

Persian Gulf Pro League roundup: Sepahan beaten by Tractor as title race heats up



Tractor players celebrate the winner in a 1-0 victory over Sepahan in the Persian Gulf Pro League in Tabriz, Iran, on April 7, 2023.

IRNA

Sports Desk

Sepahan's 1-0 away defeat against Tractor on Friday meant the top three in the Persian Gulf Pro League are now separated by a single point. Former Persepolis player Reza Asadi kept his composure to score from the spot in Tabriz's full-packed Yadegar-e Imam Stadium after Brazilian Gustavo was brought down in the box by Sepahan midfielder Masoud Rigi just after the hour mark.

Despite the untimely setback, Jose Morais's men remain top of the table with 52 points but now have Esteghlal level on points with them, while Persepolis closed the gap on top to one point after a comprehensive victory over

Malavan FC.

Earlier on Friday, in-form winger Mehdi Qayedi fired home the winner 10 minutes after the break as Esteghlal walked away with a massive 1-0 win at Aluminium Arak.

On Thursday, Mehdi Torabi and Saeed Sadeqi were on the score-sheet in the first half and Brazilian substitute Leandro Pereira netted his first goal for the Reds with eight minutes remaining to help Persepolis beat Malavan 3-0 at Tehran's Azadi Stadium.

Elsewhere, Mohammad-Amin Hazbavi and Sassan Ansari scored in each half as Foolad Khuzestan defeated Nassaji Mazandaran 2-0 in Ahvaz's Foolad Arena. Mes Rafsanjan edged

bottom-side Naft Masjed Soleyman 1-0 to get back in the winning ways – courtesy of Mohsen Azarbad's striker right before the interval – while San'at Naft Abadan won the battle of strugglers at home, beating Mes Kerman 2-1, thanks to Ahmad Shariatzadeh's spot-kick deep into stoppage time after Ahmad Nasiri canceled out Mehdi Mami-zadeh's opener for the home side.

In Isfahan, Amirhossein Jeddi bagged the winner with 15 minutes left on the clock to lead Zob Ahan to a 1-0 win against fourth-placed Golgozar Sirjan. Paykan came out victorious against Havadar thanks to Ebrahim Salehi's goal late in the first half.

Arsenal boss Arteta expects 'jungle' atmosphere at Anfield



JOHN SIBLEY/REUTERS

Arsenal manager Mikel Arteta expects the atmosphere away to Liverpool today to be like a "jungle".

Arsenal last won at Anfield in 2012 and before their last league visit Arteta played 'You'll Never Walk Alone' on a sound system at the training ground, BBC Sport reported.

The Gunners lost 4-0 that day but will return to Anfield eight points clear at the top of the Premier League.

"You cannot train the players in the zoo and then go to the jungle on Sunday," said Arteta.

"It's impossible. You have to expose yourself. You have to prepare the players. You have to tell them what they're going to be facing and you have to recognise that."

The Spaniard added: "The team is full of enthusiasm and positivity."

"We know that we have a big challenge but it is a big opportunity to go to Anfield and do something we haven't done in many years and that is what [has been] driving the team the last few days."

During the first half of Arsenal's last league trip to Anfield in November 2021 Arteta and Liverpool boss Jurgen Klopp were booked for clashing on the touchline with the score at 0-0.

Asked if he would react in that manner again, Arteta said: "I reacted to defend our players the best possible way but I don't like seeing myself like this so hopefully not."

"It happens in football and after that we hugged each other and moved on. The last time we were together nothing happened."

Liverpool have challenged for the Premier League title in three of the past four seasons, winning it for the first time in 2020, but this term they are well off the pace in eighth place.

The Reds are 29 points behind leaders Arsenal having lost nine times in 28 matches. They have not lost more league games in any of Klopp's six full seasons in charge.

"It is one of these moments where it is really not good," Klopp said. "You get in this whirlwind and it sucks you in that direction and all of a sudden it's like 'Wow, where are we?'"

"[But] I am not a worse manager than last year, definitely not. It doesn't mean the outcome is good enough, not at all. But I'm not worse."

"And the players are not worse players. They've just played worse. That's definitely the case."

Nets lock up NBA playoff berth; Warriors, Lakers keep pressure on

The Brooklyn Nets booked an NBA playoff berth on Friday as the Eastern Conference puzzle pieces fell into place, but suspense remained in the wild West with wins for Golden State, New Orleans and the Los Angeles Lakers.

The Nets beat the Orlando Magic 101-84 and clinched the sixth seed in the East, avoiding the play-in tournament in which the seventh- through 10th-placed teams will fight for two remaining playoff berths.

The Nets actually knew they had secured the spot in the fourth quarter of the contest – when the Miami Heat fell 114-108 to the Washington Wizards to finish seventh in the East.

The Heat, clearly content to headline the play-in, rested six of their top players – including Jimmy Butler and Tyler Herro – a strategy repeated around the league by both playoff-bound teams and those already eliminated.

Even with the boost from Miami, the Nets had reason to celebrate their guaranteed berth in a tumultuous season that saw coach Steve Nash sacked after a stumbling start and Kyrie Irving suspended in an anti-Semitism row.

All that came before the stunning trades of Irving and superstar

Kevin Durant in February.

Atlanta clinched eighth place in the East despite a 136-131 overtime loss to the short-handed Philadelphia 76ers thanks to Boston's 121-102 victory over Toronto.

Jayson Tatum scored 21 points for Boston and sat out the second half as the Celtics easily overcame the absence of Marcus Smart, Malcolm Brogdon and Jaylen Brown – who was a late scratch after needing stitches for a cut on his right hand suffered in an accident at home. Meanwhile, the Bulls rested DeMar DeRozan and Zach Lavine, but rallied to beat the depleted Dallas Mavericks 115-112.

Coby White scored 24 points to lead Chicago against a Mavs team that threw in the towel, abandoning their slim hopes of making the Western Conference play-in as they held out Irving and four other key players – and pulled star Luka Doncic after the first quarter.

Mavs coach Jason Kidd said the players who were on the floor wouldn't "cheat the game" and indeed Dallas started off hot and led 67-54 at halftime.

But Chicago clawed back and Dallas' defeat handed a Western Conference play-in berth to the Oklahoma City Thunder.

Although the "tanking" maneuver

could bolster Dallas' position in the NBA draft, it's an ignominious end to the season for a team that reached the Western Conference finals last year.

Elsewhere in the West, the Lakers beat the playoff-bound Phoenix Suns 121-107 and the New Orleans Pelicans downed the New York Knicks 113-105 to maintain their faint hopes of escaping the play-in.

D'Angelo Russell scored 24 points, Austin Reaves added 22 and LeBron James scored 16 for the Lakers, who took advantage of the absence of Suns stars Durant and Devin Booker.

The Warriors, led by 29 points from Klay Thompson and 25 from Stephen Curry, moved a half-game ahead of the Los Angeles Clippers for fifth in the West with a 119-97 victory over the Sacramento Kings.

The Memphis Grizzlies clinched the second seed, ahead of Sacramento, with a 137-114 victory over a Milwaukee Bucks team that rested half a dozen stars, including Giannis Antetokounmpo.

Jaren Jackson scored 36 points for the Grizzlies, who trailed by one at halftime but out-scored Milwaukee 37-15 in the third quarter to take charge.



Brooklyn Nets' Nic Claxton (33) goes up for a dunk during an NBA victory over the Orlando Magic in Brooklyn, NY, US, on April 7, 2023.

NBA

Ancelotti expects veteran trio to extend stay at Real

Real Madrid manager Carlo Ancelotti expects the trio of Karim Benzema, Luka Modric and Toni Kroos to extend their stay at the LaLiga club with new deals after their current contracts expire at the end of this season.

Ballon d'Or winner Benzema, 35, and 37-year-old Croatia midfielder Modric have helped Real win five Champions League titles, while ex-Germany international Kroos, 33, has won four, Reuters reported.

Though Modric and fellow midfielder Kroos have played slightly less this season, former France forward Benzema is Real's top scorer with 25 goals in all

competitions.

Ancelotti said the club are in talks with the players about new deals.

"I think (they) will stay," Ancelotti said on Friday. "We have to evaluate the players not by their age but by what they do."

"You can think the three don't have the physical profile or energy of the younger players, but what these three have in terms of game management is unique, you can't buy it on any market in the world."

"This is born with experience – age takes something from you, but it gives you something back as well."



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