

Persian Gulf Pro League:

Iralco, Esteghlal share the spoils;
Rahmati steps down after Havadar loss

Sports Desk

Iralco came from behind to salvage a point at home against Esteghlal in a 1-1 draw in the Persian Gulf Pro League.

Seyyed Mahdi Rahmati, meanwhile, stepped down from his role as Havadar head coach after his team fell to a 1-0 home defeat against Nassaji Mazandaran. Desperate to get back on the winning ways following last Monday's goalless game against Golgozar, Esteghlal went in front in Arak thanks to a VAR-given spot kick deep into first-half added time.

Iralco defender Aref Haji-Eidi was deemed to have elbowed Esteghlal midfielder Zobeir Niknafs when heading the ball clear in the box, and Uzbek talisman Jaloliddin Masharipov held his nerve to dink the ball past goalkeeper Mohammad Khalifeh.

Amin Kazemian bagged a well-deserved equalizer



for the home side with a 63rd-minute low drive from inside the box to join Trac-

tor trio Amirhossein Hosseinzadeh, Mahdi Hashemnejad, and Tomislav Strkalj

on top of the league's leading marksmen chart with five strikes.

There was little to separate the two sides afterwards as the frustrating draw left



Esteghlal fullback Abolfazl Jalali (33) is seen in an aerial battle with Iralco's Amin Kazemian in a 1-1 draw in the Persian Gulf Pro League in Arak, Iran, on Dec. 20, 2024.

● FFIRI

Esteghlal in the eighth place of the table with 16 points before Saturday's fixtures, with Iralco in ninth on 15 points.

Next for Esteghlal is a visit to Chadormalou on Thursday before a highly-anticipated encounter against Sepahan at Tehran's Azadi Stadium on January 2.

Iralco will play away to Malavan on Friday, followed by a home game against struggling Shams Azar.

In Tehran, a seventh league defeat of the season saw Rahmati part ways with Havadar, which has only managed one victory in 13 outings to sit bottom of the table with eight points.

Former Persepolis striker Hamed Pakdel's tame effort

from the edge of the box found the bottom corner with 12 minutes left on the clock as Nassaji celebrated a second win of the campaign, moving up to 12th in the 16-team table with 13 points.

Friday's games came after Foolad Khuzestan had defeated Chadormalou 2-1 in Ahvaz on the preceding night.

Sasan Ansari's second-minute strike for Foolad was canceled out by Seyyed Ali Yahyazadeh in the 38th minute, but Malian center-back Moussa Coulibaly scored from the spot with four minutes remaining to secure maximum points for the home side, which went down to 10 men in the 90th minute after a second booking for substitute Abolfazl Attar.

Meanwhile, Mohammad-Taha Tabatabaei's composed finish in the 79th minute led Khaybar to a 1-0 win over Esteghlal Khuzestan in Khorramabad.

Legendary weightlifter Rezazadeh backs
Iranians to restore superheavyweight dominance

Sports Desk

Weightlifting great Hossein Rezazadeh tipped his fellow-Iranians Alireza Yousefi and Ali Davoudi to dominate the superheavyweight class for the coming years after the two bagged five medals between them at the IWF World Championships last week.

Former world junior champion Yousefi, 21, grabbed the clean & jerk gold before settling for the total silver in the men's +109kg event in Manama, while Davoudi claimed the snatch and total bronzes.

Armenian Varazdat Lalayan, meanwhile, finished on a 215-252-467 record to bag the snatch and total golds, coupled with a C&J bronze – a first world superheavyweight champion other than Georgian Lasha Talakhadze since Russian Ruslan Alibegov made a clean sweep of triple golds in 2014.

Talakhadze, who won a third consecutive Olympic gold in August, has been the dominant

force in the weight division for a decade, but he fueled his retirement rumors when he decided to skip the event in the Bahraini capital.

"Talakhadze is 30 now, and the physical toll of training and competing is hard to manage for someone his age. I don't think we will see him in competitive action ever again," Rezazadeh said of the Georgian great.

The superheavyweight class was the Iranians' territory for the best part of 15 years before Talakhadze made his breakthrough in 2015, as Rezazadeh collected double Olympic golds in 2000 and 2004, with Behdad Salimi winning the ultimate prize in London 2012.

Rezazadeh believes Yousefi and Davoudi will bring back the glory years of the category to Iranian weightlifting again.

"They did a great job in winning five medals in Manama and I am positive they will restore the superheavyweight reign for the country in the near future," said Rezazadeh, who also has 10

world golds under his belt.

"Yousefi's 262kg lift in the C&J discipline was truly exceptional and worthy of winning the gold medal. I even told him he is capable of shattering the world record [which belongs to Talakhadze with 267kg]. That's what Talakhadze and I had done in the past and I'm sure he has what it takes to emulate that feat. He'll just need to do better with his snatch efforts to boost his chances for the total gold.

"Davoudi was also in a decent form, though he will have to raise his records in both snatch and C&J categories," Rezazadeh said of Tokyo Olympic silver medalist.

Asked about the two Iranians' main rivals in future competitions, Rezazadeh named Lalayan and Iraqi prodigy Ali Ammar Rubaiawi, who bettered the snatch world junior record in the Paris Olympics and finished fifth in the total standing in Manama.

A total of 10 medals saw a rejuvenated, new-look Iranian squad



collect 560 points to finish runner-up to China in the men's competitions.

"Weightlifting has been among the most prolific sports for Iran

over the years, and I'm confident this group of young talents will win several medals in the 2026 Asian Games and the 2028 Olympics," Rezazadeh said.



Iranian weightlifters Alireza Yousefi (R) and Ali Davoudi (L) pose alongside Bahrain's Gor Minasyan and Armenian Varazdat Lalayan at the IWF World Championships in Manama, Bahrain, on Dec. 15, 2024.

● IWFI



NBA Cup champion Bucks no match for Cavs

REUTERS – Donovan Mitchell scored 27 points to lead the Cleveland Cavaliers to a 124-101 home win over the Bucks on Friday, swiftly bringing Milwaukee down from its NBA Cup-championship high. Five other Cavs scored in double-figures, with Darius Garland putting up 16 and Evan Mobley and Dean Wade adding 15 each. Ty Jerome had 13 points, and Jarrett Allen posted 10 points and 10 rebounds.

Giannis Antetokounmpo led Milwaukee with 33 points along with 14 rebounds. Fellow star Damian Lillard did not travel with the team due to a right calf strain. Khris Middleton scored 14 off the bench, and Brook Lopez contributed 10 points.

The Cavaliers have won three in a row and seven of their past eight. The Bucks had a three-game winning streak end, though the count doesn't in-

clude their 97-81 victory over the Oklahoma City Thunder in the NBA Cup final on Tuesday, as that game isn't included in the regular-season standings. Elsewhere, Jalen Williams scored a season-high 33 points and Shai Gilgeous-Alexander added 25 as visiting Oklahoma City Thunder withstood a fourth-quarter rally to beat Miami Heat 104-97.

Joel Embiid scored 12 of his game-high 34 points in the

fourth quarter to propel Philadelphia 76ers to a 108-98 home win over Charlotte Hornets.



Cavaliers guard Donovan Mitchell (45) goes to the rim for two against Milwaukee Bucks in Cleveland, OH, US, on Dec. 20, 2024.

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