

## S Korea's Pohang to face Saudi Arabia's Al-Hilal in AFC Champions League final



JEONJU: Pohang Steelers' Alex Grant (right) celebrates his goal with teammates against Ulsan Hyundai during the AFC Champions League semi-finals football match between South Korea's Ulsan Hyundai FC and FC Pohang Steelers in Jeonju yesterday. — AFP

**JEONJU/RIYADH:** South Korea's Pohang Steelers will face Saudi giants Al-Hilal in the AFC Champions League final after defeating title-holders Ulsan Hyundai 5-4 on penalties yesterday. Saudi giants Al-Hilal stayed on course for a second AFC Champions League title in three years with a tense 2-1 semi-final victory over cross-city rivals Al-Nassr on Tuesday.

Pohang Steelers and Ulsan Hyundai, the two sides, rivals on South Korea's east coast, were locked at 1-1 after 120 tense minutes with Pohang equalizing with just a minute left of normal time to force the extra period.

Skipper Kang Sang-woo was the hero for Pohang, holding his nerve to slam his winning penalty into the corner, before being mobbed by his teammates. Ulsan top the K League but it was mid-table Pohang who started better and hit the post in the opening quarter at Jeonju World Cup Stadium, where there was a sparse, socially distanced crowd.

The two sides conjured up only three shots on target between them in 45 minutes of cautious first-half football. But the game came to life after that. Pohang goalkeeper Lee Jun had looked shaky

throughout and it was his mistake that allowed Ulsan to score when he fumbled a routine stop into the path of Yun Il-lok.

The 2009 champions Pohang squandered three clear-cut chances in the space of 10 frenetic minutes, but just when Ulsan looked like they had weathered the storm, their skipper Won Du-jae was red-carded in the 68th minute. It was all Pohang after that and the pressure told in the 89th minute when their British-born Australian defender Alex Grant popped up with a looping header that went in off the post to force extra-time.

### Title clash

Al-Hilal's Mali striker Moussa Marega and Saudi international Salem al-Dawsari struck either side of the break in Riyadh to set up a title clash with Pohang in the final on November 23. Al-Hilal won their third Asian title in 2019 but were dramatically kicked out of the tournament last year after several members of their squad tested positive for COVID-19.

But the team known locally as "Al-Zaeem", or "The Boss" seem to have successfully banished the memories of that fateful day from their minds with an impressive run this year as they moved

within striking distance of another international trophy.

Al-Hilal and Al-Nassr have clashed on numerous occasions domestically but the magnitude of a crucial continental clash was not lost on them as both teams made a cautious start at the King Saud University Stadium in the Saudi capital. The first notable chance fell Al-Hilal's way but al-Dawsari failed to take advantage of the opportunity by firing wide from the edge of the box after receiving a pass from Matheus Pereira.

Al-Hilal were not to be denied for long though as Marega scored his first goal of the tournament in the 17th minute. Mohamed al-Burayk found Bafetimbi Gomis with a long pass and the 36-year-old Frenchman deftly steered the ball for Marega who made no mistake with a right-footed shot to the bottom left corner of the post.

Al-Nassr raised their game a notch after that but were dealt a body blow when defender Ali Lajami was sent-off seconds before half-time for a foul on Marega. Despite the setback Al-Nassr managed to hold their own and found the equalizer five minutes after the break with Anderson Talisca heading home



Hilal's forward Bafetimbi Gomis celebrates the win with Hilal's coach Leonardo Jardim during the AFC Champions League semifinal football match between KSA's Al-Nassr and KSA's Al-Hilal on Tuesday, at the Mrsool Park Stadium in Riyadh. — AFP

from close from a cross by Abdulfattah Asiri following a corner.

Sultan al-Ghanem and Talisca missed chances thereafter for Al-Nassr and soon Al-Hilal wrested control once again with al-Dawsari scoring his third goal of the

knockouts, his chip taking a slight deflection off Abdulla Madu before finding the net. Al-Hilal survived several anxious moments after that with Abderrazak Hamdallah an Abdulla Madu missing chances in stoppage time. — AFP

## Steve Bruce leaves Newcastle by 'mutual consent' after takeover

**LONDON:** Steve Bruce has left his position as Newcastle manager by "mutual consent", 13 days after a Saudi-led takeover at St James' Park, the Premier League club announced yesterday. Bruce, whose departure was widely expected, took charge of his 1,000th match as a manager in Sunday's 3-2 defeat by Tottenham — his only game under the new owners.

His assistant, Graeme Jones, will take charge of the team for Saturday's trip to Crystal Palace, with the Magpies still searching for their first Premier League win of the season and sitting just one place off the foot of the table. Former Roma coach Paulo Fonseca is the bookmakers' favorite to succeed Bruce, with ex-Bournemouth boss Eddie Howe and former Borussia Dortmund manager Lucien Favre also linked with the job.

"Newcastle United can confirm that Steve Bruce has left his position as head coach by mutual consent," said a club statement, which confirmed the search for a new head coach was under way. "He leaves the Magpies after more than two years in charge, having steered the club to 13th and 12th-place finishes in the Premier League."

Bruce, 60, said he was grateful to have had the opportunity to manage the "unique" club, saying he had experienced "highs and lows" during his tenure.

"This is a club with incredible support, and I hope the new owners can take it forward to where we all want it to be," he said. "I wish everyone the very best of luck for the rest of this season and beyond."

In an interview with the Daily Telegraph, Bruce admitted the Newcastle job could be his last. "It's taken its toll on my whole family because they are all Geordies (from the Newcastle area) and I can't ignore that," he said.

"This will probably be me done as a manager — until I get a phone call from a chairman somewhere asking if I can give them a hand," he added. "Never say never, I've learnt that." Bruce, who managed a long list of clubs including Sunderland and Aston Villa, also hit out at the critics whom he felt never gave him a chance at the club.

"By the time I got to Newcastle, I thought I could handle everything thrown at me but it has been very, very tough," he said. "To never really be wanted, to feel that people wanted me to fail, to read people constantly saying I would fail, that I was useless, a fat waste of space, a stupid, tactically inept cabbage head or whatever. And it was from day one."

### Newcastle takeover

The £305 million (\$420 million) Newcastle takeover was rubber-stamped by the Premier League earlier this month after it received legally binding assurances that the Saudi state would not control the club. Bruce was a deeply unpopular figure with the Newcastle supporters, in part due to his past as manager of northeast rivals Sunderland. A recent poll from the Newcastle United Supporters Trust found



NEWCASTLE: Newcastle United's English head coach Steve Bruce looks on during the English Premier League football match between Newcastle United and Tottenham Hotspur at St James' Park in Newcastle-upon-Tyne, north east England on Sunday. — AFP

that 94 percent of fans wanted him to quit.

However, he kept the club afloat by staying out of relegation trouble in his two full seasons in charge despite the limited resources provided by Ashley. A wave of Saudi investment is expected to transform Newcastle's

fortunes on the pitch, following the example set by English champions Manchester City and French powerhouse Paris Saint-Germain. The club have not won a major trophy since 1969 despite regularly attracting crowds of more than 50,000. — AFP