

Persian Gulf Pro League:

# Esteghlal edges Foolad to go back on top; Nassaji clear of bottom

## Sports Desk

Esteghlal was back on top of the Persian Gulf Pro League table thanks to a 1-0 victory over relegation-threatened Foolad Khuzestan in Tehran's Azadi Stadium.

In a game that chances were few and far between, Iman Salimi's smashing set-piece header right before the hour mark was the difference between the two sides but it was still enough for the Blues to restore the one-point lead over their archrival Persepolis – two days after the capital Reds had walked away with a 2-0 win at Havadar.

The result means Esteghlal head coach Javad Nekounam, whose defensive and unadventurous brand of football has been criticized by sections of the club faithful throughout the season, is now three victories away from the Iranian top-flight trophy in his first season on the Blues bench. "Our tempo was low in the first half but we created opportunities after the break and could have scored more goals if we had been more clinical in front of the goal. We barely gave away chances and were well-organized in the back. I believe it was a decent result, given the number of absences we had for the game," said the Blues boss, whose team remains unbeaten in the league since the away loss to Sepahan in late August.

in the Iranian league's tightest title race in years, Esteghlal will have to visit Nassaji Mazandaran and Paykan either side of a home fixture against Golgozar Sirjan, with Persepolis hosting Esteghlal Khuzestan and Mes Rafsanjan and playing away to Shams Azar.

Elsewhere on Monday, Nassaji took a giant step towards survival by claiming a massive 4-1 win at Esteghlal Khuzestan in the clash of relegation strugglers.

Vahid Mohammadzadeh headed Nassaji in front with two minutes into the game

before Mohammadreza Azadi doubled the visitors' lead midway through the first half.

Things went from bad to worse for the home side when Ousmane Ndong was shown a straight red for denying the goal-bound Azadi in the box and the Nassaji striker bagged his second from the spot late in the first half.

Javad Aqaiepour netted his seventh goal of the season to give the host a lifeline 17 minutes from normal time but veteran Mohammad Abbaszadeh's 84th-minute strike secured a decisive three points for the northern Iranian club.

A third victory in five matches saw Sabet Elhami's side go three points clear of the relegation zone, while Esteghlal Khuzestan is just outside the bottom two on goal difference.

Sitting rock bottom, San'at Naft Abadan is on course for a place in the second-tier league next season, while the battle for safety between city rivals Esteghlal Khuzestan and Foolad – which have three titles between them since the Iranian Pro League was launched two decades ago – is set to go down the wire. Foolad will be looking to make the most of the back-to-back home games against Zob Ahan and Paykan before the final-day trip to Nassaji.

The Ahvaz Blues, meanwhile, will play away to Mes Rafsanjan following next Tuesday's visit to the capital and will hope to have a chance of survival when they welcome Havadar for the final round of fixtures on May 31.

The other game of the day saw Zob Ahan bounce back from successive defeats against Nassaji and Esteghlal to edge out Paykan 1-0 at home, courtesy of Fariborz Gerami's sensational halfway line strike.



Esteghlal defender Iman Salimi (1) celebrates his goal in a 1-0 victory over Foolad Khuzestan in the Persian Gulf Pro League at the Azadi Stadium, Tehran, Iran, on May 13, 2024.  
● ALI SHARIFZADEH/IRNA

## Iran's Alamian given Olympic boost in latest ITTF World Ranking



Iran's Noshad Alamian is seen in action during a victory over world No. 4 Liang Jingkun from China in the Saudi Smash event in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia, on May 6, 2024.  
● saudismash.com

## Sports Desk

Iranian Noshad Alamian was handed a major boost in his quest for a place in the table tennis contests of the Paris Olympics in July after moving up by 17 spots in the ITTF Men's Singles World Ranking, released on Tuesday.

The left-handed Iranian is 51st in the international governing body's latest list with 516 points and remains in contention for an Olympic berth through the World Ranking. Up to 15 players – not already

qualified – will be handed a quota place through the World Ranking of Week 25 on June 18. Alamian's massive surge in the ranking – the second highest in the top 60 – came after the Iranian enjoyed an impressive run during last week's Saudi Smash 2024 in Riyadh, where he came from behind twice to beat world No. 4 Liang Jingkun from China in a thrilling five games, before his campaign came to an end against Chinese teenager Lin Shidong – ranked 11th in the latest list in the round of 16. Should Alamian go all the way

to punch his Paris ticket, it will round off a remarkable 12 months for the Iranian, who ended the country's 65-year drought in the Asian Games last October by grabbing the men's team bronze – alongside his younger brother Nima and Amirhossein Hodaei – before teaming up with his brother for a third-place finish in the men's doubles event in Hangzhou.

Hodaei fell down six places to stand 137th in the ITTF Ranking, while Nima's 172nd place remained unchanged.

## Nourollahi at the double as Al Wahda routs UAE league leader

## Sports Desk

Iranian midfielder Ahmad Nourollahi bagged a couple of goals to inspire Al Wahda to a 4-1 rout of UAE Pro League leader Al Wasl in Dubai's Zabeel Stadium.

With the game tied at 1-1, courtesy of Omar Khribin's fifth-minute spot-kick for Al Wahda and Soufiane Bouftini's equalizer four minutes later, Nourollahi restored the visiting

side's lead right after the hour mark when goalkeeper Khaled al-Senani made a mess of saving his effort from outside the box. Argentine Facundo Kruspzky put the game to bed with four minutes from normal time before the Iranian netted his second with a sublime strike in the fourth minute of added time.

Former Persepolis midfielder took his tally to 10 goals and nine assists in 30 appearances

across all competitions this season, though he is yet to get an international call-up after a falling-out with Iran head coach Amir Qalenoee ahead of a World Cup qualifier in Uzbekistan back in November.

Despite a first league defeat of the season, Al Wasl remained top of the Emirati top-flight table with 55 points – six clear of Shabab Al-Ahli with five games to spare – with Al Wahda in third on 41 points.



Al Wahda midfielder Ahmad Nourollahi (7) celebrates his second goal in a 4-1 win against Al Wasl in the UAE Pro League in Dubai, UAE, on May 13, 2024.  
● uaeleague.ae