

Persian Gulf Pro League wrap-up:

Mahdipour stunner sends Esteghlal clear on top

Sports Desk

Esteghlal moved four points clear on top of the Persian Gulf Pro League after Mahdi Mahdipour's superb strike helped the Tehran Blues edge out San'at Naft Abadan 1-0 at Tehran's Azadi Stadium on Friday.

There was little to separate the two sides in the first half but Mahdipour broke the deadlock with a sizzling strike from 20 yards out as Javad Nekounam's men kept a perfect home record in the ongoing Iranian top-flight campaign.

Meanwhile, a ninth defeat of the season – in head coach Sohrab Bakhtiarizadeh's first game in charge – saw San'at drop into the relegation zone.

Esteghlal is top of the table with 35 points – four points clear of Sepahan, which had its away fixture against Tractor postponed due to AFC Champions League involvement.

The Blues' triumph came a day after third-placed archrival Persepolis blew the chance to overtake Sepahan in the table, as new Brazilian coach Osmar Loss Vieira, a number two to ex-manager Yahya Golmohammadi, got off to a losing start on the Reds bench.

Amir Nouri scored the only goal of the game with a screamer 15 minutes from normal time as Iralco inflicted a second loss of the season on the defending champion.

Elsewhere, Mahdi Tartar's Malavan FC continued its impressive run with a massive 1-0 away victory over Zob Ahan in Isfahan, courtesy of Reza Ja'fari's composed finish with three minutes left on the clock.

Shams Azar, the surprise package of the season, shared the spoils with bottom club Esteghlal Khuzestan in a goalless stalemate in Qazvin – the same scoreline for Mes Rafsanjan and new manager Moharram Navidkia at home against Masoud Shojaei's Havadar.

Paykan and Nassaji Mazandaran played to a 1-1 draw in Tehran. Mohammadreza Azadi headed home on the half-hour mark to put Nassaji in front, only to see his goal canceled out by Hamed Pakdel's 57th-minute equalizer from the spot.

In the opening fixture of the Iranian league after a six-week Asian Cup pause, Golgozar Sirjan walked away with a 1-0 win at Foolad Khuzestan, thanks to a Saeid Saharkhizan's close-range volley in the first half.



Esteghlal midfielder Mahdi Mahdipour (2nd L) celebrates with teammates after scoring the winner in a 1-0 victory over San'at Naft Abadan in the Persian Gulf Pro League at the Azadi Stadium, Tehran, Iran, on February 16, 2024.
● SADEQ NIK-GOSTAR/FARS

Conceicao tells Porto fans to 'respect' Taremi amid Inter transfer saga



● HUGO DELGADO/EPA

Sports Desk

Porto head coach Sergio Conceicao came to Mahdi Taremi's defense, urging the Dragons supporters to show "respect" for the Iranian striker ahead of his imminent free transfer to Serie A giant Internazionale in the summer.

Italian journalist Fabrizio Romano wrote on X last Monday that the verbal agreement between the Nerazzurri and Taremi has been in place for a month over a two-year contract with the option to be extended for an additional season, which will see the Iranian earn €3 million per season.

The 31-year-old Iranian international was to undergo medical tests at Inter this week, but the proceedings were reportedly called off after Porto fans showed their frustration with the striker, feeling betrayed given Taremi will be under contract with the Portuguese club until the end of June.

However, speaking ahead of Porto's home league game

against Estrela Amadora on Saturday, Conceicao said Taremi deserves more admiration for what he has achieved throughout the four years at the club.

"Taremi has a contract until June and respects the club," the former Portugal international and Lazio winger said.

"There is no one who has stronger feelings for the club and if I felt that a player was not committed – even if he was called Maradona – he wouldn't be with me.

"We're talking about a player who is in the top three of the club's all-time top scorers. He's only behind Jardel and Jackson [Martinez], and ahead of Hulk, but people seem to forget Taremi's goals and assists.

Having joined from Rio Ave in July 2020, Taremi has bagged 86 goals, while providing his teammates with 53 assists, in 172 appearances for Porto across all competitions before Saturday's game.

He finished as the leading marksman of the Portuguese top flight last season with 22

strikers, though a below-par campaign, by his own standards, has seen the Iranian find the net only on three occasions in 16 league games this term, plus a couple of goals in the Champions League group stage.

Taremi returned to the club last weekend to make a cameo appearance in the 3-2 defeat at Arouca, following four weeks on international duty at the AFC Asian Cup in Qatar, where Iran was beaten by the host in the semifinals.

"He took a trip back from Qatar and made himself available for team selection against Arouca without any rest. Taremi can give you all sorts of solutions upfront," added the Porto manager.

A Primeira Liga champion with Porto in 2022, Taremi was on the verge of joining Inter archrival Milan last summer, only to see the deal fall through on the transfer deadline day after the striker's camp and the Rossoneri failed to reach agreement on personal terms.

Iran's Hashemi wins Asian shot put bronze

Sports Desk

The first day of the Asian Indoor Athletics Championships in Tehran saw Iranian Elham Hashemi claim a bronze medal. Representing the country in the women's shot put final, Hashemi

registered a best throw of 14.27m to finish on the third podium.

China's Sun Yue tallied 17.65m to walk away with the ultimate prize, with Nasriddinova Malika of Uzbekistan settling for the silver with 15.42m. Elsewhere on Saturday's

morning session, Shiqi Xiong won the women's long jump with 6.55m – five centimeters clear of her fellow-Chinese Tan Mengyi in the second place. Indian Harmilan Bains clocked 4:29.55 for the women's 1500m gold.

Qassempour dealt fresh surgery blow to quest for Olympic berth

Sports Desk

Kamran Qassempour suffered yet another blow to his quest for a freestyle wrestling place in the Paris Olympics after being forced to undergo a hernia surgery on Friday – caused by the immense training pressure in recent weeks.

Having missed last September's World Championships with a groin injury, the two-time world 92kg champion made a first in-

ternational appearance in more than a year in the Zagreb Open Ranking Series event in January, where he took part in the Olympic 97kg weight class.

The Iranian fell to a last-four defeat against American great Kyle Snyder before setting for a consolation bronze, courtesy of a 3-1 victory over Turkish Erhan Yaylaci.

Young Iranian prodigy Amir-Ali Azarpira, meanwhile, came from behind to beat Snyder in

the final showdown to introduce himself as the country's frontrunner in the Olympic qualifying events in the coming months.

The latest injury setback will sideline Qassempour for two to four weeks, meaning he will be ruled out of Turkey's Yasar Dogu & Vehbi Emre tournament in early March, which will also serve as the Iranian trials for the Olympic qualifiers as well as the Asian Championships in April.



● FARSHAD BANDANI/iwfir