

Persian Gulf Pro League preview:

Tractor eager to return to winning ways before midseason break

Sports Desk

Tractor will be keen on ending a two-game winless run in the Persian Gulf Pro League when playing at home against Esteghlal Khuzestan in the last round of fixtures before the midseason break on Thursday.

Stunned 1-0 by Shams Azar last time out in Tabriz, Tractor had a Mahdi Torabi's late equalizer to thank for rescuing a point in the 1-1 away draw against Nassaji Mazandaran on Friday.

The result still proved costly for Tractor as it saw the Tabriz-based club drop to second in the Iranian top-flight table, while in-form striker Mahdi Hashamnejad and Croatian head coach Dragan Skocic were sent off in stoppage time and will miss Thursday's game.

Nine-placed Esteghlal Khuzestan will be looking to build on a decent performance against formidable archrival Foolad in a goalless Ahavaz Derby when coming up against the host's prolific frontline.

Meanwhile, a highly-anticipated matchup will see Sepahan, which routed Havadar 5-0 to overtake Tractor on top, visit Tehran's Azadi Stadium to square off against Esteghlal.

Having replaced Portuguese coach Jose Morais in November, Frenchman Patrice Carteron has enjoyed an impressive start to life on Sepahan bench but could still face a demanding test against the Tehran Blues' solid



backline. South African coach Pitso Mosimane has been quick to find a solution to Esteghlal's defensive woes since taking over from Ja-

vad Nekounam last October, as his team has conceded a single goal in the previous six domestic outings across all competitions. Sepahan winger Mahdi Limou-

chi will be the man to watch on the Azadi pitch after he bagged a sensational hat-trick against Havadar to join Iralco's Amin Kazemian on top of the league's

leading marksmen chart with six goals.

Matchday 15 will kick off today with a game in Tehran's Shahr-e Qods Stadium, where defending



Tractor striker Amirhossein Hosseinzadeh (99) is pictured during a 1-1 draw against Nassaji Mazandaran in the Persian Gulf Pro League at the Vatan Stadium, Qaemshahr, Iran, on Dec. 27, 2024.

● FFIRI

champion Persepolis and bottom-side Havadar go head-to-head.

The game could mark the end of interim coach Karim Baqeri's short stint in the Tehran Reds' dugout, with Persepolis reportedly in talks with several foreign candidates for the job ahead of a hectic January schedule.

Persepolis pulled off a 2-1 comeback victory over Khaybar on Friday to put a lid on a two-game losing streak and a second successive win could boost Baqeri's chances for the permanent role until the end of season, though he is believed to have no intention of extending his spell beyond today's encounter.

Elsewhere in the league, Golgozar will host Chadormalou in Sirjan, with fifth-placed Zob Ahan chasing a fourth win in five games when playing Nassaji at home.

Khaybar will face fellow-struggler Mes Rafsanjan in Khorramabad, while relegation-zone side Shams Azar plays away to Iralco. Yahya Golmohammadi's Foolad will be desperate to return to winning ways in the home fixture against Malavan, which has been without a victory in four games.

Man United face 'really clear' threat of relegation, admits Amorim



● LEE SMITH/ACTION IMAGES

THE GUARDIAN - Ruben Amorim admitted Manchester United need a "shock" and are being dragged into a relegation fight after their 2-0 defeat by Newcastle at Old Trafford on Monday night. It leaves United in 14th place on 22 points at the halfway stage of the Premier League season, seven above the drop zone. The defeat came after first-half goals from Alexander Isak and Joelinton and is United's fourth consecutive loss in all competitions and the first time three consecutive home league matches have been lost since 1978-79.

"Our club needs a shock and we have to understand that," Amorim said. "It is also why I speak of relegation. That is really clear [the possibility] and we have to

fight. It is a really difficult moment, one of the more difficult moments in the history of Manchester United and we have to address it with honesty and to be clear with that, we have to fight [in] the next game."

That next game is the difficult trip to Liverpool, the league leaders, on Sunday. Amorim has endured five defeats in his first eight league matches, the poorest of any United manager for 103 years, but he will have little money to strengthen next month unless major sales are made.

"We don't have that possibility in January if we don't take [sell] some players," Amorim said. "You know the situation better than me. It is not that I am arriv-

ing here and can spend money changing the team."

The squad that Amorim inherited was not built for his 3-4-3 formation. The head coach was asked why he did not wait until the close season to implement it. "When you have a change of coach, especially in this type of club, it is because they were not winning," he said. "They play in the system they were bought for and were losing. So I am going to change to that system? This team was already in trouble."

Marcus Rashford was reinstated to the match squad but remained an unused substitute. Amorim was asked why. "I think about the team, you a lot about Marcus. I just want to win the game," he said.

Westbrook, Jokic star as Nuggets beat Jazz in NBA

BBC - Russell Westbrook and Nikola Jokic both scored triple-doubles in the Denver Nuggets' 132-121 NBA victory against the Utah Jazz. Westbrook finished with 16 points, 10 rebounds and 10 assists which included no turnovers, while Jokic added 36 points, 22 rebounds and 11 assists.

The Jazz led 66-64 at the break before the Nuggets pulled away in the third quarter, with Jamal Murray also adding 20 points and 10 assists.

Elsewhere, Joel Embiid scored 37 points and added nine rebounds as the Philadelphia 76ers beat the Portland Trail Blazers 125-103.

Tyrese Maxey also had 23 points for the Sixers while Kelly Oubre Jr had 15 points and eight steals.

Josh Hart made his third triple-double of the season to lead the New York Knicks to a 126-106 win over the Washington Wizards.

Hart had 23 points, 15 rebounds and 10 assists alongside Karl-Anthony Towns' 32 points and 13 rebounds, helping the Knicks to an eventually comfortable victory after a close first half which resulted in them holding a slender 59-57 lead.

Darius Garland scored 25 points and Donovan Mitchell added 23 as the Cleveland Cavaliers continued their fine run of form with a 113-95 win over the Golden State Warriors.

The Cavaliers are unbeaten in their last seven matches and sit top of the Eastern Conference with a 28-4 record, while the struggling War-

riors have lost four of their last five.

James Harden helped the Los Angeles Clippers to a tight win over the New Orleans Pelicans, scoring four free throws in the final 18 seconds to secure a 116-113 victory.

De'Aaron Fox starred with 33 points as the Sacramento Kings beat the Dallas Mavericks 110-100 to recover from a losing streak of six games in a row.

The Mavericks continued to struggle with injury absences, including Kyrie Irving and Luka Doncic.

The Chicago Bulls edged past the Charlotte Hornets for a 115-108 win in overtime, helped by Coby White scoring 23 points and adding 10 rebounds and nine assists.



● RICK EGAN/AP