

Esteghlal, Persepolis flying high ahead of season-defining derby



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Persian Gulf Pro League giants Esteghlal and Persepolis are in dazzling form ahead of the highly-anticipated encounter at Tehran's Azadi Stadium on Sunday. As if the 100th Tehran derby needed more reason for excitement, a defeat for either side could virtually mean the

end of the hunt for the top-flight title with three rounds of matches to spare after Sunday's game.

Last Saturday's 6-1 hammering of Havadar at home saw Esteghlal leapfrog Sepahan to go top of the table on a more number of goals scored, with Persepolis trailing the top two by a single point after beating Mes Kerman 3-1.

Back-to-back league defeats against Sepahan and Tractor

in January had left Esteghlal eight points off the pace of the title race, leaving Portuguese manager Ricardo Sa Pinto on the verge of sacking with less than seven months into the job.

However, a run of nine wins and a draw in 10 outings has seen the Blues flying high before chasing a first derby win in the league since March 2018.

In-form winger Mehdi Qayedi got off to a shaky start

to the season since rejoining Esteghlal on loan from Emirati club Shabab Al Ahli in the summer but has been scoring and creating chances at will in recent weeks, bagging eight goals in the past nine appearances.

The 24-year-old has formed a formidable partnership with Mohammad Mohebbi, who netted twice against Havadar to take his tally for the season to seven goals.

Meanwhile, Persepolis,

which lost the top spot after a 1-0 home defeat against Sepahan in late March, was right back in the winning ways after the Persian new year vacations and enters Sunday's game on the back of three consecutive victories, including a massive 1-0 away win against sixth-placed Mes Rafsanjan.

The good news for Persepolis manager Yahya Golmohammadi is that summer marquee signing Saeed Sadeqi looks to have found his scoring boots after returning from a hamstring injury, while the addition of Soroush Rafiei in recent weeks has provided the Reds with more creativity in the middle of the pitch.

Impressive young striker Mohammad Omri missed the win against Mes Kerman with an injury but is expected to recover in time to make the starting XI in the derby.

Golmohammadi will hope his backline of goalkeeper Alireza Beiranvand and center-backs Morteza Pouraliganji and Giorgi Gvelesiani, which have conceded 13 goals in 26 games – second best in the league – will produce another fine performance when facing the league's best frontline with 42 goals.

A draw on Sunday will do little to help either of the two in the title run-in but it could see Sepahan move two points clear on top after the home game against Malavan a day later, edging ever closer to a first league crown in eight years.

Booker, Suns even NBA playoff series with Clippers



Suns guard Devin Booker (1) drives on Clippers forward Kawhi Leonard during Game 2 of a first-round NBA playoff series in Phoenix, AZ, US, on April 18, 2023.

● MATT YORK/AP

Devin Booker recorded 38 points and nine assists, and the Phoenix Suns evened their first-round Western Conference playoff series at one game apiece with a 123-109 victory over the visiting Los Angeles Clippers on Tuesday night.

Kevin Durant added 25 points, six rebounds and five assists as Phoenix rebounded from a Game 1 home loss. Kawhi Leonard registered 31 points, eight rebounds, seven assists and three steals and Russell Westbrook added 28 points for the Clippers. Game 3 of the best-of-seven series is tonight in Los Angeles, Reuters reported.

The Clippers trailed by 13 points early in the fourth quarter, but Leonard made a 3-pointer and Westbrook sank two free throws to bring them within 115-109 with 3:13 left. But Los Angeles wouldn't score again. Chris Paul made a high-arching jumper, fed Deandre Ayton for a layup and then drilled a jumper from the top of the key to give the Suns a 121-109 lead with 2:01 remaining. Bismack Biyombo scored on a tip-in with 31.8 seconds left to account for a game-high 14-point lead as Phoenix closed it out.

Elsewhere, Jayson Tatum led five scorers in double figures with 29 points as Boston Celtics grabbed a 2-0 lead in its Eastern Conference first-round playoff series with a 119-106 win over visiting Atlanta Hawks.

Tatum added 10 rebounds and six assists to lead the Boston offense. Derrick White added 26 points, including 14 in the fourth quarter. After Atlanta took an 11-point lead on DeAndre Hunter's 3-pointer with 5:42 left in the first quarter, Boston outscored the Hawks 50-27 for the remainder of the first half and, for the most part, cruised from there.

Meanwhile, Donovan Mitchell and Evan Mobley each posted double-doubles and Darius Garland helped key a decisive second-quarter surge for host Cleveland Cavaliers, which evened its Eastern Conference quarterfinal series with New York Knicks with a 107-90 victory in Game 2. Mitchell, the seventh-leading scorer in the NBA this season at 28.3 points per game, had just 17 points Tuesday but collected a career-high 13 assists. Mobley had 13 points and 13 rebounds while Garland scored 32 points, including 26 in the first half.

Chelsea's limp CL exit completes season from hell

As Chelsea owner Todd Boehly surveyed the wreckage of his club's season from hell after their Champions League exit on Tuesday, the American might have pondered just how long it will be before they feature in the competition again.

Chelsea are left with nothing but pride to play for in the final weeks of a disastrous campaign after Real Madrid's 2-0 victory in the quarter-final second leg at Stamford Bridge completed a 4-0 aggregate success for the holders, AFP reported.

Appropriately, the troubled Premier League side once again paid the price for a lack of cutting edge as they wasted a host of chances before succumbing to a pair of clinical Real moves finished by Rodrygo.

Since Boehly joined forces with co-owner Behdad Eghbali's Clearlake Capital to buy Chelsea last year, the west London club have suffered one self-inflicted wound after another.

They are languishing in 11th in the Premier League, will finish without a trophy and are unlikely to even qualify for the Europa Conference League, leaving Boehly and Eghbali facing a turbulent

close-season as they try to repair Chelsea's tarnished reputation. In a sign of the turmoil enveloping Chelsea, former Blues striker Didier Drogba ripped into Boehly on French television ahead of the Real game.

"I don't recognise my club. It's no longer the same club. There is a new owner and a new vision. A dressing room of over 30 players is difficult for a manager," Drogba said.

The question is how much lower can Chelsea sink after suffering four successive defeats since Frank Lampard returned as manager until the end of the season following Graham Potter's sacking.

"Chelsea have had huge success

for 20 years, winning the Premier League, qualifying for the Champions League year after year. Maybe this is the year where we aren't quite where we want to be," Lampard said.

"Manchester United and Arsenal have spent time out of the Champions League. Maybe some clubs are more stable than we are at the minute in terms of the squad. But we can set the building blocks now for where we want to get to."

Boehly's chaotic influence has turned Chelsea into a laughing stock less than 12 months into his reign.

The team that lifted the Champions League trophy under Thomas Tuchel just two years ago is al-

ready being broken up.

Of the 11 that started Chelsea's 1-0 win against Manchester City in the final in May 2021, only four were in Lampard's line-up to face Real on Tuesday.

Despite masterminding Chelsea's European triumph, Tuchel was surprisingly dismissed in September amid reports of rows between the German and Boehly over transfer policy.

Perhaps Tuchel had a point because Boehly's £550 million (\$671 million) spending spree on new signings has done nothing to solve Chelsea's problems.

When the fiery Tuchel was axed, Potter was hired as the "collaborative" manager who would work with Boehly to replicate his impressive work with low-budget Brighton on a bigger stage with Chelsea.

But the former Ostersunds and Swansea boss looked out of his depth from the start of his first job at a major club.

It proved impossible for Potter to juggle a bloated squad, with Boehly crucially failing to find a prolific striker in his frenzied spending.

'Ruthless approach'

Potter struggled to impose his philosophy on an injury-hit squad that reportedly lacked respect for his modest managerial CV, with some said

Chelsea's Raheem Sterling and head coach Frank Lampard are pictured after a 2-0 defeat against Real Madrid in the UEFA Champions League quarter-final second leg at Stamford Bridge, London, Britain, on April 18, 2023.

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