

## Two steps forward ...

The Peykan-Bargh meeting on Jan. 9 in Tehran shaped up as a nondescript match, a mid-table clash in the Azadegan League, Iran's top-level league.

It took on historical proportions when the home team, Peykan, allowed female fans to watch the game.

In a country with strict rules segregating men and women since the institution of the Islamic Republic in 1979, even the presence of a few female spectators was groundbreaking.

The reason given for the relaxation of the ban, according to Peykan official Mahdi Dadras, was that the presence of women will encourage its (male) fans not to yell obscenities and improve player morale.

The move is in response to a growing

interest by young women in soccer. Iranian officials had to acknowledge that women celebrated along with men when Iran beat Australia in a dramatic playoff to qualify for the 1998 World Cup.

The move is not without opponents.

The conservative newspaper *Jomhuriye Eslami* said the growing interest among women "is no evidence of ethical correctness."

"There are a lot of people in the world who would like alcohol, drugs and gambling, all of which are ugly, unpleasant and forbidden habits," the paper said.

Iran recently allowed women to play soccer, but they must conform to the country's strict dress code and are forced to play indoors away from the gaze of men.

## ... and one step back

A day after the breakthrough in Iran, women's soccer took a step backwards when one of the first experiments in professional women's soccer outside the Women's United Soccer Association collapsed.

Mohamed Al Fayed, chairman of Premier League club Fulham, announced that players on England's first professional women's soccer team will go part-time at the end of the season.

Fulham Ladies went pro in April 2000 with the expectation that other clubs would follow suit thereafter. Plans for women's pro league in 2003-04 appear dead.

Al Fayed, the Harrod's chairman — his son, Dodi, died in the 1999 car crash that also killed Princess Diana — blamed the setback on the failure of English soccer authorities to develop the women's game.

"The mediocre advances in women's football during this period have made it impossible for me to continue at a professional level," he said. "I have invested millions of pounds into Fulham FC, and the priority for me is to focus on the club's core business of Premier League football."

The demise of the women's pro team is the latest setback for Al Fayed.

**Mohamed Al Fayed, chairman of Premier League club Fulham, says his priority is the London club's core business of Premier League soccer.**



DYLAN MARTINEZ/REUTERS

He spent tens of millions of dollars leading the small London club from the Third Division, the bottom of English pro soccer, in 1997 to the Premier League. It lost an English-record \$40 million in 2000-01 and faces relegation this season.

Al Fayed's efforts to redevelop Fulham's home stadium, Craven Cottage, was blocked by neighborhood groups, and he has reportedly agreed to demolish the stadium and replace it with apartments.

Environmentalists have blocked other stadium initiatives, forcing the Cottagers to share QPR's Loftus Road.

— Paul Kennedy