

Persian Gulf Pro League:

Tehran archrivals to resume title race

Sports Desk

The excitement is back in the Iranian club football as the top-flight sides will begin the second half of the Persian Gulf Pro League season today and tomorrow following a six-week Asian Cup pause.

While the game between Tractor and Sepahan – fourth and second in the table respectively – has been postponed due to the latter's involvement in the AFC Champions League last 16, Tehran archrivals Esteghlal and Persepolis will resume what will presumably be a fourth-horse title race going down the wire.

League leader Esteghlal will be looking to build on a perfect home record in the ongoing campaign when hosting struggling San'at Naft Abadan – third from bottom in the table – at the Azadi Stadium on Friday. However, the buildup to the game has been dominated by yet another public feud between Blues head coach Javad Nekounam and club chairman Ali Khatir over a quiet midseason transfer window.

Nekounam had some high-profile names in his

wish list, including Iranian internationals Alireza Jahanbakhsh, Ali Qolizadeh, and Saeid Ezzatollahi, but was eventually left with the addition of Brazilian center-back Raphael Silva, rejoining the Blues only six months after parting ways with the club, and Uzbek winger Jaloliddin Masharipov from Greek club Panserraikos.

The game will be a first for new San'at manager Sohrab Bakhtiarizadeh – a former Iran and Esteghlal defender who replaced Abdollah Veisi and is tasked with steering the southern Iranian club in another familiar battle for survival.

New-look Reds

A lot has changed for the defending champion Persepolis since the last game before the hiatus – a 1-1 away draw at Mes Rafsanjan.

Yahya Golmohammadi, who had his own dispute with the club hierarchy, stepped down from his role to end a trophy-laden four years on the Reds bench.

The Reds' approach for ex-Croatian coach Branko Ivankovic ended in vain and Brazilian Osmar Loss Vieira, a No. 2 to Golmohammadi,

was handed the job for the rest of the campaign.

Osmar's first test comes away to Iralco today in Arak against Mojtaba Hosseini – also a former assistant to Golmohammadi.

Trailing Esteghlal by two points, third-place Persepolis had to part ways with Milad Sarlak and Mohammad Omri but made some marquee signings during the winter break in Qatari fullback Abdulkarim Hassan and Uzbekistani international midfielder Oston Urunov, as well as striker Issa Alekasir, who had left the club to join Sepahan in the summer.

The game, however, is likely to come too soon for the trio as Persepolis failed to register their contracts in time due to a FIFA transfer ban. Elsewhere, fifth-placed Zob Ahan will host Malavan FC – sixth in the table – today in a match that could see the winner join the title race, while Shams Azar, the surprise package of the season, welcomes bottom-side Esteghlal Khuzestan.

Moharram Navidkia will begin a new chapter in his career as the Mes Rafsanjan coach at home against Masoud Shojaei's Havadar.



PAYAM SANI/IRNA

Iran wins women's title at Taekwondo Fajr Open



PARNIAN MADADI/taekwondo.ir

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Iranian women's team picked up where it left off on Day 1 of the Taekwondo Fajr Open in Tehran by collecting another 11 medals, including three golds.

Tuesday's results saw the Iranian girls lift the champion's trophy – thanks to seven golds and silvers apiece, as well as 11 bronzes – with Armenia and Kazakhstan in the following spots respectively.

"A number of the national team members were absent in the event, but up-and-coming faces broke through and showcased their enthusiasm in some thrilling bouts," Iran head coach Mino Maddah said, adding: "There was little to separate the contestants and even high-profile participants like Nahid Kiani and Mobina Ne'matzadeh knew they couldn't afford to underestimate any opponent."

Reigning world champion Kiani, who has secured a berth at the Paris Olympics, headlined the Iranians' campaign on Day 2, defeating Kazakhstan's Mariya Sevostyanova for the -57kg gold, with Aida Khorshidi and Sara Mizban bagging double bronzes for the host.

"It was tough bout in the final but I'm here to prepare for the Olympics and fix my weak points," said Kiani, adding she would also take part in the upcoming World Taekwondo President's Cup as well as the Asian Taekwondo Clubs Championships, which will follow the Fajr Open in the Iranian capital until February 22.

Elsewhere, Maryam Malakou-tikhah came out on top against Sogol Shiri in an all-Iranian -49kg final, while their compatriot Parimah Changi settled for a consolation bronze alongside Botakoz Kapanova of Kazakhstan. Armenian Urganavaeva Nina came

out victorious against the host's Yalda Valinejad to walk away with the gold in the -67kg contests before being awarded the MVP prize in the women's competitions.

Iranian Fereshteh Fat'hi and Kazakhstan's Kamila Aimukasheva shared the third podium of the weight class.

Nioush Shadlou rounded off a remarkable run for the Iranian girls by defeating teammate Zeinab Asadi in the +73kg final, and Hadis Eslamifard won a joint bronze along with Munira Abdusalomova of Tajikistan. Ma'soumeh Ranjbar (-46kg), Ghazal Soltani (-53kg), Asma Sedaqat (-62kg), and Elham Haqiqi (-73kg) had made a clean sweep of four golds for Iran on the opening day of the competition's 33rd edition, which will finish with the conclusion of the men's event today in the Iranian capital's Taekwondo House.

Injuries take shine off Manchester City victory for Guardiola

PA MEDIA – Pep Guardiola was left to rue injuries to Jack Grealish and Bernardo Silva after Manchester City returned to Champions League action with a 3-1 win at FC Copenhagen on Tuesday. Grealish, handed his first start in six matches, lasted just 21 minutes of the holders' largely straightforward last-16 first-leg success at Parken Stadium before being forced off with a groin injury. Silva, who put City into a 2-1 lead just before the break with a fine flicked finish, took a knock to the ankle late in the game. The double blow comes after Josko Gvardiol missed the game with an ankle injury and Mateo Kovacic was also unavailable. City manager Guardiola said:

"It's something muscular with Jack, his groin.

"He felt it on the grass, started to complain. The players can feel it immediately if it's muscular. It's a pity, he's gutted.

"He wanted to continue but we didn't want to make the damage even worse. We'll make tests tomorrow.

"Bernardo has a big knock in his ankle and Josko is out two to three weeks. Kova is ready to come back."

The injuries took the gloss off what was a mainly comfortable night for City.

They took an early lead through Kevin De Bruyne and, dominant in all departments, should have led by more before Magnus Mattsson levelled after an Ederson error.

Silva restored the lead and Phil Foden gave the scoreline

a more realistic look in stoppage time.

Guardiola said: "It was really, really good. I'm so proud we played at that tempo. It was perfect.

"We were patient in the right moments but it's not done. I know how difficult it is.

"It's not decisive but a good result. Hopefully we can finish at home in front of our own people and go to the next round."

Danish champions Copenhagen had not played competitively for two months due to their league's winter break and their rustiness was evident.

Coach Jacob Neestrup said: "Of course it's going to be difficult, but now we have three games in the Danish league where we need to get results. Then we take the away game, where we try to do our very, very best."



Manchester City's Bernardo Silva (c) is seen in action against FC Copenhagen in the UEFA Champions League last 16 before a late injury at the Parken Stadium, Copenhagen, Denmark, on February 13, 2024.
ZAC GOODWIN/PA