Ronaldo primed to add Asian club crown to long list of accolades

AFP- Cristiano Ronaldo will hope to add an Asian Champions League crown to his long list of achievements when the continent's top club competition kicks off on Monday.

The former Real Madrid and Manchester United forward saw his first attempt with the Saudi side Al Nassr end in the quarter-finals.

Now rebranded as the Asian Champions League Elite, Al Nassr and the other teams from Saudi Arabia will be a major threat after spending vast sums of money in the last two years on the likes of Ronaldo and Neymar.

England forward Ivan Toney was the latest big name to swap Europe for Saudi when he left Brentford for Al Ahli last month for more than $45 million.

As part of the revamp to the competition, Saudi Arabia – which is expected to host the 2034 World Cup – will stage a mini knockout tournament in the final stages to decide the overall winner.

The champions will take home at least $12 million.

Al Nassr, Al Ahli and Neymar's Al Hilal will all be involved when the Champions League Elite launches on Monday with a new format that splits 24 teams evenly into two groups of East and West.

The top eight teams from each zone then advance to a knockout round of 16 to be played in March over two legs, before the action moves to Saudi from the quarter-finals onwards.

Saudi champions Al Hilal are looking to win a record-extending fifth Asian title but they are still waiting for the return of the Brazilian ace Neymar, who has been sidelined since suffering a serious knee injury last year.

Al Hilal have signed Portugal full-back Joao Cancelo from Manchester City, bolstering a squad that already featured Aleksandar Mitrovic, Sergej Milinkovic-Savic and Ruben Neves.

Al Nassr finished a distant second to Al Hilal in last season's Saudi Pro League but as well as Ronaldo they can call on Sadio Mane, Aymeric Laporte and Marcelo Brozovic.

The 39-year-old Ronaldo, a five-time Ballon d'Or winner and multiple European Champions League winner, recently scored the 900th goal of his career when he netted for Portugal.

For all the Saudi star power, the defending champions come from the United Arab Emirates.

Al Ain beat Al Nassr on penalties in the last eight and Argentine great Hernan Crespo coached them to victory in the final against Japan's Yokohama F-Marinos over two legs.

Al Ain are one of two UAE clubs taking part in this year's edition, with teams from Qatar, Iran, Uzbekistan and Iraq completing the West zone line-up.

– Japan challenge –

In the East, clubs from Japan have posted the best results in recent years and Yokohama return to the Champions League to spearhead their challenge.

Coach Harry Kewell has been sacked since leading them to last season's final, with the former Liverpool and Leeds forward paying the price for his team's lacklustre domestic form.

Kawasaki Frontale and Vissel Kobe are also representing Japan,

while three-time champions Pohang Steelers, twice winners Ulsan and debutants Gwangju will carry the flag for South Korea.

Chinese clubs' spending power has long since dried up but former Chelsea attacker Oscar is still on the books of Shanghai Port, who are led by Australian coach Kevin Muscat.

Shandong Taishan and Shanghai Shenhua are also involved from China, while one club each from Australia, Thailand and Malaysia feature in the East league stage.

The premier Asian club title has alternated between East and West zone for the past six seasons, but East teams dominated for more than a decade prior to that.