

Persian Gulf Pro League roundup:

Tractor back on top; Esteghlal, Sepahan share the spoils

Sports Desk

Tractor moved back atop the Persian Gulf Pro League table ahead of the midseason break thanks to an emphatic 3-0 victory over Esteghlal Khuzestan in Tabriz's Yadegar-e Imam Stadium on Thursday.

Mahdi Shiri smashed the ball into the top corner to put Tractor in front late in the first half, before Mohammad Naderi doubled the home side's lead with a superb strike right after the break, curling home with the outside of his left foot from the edge of the box.

Croatian striker Tomislav Strkalj found the net two minutes from normal time to secure only a third home victory of the campaign for Tractor, which overtook Sepahan in the table on goal difference at the halfway stage of the Iranian top-flight season.

In Tehran's Shahe-e Qods Stadium, prolific winger Mahdi Limouchi scored his seventh goal of the season – joining Persepolis's Ali Alipour as the leading marksmen in the league – in the 74th minute to cancel out Masoud Juma's first-half strike – Kenyan striker's first goal in the Esteghlal colors since joining the Tehran Blues in November.

The visitors finished the game with 10 men after skipper Mo-

hammad Karimi was shown a second yellow card with five minutes left on the clock.

A fourth successive draw in the league saw Pitso Mosimane's Esteghlal finish the first half of the season in the 10th place with 18 points – 14 points adrift of the top two. Elsewhere, Malavan goalkeeper Habib Farabasi's howler in chesting the ball led to a Abolfazl Zadeh-Attar's 91st-minute winner as Foolad Khuzestan defeated Malavan 2-1 at home. Mohammadali Kazemi's stunning bicycle-kick gave the host a fourth-minute lead before Abolfazl Safarzadeh drew the visitors level in the 65th minute.

The victory left Foolad in the fourth place with 28 points. In the battle of the bottom-half strugglers, Maysam Taymouri and Saeid Vasei scored in each half to help Mes Rafsanjan come from behind for a massive 2-1 win away to Khaybar, which had taken the lead through Faraz Emamali's 28th-minute opener.

The result saw Mes move up to 12th with 16 points – one point above Nassaji Mazandaran, which played to a goalless stalemate at Zob Ahan earlier in the day.

Khaybar, meanwhile, remained on the 13-point mark – only standing out of the rele-

gation zone thanks to a better goal difference over Shams Azar.

Shams Azar fell to a third defeat in four league outings, suffering a 3-0 away loss to Iralco, courtesy of goals from Milad Badraqueh, Mehran Mousavi, and Rahman Jafari. Thursday's results came after Persepolis thrashed bottom-side 5-0 at home on the preceding night – a second win in as many games for Karim Baqeri as the interim coach.

Alipour bagged a hat-trick to take his tally to five goals in three outings, with Issa Aleksir and Oston Urunov also on the scoresheet, as the defending champion remained third points behind Tractor and Sepahan.

In Sirjan, second-half goals from Arman Akvan and Brazilian Gustavo Vagenin led Golgozar to a 2-0 home win against Chadormalou, lifting Mahdi Tartar's side to the fifth place with 21 points.



Tractor players celebrate their second goal during a 3-0 victory over Esteghlal Khuzestan in the Persian Gulf Pro League at the Yadegar-e Imam Stadium, Tabriz, Iran, on Jan. 2, 2025.

● FFIRI



Freestyle Wrestling National Championships: Goleij back in national team fray with 97kg title

Sports Desk

Mojtaba Goleij made his case for a place in the national team squad by winning the 97kg title at the Freestyle Wrestling National Championships – the opening phase of the Iranian trials for September's World Championships – on Thursday.

A world bronze winner in 2021, Goleij defeated reigning Asian under-20 champion Abolfazl Babalou 6-0 in the final showpiece to throw down the gauntlet to Olympic bronze medalist Amirali Azarpira and two-time world

92kg champion Kamran Qasempour, who is keen on competing in an Olympic weight class ahead of the Los Angeles Games in three years' time.

Hadi Rezaei looked to be the favorite for the 57kg title after a massive 7-3 victory over former world silver medalist Alireza Sarlak in the semifinals, but ultimately found it tough against 20-year-old Milad Valizadeh, suffering a 7-1 defeat.

Yassin Rezaei capped off his dominant 65kg campaign with a 13-2 win against Dariush Hazratqolizadeh in the final – a fifth victory by technical superiority for the 2023

Asian bronze winner in as many bouts.

Hossein Abouzari finished atop the podium in the 74kg class, thanks to a 7-2 win against Hossein Mohammad-Aqaei in the final, while the 86kg showdown saw Omidreza Soheili come out victorious (10-2) against Mohammad-Hossein Norouzian.



Mojtaba Goleij (red) is seen in action against Abolfazl Babalou in the 97kg final at the Freestyle Wrestling National Championships in Gorgan, Iran, on January 2, 2025.

● IAWF

Liverpool's Slot insists Man Utd 'much better' than league table shows

AFP – Arne Slot says crisis-hit Manchester United are "much, much better" than their shocking position in the Premier League suggests as he prepares his Liverpool team for a clash against their fierce rivals on Sunday.

Liverpool are six points clear at the top of the Premier League table – and are hot favorites to land a 20th English top-flight crown, which would pull them level with record-holders United.

United, by contrast, are 14th

in the table after five defeats in their past six league games under new manager Ruben Amorim.

But Slot, also in his first campaign in England, is adamant he will not take his opponents lightly at Anfield, when asked if he might rest players at Friday's pre-match press conference.

"No, of course I'm not going to plan to rest any player because it's a big game and I think it's for me I said it before the first fixture (a 3-0 win at Old Trafford) and

I can say it one more time, that they have much better players in my opinion than maybe the league table shows at the moment.

"I think it's going to take a while maybe for Ruben Amorim to bring this out of the players... but they will definitely go up and they are much, much, much better than the league table shows at the moment."

Slot was asked whether he could categorically state that Liverpool would not let Trent

Alexander-Arnold leave in the January transfer window, with the defender heavily linked with a move to Real Madrid.

Slot said Alexander-Arnold was "fully committed" to Liverpool and would be playing on Sunday. "Hopefully he brings the same performances as he brought in for the last half-year, because I think everybody saw how great a first half of the season he had, how much he is here, how much he wants to win here," said Slot.



● REUTERS