

Persian Gulf Pro League roundup:

Esteghlal held at Foolad; Persepolis, Sepahan close the gap on top

Sports Desk

The latest round of fixtures at the Persian Gulf Pro League saw Esteghlal play to a goalless draw at bottom-half struggler Foolad Khuzestan.

Sepahan, meanwhile, routed Mes Rafsanjan 4-1 at home to close the gap on Javad Nekounam's Blues on top of the table, with Persepolis walking away with a much-needed 1-0 victory over Havadar at the Azadi Stadium.

Boring in Foolad Arena

Nekounam's reunion with his former employers turned out to be a boring affair at the Foolad Arena, as the home side – third from bottom – seemed to be more than happy with the minimum point against the in-form Blues, while the visiting side failed with creating clear-cut chances despite desperately

searching for a winner. In a further blow for Esteghlal, Iman Salimi was forced out before the break with an eye injury, leaving the center-back a doubt for Thursday's Tehran derby against Persepolis.

A second successive draw away from home kept Esteghlal on top with 24 points – three clear of Sepahan and Tractor, although the Isfahan-based club has a game in hand.

Sepahan flying high

Days after becoming the only Iranian top-flight side to progress to the knock-out phase of the AFC Champions League, Sepahan marched to a third victory in a row in the domestic league.

Ex-Sepahan striker Sajjad Shabbazzadeh sent his effort wide after going past keeper Payam Niazmand deep into the first-half stoppage time, arguably a pivotal point throughout the contest as the home side went on to score four in the second half before a late consolation for Mes.

Iranian international fullback Ramin Rezaeian broke the deadlock with yet another superb free-kick 10 minutes after the restart, with Reza Shekari adding a second six minutes later.

Shahriyar Moghanlou came off the bench to find the net twice and take his tally to five for the season, before Jalal Alimohammadi sent Niazmand the wrong way from the spot to cut the deficit to three.

Having been deducted four points for a 'budget cap violation' earlier in the season, Sepahan, boasting probably the most formidable squad in the league, remains the favorite to go all the way to lift the ultimate prize by the end of the campaign.



Relief for Reds

Stepping onto the pitch on the back of a devastating defeat at home against Al Duhail, which led to the Reds crashing out of the Asian elite clubs event, Yahya Golmohammadi and his men knew a seventh consecutive match without a victory was the last thing they needed ahead of the encounter with their archrivals.

Persepolis, playing without suspended top scorer Shahab Zahedi, had Saeb Mohebbi to thank for the maximum points as Havadar defender's own goal midway through the first half settled the scoreline.

The result might have provided relief for Golmohammadi, who had sections of the crowd chanting against him after the Al Duhail defeat, but the Reds manager was still left with much to think about, as his players were again wasteful in front of the goal, while

clearly running out of steam in the second period.

A first league victory since late October lifted the defending champion to fourth in the table – equal on 20 points with Zob Ahan, which shared the spoils in a goalless stalemate at Paykan on the preceding night.

Elsewhere on Saturday, Nassa-ji Mazandaran celebrated only a second win of the season, edging out fellow relegation zone side Esteghlal Khuzestan 1-0 at home, courtesy of Amirmohammad Houshmand's 66th-minute strike. On Thursday, Brazilian Gustavo Vagenin scored right before the break as Tractor left Sirjan with a massive 1-0 win against Golgozar. Shams Azar continued the impressive run in its debut top-flight campaign, thanks to Ali-Asghar Arabi's second-half double in a 2-0 victory away to Malavan FC on Friday, which saw Mahdi Tartar's side drop to sixth in the standing – one point adrift of Persepolis and Zob Ahan.

In Abadan, three first-half goals saw Amin Kazemian and Reza Jabireh find the target either side of a Yousef Kayshams' equalizer to steer Iralco to a 2-1 win at San'at Naft in a match dominated by controversial refereeing decisions.

Esteghlal defender Armin Sohrabian (5) goes up for a header during a goalless draw against Foolad Khuzestan in the Persian Gulf Pro League at the Foolad Arena, Ahwaz, Iran, on December 9, 2023.
● AMIN BAHRAMI/IRNA

James named MVP as Lakers win inaugural NBA Cup

AP – As commissioner Adam Silver prepared to hand LeBron James the MVP trophy of the inaugural NBA In-Season Tournament, he cautioned that “it doesn't come with a franchise”.

James bent over in laughter, but he has been serious about wanting to own an NBA expansion team in Las Vegas.

For now, he'll more than settle for the individual honor and tournament championship after scoring 24 points and adding 11 rebounds Saturday night to help the Los Angeles Lakers beat the Indiana Pacers 123-109 in the final.

“My enthusiasm about being here post-career, bringing a team here has not changed,” James said. “The fans are amazing here. This is a place that loves great attractions, and I think the

NBA will be another great addition to this city.”

As well as James played Saturday, the star was teammate Anthony Davis, who had 41 points and 20 rebounds – numbers that would have been season highs if they counted. This is the only game in the tournament that doesn't figure in the standings or statistics.

Davis also shot 16 of 24, had five assists and blocked four shots.

“They're a hell of a one-two punch,” Lakers coach Darvin Ham said about James and Davis. “That one or two could be either one of them on any given night. At the end of the day, they know how to take it to the next level when everything is on the line.”

Los Angeles are the first In-Season Tournament champions because the two headliners received plenty of

help.

Austin Reaves scored 28 points, D'Angelo Russell added 13 points and Cam Reddish set the tone defensively by limiting the damage by Indiana's Tyrese Haliburton, who emerged as one of the faces of this tournament.

He had 20 points and 11 assists against the Lakers, often passing to a teammate rather than trying to force the action.

Also for the Pacers, Benedict Mathurin scored 20 points and Aaron Nesmith had 15.

In addition to taking home a trophy, Lakers players on standard contracts each made \$500,000 and the Pacers received \$200,000 apiece. Players on two-way deals take home half those amounts.

The tournament and the title game had a combination of a NBA playoff and one-and-done NCAA tournament kind of atmosphere, and the Pacers and Lakers played as if their seasons were on the line.

The Lakers led most of the game, though Indiana kept in striking distance until Los Angeles went on a 15-3 run late in the fourth quarter to turn in a 100-96 lead into a 115-99 advantage.

Lakers' LeBron James hoists the NBA Cup trophy as teammates celebrate the victory over the Pacers in the In-Season Tournament final in Las Vegas, NV, US, on December 9, 2023.
● AP



Ukraine must consider interests in taking part in Paris Olympics, says minister

REUTERS – Ukraine must consider whether taking part in next year's Paris Olympics is in the nation's interests but participation is impossible unless the IOC alters its “non-constructive position,” Ukraine's sports minister said on Saturday. Matviy Bidnyi, Ukraine's minister of youth and sport, was speaking on national television a day after the International Olympic Committee said Russian and Belarusian athletes could compete in Paris as neutrals without flags, emblems or anthems. “The decision to participate should be made based on what it will bring to the country, what the reaction will be and how much it will bring us closer to victory,” Bidnyi said, referring to Ukraine's 21-month-old war with Russia. “We should not make rash decisions. It will be a balanced decision and we have to communicate it to the public. We will weigh the pros and cons very carefully.”

Russians and Belarusians had initially been banned from competing internationally following Russia's February 2022 invasion of

Ukraine, for which Belarus has been used as a staging ground.

Ukrainian Foreign Minister Dmytro Kuleba on Friday condemned the IOC decision as “shameful”. Russia's Sports Minister, Oleg Matytsin, called the conditions set by the IOC for Russian athletes' participation at the Olympics “discriminatory”.

Bidnyi said Ukraine could work towards participating if leaders came to the conclusion that it would “promote our position to the world”.

“If we continue to see the absolutely non-constructive position of the IOC, to continue to tolerate the participation of the henchmen of the bloody (Russian) regime, this will make our participation impossible.”

Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy has for months tried to rally world support for his call for all Russian and Belarusian athletes to be barred from the Games. However, he has not raised the question of whether Ukrainians will take part alongside them competing as neutrals.

