

Persian Gulf Pro League preview: Decisive tests for Tehran archrivals in title hunt



● ALI SHARIFZADEH/IRNA

● RASOUL SHOJAEI/IRNA

Sports Desk

With only a single point separating the Tehran archrivals on top of the Persian Gulf Pro League table with six games to spare, it is fair to say that the battle for the domestic crown will go down the wire on May 31. Still, Esteghlal and Persepolis supporters could expect a pivotal point in the title race when their teams are involved in two highly-anticipated fixtures – featuring the top four in the table – today in what will arguably be the toughest tests for both sides until the end of the season. Sitting atop the table with 53 points, Javad Nekounam's Esteghlal visits Tabriz to play

fourth-place Tractor in an expected jam-packed Yadegar-e Imam Stadium, before Persepolis welcomes Sepahan to the capital's Azadi Stadium for the day's late kickoff. The Tehran Blues are on a 21-game unbeaten run the league – their sole defeat of the campaign coming away to Sepahan in August last year – though even a draw could see them drop to second in the table by the end of the day. Iranian under-23 international Mohammadreza Khaledabadi will make his Esteghlal debut between the sticks as skipper Seyyed Hossein Hosseini, who has registered a season-high 14 clean sheets, will serve a one-

game suspension by the federation for disciplinary reasons. Argentine striker Gustavo Blanco will be the man to watch in the Blues outfit after scoring four goals in the previous six matches, while in-form left back Abolfazl Jalali, who has 10 assists under his belt, is also tipped to make a massive contribution. Tractor, meanwhile, has been without a league win in four matches though a shootout win against Zob Ahan in the Hazfi Cup last time out could see the Tabriz-based club regain momentum for today's encounter. An ex-assistant to Yahaya Golmohammadi on Persepolis bench, Hamid Motahari, who was appointed to Tractor's caretaker

role – replacing Spanish Paco Jemez – before the cup tie, will surely be eager to dent Esteghlal's title charge, while winter signing Amir-Arsalan Motahari will be highly motivated against his former club after spending a half-season behind Blanco in the pecking order.

Relief for Reds?

Persepolis has been in flying form in the league since Brazilian Osmar Vieira was promoted to the head coach role following Golmohammadi's departure in January as the Reds have won seven in nine games, while keeping seven clean sheets in the process. However, Osmar's coaching acumen went under huge scru-

tiny after last Friday's cup exit against Iralco – in which the Reds relinquished a two-goal lead twice before losing on penalties – and the Brazilian's future on the bench could be dealt further blow with a defeat in the so-called 'Iranian Clasic'. The Reds will have to do without their key trio in Alireza Beiranvand, Omid A'lishah – who are both injured – and suspended fullback Danial Esmaeilifar, though they will still be looking to build on impressive performances by Oston Urunov, Mahdi Torabi, and Issa Alekasir in chasing a first league win over Sepahan since December 2021. Widely regarded as the title favorite in the early stages of the

season, Sepahan is now lagging behind the top two – trailing the Blues by eight points – and a loss today will all but ruin the club's slim trophy aspirations, not to mention it will mark the beginning of the end for Portuguese manager Jose Morais after two seasons in charge. Elsewhere today, relegation candidates San'at Naft Abadan and Nassaji Mazandaran will play away to Havadar and Zob Ahan respectively, with Esteghlal Khuzestan – third from bottom – hosting fifth-place Malavan in Ahvaz. Moharram Navidkia's Mes Rafsanjan will welcome Golgohar Sirjan, while Iralco and Foolad will square off in Arak.

Uzbekistan and Japan secure qualification for Olympic Games



Uzbekistan players and coaching staff celebrate after the victory over Indonesia in the U23 Asian Cup semifinals in Doha, Qatar, on April 29, 2024. ● AFC

and the U23 Asian Cup final. They will next take on a Japan side that handed Iraq a 2-0 defeat at Doha's Jassim bin Hamad Stadium, with Mao Hosoya and Ryotaro Araki scoring in the 28th and 42nd minutes respectively. That win means Japan maintain their record of qualifying for every Olympics since 1996. Uzbekistan, winners of the Asian Under-23 title in 2018, will face Japan on Friday in the final, while Indonesia and Iraq meet on Thursday for Asia's third confirmed berth in Paris. The losers of that Olympic playoff will enter into a final eliminator against Guinea, the fourth place finisher in Africa's qualifying tournament, on May 9 for the final spot at the Games.

REUTERS – Uzbekistan and Japan secured two of Asia's three berths at this year's Olympic Games football tournament with wins over Indonesia and Iraq respectively at the Under-23 Asian Cup in Qatar. Uzbekistan sealed a 2-0 semi-final win against the Indonesians to confirm their

first appearance at the Games since gaining independence from the Soviet Union in 1991. Husain Norchaev put Timur Kapadze's side in front with a volleyed finish from close range in the 68th minute before Pratama Arhan's late own goal confirmed Uzbekistan's progress to both the Olympics

NBA play-offs: Lakers knocked out by Nuggets

BBC – LeBron James' Los Angeles Lakers were knocked out of the NBA play-offs as the Denver Nuggets completed a 4-1 series win in the Western Conference. In the fifth game of the best-of-seven series, defending champions the Nuggets won a tense encounter 108-106. Jamal Murray scored 32 points, including the winner with just 3.6 seconds left when the scores were tied. James' 30 points and 11 assists were in vain for the Lakers. The NBA's all-time leading points scorer was chasing his fifth title and his first with the Lakers since 2020. But when asked about his future, James would not confirm whether he had played his last game for the Lakers. "I'm not going to answer that," he said. "I just want to get home to the family, honestly, and start looking at the schedule." He said that after spending some time with his family, he will travel to Las Vegas for a USA Basketball training camp ahead of the Olympics. Elsewhere in the Western Conference, the Oklahoma City Thunder



Nuggets' Jamal Murray (L) dribbles to the rim during a victory over the Lakers in Denver, CO, US, on April 29, 2024. ● AP

also progressed to the last eight with a 97-89 win over the New Orleans Pelicans. Jalen Williams scored 24 points and Shai Gilgeous-Alexander added 24 with 10 rebounds to complete a 4-0 series clean sweep. The Thunder had a slender 44-43 advantage at half-time, before the Pelicans took a 80-75 lead but could not cling on as they struggled defensively. In the Eastern Conference, the Boston Celtics edged closer to

the next round as they took a 3-1 advantage in their play-off series with the Miami Heat. They won the fourth match 102-88, but were dealt an injury concern as centre Kristaps Porzingis limped off the court with a calf strain shortly before half-time, and did not return. Derrick White's career-best 38 points helped the Celtics to victory, with the fifth match of the best-of-seven series taking place today.