

## Persian Gulf Pro League preview:

## No room for error as the endgame nears

## Sports Desk

Esteghlal and Persepolis will be back in action today as a neck-and-neck title race in the Persian Gulf Pro League enters the closing stages.

Goalless results for both sides last time out meant only a single point remains the difference between Tehran archrivals with five games to spare in the Iranian top flight.

Enjoying a best home record in the league, Esteghlal will be hoping to get back to winning ways and keep the fate of the title in its own hands when the final whistle is blown by the end of the day's late fixture against Zob Ahan at the capital's Azadi Stadium.

The bad news for Javad Nekounam and his men, however, is that today's opponent has been the best team away from home as six of Zob Ahan's victories this season have come on the road while Mohammad Rabiei's side has only lost once outside Isfahan.

Esteghlal skipper Seyyed Hossein Hosseini will be back between the sticks after serving a one-game ban against Tractor, looking to register a 14th clean sheet of an impressive campaign. Persepolis, meanwhile, will visit relegation-threatened Nassaji Mazandaran earlier in the day, and could move atop the table for a couple of hours with maximum points.



Last Wednesday's frustrating home stalemate against Sepahan proved costly for Persepolis as integral captain Omid A'alishah received his marching orders late

in the game and will miss today's encounter.

The Tehran Reds head into the contest on the back of five successive wins against their host

but the northern Iranian club has been in fine form under Saket Elhami in recent weeks, pulling off a precious point at third-place Sepahan before back-to-back

Esteghlal (blue) and Zob Ahan played to a 1-1 draw when the two sides met in the Persian Gulf Pro League in Isfahan last November.  
● KAZEM GHANE/IRNA

wins against Tractor and Zob Ahan saw Nassaji move into the safety zone.

New signing Luan Polli has made massive contribution to Nassaji's recent success as the Brazilian keeper has only conceded one goal in four appearances for the club.

Meanwhile, there race to avoid relegation is as wide open as it has ever been.

San'at Naft Abadan sits rock bottom with 16 points and is destined for a second-tier campaign next season, but Nassaji, Foolad, and Esteghlal Khuzestan are only separated by one point in the survival battle.

Esteghlal Khuzestan, second from bottom with 21 points, will be facing a daunting challenge when visiting Isfahan to play Sepahan, while fellow-southern Iranian side Foolad – sitting below Nassaji on goal difference – will chase all points at home against fourth-place Tractor.

San'at will put in a last-ditch effort to stay in the top flight at home against Moharram Navidkia's Mes Rafsanjan.

Elsewhere, Mahdi Tartar's Malavan – fifth in the table – will continue its quest for a higher finish at home against Havadar, which is on a six-game unbeaten run in all competitions under Masoud Shojaei.

The early kickoff of the day will see Paykan and square off against Iralco and former manager Mojtaba Hosseini in Tehran.

Iran crowned  
Asian U19 beach volley champion

## Sports Desk

A straight-set victory over Lebanon saw Iran lift the trophy at the 5th Asian U19 Beach Volleyball Championships in Roi Et, Thailand.

The Iranian duo of Habib Akbarzadeh and Amir-Ali Qalehnovi defeated Lebanon's Hadi El Chabib and Jad

Abi Karam 21-12 in back-to-back sets to win the Asian crown for a second time in the history of the competition.

Having beaten Vietnam 1, Australia 2, Thailand 3 for a top-spot finish in Pool C, Iran 1 went on to defeat Hong Kong 2 and the New Zealand 2 before a last-four win against Australia.

Undisputed champion 'Canelo' Alvarez  
hands Munguia first defeat

Saul "Canelo" Alvarez (R) lands a right hand on Jaime Munguia during their super-middleweight world title fight in Las Vegas, NV, US, on May 4, 2024.  
● JOHN LOCHER/AP

AFP – Saul "Canelo" Alvarez retained his undisputed super-middleweight world title with a convincing unanimous decision over fellow Mexican Jaime Munguia on Saturday.

Alvarez handed Munguia the first defeat in 44 professional bouts, dropping the 27-year-old challenger in the fourth round and inexorably taking control to improve to 61-2-2 in his storied career.

The judges scored it 117-110, 116-111 and 115-112 for Alvarez, who retained his IBF, WBA, WBC and WBO belts. Munguia, whose 34 knockouts included victories inside the distance in four of his previous five fights, came out on the attack.

He pushed back the vastly experienced Alvarez with his jab

and rattled the champion in the third round with a right to the jaw.

But Alvarez responded in the fourth. After Munguia connected with a pair of solid rights Alvarez followed a left hook with a massive uppercut that sent Munguia to the canvas.

"You know, I take my time," Alvarez said of his measured start.

"I have a lot of experience. Jaime Munguia is a great fighter. He's strong. He's smart, but I take my time."

The fifth round opened to chants of "Canelo!" ringing in the T-Mobile Arena in Las Vegas, where support was evenly divided between the Mexican combatants in a fight coinciding with Mexico's Cinco de Mayo festivities. An Alvarez jab popped Munguia's head back and, in the sixth, an Alvarez left hook had Munguia's knees buckling briefly.

In a fight billed as a possible changing of the guard, Munguia – who has honed his aggressive style under the tutelage of longtime Manny Pacquiao trainer Freddie Roach – continued to press.

But his vaunted power rarely bothered Alvarez, who repeatedly found a way past Munguia's guard to land the more damaging blows.

Munguia managed to assert himself again in the ninth round, backing the champion up with a flurry of blows to the face before Alvarez responded with more punishing blows to the body.

Munguia seemed to know in the 12th he needed a knockout, but once again it was Alvarez ending the round on the strongest note with another jarring uppercut.

Inter 'happy to have' Taremi,  
Inzaghi says

## Sports Desk

Inter head coach Simone Inzaghi confirmed the acquisition of Iranian striker Mahdi Taremi on Saturday, saying the newly-crowned Serie A champion is thrilled to have signed the Porto talisman.

"We're very happy to have him," the Italian said when he was shown footage of Taremi's strike for Porto against Chaves during an interview with DAZN after the Nerazzurri's 1-0 defeat at Sassuolo.

Yet to be officially unveiled as a summer signing for Inter, Taremi found the net from the spot with 17 minutes left on the clock to help the Dragons beat Chaves 3-0 and remain third in the Liga Portugal table with two games to spare.

The goal was the Iranian's ninth in 32 games for Porto across all competitions this season.

"He is an important player, he has a lot of experience in the Champions League games, in Europe, he scored many goals and we are happy to have him," Inzaghi said.

"We will have a larger squad next season, so we needed

more strikers," added the Italian, whose side will be involved in the expanded Champions League next season as well as the new 32-team FIFA Club World Cup in the United States next summer.

The leading marksman in the Portuguese top flight last season, Taremi is Porto's third all-time top scorer with 89 strikes in 179 matches – including 10 in 26 appearances in the European elite clubs' competition.

The agreement had already been in place between Inter and the Iranian, whose Porto contract expires on June 30, since January as he will be joined by Napoli midfielder Piotr Zielinski in signing for the Italian giant.

Porto striker Mahdi Taremi celebrates his goal during a 3-0 victory over Chaves in Liga Portugal in Chaves, Portugal, on May 4, 2024.  
● KENZO TRIBOUILLARD/AFP

