

## Sports Desk

The curtain was brought down on the tightest Persian Gulf Pro League title race in years on Thursday, with Persepolis claiming a record-extending eighth title – 15th in the Iranian top-flight.

Fifteen years to the date after a 96th-minute winner had seen Persepolis beat Sepahan 2-1 to overtake its opponent for the top spot on the final day of the season, the Reds again pipped the Isfahan-based club to the Pro League crown, thanks to a 4-0 away victory over Nassaji Mazandaran.

Needing maximum points in Qaemshahr's Vatani Stadium to secure the title, Persepolis supporters had their stress eased early on this time around when Ali Nemati's hammered home from close range with less than two minutes into the game after a Mehdi Torabi's set-piece ended up on the fullback's boot. Nassaji centerback Mehrdad Abdi received his marching orders for a second bookable offense in the 15th minute and Saeed Sadeqi doubled the lead for Persepolis with a composed finish right before the half-hour mark.

Persepolis kept dominating the contest until Soroush Rafiei bagged the third goal with a sublime strike from behind the box in the 75th minute and Milad Sarlak, who scored the first goal of the campaign for Persepolis, fired in from long range three minutes later to round off a season of twists and turns for the Tehran-based Reds in style.

When a Mohammad Karimi's last-gasp strike gave Sepahan a 1-0 win against Persepolis in Tehran 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 seven successive wins after the Persian New Year's vacations – including a massive one-goal triumph over archrival Esteghlal in the Teh-

## Persian Gulf Pro League: Persepolis lifts sixth trophy in seven years



Persepolis captain Omid Alishah lifts the trophy as Persepolis players celebrate winning the Persian Gulf Pro League title at the Shahid Vatan Stadium, Qaemshahr, Iran, on May 18, 2023.  
● MOAHMMADREZA ALIMADADI/IRNA

ran derby – propelled Persepolis to a sixth league trophy in seven years.

"We didn't give up after the Sepahan defeat and moved on with aspiration. We set a benchmark for other players and managers, and Persepolis is definitely the team to be inspired by as a role model for the rest of the league," said Persepolis manager Yahya Golmoham-

medi, who has now won the league three times since taking over midway through the 2019/20 season. Persepolis remains on course for a second double in four years and will take on Havadar in the Hazfi Cup last-four on Thursday. "Our season is not finished yet and we'll start preparing for the Havadar game tomorrow. I've told my players that the next game is the

most important of the season for us and I just hope we can keep up the recent momentum until we win the Hazfi Cup," Golmohammadi added.

### San'at survives

There was all to play for in Kerman's Shahid Bahonar Stadium as Sepahan, trailing the top by a single point, was craving for the Reds' slip while Mes Kerman hoped a draw

would be enough for the host to avoid relegation.

Milad Zakipour's strike for Sepahan five minutes after the break did little to uplift the away fans in Kerman, who had heard about Persepolis's two-goal lead at halftime, but it was surely music to the ears for San'at Naft Abadan supporters, whose team was level on points with Mes prior to Thursday's visit

to Golgozar Sirjan, needing to better Mes Kerman's result to move out of the relegation zone.

Shahriyar Moghanlou tapped in a second goal for Sepahan in the 90th minute to finish as the league topscorer with 13 strikes.

Hassan Moradifar pulled one back for the home side but it was too little too late as Farzad Hosseinkhani's side is back in the second-tier league after one season, while Sepahan was left ruing the 1-1 home draw against Malavan in April, in which the host conceded the equalizer with four minutes from normal time.

In Sirjan, when Mehdi Mamizadeh netted the winner for San'at Naft in the first minute of the stoppage time, the survival mission was accomplished for head coach Abdollah Veisi.

San'at was eight points adrift of the safety zone when Veisi was appointed to the job in March, but made the most of Mes Kerman's wobble by collecting 12 points in a six-game unbeaten run – including a 1-1 draw against Esteghlal in Tehran.

Elsewhere, the shocking result of the day came in Tehran's Azadi Stadium, where Mehdi Qaedi scored a hat-trick and Abolfazl Jalali, Mohammad-Hossein Moradmand, Arash Rezavand, and Ja'far Salmani were also on the scoresheet as Esteghlal thrashed fourth-place Tractor 7-1.

In Ahavaz, Saeed Vase'ei and Mohammad-Amin Hazbavi scored inside nine minutes to give Foolad Khuzestan a two-goal lead against Aluminium Arak, only to see their lead canceled out thanks to late goals by Mohammadreza Azadi – from the spot – and Reza Jabireh as it finished 2-2.

Zob Ahan and Havadar shared the spoils in a six-goal thriller in Isfahan, while Paykan and Mes Rafsanjan played to a 1-1 draw in Tehran. Naft Masjed Soleyman, whose relegation had been secured last week, defeated Malavan 5-1.

## 'Amazing' Murray leads Nuggets rally in 108-103 win over Lakers

AFP – Jamal Murray scored 23 of his 37 points in the fourth quarter as a furious finale carried the Denver Nuggets to a 108-103 win over the Los Angeles Lakers on Thursday and a 2-0 lead in their NBA Western Conference final series.

17 rebounds and 12 assists for the Nuggets, but it was Murray who starred when it mattered most. He made six of seven shots, including four of five from three-point range, playing all 12 minutes of a final period in which Jokic and fellow

enough for a Nuggets team that had kept it close but couldn't find a way past LeBron James and the Lakers through the first three periods at Denver's Ball Arena. James and Austin Reaves scored 22 points apiece for the Lakers and Jap-

ers couldn't stem the tide once Murray got going. The Lakers pushed their lead to as many as 11 in the second quarter before coming up empty on 10 straight attempts – a dry spell ended by James's driving finger-roll layup. James, who also had nine rebounds and 10 assists, then found Hachimura for an alley-oop dunk that put the Lakers up 53-48 at halftime. Anthony Davis made just four of 15 shots on the way to 18 points and 14 rebounds for the Lakers, who nevertheless pushed the lead back to 11 midway through the third as James came up with a steal and raced for a dunk. But again the Nuggets clawed back, pulling level at 74-74 on Murray's pull-up jumper with 2:10 left in the third, only for the Lakers to pull away again to lead by three, 79-76, going into the final period. With 9:21 left to play a Murray three-pointer gave the Nuggets the lead for the first time since the first quarter – and they wouldn't fall behind again. "I think he was amazing," Jokic said. "When it mattered the most, he made shots and he won us the game, basically."



Nuggets' Jamal Murray (27) shoots during a victory over the Lakers in Game 2 of the NBA Playoffs Western Conference Finals in Denver, CO, US, on May 18, 2023.  
● GARRETT ELLWOOD/GETTY IMAGES

Two-time NBA Most Valuable Player Nikola Jokic racked up another triple-double with 23 points,

starts Kentavious Caldwell-Pope and Aaron Gordon went scoreless. Murray's exploits were

anese reserve forward Rui Hachimura delivered a brilliant 21 points off the bench, but the Lak-

## Nadal out of French Open, plans retirement in 2024



● ALEX SHARP/wimbledon.com

BBC – Rafael Nadal will miss the French Open for the first time in 19 years after a hip injury ruled out the record 14-time men's singles champion. The 36-year-old Spaniard, who has won 22 major titles, also said he plans to retire after the 2024 season. "I didn't make the decision, my body made the decision. To play Roland Garros is impossible," he said. "Next year will probably be my last year. That is my idea. If I keep going now I won't be able to make it happen." Nadal holds the joint record number of men's major triumphs alongside Serbia's Novak Djokovic. He has

won 70 other ATP titles and spent 209 weeks at world number one – the sixth longest amount of time in ATP history. Known as the 'King of Clay', Nadal has won 112 of his 115 matches at the French Open. However, the Majorcan left-hander has not played since sustaining the hip problem at the Australian Open in January. Nadal has been practising in recent weeks, but was not fit enough to play a tournament in the run-up to Roland Garros. The French Open starts in Paris on 28 May and runs until 11 June.

"I'm still in the position where I am not able to feel ready to compete at the standards I need to be to play at Roland Garros. "I am not the guy who will be at Roland Garros just to try to be there and in a position where I don't like to be." Nadal said he needs to stop playing for the foreseeable future in order to make a full recovery and complete a planned farewell season in 2024. "I will stop for a while, maybe one month and a half, maybe two months, maybe three months or maybe four months. I don't know. I do not like to predict the future," he said.