

Persian Gulf Pro League: Nerve-racking finale at both ends of the table



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Persepolis players are seen ahead of the kickoff in the Persian Gulf Pro League victory over Shams Azar in Qazvin, Iran, on May 28, 2024.

● HOSSEIN GHOLIKHANI/IRNA

Sports Desk

A long, exhausting season of the Persian Gulf Pro League will come to an end tonight with five teams having all to play for at both ends of the table.

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A home win will be between Persepolis – leading Esteghlal by a single point – and a remarkable seventh league title in eight seasons when the Capital Reds welcome Moharram Navidkia's Mes Rafsanjan to the Azadi Stadium.

Persepolis, which only moved atop the table for the first time eight days ago – after overcoming a halftime three-goal deficit to win a seven-goal thriller against Esteghlal Khuzestan at home – will have an impressive run in the second part of the campaign to thank for a likely title.

Named as the interim coach following Yahya Golmohammadi's departure in January, Osmar Vieira – a number two

to his predecessor – got off to a losing start in his new role – a 1-0 defeat at Irasco – but went on to lead the Reds to 11 wins in 13 unbeaten matches, including a massive 3-1 win at Shams Azar last time out, and another three points today will all but guarantee an extended spell on the bench for the Brazilian.

Meanwhile, for all the criticism he has received for his defensive-minded approach, Esteghlal head coach Javad Nekounam, who took charge for the start of season, deserves credit for keeping an average squad on top of the table for the best part of campaign, though he will be left regretting his gameplan in the goalless stalemate at Nassaji Mazandaran, which saw the Blues relinquish the table summit, if his team fails to win a second title in three years.

While Nekounam will be longing for a favor from his former international teammate Navidkia, who lost his job as the Sepahan manager after coming short against Persepolis in the title race three years ago, Esteghlal boss will have to come up against his opposite number on Paykan bench Reza Enayati – a league champion with the Blues as a prolific striker. Stepping into the game on

the back of four defeats in an eight-game winless run, Paykan is two points clear of the relegation zone but another setback at home today could see the club drop to the second tier for the first time in eight years.

Esteghlal Khuzestan, the last team other than the capital rivals to win the league, is in the bottom two ahead of the home fixture against Havadar but head coach Siros Pourmousavi will hope his men can build on the recent brave performances, including last Wednesday's comeback 3-2 win at Mes Rafsanjan.

Foolad, meanwhile, will play away to Nassaji, which is on a high after a 5-0 thrashing of Havadar in the previous outing secured a top-tier place for the northern Iranian club. A two-time champion since the Iranian Pro League was introduced two decades ago, Foolad would have been within touching distance of survival on Wednesday, had it not been for conceding a 97th-minute equalizer in the 2-2 home draw against Paykan and now any outcome other than maximum points at Nassaji could see the 2022/23 AFC Champions League quarterfinalist relegated for the second time in the Pro League era.

Azmoun 'set for new chapter' after Sevilla shows interest: *Fabrizio Romano*

Sports Desk

Iranian international striker Sardar Azmoun is tipped for a start in a third major European league in as many years next season, according to high-profile Italian journalist Fabrizio Romano.

Having joined AS Roma from Bayer Leverkusen last June, Azmoun, 29, saw his season-long spell with the Gial-

lorossi come to an end with a 2-1 defeat at Empoli, during which he came on as a second-half substitute, in the final round of Serie A fixtures last Sunday.

Former Zenit St. Petersburg forward is "set for new chapter after AS Roma loan due to expire this week," Romano, who is best known for his transfer news, wrote on X on Thursday, adding: "Understand [La Liga

side] Sevilla are still showing interest after Azmoun talks in January, it's a possibility being discussed."

"There are also more clubs keen [on signing Azmoun], with possibility to stay in Serie A," wrote the Italian.

Azmoun bagged three goals – all in the Italian top flight – in 29 games across all competitions for AS Roma – the best part of which came as cameo appear-

ances – in a season that was interrupted by a couple of injury spells as well as the international duty in the AFC Asian Cup in January.

Azmoun was hoping to extend his stay in the Italian capital but AS Roma, which failed to secure Champions League action for next season, has refused to meet Leverkusen's reported €12.5-million asking price for the Iranian.



● FABIO ROSSI/GETTY IMAGES

Mavericks beat Timberwolves to reach NBA Finals

BBC – The Dallas Mavericks will face the Boston Celtics in the NBA Finals after beating the Minnesota Timberwolves 4-1 in the Western Conference finals.

Luka Doncic and Kyrie Irving each hit 36 points to lead the Mavericks to a resounding 124-103 victory in game five in Minnesota.

Slovenian star Doncic, 25, set the tone with 20 points in the first quarter before Dallas moved into a dominant 69-40 lead at half-time and the Timberwolves could not fight back. It is the first time the Mavericks have reached the Finals since winning their sole NBA title in 2011 and only the third time overall.

They beat the Los Angeles Clippers in round one before reaching the conference finals with victory over top seed the Oklahoma City Thunder.

The best-of-seven NBA Finals begin in Boston on Thursday. The Celtics are chasing a record 18th NBA title in their 23rd Finals appearance.

Anthony Edwards and Karl-An-

thony Towns each scored 28 points for the Timberwolves, who beat the Phoenix Suns 4-0 in round one before stunning defending champions the Denver Nuggets in the conference semi-finals.

But their usually superb defence could not stifle the sublime Doncic throughout the series.

"It was Luka magic mode," said Mavericks head coach Jason Kidd.

"He set the tone and then he made it easier for everyone else. Everybody else stepped up."

Irving took over the scoring in the second quarter and will now appear in his first NBA Finals since 2017.

"I was enjoying it, you're just watching a special performance take place," said Irving.

"When Luka starts off a game like that, we're a tough team to beat"



Mavericks' Luka Doncic (77) shoots in a victory over Timberwolves in the NBA Western Conference finals in Minneapolis, MN, US, on May 30, 2024.

● AP