

Persian Gulf Pro League: Reds and Blues win as title race goes down to the wire



Persepolis midfielder Masoud Rigi celebrates after scoring in a 3-1 win at Shams Azar in the Persian Gulf Pro League in Qazvin, Iran, on May 28, 2024.
● HOSSEIN GHOLIKHANI/IRNA



Esteghlal defender Rouzbeh Cheshmi celebrates his goal in a 1-0 victory over Golgozar Sirjan in the Persian Gulf Pro League at the Azadi Stadium, Tehran, Iran, on May 28, 2024.
● PAYAM SANI/IRNA

Sports Desk

The tightest title race in the Persian Gulf Pro League in years will be decided on the final day of the season after both Persepolis and Esteghlal came out victorious in the penultimate round of fixtures on Tuesday. Leading its city rival by a single point, Persepolis walked away with a massive 3-1 triumph over Shams Azar in its last outing on the road, with Esteghlal edging out Golgozar 1-0 at home in the simultaneous match to keep up with the Reds heading into Saturday's decisive games. A home win against Mes

Rafsanjan at Tehran's Azadi Stadium will secure a remarkable seventh top-flight crown in eight seasons for Persepolis, while the Capital Blues, who were on top for the best part of the campaign before last Friday's frustrating stalemate at Nassaji, will long for one last twist in the two-horse race when playing away to relegation-threatened Paykan. Esteghlal hoped Saeid Daqiqi's Shams Azar – the surprise package of the season which had taken four points from Esteghlal and Sepahan at home – would come up with yet another brave performance on Tuesday but in-form winter sign-

ing Oston Urunov bagged his sixth goal in 12 games with 19 minutes into the contest to ease the pressure on the visiting Reds. Iranian international center-back Rouzbeh Cheshmi broke the deadlock for Esteghlal with a low drive from the edge of the box right before the interval, and when Mohammad Papi headed home the equalizer for Shams Azar six minutes after the break, the Blues crowd at the Azadi venue went into raptures. However, Esteghlal supporters could only celebrate for 10 minutes as former Blues midfielder Masoud Rigi found his first goal in

the Reds shirt to restore the one-goal lead for Osmar Vieira's men on the hour mark. A late blunder by Shams Azar keeper Alireza Ja'far-pour was like a bucket of cold water for the Blues faithful after he made a mess of what looked to be a routine save against Mahdi Torabi's cross before the ball went in through his legs. While Esteghlal coach Javad Nekounam will be eager to see his former international teammate Moharram Navidkia and his Mes side pull off a major upset on the final day, Paykan manager Reza Enayati can still provide a stern test for the Blues – with whom he lifted the

league trophy as a prolific striker.

San'at goes down

Enayati had Ali Qorbani to thank for his 98th-minute equalizer which saw Paykan salvage a 2-2 draw at Foolad Khuzestan and remain above its southern Iranian host in the survival battle. The excitement will be equally high at the bottom end of the table with Paykan, Foolad, and Esteghlal Khuzestan looking to avoid joining San'at Naft Abadan in the second division next season. A 2-1 away defeat against Zob Ahan meant San'at will begin next campaign in the second tier for the first time

in nine years. Esteghlal Khuzestan, which surrendered a three-goal halftime lead against Persepolis to leave Azadi empty-handed last Friday, will head into Saturday's fixtures in the bottom two but will be hoping to build on Tuesday's massive 3-2 victory at Mes Rafsanjan. Reza Dehqani put Mes in front 14 minutes into the game before Javad Aqa-eipour's double and Ousmane Ndong's close-range finish in the space of 17 minutes gave the southern Blues a commanding lead at the break, with Farshid Baqeri's late consolation too little too late for the home side.

In Tehran, Mohammadreza Azadi netted twice with Hossein Zamehran, Mohammad Abbaszadeh, and Mehrdad Abdi also on the scoresheet, to help Saket Elhami's Nassaji go four points clear of the bottom two with an emphatic 5-0 away win against Havadar. Nassaji will still play a part in the survival battle when hosting in the season finale. Elsewhere, Kaveh Rezaei scored in the first half as Sepahan defeated Iralco 1-0 in Arak to all but secure a third-place finish, with fourth-place Tractor coming from behind to beat Malavan 3-1 in its final home game.

Serbia's Novak Djokovic reacts during the second set tie break in his first round match against France's Pierre-Hugues Herbert in the French Open in Paris, France, on May 28, 2024.
● STEPHANIE LECOQ/REUTERS

Djokovic 'moving in positive direction' with French Open win

BBC – Novak Djokovic began his French Open title defence with a solid if not spectacular victory over home hope Pierre-Hugues Herbert. Serbia's Djokovic, 37, upped his level when it mattered to win 6-4 7-6 (7-3) 6-4 in Tuesday's night session at Roland Garros. The 24-time Grand Slam champion will take sole ownership of the record of most major titles with a fourth victory on the Paris clay. But he has come into the event in uncertain form. Djokovic has endured a turbulent season, having been far from his lofty heights and not yet reaching a final. Playing in Geneva last week was a sign

he wanted to build rhythm and confidence before heading to the French Open, saying when he arrived that he had "low expectations but high hopes". Therefore, it was intriguing to see how Djokovic would perform against 142nd-ranked wildcard Herbert. Djokovic's movement at the baseline did not always look comfortable and lacked some sharpness in his returning. However, he generally served well and was still able to pick his moments to strike – most notably in a commanding tie-break. This year, Djokovic has appeared to lack some of the fire which has often

fuelled his success but his demonstrative celebrations as he clinched the two-set lead indicated his pleasure. Chances were rare in the third set before he piled on the pressure again in what proved to be the final game. A stunning winner at deuce teed up a first match point and Herbert blinked to hand it over with a double fault. "I'm glad I started the way I started, the way I felt on the court," said Djokovic, who plays Spain's world number 63 Roberto Carballes Baena in round two. "Comparing to the previous weeks of tournaments I played [recently], I felt good, better. I'm moving in a positive direction."

Usyk v Fury rematch set for December, Saudi official says

BBC – Undisputed heavyweight champion Oleksandr Usyk and Tyson Fury are set to meet in a rematch on 21 December, according to the chairman of Saudi Arabia's general entertainment authority. Usyk beat Fury by split decision to become the first undisputed champion

of the four-belt era on 18 May. A rematch was said to be in the works for October but Turki Alalshikh says the date has been pushed back to December. "The world will watch another historical fight again," Alalshikh added on X. "Our commitment to boxing fans continues. We hope you enjoy it."

Usyk, the first undisputed heavyweight champion since Lennox Lewis in 1999, added Fury's WBC belt to his WBA, WBO and IBF collection when they fought in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia earlier this month. The 37-year-old Ukrainian has won all 22 of his professional fights. Alalshikh did not name a venue or desti-

nation for the rematch but stated it would take place "during Riyadh Season". Riyadh Season is an entertainment festival held every winter since its launch in 2019 which has hosted a number of high profile boxing events. The contest would give Briton Fury, 35, the opportunity to gain revenge after

tasting defeat for the first time in his 16-year professional career against Usyk. It is unlikely that all four belts will be on the line in the rematch with the IBF planning to strip Usyk as he will not be facing its mandatory challenger next.