just more than a minute left.

Sacramento wasn't quite done, pulling within 119-118 on a 3-pointer with 6.6 seconds left. After Gary Trent Jr. made two free throws for the Blazers, Fox hit one then appeared to miss the second intentionally. After a review over whether the ball hit the rim, Portland got the ball back with 3.7 seconds left and Lillard was fouled to close it out.

Lillard finished with eight 3-pointers.

Both teams were also playing the second of a back-to-back heading into the All-Star break.

The Kings had won two of their last three games after a nine-game losing streak. Sacramento was still without reigning NBA rookie of the month Tyrese Haliburton, who missed his fourth game with a calf injury.

Nemanja Bjelica's 3-pointer gave the Kings an early 21-16 lead. Lillard's 3 late in the opening quarter put Portland up 28-27, and the All-Star had 15 points by the end of the period.

Chelsea Inflict Fifth Straight Home Defeat on Liverpool

LONDON (AFP) - Chelsea have gained the upper hand in a tight battle for a place in next season's Champions League by inflicting Liverpool's fifth consecutive home defeat as Mason Mount's winner earned a 1-0 win.

The Blues move into fourth in the Premier League, four points clear of Liverpool, who slip to seventh.

After a 68-game unbeaten league run at Anfield over nearly four years was ended in January, the English champions are now on their worst ever league run at home.

By contrast, Chelsea's unbeaten run since Thomas Tuchel replaced the sacked Frank Lampard in January stretches to 10 games.

Tuchel was appointed with Chelsea five points adrift of the top four, but they are now in pole position to secure a much-needed return to the riches of the Champions League after spending £220 million on new players in last summer's transfer market.

Timo Werner is one of the big money signings that has failed to live up to his price tag.

The German international,



Defeat to Chelsea saw Liverpool slip to seventh in the Premier League

who has long linked with a move to Liverpool before arriving at Stamford Bridge, has now scored just once in his last 18 Premier League games.

However, Werner was desperately unfortunate not to end that barren run when he flicked the ball beyond onrushing goalkeeper Alisson Becker and bundled the ball over the line.

A VAR review, though, controversially chopped the goal off for the most marginal of offside decisions.

At the other end, Sadio Mane should have then given Liver-

pool the lead against the run of play when he skewed a glorious chance well wide.

The combination of Fabinho and Ozan Kabak was Liverpool's 19th central defensive partnership of an injury-ravaged season.

Chelsea were easily exposing the lack of co-ordination in the backline and another simple ball over the top three minutes before half-time freed Mount before he cut inside to brilliantly find the far corner.

Andy Robertson cleared Hakim Ziyech's goalbound shot off the line as the visitors also started the

second-half strongest.

Needing a goal, Klopp took the surprise decision to withdraw the Premier League's top goalscorer Mohamed Salah as Diogo Jota made his return from a three-month injury layoff.

The Egyptian shook his head in frustration at the call in a further sign all is not well in the Liverpool camp.

Salah's agent responded with posting a full stop on Twitter, suggesting the 28-year-old's time at Anfield may be coming to an end.

Werner had another great chance to seal the three points, but Alisson spread himself well to block at his near post.

Klopp's men have now won just three of their last 13 league games to tumble down the table since topping the standings at Christmas.

Tuchel has continuously followed in the footsteps of his compatriot, succeeding Klopp at Mainz and Borussia Dortmund.

The Chelsea boss had won just two of their previous 14 meetings, but came out well on top in their first tussle in English football.

Sanchez Scores Twice in Win for Serie A Leaders Inter



Inter Milan lead Serie A by six points

MILAN (Dispatches) - Alexis Sanchez has scored twice to earn Inter Milan a 2-1 win at Parma and move them six points clear at the top of Serie A.

The Chilean latched on to a loose ball to open the scoring in the 54th minute after an even first half.

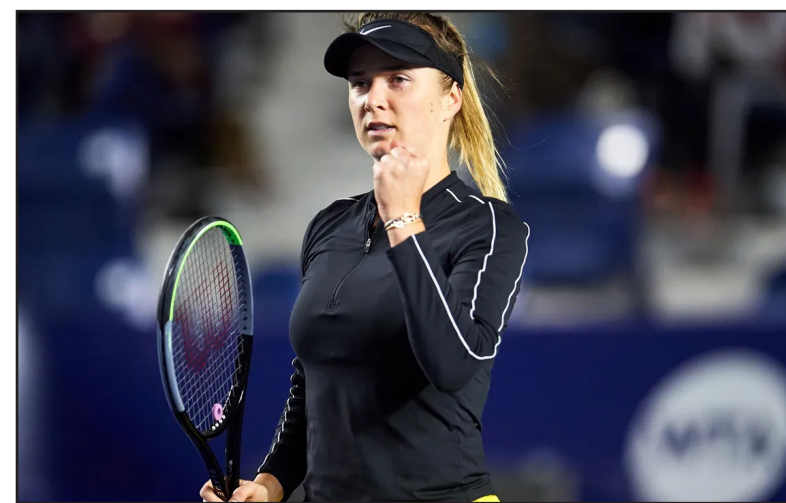
He added a second eight minutes later after fine work by fellow ex-Manchester United forward Romelu Lukaku.

Parma cut the deficit through Hernani but Inter held on in their bid for a first Italian title in 11 years.

A sixth league win in a row moves them six points clear of rivals AC Milan and 10 ahead of champions Juventus, who are third.

Struggling Parma remain 19th, six points from safety, and without a league win since November.

Top Seeds Svitolina, Pliskova Upset at Qatar Open



DOHA, Qatar (Reuters) — The top two seeded players at the Qatar Open were eliminated in the quarterfinals as Victoria Azarenka played through pain to win against Elina Svitolina and Jessica Pegula defeated Karolina Pliskova.

Azarenka held off a late comeback from top-seeded Svitolina, her doubles partner this week, to seal a 6-2, 6-4 win on her third match point.

Azarenka managed an apparent lower back problem with stretches and help from a physiotherapist.

The Belarusian will play Garbine Muguruza, who ousted Maria Sakkari 6-3, 6-1. Muguruza last reached the Doha final in 2018, losing to Petra Kvitova. Sakkari

landed only 57% of first serves to 82% for Muguruza, and was broken five times.

Pegula continued her blistering start to 2021 by beating second-seeded Pliskova 6-3, 6-1, breaking the big-hitting Czech player's serve five times.

That took Pegula to a 12-3 record this year, including qualifying matches, in a run which has already lifted the U.S. player into the top 50 for the first time after reaching the Australian Open quarterfinals.

Her reward for beating Pliskova is a semifinal against fourth-seeded Kvitova, who ousted Anett Kontaveit 6-3, 3-6, 6-2 in a match with 16 breaks of serve.

Portuguese Grand Prix Confirmed on F1 Calendar

LONDON (Dispatches) - Formula 1 has confirmed the Portuguese Grand Prix will go ahead on 2 May as the third race of the 2021 World Championship.

The sport said Portuguese authorities would decide whether spectators could attend in the coming weeks.

The organizers of the Azerbaijan Grand Prix, from 4-6 June, have said their race will be held behind closed doors.

A statement said the weekend in Baku "has arrived too soon to safely host the event with fans present".

F1 is planning to hold its longest-ever season at 23 races this year.

President Stefano Domenicali said: "We are confident and excited about our 2021 season, having shown last year that we could deliver 17 races safely."



Before last year, the Portuguese GP was last held in 1996