

Persian Gulf Pro League: Sepahan wobble keeps Persepolis on top of the table



An effort by Sepahan striker Shahriyar Moghanlou (yellow) goes wide during a 1-1 draw against Malavan FC in the Persian Gulf Pro League at the Naqsh-e Jahan Stadium, Isfahan, Iran, on April 24, 2023.
● PEYMAN SHAHSANAEI/ISNA

Sports Desk

The Persian Gulf Pro League title race took yet another dramatic twist on Monday after Sepahan was held to a 1-1 draw at home against Malavan.

Soheil Fadakar scored for the visiting side with four minutes from normal time to cancel out Shahriyar Moghanlou's opener on the hour mark in Isfahan's

Naqsh-e Jahan Stadium. Sepahan, which is looking for a first league title in eight years, desperately pushed for a winner during 11 minutes of stoppage time but a resolute Malavan side held off the late pressure to go six points clear of the relegation zone.

Malavan manager Maziar Zare', who spent three seasons as a midfielder in Persepolis, did his former

club a big favor as the result meant Yahya Golmohammadi's side remained on top of the table with 57 points. The title race, however, is wide open as the top three – Persepolis, Sepahan, and Esteghlal – are only divided by two points.

Trailing Esteghlal and Sepahan by a single point before this week's matches, the Reds walked away with a massive 1-0 victory in Sun-

day's Tehran derby – thanks to an Issa Al-e Kassir's second-half strike – to leapfrog the Blues and now have their fate in their own hands with three games to spare. Chasing a sixth Iranian top-flight crown in seven seasons, Persepolis, which will face Golgozar Sirjan in the Hazfi Cup quarterfinals on Sunday, will play away to Paykan in Tehran on return to league action on May 6, a

day after Esteghlal's home fixture against San'at Naft Abadan and Sepahan's visit to Naft Masjed Soleyman. Persepolis will host Golgozar again in the league six days later, with Sepahan welcoming Paykan, while defending champion Esteghlal will fly to Rafsanjan to take on sixth-place Mes Rafsanjan. The final round of fixtures will see Persepolis visit Nas-

saji Mazandaran on May 18. Sepahan will also play its last game away from home, squaring off against Mes Kerman, which is now third from bottom and could be battling for survival on the final day. Esteghlal will finish its campaign with a tricky contest against in-form Tractor, which moved up to fourth on Sunday, at Tehran's Azadi Stadium.

Brilliant Butler fires Heat past Bucks; Lakers sink Grizzlies in NBA Playoffs

Jimmy Butler conjured a dazzling 56-point performance as the Miami Heat came from behind to shove the top-seeded Milwaukee Bucks to the brink of elimination from the NBA Playoffs on Monday, while LeBron James led an overtime rally to give the Los Angeles Lakers a commanding series lead over the Memphis Grizzlies.

In an electrifying battle at Miami's Kaseya Center, Butler all but single-handedly led Miami to a 119-114 win that leaves the Bucks 3-1 down in the best-of-seven Eastern Conference first-round series, AFP reported.

In the Western Conference, the second-seeded Grizzlies are also staring down the barrel of an early playoff exit after the Lakers claimed a 117-111 victory to take a 3-1 series lead. James finished with 22

points, 20 rebounds and seven assists and grabbed a game-tying driving layup with 0.8 seconds remaining in the fourth quarter to force overtime.

James then marshalled the Lakers superbly in overtime, scoring four points to put the Lakers in sight of the conference semi-finals.

But the performance of the day came in Miami, where Butler's 56-point haul was the joint fourth-highest individual scoring total in an NBA playoff game ever.

Only Michael Jordan (63 points), Elgin Baylor (61) and Donovan Mitchell (57) have scored more in a post-season game.

Milwaukee, who welcomed Giannis Antetokounmpo back into their lineup after a two-game injury absence, had looked to be cruising towards victory after leading from the opening sec-

onds and keeping Miami at arm's length throughout.

Milwaukee led by 14 points early in the fourth quarter and seemed to be poised to square the series at two games apiece after a ruthless shooting performance from Brook Lopez, with Antetokounmpo providing scoring support.

But Butler led an astonishing late 13-0 run to transform the contest and with the crowd roaring him on, scored 21 points in the fourth quarter to leave the Bucks shellshocked in defeat. Butler said his solo masterpiece was the result of a "complete team effort."

No other Miami player broke 20 points, with Bam Adebayo the next highest Miami scorer with 15 points. Only two other Miami players cracked double figures. Lopez finished with 36

points and 11 rebounds while Antetokounmpo made a triple double on his return with 26 points, 10 rebounds and 13 assists.

In Los Angeles, the Lakers also left it late before subduing a resurgent Grizzlies in overtime.

Memphis looked well-placed to level the series after opening up a seven-point lead with just over five minutes remaining in the fourth quarter.

But the Lakers' D'Angelo Russell reeled off three straight three-pointers to turn the game around and give the hosts a 99-97 lead. A frantic final few minutes saw Memphis take a 104-102 lead with just seconds left on the clock after a sensational behind-the-back pass from Ja Morant set up Desmond Bane for a running layup.

But James conjured his game-tying drive to force



Heat forward Jimmy Butler (22) dunks the ball during a victory over the Bucks in Game 4 of a first-round NBA basketball playoff series in Miami, FL, US, on April 24, 2023.
● MARTA LAVANDIER/AP

overtime and the Lakers tightened up defensively to close out the win.

Lakers coach Darvin Ham reserved special praise for the leadership of the 38-year-old James down the stretch.

"All of his travels, all of the phenomenal things he's

accomplished, he still has that passion, that grit to be on top," Ham said. "And that's what you saw... that's who he's been his entire career." Bane led the Memphis scoring with 36 points while Morant finished with 22.

Chelsea in advanced talks with Pochettino to become new manager



● GETTY IMAGES

Chelsea are in advanced talks to make former Tottenham boss Mauricio Pochettino their new manager.

The Argentine, whose most recent job was at Paris St-Germain, is keen on the role but more negotiations will take place before any deal is finalized, BBC reported.

Chelsea want a quick resolution and believe they are at the end of the process as they search for a permanent replacement for Graham Potter.

Pochettino, 51, would take over from interim manager Frank Lampard.

The former England midfielder took charge of the Blues after they sacked Potter at the start of April, but has lost all four of his games in charge.

It is not yet known whether Pochettino, who has been out of work since PSG sacked him in July 2022, will take over immediately or whether Lampard will stay on as planned until the end of the season.

The Argentine said no to an initial approach from Chelsea, but now the club are happy to hand him more control as he looks for a job that allows him to have input and impact beyond selecting the first team.

Chelsea held talks with former Bayern Munich boss Julian Nagelsmann before he fell out of the running.

Former Spain and Barcelona manager Luis Enrique had been among the contenders, and Burnley boss Vincent Kompany, who has guided the Turf Moor side to promotion to the Premier League this season, was also on the shortlist.

Pochettino managed Spurs for five years from 2014 and led them to the 2019 Champions League final, which they lost to Liverpool.

He was sacked in November 2019 after they made a disappointing start to the following campaign – they were 14th in the Premier League at the time of his departure.

Pochettino also guided Spurs to the League Cup final in 2015 and second in the Premier League in 2016-17, with Chelsea winning both competitions.

He was also the Tottenham manager during an infamous game against Chelsea in May 2016 in which his side picked up nine yellow cards, and the hosts three.

Spurs took a 2-0 lead at Stamford Bridge, but were held to a 2-2 draw – a result that ended their title hopes and confirmed Leicester City as Premier League champions.

Pochettino had been linked with a return to Tottenham after Antonio Conte left in March, but instead looks set to join their London rivals.