

## Persian Gulf Pro League: All on the line at both ends of the table in highly-anticipated finale



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### Sports Desk

It is 15 years to the date since Persepolis beat Sepahan 2-1 in the most dramatic fashion – courtesy of a 96th-minute winner – to overtake its opponent for the Persian Gulf Pro League crown on the final day of the season.

A decade and a half on, the most decorated teams in the Pro League era are again involved in the two-horse race to take home the coveted trophy when the final round of league fixtures is played across eight stadiums today.

Persepolis heads into the away game in Qaemshahr's Shahid Vahani Stadium, looking to seal a sixth title in seven years with maximum points against Nassaji Mazandaran.

Sepahan, meanwhile, trailing the top by a single

point, knows a win against struggling host Mes Kerman needs to be coupled with the Reds' slip if the Isfahan-based club is to lift the trophy for the first time since 2015.

When a Mohammad Karimi's last-gasp strike saw Sepahan walk away with a 1-0 win against Persepolis in Tehran's Azadi Stadium back in March, the Reds' title quest looked in tatters, as they fell to third in the table – four points behind then leader Sepahan.

However, a remarkable run of six successive wins after the Persian New Year's vacations – including a massive one-goal triumph over archrival Esteghlal in the Tehran derby – has put Yahya Golmohammadi's men on the cusp of glory.

Mehdi Torabi's dazzling form of late has played an

integral part in the Reds' title run-in as he has bagged five goals in as many recent games – including a hat-trick in the 4-0 hammering of Golgozar Sirjan last time out – while providing his teammates with a couple of assists.

Golmohammadi will hope to have his Iranian international winger and Vahid Amiri as well as resurgent trio of Soroush Rafiei, Saeed Sadeqi, and Issa Alekassir on their best day as a win in Vahani Stadium will leave Persepolis two games away from a second domestic league and cup double in four years.

Should Sepahan, who many believe has played the best football in the 16-team league this season, finish its campaign empty-handed, the club supporters will rue the controversial 1-0 defeat at Tractor and, perhaps

most significantly, the 1-1 home draw against Malavan in April.

A day after the derby victory for Persepolis, Sepahan had to beat Malavan to regain the top spot and Jose Morais's men looked in control for the best part of the contest, before a Soheil Fadakar's equalizer with four minutes from normal time silenced the jam-packed Naqsh-e Jahan Stadium.

### Seeking survival

Tensions will be equally high at the other end of the table as Mes Kerman and San'at Naft Abadan will be craving to avoid joining Naft Masjed Soleyman in relegation.

Mes and San'at Naft are level on points, but the former sits just outside the bottom two thanks to a head-to-head advantage over

San'at.

Mes was eight points clear of the relegation zone in late March before a 2-1 loss at San'at was followed by three successive defeats and a goalless stalemate at Malavan last Friday and a defeat against Sepahan today could well see Farzad Hosseinkhani's side return to the second-tier league after a year.

San'at Naft, meanwhile, plays away to Golgozar Sirjan, hoping to better Mes Kerman's result.

The southern Iranian club, which appointed Abdollah Veisi as the manager in March, made the most of Mes Kerman's wobble by collecting nine points in a five-game unbeaten run – including a 1-1 draw against Esteghlal in Tehran. The bad news for Veisi is that his team will have to do without its talisman

Taleb Rikani for today's game after San'at skipper was shown a straight red in the 1-1 draw against Zob Ahan.

Elsewhere in the league, Esteghlal and Tractor – third and fourth in the table respectively – will square off at the Azadi Stadium, with both sides looking to round off their impressive runs in the second half of the season in style.

Foolad Khuzestan will host Aluminium Arak in Ahvaz's Foolad Arena, while in Isfahan, Zob Ahan welcomes Havadar.

Bottom club Naft Masjed Soleyman will play its last game in the Iranian top-flight for a while when hosting Malavan, and Mes Rafsanjan will visit Paykan in what could be head coach Mohammad Rabiei's final game on Mes bench.

**Inzaghi always believed that Inter would reach Champions League final**



Inter head coach Simone Inzaghi reacts on the touchline during the 1-0 victory over Milan in the UEFA Champions League semi-final second leg in Stadio Giuseppe Meazza, Milan, Italy, on May 16, 2023.

● AFP

**REUTERS** – Inter Milan manager Simone Inzaghi said he never doubted that his team could reach the Champions League final as they completed a resounding 3-0 aggregate victory over rivals AC Milan on Tuesday.

A month ago, Inzaghi faced criticism and was under pressure after a lacklustre run of results, yet his side has turned it around and their 1-0 semi-final second leg win over Milan was their eighth in a row in all competitions.

"It was a dream at the start, but we always believed, we had an extraordinary run and to win the semi-final in a derby this way is immensely satisfying. We can only praise the lads," Inzaghi told Sport Mediaset.

Inter are third in Serie A and will face Fiorentina in the Coppa Italia final on May 24. Their return to form has been built on a solid defence, keeping six clean sheets in their current winning streak and conceding only three goals.

"I had said a long while back we would put in a crazy effort without looking at one competition or the other, just trying to achieve our best," he said.

Inzaghi basked in the glory of his team's victory over Milan, a fourth successive win over their city rivals. Milan had not suffered four defeats in a single campaign against Inter since the 1973-74 season.

"They showed strength, determination, aggression, concentration, they were wonderful," he said. "We played four derbies since January and won all four, we know Milan are the Champions of Italy and have huge quality, but the players were excellent and deserve to enjoy this evening."

Before their two semi-final victories, Inter beat Milan 3-0 to lift the Italian Supercup in January and grabbed a 1-0 win in Serie A the following month.

Inzaghi said that Serie A was now the primary focus for his players, who face newly crowned champions Napoli on Sunday.

"I gave the players a day off tomorrow because we haven't had it since April 1. It was deserved, We'll meet again from Thursday because we have to prepare for a league match in Naples."

The Champions League final will be played at the Ataturk Olympic Stadium in Istanbul on June 10.

## Jokic leads Nuggets past Lakers 132-126 in West opener

**AP** – Nikola Jokic recorded his sixth triple-double of these playoffs with 34 points, 21 rebounds and 14 assists, powering the Denver Nuggets to a 1-0 lead over the Los Angeles Lakers in the NBA Western Conference finals.

Behind Jokic's sizzling start and strong finish, and Jamal Murray's 31 points while battling an ear infection, Denver beat the Lakers in the opener of the West finals for the first time ever.

After a slow start, Anthony Davis had 40 points and 10 rebounds, and LeBron James finished with 26 points, 12 boards and nine assists. Austin Reaves chipped in 23 points and fueled L.A.'s desperate fourth-quarter run that nearly erased Denver's 14-point cushion after three.

Nuggets guard Kentavious Caldwell-Pope scored 21 points against his former team. Michael Porter Jr. had 15 points and 10 boards and Bruce Brown added 16 points. The Nuggets led by as many as 21 but the Lakers pulled within three points twice in the fourth quarter, once on Reaves' 3-pointer at 124-121 and again on James' pair of free throws that made it 129-126 with 1:12 remaining.

"Yeah, it took us a half to get into the game," James said, "and that was pretty much the ballgame right there. They punched us in the mouth to start. ... I know the game is won in 48 minutes, but they set the tone in 24 minutes and we were playing catch-up for the next 24."



Nuggets' Nikola Jokic (15) shoots during a victory over the Lakers in Game 1 of the Western Conference finals in Ball Arena, Denver, CO, US, on May 16, 2023.

● MATTHEW STOCKMAN/AFP

In the fourth quarter, Rui Hachimura guarded Jokic, allowing Davis to crowd the paint and make things harder for the Nuggets big man to dominate the paint. But it wasn't enough.

After Jokic sank two free throws with 26

seconds left to give Denver a 131-126 lead, Murray poked the ball from James as he was about to take it to the hoop and Jokic gathered the loose ball before being fouled with 10.9 seconds left. He sank one of two and James misfired from 3 as the

seconds ticked off.

"I'd rather clean things up after a win in the Western Conference finals than after a loss, so I will take it," Nuggets coach Michael Malone said. "But much work to do." Game 2 is tonight at Ball Arena, where the top-seeded Nuggets are 7-0 in the playoffs and 41-7 overall, the best home record in the league this season.

Jokic said a day earlier that the Nuggets desperately needed to avoid following in the sneaker-steps of the Memphis Grizzlies and Golden State Warriors, both of whom dropped their home opener to the Lakers and wound up losing in six games.

Moreover, James has won his last 20 playoff series in which his team has won the opener.

The Nuggets hadn't taken Game 1 against the Lakers since 1979, when they won the opener of the best-of-three series only to lose the next two. That's the closest the Nuggets have ever come to eliminating the Lakers, who have beaten Denver three times in the West finals, including in the Florida bubble in 2020.

Flashing his MVP credentials in a stunning display of power in the first quarter, Jokic pulled down a dozen boards and dished out five assists to go with eight points. That made him the first player since at least 1997 to have a dozen or more boards and at least five assists in any quarter of an NBA playoff game.