

Persian Gulf Pro League: Late drama in Azadi Stadium as momentum shifts in Reds' favor

Sports Desk

The two-horse race for the Persian Gulf Pro League crown took a pivotal twist on Friday as Esteghlal relinquished the top spot to archrival Persepolis with two games to spare.

Uzbek winger Oston Urunov bagged the winner deep into stoppage time as Persepolis pulled off the most sensational of comebacks in the Iranian top-flight history, scoring four in the final 20 minutes to beat 10-man Esteghlal Khuzestan 4-3 in Tehran's Azadi Stadium.

In the simultaneous match, Esteghlal was held to a frustrating goalless draw at Nassaji Mazandaran as Javad Nekounam's Blues lost their hold on the title fate.

There was little to separate the two sides in a cautious game in Qaemshahr's Vatani Stadium, with the best chance of the contest coming the visiting side's way with two minutes left on the clock, with Brazilian keeper Luan Polli making a heroic save to deny Payman Babaei's well-hit strike from the edge of the box.

The result, coupled with the Reds' dramatic victory, saw Esteghlal, which led the table for the best part of the campaign, drop to second – one point adrift of Persepolis – while it was enough for Saket Elhami's men to take yet another step toward survival as Nassaji is now 13th in the table – four points clear of the relegation zone.

Magnificent fightback

When the halftime whistle was blown at the Azadi Stadium, the



Persepolis manager Osmar Vieira (c) celebrates with his coaching staff during a 4-3 victory over Esteghlal Khuzestan in the Persian Gulf Pro League at the Azadi Stadium, Tehran, Iran, on May 24, 2024.
● FFIRI

Reds' quest for a seventh league trophy in eight years seemed to be all but over.

Alireza Kazemi's composed finish gave relegation-threatened Esteghlal Khuzestan a surprise lead with four minutes into the game and the home side, desperately looking for an equalizer, was stunned again in the 41st

minute, with Iraqi striker Aso Rostam smashing home into the bottom corner.

Kazemi netted his second of the night with a superb strike right before the interval to put Sirous Pourmousavi's side on course for the biggest upset of the season. Persepolis coach Osmar Vieira made three changes for the

start of the second half but his men still struggled to find a way through before a game-changing incident in the 57th minute saw Brazilian midfielder Sávio Rober to receive his marching orders for a second bookable offense.

The Reds fans, however, had to wait another 20 minutes to see their team get off the mark –

thanks to referee blowing in his whistle for a spot-kick after Vahid Amiri, introduced at halftime, was brought down in the box.

Hossein Kan'anizadegan kept his nerve to wrongfoot southern Blues goalkeeper Farzin Garousian from the spot and then set up Danial Esmaeilifar, whose low drive went in through the keep-

er's legs two minutes later. Persepolis striker Issa Alekassir continued his impressive form of late with an 86th-minute equalizer before Urunov's last-gasp strike on the rebound sent the Reds bench and supporters into utter jubilation.

The late heartbreak saw Esteghlal Khuzestan drop into the bottom two, while Foolad Khuzestan made the most of the result in the capital by beating Zob Ahan 1-0 in Ahvaz – courtesy of Mousa Coulibaly's second-half header – to open a three-point lead on its city rival.

Elsewhere, the league's leading marksman Shahriar Moghanlou scored his 16th goal of the campaign with Ramin Rezaeian also on the scoresheet as Sepahan defeated Havadar 2-0 at the Naqsh-e Jahan Stadium to remain third in the table.

Fourth-place Tractor shared the spoils with Paykan in a goalless encounter in Tehran – a massive point for the latter, who is above Nassaji in the standings on goal difference. Sajjad Shahbazzadeh's second-half goal helped Mes Rafsanjan walk away with a 1-0 win at Malavan, while Iralco defeated Golgozar 3-2 in Sirjan.

Maysam Tohidast scored a double, the second coming in the second minute of added time, as San'at Naft Abadan came from behind twice to play to a 2-2 home draw against Shams Azar, though the final outcome was barely a relief for the host, which is rock bottom in the table with 21 points – four away from the safety zone.

World Para Athletics Championships: Khosravi grabs fourth gold for Iran

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Yasin Khosravi won a fourth gold medal for Iran at the World Para Athletics Championships, coming out on top in the men's shot put F57 final in Kobe, Japan. The world record holder and defending champion took an early lead with his first attempt before his fifth throw of 15.83m – a best tally of the season – rounded off a dominant performance for the Iranian, who also captured the ultimate prize in last year's Asian Para Games.

Three-time world champion and a bronze winner in Tokyo Paralympics, Thiago Paulino dos Santos of

to finish second to China's Sun Pengxiang, who shattered the world record with 48.94m, while Indian Navdeep took the bronze with 42.82m.

Beit Sayyah's medal was the 14th for the Iranian squad at this year's competitions.

Amirhossein Alipour won a first gold for the country, thanks to a sensational campaign in the shot put F11 final, which saw him break the two-decade standing record in the championships.

High-profile Iranian and reigning Paralympic champion Saeid Afrooz flexed muscles ahead of his title defense in Paris later in the summer by grabbing a

javelin throw gold.

Stepping into the event as the defending champion, Afrooz was in a league of his own in the F34 final as all his attempts – topped by the fifth of 40.14m – were enough to secure the gold.

The pinnacle of the Iranian women's campaign came in the 400m T12 final, when Hajar Safarzadeh made history by clocking an Asian record of 57.56 seconds to become the country's first female gold medalist in 11 editions of the World Championships.

Brazil tallied 15.08m to settle for the silver, with Finland's Teijo Koopikka finishing on the third podium with 14.74m.

On Saturday, Iran's Sadeq Beit Sayyah grabbed a second successive world silver in the men's javelin throw F41 event.

Beit Sayyah, also a silver medalist in Tokyo, registered 47.92m

Iran's Yasin Khosravi celebrates after winning the shot put F57 gold at the World Para Athletics Championships in Kobe, Japan, on May 24, 2024.
● paralympic.org

Djokovic worried about French Open title defence



● FABRICE COFFRINI/AFP

REUTERS – World number one Novak Djokovic said he does not consider himself a favourite ahead of his title defence at the French Open, which begins with a first-round match against local hope Pierre-Hugues Herbert today.

Djokovic's barren run ahead of Roland Garros continued as the 24-times Grand Slam winner was beaten 6-4 0-6 6-1 by Tomas Machac on Friday, weeks after losing heavily to Alejandro Tabilo in Rome. The 37-year-old Serb is strugg-

ling to regain his rhythm with many fearing that his erratic form could spell trouble for his bid for a fourth Paris crown.

"Of course I am worried... I haven't been playing good at all this year," Djokovic told reporters after being beaten by Machac on Friday.

Asked about his title defence at Roland Garros, Djokovic said: "(I've had) some (good) matches here and there but it is what it is. You have to accept it. I don't consider myself a favourite there.

"I have a lot to work on. I'm go-

ing to take it match by match and see how far I can go."

During the final moments of the first set, Djokovic requested a medical pause due to a stomach issue. Earlier in May, he was hit on the head by a fan's water bottle while signing autographs.

"I just need to feel better. It's not enjoyment when you are suffering on the court feeling this way," he added.

"You're not able to focus on tennis when you have other stuff happening. I just hope I can be fit and ready and prepared for Roland Garros."