

Persian Gulf Pro League roundup: Late VAR drama seals opening-day win for Esteghlal

Sports Desk

Esteghlal got off to a winning start in the new Persian Gulf Pro League season, thanks to Mohammad-Hossein Eslami's last-gasp strike at Shams Azar, while Persepolis began its title defense with a 1-1 draw against Zob Ahan. New Tractor head coach Dragan Skocic announced his return to Iranian top flight in style as his Tractor side defeated Mes Rafsanjan 2-0, with Sepahan bouncing back from an ACL Elite play-off humiliation against Shabab Al Ahli with a 3-1 home victory over newly-promoted Chadormalou SC.

In Qazvin, Arman Ramezani gave Javad Nekounam's Esteghlal the lead 10 minutes after the break before Amir-Mohammad Nessaei drew the home side level courtesy of a VAR-given spot-kick in the 89th minute.

Summer-signings Ramin Rezaeian and Eslami combined as the latter found the net in third minute of stoppage time but the celebrations were cut short after the flag was raised, deeming the former to be in an offside position.

The linesman's decision, however, was overturned by the video assistant ref and the Tehran Blues walked away with the maximum points.

The result came a night after Esteghlal's city rival Persepolis was held by Zob Ahan in Arak's Imam Khomeini Stadium – serving as the Reds' home venue.



Mohammad-Hossein Eslami (80) scores Esteghlal's late winner in a 2-1 victory over Shams Azar in the Persian Gulf Pro League in Qazvin, Iran, on August 16, 2024.
● HOSSEIN GHOLIKHANI/IRNA

Having a new head coach in Juan Carlos Garrido, the champion was stunned when Majid Aliyari headed home Mohammad Qoreishi's long throw less than a minute into the game.

Saeid Sadeqi celebrated his return from injury with a brilliant strike right before the interval, though Garrido will still have to address his wasteful frontline ahead of Thursday's much-antic-

ipated visit to Tractor. Tractor's summer of spending spree quickly paid off, with former Persepolis players Mahdi Torabi and Danial Esmailifar playing their part in giving the

club a first opening-day win in a decade. Torabi teed up Amirhossein Hosseinzadeh, who tapped in from close range in the 10th minute, before Esmailifar's low cross let

Croatian Tomislav Strkalj found the net on his Tractor debut to double the visitors' lead in the first half.

In Isfahan's Naqsh-e Jahan Stadium, Sepahan was desperate to open its campaign with a win after its hopes of a place in the revamped Asian elite clubs' competition had been wrecked two weeks ago.

Jose Morais's side had to wait till the 55th minute to get off the mark against the newcomers, when Kaveh Rezaei scored from the spot, only to see his goal canceled out by Chadormalou's Mohammad Papi seven minutes later. Skipper Mohammad Karimi's effort from inside the box went into the bottom corner off the defender to restore the one-goal cushion for Sepahan and substitute Reza Shekari secured all points in added time.

Elsewhere, Omid Nour-Afkan's second-half penalty saw Malavan come out on top against Golgozar Sirjan at home, while Esteghlal Khuzestan and Iralco shared the spoils in a goalless contest in Ahvaz.

Kheybar Khorramabad celebrated its top-flight debut with a 1-0 win away to Havadar, with Mehrdad Qanbari finding the net in the second half.

In Qa'emshahr's Shahid Vatani Stadium, a repeat of last season's final day drama saw Foolad Khuzestan defeat host Nassaji Mazandaran 1-0 in Yahya Golmohammadi's first game in charge of the visiting side.



● AFC

Iran names provisional squad for Futsal World Cup

Sports Desk

Head coach Vahid Shamsaei named Iran's provisional 22-man squad ahead of the upcoming FIFA Futsal World Cup – starting September 14 in Uzbekistan.

The players will have to report for a first training session in Tehran today.

Stepping into the competition as the reigning Asian champion, Iran is pitted against Venezuela, Guatemala, and France in Group F.

Venezuela will be making only a second World Cup appearance after reaching the last 16 in Lithuania three years ago, while Guatemala – beaten by Iran in all six previous meetings – has failed to go beyond

the group stage in five attempts. France, meanwhile, will be a debutant in Uzbekistan courtesy of an elite-round group win in the European qualifiers.

Making a ninth World Cup appearance in the upcoming edition, Iran, whose best finish came in 2016 thanks to a shootout victory over Portugal in the third-place play-off, will begin its campaign against Venezuela on September 16. Shamsaei's men will face Guatemala on September 19 before squaring off against the European opponent three days later.

The top two of the six groups will be joined by the four best third-placed finishers in the last-16 round.

The following is the Iranian 22-man World Cup squad:

Saeid Mo'meni, Sajjad Babaei, Behzad Rasouli (goalkeepers), Mohammadreza Sangsefidi, Mohammad Shajari, Mahdi Asadshir, Alireza Rafiepour, Mohammad-Hossein Derakhshani, Ali-Asghar Hassanzadeh, Salar Aqapour, Ali Akrami, Amirhossein Davoudi, Mohammad-Hossein Bazayr, Mahdi Karimi, Moslem Oladqobad, Masoud Yousef, Sajjad Yousefkhah, Hamzeh Kadkhoda, Hossein Tayyebi, Saeid Ahmad-Abbasi, Behrouz Azimi, Amirhossein Abtahi.

Eight players will be omitted for the visit to the Central Asian country.

Maresca calls for patience as he seeks to turn around Chelsea's fortunes

REUTERS – New Chelsea head coach Enzo Maresca has asked for patience ahead of their Premier League opener against reigning champions Manchester City, as the Italian tries to turn around the west London side's fortunes after a series of underwhelming seasons. Chelsea, who finished sixth last campaign and 12th in the 2022-23 season, hired the 44-year-old Maresca in June after he guided Leicester City to the English Championship title in his first season in charge. Chelsea have gone big again in

the transfer window, splashing out around 160 million pounds (\$206.50 million) on signing players such as Portuguese winger Pedro Neto, midfielder Kieran Dewsbury-Hall and Swedish-Danish goalkeeper Filip Jorgensen.

"We are going to try and do our best to win games," Maresca, who had a spell as one of Pep Guardiola's assistant managers at City, told reporters on Friday.

"The big difference between us, in this moment, and other teams is that it is just a matter

of time. Some clubs work with a manager for eight years, so with time we will close the gap and hopefully that can happen soon.

"Sometimes it (time) sounds like an excuse from managers and I know timing in football is difficult, but in our case with the process and ideas we will close the gap.

"We need their (fans) support because when you are on the pitch and you can hear the fans behind the team it is like 12 players. If they support us and be patient then we will pay

them back with performance and results."

Chelsea will be without captain Reece James after the 24-year-old right back picked up a hamstring injury.

Maresca said midfielder Conor Gallagher, 24, was training apart and would not be available for today's clash at Stamford Bridge. Gallagher was close to a move to LaLiga club Atletico Madrid but British media reports said it had been put on hold.

"He is trying to find a solution with the club," Maresca said.



● DARREN WALSH/GETTY IMAGES