

Persian Gulf Pro League roundup: Esteghlal, Persepolis flex muscles ahead of Tehran Derby



Esteghlal striker Gustavo Blanco (1) celebrates with teammates after scoring the winner in a 1-0 victory over Esteghlal Khuzestan in Ahvaz, Iran, on March 8, 2024.
● AMIN BAHRAMI/IRNA



Persepolis players celebrate a goal during a 4-2 victory over Foolad Khuzestan in the Persian Gulf Pro League at the Azadi Stadium, Tehran, Iran, on March 8, 2024.
● ALI SHARIFZADEH/IRNA

Sports Desk

It now appears to be a two-horse race for the Persian Gulf Pro League crown for the rest of the way after Esteghlal and Persepolis ran away winners over southern Iranian clubs on Friday, while a fifth successive top-flight defeat saw Sepahan drop to fifth in the table.

In Ahvaz, Argentine striker Gustavo Blanco bagged only his second goal since joining Esteghlal in the summer, heading home a Jaloliddin Masharipov's cross late in the first half, before the Tehran Blues were forced to hold on in the closing stages to beat Esteghlal Khuzestan 1-0 and restore a three-point lead over archrival Persepolis, which came out on top against Foolad Khuzestan at the capital's Azadi Stadium earlier in the day.

Chasing a fourth league victory on the bounce under Brazilian head coach Osmar Vieira, Persepolis came from behind twice to beat the 10-man Foolad 4-2.

Moussa Coulibaly gave the visiting side a 11th-minute lead after Iranian international keeper Ali-reza Beiranvand made a mess of saving Malian defender's tame effort from an acute angle.

Winter signing Oston Urunov netted his first goal for Persepolis with a composed finish in the 35th minute, but Qatari fullback Abdelkarim Hassan – also a January addition – had his maiden league start marred by an awkward own goal four minutes before the break.

Issa Alekasir drew Persepolis level again with 10 minutes into the second period, before Mojtaba Najjarian received his marching orders for keeping out

a Dania Esmailifar's effort with his arm.

Hossein Kan'anizadegan scored from the spot to put the host in front for the first time in the match in the 68th minute.

Mahdi Torabi rounded off the Reds' brilliant performance in the second half with a superb strike, curling in a left-footed effort from the corner of the box 15 minutes from normal time.

Viera hopes his men will keep up the momentum heading into Wednesday's crunch derby, though he will have to do with instrumental center-back Kan'anizadegan, who received a fourth booking of the season.

Sepahan, meanwhile, suffered further blow to its title hunt following yet another league loss – at home to Paykan, which stepped onto the pitch in Isfahan's Naqsh-e Jahan Stadium

without a win in 12 top-flight outings.

Having beaten Shams Azar by three goals in the Hazfi Cup four days earlier, Sepahan looked to be back on track when Paykan goalkeeper Mohammad Nasser's effort ricocheted off Farshad Ahmadzadeh's leg and found the back of the net with four minutes into the contest.

Mohammad-Hossein Fallah netted twice to give Paykan a 2-1 lead at the break and things went from bad to worse for the home side five minutes after the restart when Bryan Dabo was dismissed by the referee for a foul on goal-bound Hamed Pakdel – a 12th red card for Sepahan in 25 games across all competitions this season.

Reza Asadi still managed to equalize for Sepahan four minutes later – joining teammate

Shahriar Moghanlou on top of the league's leading marksmen chart with nine strikes – but former Sepahan forward Ali Qorbani secured the maximum points for the visitors with 14 minutes left on the clock.

Sepahan is now 11 points adrift of the top with two games in hand – away to Tractor and at home against Zob Ahan – but Portuguese manager Jose Morais will need a quick fix to his side's struggles if they are to keep title aspirations alive.

Elsewhere, Ricardo Alves's superb strike from 20 yards out gave Tractor the lead at Mes Rafsanjan, before Mohammad Akbari came off the bench to draw Moharram Navidkia's rejuvenated side level right at the death as it finished 1-1.

The point was still enough for Tractor to leapfrog Malavan into

third spot on goal difference – seven points behind Persepolis with a game in hand.

Malavan continued its fairytale campaign on the preceding night, defeating Golgozar Sirjan 1-0 at home, courtesy of a Mohammadreza Soleimani's spot-kick in the second half.

A Babak Moradi's stoppage-time penalty saw Zob Ahan surrender a two-goal lead at Havadar after going down to 10 men late in the game as the two sides shared the spoils in a thrilling 2-2 draw.

Relegation strugglers San'at Naft and Nassaji Mazandaran played to 1-1 stalemate in Abadan, while Shamas Azar bounced back from the cup setback with a 2-1 home win against Iralco, thanks to Pouria Sarabadani's penalty and Faraz Emam-Ali's strike against Mahdi Limouchi's late consolation for the visiting side.

Iran wins Vehbi Emre tournament; Geraei stunned in Sofia



● UWW

Sports Desk

A remarkable 12 medals, including four golds, saw Iran win the Greco-Roman title at the Yasar Dogu & Vehbi Emre wrestling tournament in Antalya, Turkey.

Hassan Rangraz's men topped the team table with 166 points, followed by the host and Kirgizstan, which collected 107 and 97 points respectively. Saeid Esmaili (67kg) and Amin Kavianejad (77kg) walked away with

the ultimate prize of their respective weight classes on Friday, a day after Pouria Dadmarz (55kg) and Mohammad-Hadi Saravi (97kg) had won a couple of golds for the country. Amir-Reza Dehbozorgi (60kg), Ali Oskou (77kg), Rasoul Garmsiri (82kg), Mahdi Bali (97kg), and world champion Amin Mirzazadeh (130kg) settled for five silvers, while Amir Abdi (77kg), Abbas Mahdizadeh (82kg), and Fardin Hedayati (130kg) left Antalya with three consolation bronzes.

Wakeup call for Geraei

Meanwhile, reigning Olympic champion Mohammadreza Geraei was given a reality check ahead of his Greco-Roman 67kg title defense at the Paris Games after being pinned by Kazakhstan's Adilkhan Satayev in the Dan Kolov – Nikola Petrov tournament in Sofia, Bulgaria.

The Iranian went on to add the world gold to his Olympic success in 2021, but a slump in form over the past two years saw Geraei lose the world final to Serbian Mate Nemes in 2022 before laboring to the bronze in last September's World Championships.

Taking part in the 72kg contests, Geraei looked to be back to his best when claiming four superiority victories – including an 8-0 triumph over Satayev – in a round-robin format in the Bulgarian capital, but while leading 5-1 in the final, suffered a shock fall defeat in a rematch with the Kazakhstani wrestler to take the silver.

Mohammad Naqousi won the 82kg gold in the Greco-Roman contests, with Mohammad-Mobin Azimi finishing on the top podium of the 92kg class in the freestyle event.

Yassin Rezaei won a second freestyle bronze for the country, taking the bronze in the 61kg event.

Destructive Joshua knocks out Ngannou in second round



Anthony Joshua (left) lands a punch on Francis Ngannou in a heavyweight bout in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia, on March 8, 2024.
● RICHARD PELHAM/GETTY IMAGES

BBC – Briton Anthony Joshua delivered the most powerful statement to the heavyweight division with a destructive second-round knockout win over Francis Ngannou in Saudi Arabia. Joshua, 34, floored the former UFC champion in the first round and early in the second. A dazed Ngannou rose to

his feet in Riyadh but was stunned by an explosive and formidable right moments later as the referee halted the contest. The 37-year-old appeared to be out before he even hit the canvas and required medical treatment.

Victory is two-time world champion Joshua's fourth in 11 months, and keeps

alive his ambition of recapturing a world title. Eddie Hearn called for Joshua, who he has promoted throughout the heavyweight's pro career, to face the winner of Tyson Fury and Oleksandr Usyk. The pair will fight to become the undisputed heavyweight champion in May, with a rematch later in the year.