

High stakes in Tehran Derby: Esteghlal, Persepolis eyeing statement triumph



Having endured weeks of turmoil and speculation surrounding his future with the Blues, Nekounam will be desperate to prove he remains the right man for the job with a first league victory over the archrivals since 2018.

Sports Desk

With only five rounds of fixtures played in the new Persian Gulf Pro League season, today's Tehran Derby could hardly be considered as a milestone in the Iranian top-flight title race.

However, there will still be more than three points and the bragging rights on the line for capital heavyweights Esteghlal and Persepolis, as well as their head coaches, in the highly-anticipated encounter.

Having endured weeks of turmoil and speculation surrounding his future with the Blues, Esteghlal coach Javad Nekounam will be desperate to prove he remains the right man for the job with a first league victory over the archrivals since 2018.

For Nekounam's opposite number Juan Carlos Garrido, meanwhile, success in today's occasion will represent a stepping stone in his side's progress in the early stages of his helm at the Reds.

Esteghlal has been without a win in three league outings since the opening-day late victory at Shams Azar, while the club's 29-game unbeaten run in the Iranian top flight came to an end at Esteghlal Khuzestan in August.

The 1-0 defeat in Ahvaz triggered an ongoing falling-out between Nekounam and the club hierarchy, though an emphatic 3-0 beating of Al Gharafa in their AFC Champions League Elite opener temporarily eased the pressure on the manager.

Esteghlal had to come from behind twice to salvage a point in a VAR-driven 2-2 draw at Nassaji Mazandaran last time out, but the hard-fought point came at a cost for the Blues as instrumental center-back Rouzbeh Cheshmi received his marching orders in the stoppage time and will be out of the Persepolis game.

With four goals and an assist to his name since joining the club in the summer, Ramin Rezaeian will be the man to watch in the Blues outfit.

The veteran fullback, who was on the scoresheet for the Reds when they claimed a famous 4-2 triumph over the city rivals nine years ago, will be keen to build on his impressive form of late against his former employers, with whom he lifted his sole league trophy in 2017.

Reds on the rise

Persepolis got off to a slow start to its domestic title defense under Garrido, who was only appointed to the Reds role in June.

Chasing a seventh league crown in eight seasons, the Reds were held to a frustrating 1-1 home draw against Zob Ahan on the opening day and then had new Algerian keeper Alexis Guendouz and fellow-summer signing Ayoub El Amloud, who bagged a late equalizer, to thank for managing a point away to Tractor.

Garrido's tactics started to kick in during a convincing 2-0 victory over Foolad Khuzestan, and even a 1-0 loss to Al Ahli Saudi took nothing away from the Reds' dominant performance against the star-studded host.

Ali Alipour, the Reds' all-time leading marksman in the Iranian

Pro League, got off the mark on his return to club in Friday's 2-0 over Iralco and will be eager to add to his four derby goals today.

El Amloud was back in training with the rest of the team on Sunday, having missed Friday's game with an injury, but star winger Oston Urunov remains a doubt for the derby after he was forced off right before half-time against Iralco with a hamstring problem.

Elsewhere in the league, another mouth-watering clash will be on the cards in Isfahan as Sepahan – sitting atop the table with 13 points – will welcome second-place Tractor on Friday.

Malavan will play Esteghlal Khuzestan at home and Golgozar and Havadar will square off in Sirjan, while Iralco will chase a first win of the season when hosting newcomer Kheybar FC in Arak.

Mes Rafsanjan will visit Chadormalou, with Shams Azar and Nassaji hoping to end their winless run when they go head-to-head in Qazvin.

Yahaya Golmohammadi's Foolad will face Zob Ahan in Ahvaz on Saturday.



For Nekounam's opposite number Juan Carlos Garrido, success in today's occasion will represent a stepping stone in his side's progress in the early stages of his helm at the Reds.



Nadal included in Spain squad for Davis Cup finals



● CLIVE BRUNSKILL/GETTY IMAGES

BBC – Rafael Nadal has been included in Spain's squad for the Davis Cup Final Eight in November.

The former world number one, 38, has been added alongside world number three Carlos Alcaraz, Roberto Bautista Agut, Pablo Carreno Busta and Marcel Granollers. Nadal has not competed since

the Paris 2024 Olympics, where the 22-time Grand Slam champion was beaten in the singles by Novak Djokovic and lost in the quarter-finals of the doubles after partnering Alcaraz.

He withdrew from the US Open in August and last weekend's Laver Cup because of fitness concerns.

Six-time champions Spain, whose most recent success came in 2019, face Netherlands in the quarter-finals, starting on 19 November.

Nadal missed the US Open because he said he would not "be able to give my 100% at this time".

He then pulled out of the Laver Cup earlier in September, saying he believed there are "other players who can help the team deliver the win".

Nadal also missed the Australian Open in January through injury and decided not to play Wimbledon to focus on the Olympics.

He previously hinted at retirement later this year, but said before the French Open he was not "100%" certain that would be the last time he played at Roland Garros.

The Davis Cup quarter-finals take place 19-21 November, with the semi-finals following on consecutive days before the final on Sunday, 24 November. Reigning world number one Jannik Sinner is set to lead defending champions Italy, who will seek to become the first team to retain the title since 2013.

Man City rocked as injured Rodri may miss rest of season



● SIMON STACPOOLE/GETTY IMAGES

THE GURADIAN – Rodri sustained an anterior cruciate ligament injury in Manchester City's 2-2 draw with Arsenal on Sunday, initial tests have indicated, and may miss the rest of the season, handing the champions a serious blow in their push to win a fifth successive Premier League crown. The 28-year-old was forced off

after 21 minutes of the game at the Etihad Stadium, having gone down under minimal contact following a challenge by Thomas Partey inside the Arsenal area, but in clear agony. City await further tests but fear the worst in regards to the availability of one of Pep Guardiola's most important and influential players.

As the manager said in March of the midfielder he rates as the best No 6 in the world: "He is irreplaceable right now."

Guardiola has struggled to find a deputy for Rodri. Calvin Phillips was signed from Leeds in July 2022 to offer competition but was ultimately judged not to be of the requisite standard and is now on loan at Ipswich. Mateo Kovacic, who replaced Rodri against Arsenal, is trusted by Guardiola but the Croatian is a different profile of player and, as such, City would have to adjust how they set up if he is to step in long term. Ilkay Gundogan and Rico Lewis are other potential options to play at the base of City's midfield.

Rodri was suspended for three games towards the start of last season and City lost them all. Their only defeat in regulation time during the campaign with him in the side came against Manchester United in the FA Cup final in May. He was named player of the tournament as Spain won Euro 2024 in the summer and is a contender to win the men's Ballon d'Or next month after being named on the award's shortlist.