

Big four gearing up as countdown is on for Persian Gulf Pro League



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Iranian football fans are to be treated to another season of excitement in the Persian Gulf Pro League when the country's top-flight action gets underway on Thursday.

It has been just over two months since Persepolis thrashed Nassaji Mazandaran by four goals on the final day to round off one of the tightest title contests recent years with a sixth league crown in seven seasons.

And now the Tehran Reds, which went on lift the Hazfi Cup trophy in May, are again tipped to be engaged in a four-horse race alongside archrival Esteghlal, Sepahan, and Tractor for the ultimate prize of the Iranian club football.

The defending champion will surely benefit from minimum changes being made to the starting XI as striker Issa Alekasir, who played a massive role in the late stages of the Reds' title run-in last season, is

the only marquee player to have left the club – signing for Sepahan.

Persepolis has managed to hold on to the integral members of the best backline in the league, including star goalkeeper Alireza Beiranvand, while international center-back Hossein Kan'anizadegan has rejoined from Qatari club Al Ahli to add to the depth of the squad.

Zorya Luhansk forward Shahab Zahedi has also been recruited on loan but Persepolis will be looking to have more signings up front to fill the void caused by the departure of Aleksir as well as Brazilian Leonardo Pereira and Malian Cheick Diabaté.

Sepahan and Tractor, unlike Persepolis, have undergone a somewhat full-scale rebuild as they are desperate to end the Reds' dominance in the Iranian top flight.

Sepahan looked to be on its way to a first title in eight years under Portuguese head coach Jose Morais

last season before untimely wobbles against Tractor and most significantly in a 1-1 home draw against Malavan FC, coupled with seven successive wins for Persepolis, saw the Isfahan-based powerhouse ultimately finish one point adrift of the top spot.

The addition of Alekasir, Reza Asadi, and Kaveh Rezaei to the squad already possessing last season's top scorer Shahriyar Moghanlou promises a formidable frontline for Sepahan, while Reza Shekari and Ehsan Pahlevan have also been signed to bring more creativity to the midfield area.

Tractor will be looking to build on an impressive run in the second half of the previous campaign under Spanish manager Paco Jemez, who will start a first season on the northwest Iranian club's bench.

The defensive renovation has been the top priority for the Spaniard, whose team conceded 34 goals across 30 games – includ-

ing seven against Esteghlal on the final day.

Goalkeeper Hossein Pour-Hamidi, who was second to Beiranvand in the number of clean sheets last term, ended his loan spell at Iralco to return to Tractor, with international center-back Shoja Khalilzadeh joining former Persepolis teammates Mehdi Shiri, Saeed Aqaei, and Siamak Nemati in signing for the club – along with full-back Mohammad Naderi and ex-Foolad center-back Aref Aqasi.

Asadi and Mohammad Abbaszadeh, who finished behind Moghanlou and Mehdi Qayedi in the league's scoring chart, have both embarked on a new chapter elsewhere – a source of concern for Jemez – though former Esteghlal winger Amirhossein Hosseinzadeh ended his disappointing spell at Belgian club Charleroi to seal a move to Tractor.

Meanwhile, Javad Nekounam might regret the timing of his long-awaited

appointment as the head coach of Esteghlal, whose preseason has been hampered by chaos and controversy.

The Blues wasted a vital period of the transfer window trying to lure Beiranvand, before the club CEO Hojjat Karimi stepped down from his role following a failed attempt to sign the Iranian keeper.

The financial shortcomings have added to Esteghlal's misery in recent weeks and the Blues have been struggling to replace Qayedi and Mohammad Mohebbi – the club's leading marksmen last season. Prolific frontman Mehrdad Mohammadi, though, has been brought in from Qatari second-tier club Al Saliya to ease Nekounam's woes, while new signing Armin Sohrabian is expected to start in the backline after Brazilian Raphael Silva parted ways with the Blues.

The opening stages of the upcoming season could play a decisive role in how



L-R: Managers Yafya Golmohammadi (Persepolis), Jose Morais (Sepahan), Paco Jemez (Tractor), and Javad Nekounam (Esteghlal) will be the favorites to lead their teams to glory in the new season of the Persian Gulf Pro League.

the league table will shape up early on as all four will square off against each other until the fifth match-day.

Sepahan and Tractor will lock horns in Isfahan on Thursday, with Persepolis opening its title defense at home against Iralco on the same day, before Esteghlal visits southern Iran to play San'at Naft Abadan on Friday.

The second round of matches will see Persepolis play away to Tractor in a raucous Yadegar-e Imam Stadium in Tabriz on August 9 – nine days before Sepahan hosts Esteghlal. A much-anticipated Tehran derby is scheduled for September 1 at the Azadi Stadium.

Juve kicked out of Europe by UEFA for breaching FFP rules



● MASSIMO PINCA/REUTERS

BBC – Juventus have been kicked out of this season's Europa Conference League by UEFA and fined for breaching Financial Fair Play (FFP) rules.

European football's governing body has also fined Chelsea for breaching FFP rules as a result of "submitting incomplete financial information". UEFA says the matter relates to transactions which took place between 2012 and 2019.

Juventus have been fined £17.14m, while Chelsea have been fined £8.57m.

The Italian club will only have to pay half of their fine if their financial records for the next three years comply with regulations, while Chelsea have already agreed to pay the settlement figure.

The Blues have spent around £600m on 19 new players since new owner Todd Boehly took charge of the club in May 2022, but their fine relates to a seven-year period while Roman Abramovich had control of the club.

UEFA said: "Following the club's sale in May 2022, the new ownership identified, and proactively reported to UEFA, instances of potentially incomplete financial reporting under the club's previous ownership."

In a response, Chelsea said they "fully co-operated and assisted UEFA" in their investigations and "entered into a settlement agreement" with the governing body.

The Italian Football Federation (FIGC) must now notify UEFA of which club will replace Juve in the third-tier European competition. It is likely to be Fiorentina, who were beaten by West Ham in last year's final, after they finished eighth in Serie A.

The case against Juventus follows a 718,000 euro (£620,000) fine as part of a settlement agreement with Italian football authorities over a case concerning payment of players salaries.

Juventus had also been docked 10 Serie A points last season following a hearing into the club's past transfer dealings.

They were initially handed a 15-point penalty in January but Italy's highest sporting court overturned that decision in April and ordered the case to be re-examined.

They would have finished fourth and qualified for next season's Champions League had they not been sanctioned.

In response to the charge, Juventus said they accept UEFA's decision and will not be lodging an appeal.

Club president Gianluca Ferrero said: "Lodging an appeal, possibly to other levels of judgement, with uncertain outcomes and timing, would increase the uncertainty with respect to our eventual participation in the 2024/25 Uefa Champions League."

IOC invites Ukraine's Kharlan to Olympics after disqualification

REUTERS – Ukraine's Olga Kharlan was invited to compete at the Olympic Games in Paris next year by the IOC on Friday after the fencer was disqualified for refusing to shake hands with a Russian opponent during a tournament earlier this week.

A letter sent to Kharlan signed by International Olympic Committee President Thomas Bach said she would be granted an additional quota place at the Olympics if she failed to qualify.

"Rest assured the IOC will continue to stand in full solidarity with the Ukrainian athletes and the Olympic community of Ukraine during these

extremely difficult times," it added.

Kharlan, a four-time Olympic medallist and world champion, won her individual sabre bout 15-7 and then refused to shake hands with Russian Anna Smirnova – competing as a neutral – at the World Championships in Milan on Thursday. In fencing's rules, shaking an opponent's hand is mandatory and failure to do so results in a 'black card'.

Ukraine's Youth and Sports minister Vadym Huttsait welcomed the IOC decision in a Facebook post.

"Despite all the hate that my team and I have endured over the past 24

hours, after working persistently for the benefit of Ukrainian athletes and not responding to this, we now have our first result," he said.

Ukraine's Fencing Federation (NFFU) appealed against Kharlan's disqualification and the International Fencing Federation (FIE) decided later on Friday to allow the fencer to compete in the women's team sabre team competition at the World Championships.

Kharlan said earlier that she stood by her decision not to shake hands with Smirnova.

"When I have a choice... where I shake hands I will never shake hands with



Ukraine's Olga Kharlan (L) refuses to shake hands with Anna Smirnova of Russia, presenting a sabre to tap instead, at the Fencing World Championship in Milan, Italy, on July 27, 2023.

● TADASHI MIYAMOTO/SHUTTERSTOCK

her. I'm sorry but there is something bigger than Olympic Games or license

or fencing and finally I understood that, there is something more. The sup-

port for the Ukrainian people it's incredible," Kharlan told Reuters.