

Hart-broken

England manager Gareth Southgate informed the on-loan Manchester City goalkeeper Joe Hart on Monday that he would not be included in his 23-man group for the 2018 World Cup in Russia.

## Captain fantastic relieved to get past Al Jazira

Persepolis captain Seyyed Jalal Hosseini admitted that his side faced a tough obstacle in Al Jazira in the AFC Champions League Round of 16 as the defender's last-minute strike in Monday's second leg secured a 2-1 win on the night to advance on away goals after a 4-4 aggregate scoreline.

After a 96th-minute Al Jazira goal saw the Emirati side claim a 3-2 win in the first leg in Abu Dhabi last week, Persepolis went into the return meeting needing a win to have any chance of progressing to the quarterfinals for the second successive year, the-afc.com reported.

The host dominated but had to wait until just after the hour to take the lead through Ahmad Nourollahi's stunning effort from distance, only for Brazilian

Romarinho to level and silence a packed Azadi Stadium shortly after.

But Persepolis kept pushing forward and eventually got the winner its performance deserved when Hosseini, who was suspended for the first leg, fired home from 15 yards after Al Jazira had failed to clear a delivery from the left.

"It was a difficult match and we played against a very professional side," said Hosseini, who skipped Persepolis to its maiden AFC Champions League semifinal appearance last year.

"They were a team that played on the counterattack and had three brilliant players who were great on the ball.

"I want to thank God that we defeated them and I also thank our fans. I hope we can keep going."

The victory maintained the Tehran side's perfect home record in the current continental campaign as Al Jazira became the latest side to leave the Iranian capital on the back of a defeat.

On Monday, 80,000 fans packed into Azadi Stadium in what was the Iranian Pro League champion's biggest attendance in this season's competition.

Persepolis can now look forward to a three-month break until the tournament resumes with the quarterfinals in late August, when the side will be confident it can at least match its semifinal showing from 2017.

"We could have come into this in a much better position had we got a draw in Abu Dhabi," added Bashar Resan, who came off the bench with just under 15 minutes remaining.

"It was a tense match with the pressure of a huge number of fans watching us and Al Jazira were within a goal of qualifying at any point.

"But we won and that's what matters most. Our objective is to reach the final and we promise our fans that we will."



MOHAMMAD KARAM-ALI/90tv.ir

Persepolis captain Seyyed Jalal Hosseini (R) celebrates his late winner with teammates during the 2-1 beating of Al Jazira in a last-16 tie at the AFC Champions League in Tehran's Azadi Stadium on May 14, 2018.

## Durant, Thompson power Warriors over Rockets in NBA playoffs

Kevin Durant scored 37 points and Klay Thompson added 28 as defending champion Golden State defeated season win-leader Houston 119-106 in Monday's opener of their NBA playoff semifinal series.

Stephen Curry added 18 points, six rebounds and eight assists for the Warriors, who were outclassed early but battled back to seize the lead in the best-of-seven Western Conference final, which continues in Houston tonight, AFP reported.

"It's a great start. We played well," said Thompson, who scored 11 points in the fourth quarter.

"It's nice to be at home but we've got a lot of guys who have been in this league a long time. We've been in every situation."

Either the Warriors, seeking their third crown in four seasons, or the Rockets, who had the best record in the NBA this season, will face Cleveland or Boston in the NBA Finals.

"If we're going to knock these guys off we have to get a better mental focus," Rockets coach Mike D'Antoni said. "We ran out of gas a little bit in different spots and they didn't."

"It's just a bunch of stuff we can clean up and we will. We'll come out and attack them Wednesday."

Durant, who scored 17 first-half points, sparked the Warriors after the Rockets attacked early but were overtaken in the second quarter.

"You know they are going to come out with a lot of energy," Durant said. "We just tried to take their best punch and keep fighting."

NBA scoring champion James Harden scored a game-high 41 points to lead the Rockets while Chris Paul



BRETT COOMER/HOUSTON CHRONICLE

Warriors' Kevin Durant (R) drives to the basket against the Rockets in Game 1 of the Western Conference Finals in Houston's Toyota Center on May 14, 2018.

added 23 points and 11 rebounds.

"We know James is always going to score over us. We just had to keep solid and keep playing hard," Durant said.

"This Houston team never stops. They are always in the game with three-point shots. We play a calm steady game, look for a good shot and play good D every time down."

"I just try to be aggressive and look

for a shot every time I go down."

The Warriors appeared to lose the ball in the back court after a long rebound, but no violation was called and Thompson sank a three-pointer seconds later for a 106-96 edge with 3:55 left play, all-but sealing Houston's fate.

The Rockets jumped ahead 9-2 and 21-12 but the Warriors battled back, taking their first lead of the game at 35-

33 on David West's layup 2:57 into the second quarter.

Harden scored the last of his 24 first-half points on a fast-break dunk but Golden State's Nick Young answered with his third three-pointer of the half to lift the Warriors level 56-56 at halftime.

"They took the challenge and played awfully well," Warriors coach Steve Kerr said.

## Mancini vows to restore Azzurri pride

New Italy coach Roberto Mancini on Tuesday said he wanted to restore pride in the national side six months after Italians' shock failure to qualify for the World Cup.

"Not going to the World Cup is difficult for those who, like us, have always been cheering for the national team," Mancini told a press conference at the national training center at Coverciano, near Florence, AFP reported.

"I feel the need to do something for the national team and think it's the right time for me. I want to build something for the years to come and bring Italy back to the top."

Italy has been without a permanent coach since Gian Piero Ventura was sacked after the four-time world champion failed to qualify for the World Cup for the first time since 1958.

Former Manchester City and Inter Milan coach Mancini signed a two-year deal on Monday after severing his lucrative contract with Russians Zenit Saint Petersburg.

The contract, reportedly worth €



CARLO BRESSAN/AFIP

Italy's new coach Roberto Mancini poses for a photo with the Azzurri's kit during his first press conference in his new job in Florence, Italy, on May 15, 2018.

million (\$2.3 million) a year, will see Mancini lead Italy's bid to qualify for Euro 2020. If successful, it will be automatically extended until June 2022,

ahead of the World Cup in Qatar.

His first match in charge will be a friendly on May 28 against Saudi Arabia in Switzerland.

He also said he would talk to recently retired Italy great Andrea Pirlo about joining his coaching setup.

In Mancini, Italy has a coach with a solid track record as a title-winner, with 13 trophies in club football.

He led Manchester City to its first English league title in 44 years in 2012, and won three Serie A crowns with Inter. He also won the Italian Cup with Inter, Fiorentina and Lazio.

Since leaving England in 2013, Mancini coached Galatasaray, whom he led to a Turkish Cup success, and returned to Inter before joining Zenit last June.

But this will be his first international coaching job.

"I don't know if this will be my most difficult challenge, if you coach a club and you don't win everyone is angry with you, here there are 50 million people.

"That's beautiful too, though, because if you win something important there's huge satisfaction. It's not an easy challenge, but nothing is easy."

## Neymar, CL trophy top of Tuchel's PSG priorities

Paris Saint-Germain ended weeks of speculation by confirming Thomas Tuchel will be its new head coach.

The former Borussia Dortmund man's reputation as one of Europe's premier coaching talents will be instantly on the line as he ends a year-long sabbatical, the FourFourTwo magazine reported.

Waiting for him in Paris is an enviable array of talent and - providing the club's latest grapple with UEFA's Financial Fair Play rules can be negotiated - vast resources to further embellish his squad in the transfer market.

However, unhelpful speculation looms around star attraction Neymar and it seems nothing more than winning the biggest prize on offer will do for Tuchel, who might have to develop diplomatic skills as sharp as his tactical acumen.

Here are four major issues waiting at the top of the 44-year-old's overflowing in-tray as he prepares to succeed Unai Emery in the French capital.

### European success

It might be blunt and to the point but this is a non-negotiable in the eyes of PSG president Nasser al-Khelaifi and the club's ambitious Qatari owners.

Emery, it should be remembered, will leave as a domestic treble winner. That achievement did not weigh heavily enough against Champions League elimination at the hands of Barcelona and Real Madrid in the past two seasons.

### Neymar

The superstar forward scored 28 goals in 30 appearances this season after joining from Barcelona for a world record €22 million.

On Sunday he was named Ligue 1's Player of the Year but all is not quite as rosy as it seems.

A couple of on-field spats with the club's record goalscorer Edinson Cavani were unseemly, while reports of a Neymar lead-

ing a Brazilian clique in the PSG dressing room pale alongside talk of another blockbuster switch to Real Madrid that seems to be reaching an unhelpful crescendo. Whether the 26-year-old goes or stays and how he performs if it is the latter will most likely define Tuchel's reign.

### Squad balance

Neymar leaving would be a body blow, but if he does - or if UEFA demand a balancing of the books that threatens the futures of Kylian Mbappe, Angel Di Maria and others - it gives an opportunity for renewal that Tuchel is more than adept to grasp.

Outside of a lavishly gifted array of attackers, with Tuchel's countryman Julian Draxler struggling for regular starts, the holes are easy to spot.

Thiago Motta's retirement means the lack of a dedicated midfield holder and Blaise Matuidi's presence in the engine room has not been adequately replaced since the France international joined Juventus. Thiago Silva will be 34 at the start of next season but Emery's gamble at the Santiago Bernabeu showed PSG's defense is not yet ready to move on from the Brazil lynchpin despite Marquinhos and Presnel Kimpembe's obvious potential. A dependable, top-class goalkeeper is also long overdue.

### Relationships with bosses

The main factor to have checked Tuchel's upward trajectory has been a tempestuous relationship with his employers.

Acrimonious departures from Mainz and Dortmund were followed by a season from the outside looking in. His relationship with the BVB squad was also widely reported to be at a low ebb by the end.

The combination of a board unwilling to accept failure, with a squad of stars and egos assembled ambitiously but unevenly means Tuchel has flashpoints ahead and must learn how to pick his battles.

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