

# What were the defining moments in the title race for Persepolis?

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EXCLUSIVE

When the newly-finished Persian Gulf Pro League season reached the half-way point in January, Persepolis looked destined for a sixth title in seven seasons.

The Tehran-based club, who had seen their five-year dominance over the Iranian top-flight come to an end by archrival Esteghlal in the previous season, had made a summer shake-up in the squad, bringing in goalkeeper Alireza Beiranvand and his teammate in the Iranian national team Morteza Pouraliganji, as well as Sepahan trio Soroush Rafiei, Danial Esmaeilifar, and Giorgi Gvlesiani.

Creative winger Saeed Sadeghi also joined from Golgozar Sirjan, while in former PSV and Brighton player Jürgen Locadia, Persepolis seemed to have found a much-needed prolific striker.

The Reds kicked off the quest for a sixth league crown in seven years with a couple of unimpressive goalless stalemates away to Zob Ahan and at home against Foolad Khuzestan before the first victory of the season came in Arak – a city Persepolis had left empty-handed on the previous two visits – as Milad Sarlak lobbed the keeper late in the first half to secure a 1-0 win.

The result was followed by three successive wins before a 1-0 home defeat against Tractor and a goalless draw at Sepahan, but a run of three more victories in a row saw the Reds sit two points clear of Esteghlal on top of the table before the World Cup break in October.

On return to action from the two-month pause, Persepolis was hit with the shocking news of Locadia's departure.

The Dutchman had been quick to turn into a fans' favorite by scoring six goals in his first nine appearances for the Reds but parted ways with the club for "family reasons" and head coach



Persepolis players celebrate their first goal in the 4-0 victory over Nassaji Mazandaran in the Persian Gulf Pro League in Qaemshahr, Iran, on May 18, 2023.  
MEGHADAD MADADI/TASNIM

Yahya Golmohammadi had Georgian centerback Gvlesiani to thank for bagging a brace to salvage a late draw against Esteghlal in the Tehran derby.

Meanwhile, Mohammad Omri – former player of the Reds' under-21 team – filled in for Locadia in style, scoring three in two games, as Persepolis walked away with a massive 2-0 win at Golgozar Sirjan and thrashed Nassaji Mazandaran 5-1 at the Azadi Stadium.

The wins were coupled with losses for Sepahan and Esteghlal – against Paykan and Tractor respectively – in back-to-back matchdays to help Persepolis go four points clear of Golgozar and five above Esteghlal and Sepahan on top by the end of the first half of the season.

Persepolis then beat Zob Ahan 1-0 at home but double defeats by one goal against Foolad and Havadar – and a goalless game against Aluminium at home – in four games led to Sepahan overtaking the Reds on top by a three-point lead.

Golmohammadi's side closed the gap on Sepahan to a one, courtesy of two successive wins – including a dramatic 3-2 win at Tractor thanks to Vakhdat Khanonov's 95th-minute winner, but a week later Sepahan skipper Mohammad Karimi netted deep into stoppage time against a 10-man Persepolis in Tehran, with Esteghlal coming out victorious 2-0 against Foolad in Ahvaz, to leave the Reds third in the table.

Persepolis's title aspirations

looked in tatters heading into the Persian New Year break in March but Golmohammadi's men had other ideas as the season-defining period for them came after the vacations.

The Reds got off a flying start in the new Persian calendar year, leaving Rafsanjan with a 1-0 victory over Mes Rafsanjan – which had suffered only two defeats prior to the game. The morale-boosting result was followed by easy wins against Malavan and Mes Kerman – and Sepahan fell to a 1-0 defeat to Tractor – before Persepolis prepared for a crunch derby date with Esteghlal. Ricardo Sa Pinto's Blues were in dazzling form – heading into the game on the back of nine wins in 10 unbeaten games – and

were the favorites to end a five-year win drought against Persepolis in the league.

Golmohammadi still managed to pull off the most crucial three points of the season against his Portuguese counterpart, with a solid defensive display keeping Esteghlal's dynamic wingers Mehdi Qayedi and Mohammad Mohebi at bay, while Issa Alekassir came off the bench at halftime to propel his side to a 1-0 victory. Sepahan had the chance to move back atop table a day later with a win at home against Malavan FC but a Soheil Fadakar's equalizer for the visitors with four minutes from normal time stunned a jam-packed Naqsh-e Jahan Stadium in Isfahan. Sepahan's 1-1 draw at home

meant that Persepolis was now in control of the title race with three games to spare until the end of the season.

Reds supporters had to wait 80 minutes for their team to break the deadlock against a resolute Paykan side in the following matchday when Mehdi Torabi scored from the spot and the Iranian international then bagged a hat-trick to steer his side to a 4-0 thumping of Golgozar.

With Sepahan trailing the top by a point, Persepolis went into the final round of fixtures on Thursday needing a win to secure a record-extending eighth Pro League crown.

Ali Nemati was on the scoresheet with less than two minutes into the game and when Sadeqi scored a second against the 10-man host before the half-hour mark the title was all but secured.

Rafiei and Sarlak netted with a couple of superb long-range efforts in the second half as Persepolis rounded off a season of twists and turns in emphatic fashion.

A reform in the backline in the buildup to the season surely made the difference for Persepolis, which conceded 13 in 30 games – a best tally in the league – with Beiranvand keeping a record of 18 clean sheets.

The late resurgence of Torabi, Alekassir, Sadeqi, and Rafiei, as well as consistent performances by Vahid Amiri, were also decisive in the title run-in, but Golmohammadi perhaps deserves most credit for not letting his team fall apart after the Sepahan defeat.

"We never gave up after the setback against Sepahan and moved on with aspiration. We set a benchmark for other teams, players, and managers. Persepolis is definitely an inspiration for the rest of the league," Golmohammadi said after winning the title.

The Iranian head coach is now two games away from leading his team to a second domestic league and cup double in four years, with Havadar waiting in the Hazfi Cup last-four on Thursday.

## Halep charged with second breach of doping rules



GETTY IMAGES

BBC – Two-time Grand Slam champion Simona Halep has been charged with a second doping offence over "irregularities in her athlete biological passport".

The Romanian, 31, has been suspended since October after testing positive for a banned substance at the US Open.

Her additional charge is separate to the one she is already suspended for.

Halep said on Instagram she feels "helpless facing such harassment" and denies the charges, suggesting she has been "a victim of a contamination".

The athlete biological passport programme collects and compares biological data to spot discrepancies over time that suggest possible doping.

Former world number one Halep's suspension last year was imposed after she tested positive for roxadustat, an anti-anaemia drug which stimulates the production of red blood cells in the body.

She criticised the International Tennis Integrity Agency (ITIA), which is responsible for testing within the sport, for its handling of her case, arguing that there had been unnecessary delays in the process.

"I have lived the worst nightmare I have ever gone through in my life," she said.

"Not only has my name been soiled in the worst possible way, but I am facing a constant determination from the ITIA, for a reason that I cannot understand, to prove my guilt while I haven't ever thought of taking an illicit substance."

Halep added that she hopes to have the chance to prove her innocence at a hearing scheduled for the end of May. The ITIA said it was continuing discussions with an independent tribunal team and with Halep's representatives to get the matter resolved as quickly and efficiently as possible, although did not indicate how long that would take.

Nicole Sapstead, the ITIA's senior director for anti-doping, said: "We understand that today's announcement adds complexity to an already high-profile situation. "From the outset of this process – and indeed any other at the ITIA – we have remained committed to engaging with Ms Halep in an empathetic, efficient and timely manner."

In April, Halep spoke for the first time since her suspension, saying she was frustrated with the time it was taking for the case to be resolved but the ITIA said "the process is ongoing".

## Butler scores 27, Miami beats Boston to take 2-0 lead in East finals

AP – Jimmy Butler scored 27 points, hitting back-to-back buckets to tie the game and give Miami the lead, and the eighth-seeded Heat left Boston with a 111-105 victory Friday night and a 2-0 lead in the NBA Eastern Conference finals.

Butler also provided eight rebounds, six assists and an emotional spark after Boston's Grant Williams started jawing with him: Butler stared down Williams, with both players drawing technical fouls for the double head-butt.

Then "Jimmy Buckets" scored and scored some more – nine points in all

during a 23-9 run that turned a nine-point deficit into a 105-100 lead.

"I knew that was going to be good for us," said Caleb Martin, who came off the bench to score 25 points. "We'll take mad Jimmy at any time. You could kind of see it in his eyes he was ready to go after that."

Bam Adebayo had 22 points, 17 rebounds and nine assists for Miami, which returns home with a chance to sweep and become just the second No. 8 seed to reach the NBA Finals.

Jayson Tatum had 34 points, 13 rebounds and eight assists for Boston. But

the Celtics star went 0 for 3 with two turnovers in the fourth quarter, when Boston blew an 89-77 lead en route to a second home loss in three nights.

After finishing 13 games ahead of the Heat in the regular season – and then watching top-seeded Milwaukee fall to Miami in the first round – the Celtics have stumbled on what appeared to be a clear path to their second straight NBA Finals.

Jaylen Brown scored 16 points on 7-for-23 shooting; he went 1 for 5 with a turnover in the final quarter, when Miami outscored Boston 36-22.



Miami Heat forward Jimmy Butler (red) shoots against the Boston Celtics during Game 2 of the NBA basketball playoffs Eastern Conference finals at TD Garden, Boston, MA, US, on May 19, 2023.  
MICHAEL DWYER/AP