

Persian Gulf Pro League: Persepolis, Sepahan on fire as title race goes down the wire



Persepolis players celebrate their first goal in a 4-0 victory over Golgozar Sirjan in the Persian Gulf Pro League at the Azadi Stadium, Tehran, Iran, on May 12, 2023.
● MOHAMMADREZA ALIMADADI/IRNA



Sepahan players celebrate during a 5-0 win against Paykan in the Persian Gulf Pro League at the Naqsh-e Jahan Stadium, Isfahan, Iran, on May 12, 2023.
● MORTEZA SALEHI/TASNIM

Sports Desk

Persepolis routed Golgozar Sirjan 4-0 at home to stay atop the Persian Gulf Pro League table while a 5-0 demolishing of Paykan in Isfahan kept Sepahan within touching distance of the Tehran-based Reds with one round of matches to spare. Meanwhile, Esteghlal's title defense is officially over despite the Blues salvaging a 2-1 victory at Mes Rafsanjan. In the bottom end of the table, Naft Masjed Soleyman is the first team to be relegated from the Iranian top-flight following a goalless stalemate away to Aluminium Arak. Mes Kerman and San'at Naft Abadan, however, remain equal on points and will give it their best shot for survival on the final day.

Ruthless Reds

In Tehran's Azadi Stadium,

Persepolis continued its perfect run since the turn of the Persian new year in late March thanks to what was probably the Reds' best performance of the season. Reds supporters had to wait 80 minutes to see their team secure maximum points against Paykan last time out – thanks to a Mehdi Torabi's spot-kick – but it took the Iranian international, who has been in dazzling form over the past two months, only until midway through the first half to open the scoring for Yahya Golmohammadi's side. Saeed Sadeqi's low effort from outside the box was kept out by Golgozar keeper Mohsen Forouzan but Torabi pounced in on the rebound and got his second of the day 10 minutes later with a long-range freekick that bounced off the pitcher's hands.

Sadeqi put the game to bed, firing into the roof of the net with left foot from a cute angle. Torabi saved his best for last, completing his hat-trick with a sumptuous lob from outside the box four minutes after the break – a serious contender for the goal of the season. The Iranian winger has now been involved in nine of the 14 goals Persepolis has scored after the new year vacations, while a sixth successive victory since the 1-0 home defeat against Sepahan in March leaves the club within a win of a sixth league crown in seven seasons. Persepolis – top of the table with 63 points – heads to northern Iran to take on Nassaji Mazandaran in Qaemshahr's Shahid Vatani Stadium on Thursday. Sepahan, trailing Persepolis by a single point, showed

no mercy against Paykan, which went down to 10 men after Sherzod Temirov was booked twice inside two minutes late in the first half, in Naqsh-e Jahan Stadium and will be desperate to see the Red slip on the final day. Former Persepolis striker Shahriyar Moghanlou bagged a brace to overtake Tractor's Reza Asadi on top of the topscorers chart with 12 goals, while Omid Nourafkan continued his glittering campaign with a double. Ramin Rezaeian was also on the scoresheet to keep Sepahan's hopes for a first league crown in eight years alive. Sepahan will next play away to Mes Kerman, where the home side will have it all to fight for. Mes shared the spoils with Malavan in a goalless stalemate in Bandar Anzali to stay just outside the relega-

tion zone thanks to a head-to-head advantage over San'at Naft. San'at, which has managed to close an eight-point gap on Mes since Abdollah Veisi took over on the bench, got off to a flying start at home against Zob Ahan, going in front through Taleb Rikani's penalty in the third minute. San'at skipper, however, turned from hero to villain seven minutes later, when he was shown a straight red for a reckless high foot on Mohammad Qoreishi's chest. Amirhossein Jeddi equalized for the visiting side in the 27th minute as it finished 1-1. San'at Naft will visit Golgozar next, needing to better Mes Kerman's result against Sepahan to stay in the league. In Rafsanjan, three goals in seven minutes saw Esteghlal come for behind to beat

Mes Rafsanjan 2-1. Mehdi Hosseini gave Mohammad Rabiei's men a 74th-minute lead before Mohammadhossein Moradmam drew the Blues level three minutes later with a header on a Mehdi Mehdi's set-piece. Mohammad Mohebbi tapped in the winner from close range on a Mehdi Qayed'i's low cross as Esteghlal stayed four points behind its archrival on top, ruing last week's home draw against San'at Naft. Elsewhere, Havadar and Foolad Khuzestan played to a goalless draw in Tehran, while a Mohammad Qanbari's superb strike from the corner of the box in the last minute of the normal time saw Tractor edge Nassaji 1-0 to secure a fourth-pot finish in the table, and a possible berth for the AFC Champions League.

Ten Hag optimistic over 'quality' signings for United this summer



● TONY O'BRIEN/REUTERS

BBC – Manchester United can attract "quality players" this summer despite uncertainty over the club's ownership, says manager Erik ten Hag.

He said it was difficult to convince players to move to Old Trafford after he took charge at the end of last season. "I see a big difference in comparison with last year," Ten Hagsaid.

"Now many players see the project, what's going on, the dynamic and the ambition." Last summer midfielder Casemiro joined from Real Madrid for £70m and United also signed midfielder Christian Eriksen, forward Antony and defenders Lisandro Martinez and Tyrell Malacia during the summer transfer window.

Netherlands forward Cody Gakpo was heavily linked with a move from PSV Eindhoven in December before moving to Liverpool. Ten Hag said: "There were a lot of reservations last year, a lot of doubts when we approached players. This year many quality players really want to come."

Qatari banker Sheikh Jassim bin Hamad Al Thani and Sir Jim Ratcliffe's Ineos Group, who have submitted bids for United, are the two main parties looking to take control. United's owners, the Glazer family, have yet to name a preferred bidder. United, who won the Carabao Cup in February, face Manchester City in the FA Cup final on 3 June.

The club has been linked with a number of players including Tottenham Hotspur striker Harry Kane.

Ten Hag said expectations would be higher next season but they were making steady progress.

"We have to rebuild and reconstruct," Ten Hagsaid. "We are in that process and in the right direction. You can see that in the way we play."

Goalkeeper David de Gea is in talks over a new contract, although there have been reports that he may not be first choice next season.

The 32-year-old has been criticised this season, most recently after his error proved decisive in the 1-0 league defeat by West Ham last weekend.

Ten Hag said uncertainty over De Gea's future was not behind his loss of form.

"Every top football player, there's a high demand," Ten Hagsaid. "You have to accept it, deal with it, and the demand is you have to perform. I don't think that's a reason because David is so experienced. I can think about a thousand and one reasons but I don't think that's the reason."

Lakers, Heat advance to conference finals with Game 6 victories



Lakers forward LeBron James (front) scores past Warriors guard Stephen Curry during Game 6 of an NBA basketball Western Conference semifinal series in Los Angeles, CA, US, on May 12, 2023.
● ASHLEY LANDIS/AP

ASSOCIATED PRESS – LeBron James had 30 points, nine rebounds and nine assists and the Los Angeles Lakers eliminated the defending NBA champion Golden State Warriors with a 122-101 victory Friday night in Game 6 of the second-round series.

The seventh-seeded Lakers will face Nikola Jokic and the top-seeded Nuggets in the Western Conference finals starting Tuesday night in Denver.

Anthony Davis had 17 points and 20 rebounds for the Lakers, who never trailed in a closeout victory that punctuated their increasingly incredible late-season surge.

Davis said he attributes the Lakers' late-season roll to "togetherness. We want to shock the world."

Austin Reaves scored 23 points, highlighted by a 54-footer from midcourt at the halftime buzzer for the Lakers. They improved to 7-0 at home since the regular season ended with three wins in seven days over the Warriors. Los Angeles also snapped Golden State's streak of 28 playoff series with at least one road victory – an NBA-record run encompassing Stephen Curry's entire career.

James, Davis and the Lakers are the first team since 2014 to eliminate Curry's Warriors from the playoffs before the NBA Finals. Golden State has played in six of the last eight NBA Finals, missing

the playoffs entirely in the other two seasons.

Curry scored 32 points while missing 10 of his 14 3-point attempts for the sixth-seeded Warriors, whose pursuit of their fifth championship in nine seasons ended with three straight road losses and an inept offensive performance by Curry's teammates in Game 6, including a 3-of-19 effort by Klay Thompson, who missed 10 of his 12 three-point attempts.

Heat 96 Knicks 92

Jimmy Butler scored 24 points, Bam Adebayo added 23 and Miami beat New York in Game 6 to advance to the Eastern Conference finals for the 10th time overall and the third time in the last four years.

Miami became the second No. 8 seed in NBA history to make the conference finals – joining the Knicks, who pulled it off in 1999. The Heat will visit Boston or Philadelphia in Game 1 on Wednesday. The Celtics and 76ers play Game 7 of their series tonight.

Jalen Brunson was spectacular for New York, scoring 41 points on 14-for-22 shooting. But his teammates combined for only 51 points – Julius Randle had 15 and RJ Barrett 11 on 1-for-10 shooting. Josh Hart also had 11 points for the Knicks.