

Persian Gulf Pro League:

Tractor, Sepahan win as Persepolis falls further off the pace

Sports Desk

Tractor and Sepahan tightened their grip on the title race in the Persian Gulf Pro League after respective victories over Mes Rafsanjan and Chadormalou on return to Iranian top-flight action on Tuesday.

Persepolis, meanwhile, was held to a frustrating goalless draw at 10-man Zob Ahan to lose further ground at the top of the table, while Foolad Khuzestan took advantage of the Tehran Reds' slip, beating Nasaji Mazandaran 1-0 at home – courtesy of Mohammad Asgari's 84th-minute strike – to move up to the third place.

In Tabriz's Yadegar-e Imam Stadium, Tractor's prolific front three Amirhossein Hosseinzadeh, Tomislav Štrkalj, and Mahdi Hashemnejad were on the scoresheet, with Sajjad Ashouri and Danial Esmailifar adding a couple of late goals against Reza Jabireh's consolation for Mes, as Tractor thrashed the visiting strugglers 5-1 to remain top with 35 points, equal on points with second-placed Sepahan.

Sepahan, fresh from a Super Cup triumph against Persepolis, had a Mohammad-Mahdi Mohebbi's stoppage-time winner to thank for a hard-fought 2-1 away win against Chadormalou to keep pace with Tractor.

Center-back Mohammad Daneshgar gave Sepahan a 79th-minute lead with a looping header from an acute angle, only to see his goal canceled out by Ali Ka-



Tractor's Amirhossein Hosseinzadeh (red) celebrates after scoring in a 5-1 victory over Mes Rafsanjan in the Persian Gulf Pro League at the Yadegar-e Imam Stadium, Tabriz, Iran, on Jan. 21, 2025.
● ATA DADASHI/FARSNEWS

mali Jelodar in the fourth minute of added time.

Just when the host thought it had done enough to salvage a point, Mohebbi slotted home a 98th-minute winner, before his provocative 'night night' celebration led to a heated quarrel between the two sets of players and benches, while the Sepahan striker was shown a second yellow card and received his marching orders.

In Isfahan, Persepolis failed to capitalize on a one-man advantage after Zob Ahan's Hassan Shoushtari was dismissed with a second booking eight minutes before the break.

The Reds desperately knocked on the door in the second half, with Farshad Ahmadzadeh hitting the crossbar from close range, though they still felt lucky to leave the Fooladshahr Stadium with a point.

Zob Ahan substitute Behnam Taherkhani was brought down in the box by Morteza Pouraliganji in the 95th minute but referee Vahid Zamani refused to point to the spot, despite a VAR review, and was suspended "until further notice" by the federation's Referees Committee after the game.

The stalemate saw Persepolis fall to fourth in the table – trailing the top two by five points –

while there were further blow for the holders after integral Uzbek winger Oston Urunov was forced off in the first half with a hamstring problem to be a doubt for Sunday's crunch encounter with Tractor in Tehran. Elsewhere, Esteghlal got off to a dreadful start to the second half of the league campaign, suffering a shock 1-0 home loss against Shams Azar on return to the renovated Azadi Stadium on

Monday.

Amir Shabani bagged the winner in the 64th minute, as former Blues keeper Seyyed Mahdi Rahmati celebrated a winning debut as Shams Azar head coach, which saw his team move out of the relegation zone, while Esteghlal dropped to 11th with 18 points.

In Khorramabad, Mehrdad Qanbari and Mohsen Sefid-Choqaei scored in each half to help Khaybar defeat bottom-club Havadar 2-0 at home.

Iralco's Amin Kazemian netted his seventh goal of the season in the first half before Sajjad Shahbazzadeh drew Esteghlal Khuzestan level right before the hour mark as the two sides shared the spoils in Arak.

Fifth-place Golgozar Sirjan continued its impressive campaign under Mahdi Tartar, beating Malavan 1-0 at home for a third successive league victory – thanks to Mahdi Tikdari's goal in the 32nd minute.

The defeat was the sixth in seven league outings for Malavan, which had to play with nine men for the best part of the second half following red cards for Mohammadreza Rezaei and Reza Ghandipour.

Katanec stands down as Uzbekistan head coach due to health issues

AFC – Srecko Katanec has stepped down as Uzbekistan head coach due to ill health, the Uzbekistan Football Association announcing the Slovenian had departed by mutual consent on Wednesday.

The 61-year-old has led the White Wolves to second place in Group A of the AFC Asian qualifiers – Road to 26 but has left less than two months before Uzbekistan resume the qualifiers against Kyrgyz Republic in Tashkent on March 20. "The head coach of the Uzbekistan national team, Srecko Katanec, decided to cancel his contract with the Uzbekistan Football Association by mutual consent due to health problems," the UFA said in a statement on Instagram.

"The Slovenia coach noted with regret that he cannot perform his duties in a full and professional manner in his current state."

Katanec has been in the role since August 2021 and steered the country to the quarter-finals of the AFC Asian Cup 2023 in Qatar, where they lost in a penalty shoot-out to the hosts.

He took over after previously working in the United Arab Emirates, Iraq and Macedonia having also qualified his native Slovenia for the 2002 FIFA World Cup.

Katanec leaves with Uzbekistan closing in on their first qualification for the FIFA World Cup, the team three points behind Group A leaders the Islamic Republic of Iran and three points ahead of third-placed UAE with four matches remaining.

The top two finishers qualify automatically for the FIFA World Cup while the nations in third and fourth advance to a further round of preliminaries.

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Australian Open:

Djokovic 'concerned' by injury, faces fitness race

THE GUARDIAN – The clock is ticking for Novak Djokovic and what appears to be a groin or hamstring strain sustained during his quarter-final victory after he expressed fears the injury could hinder his pursuit of an 11th Australian Open and 25th grand slam title.

Djokovic overpowered Carlos Alcaraz in four sets in a match that finished close to 1am on Wednesday, fighting back after losing a first set when he received medical treatment on his upper thigh.

The former world No 1 declined to elaborate on the injury, saying only that it was similar to one he managed during his 2023 run to the Australian Open title. That was described as a 3cm tear in his hamstring at the time.

He faces the No 2 seed, Alexander Zverev, in a semi-final on Friday, offering a period of close to three days' rest. "I'm concerned, physically," Djokovic said. "But if I manage somehow to be physically good enough, mentally, emotionally, I'm as motivated as I can be."

Djokovic appeared to pick up the injury in the first set when making a lateral movement during a rally and at one point crouched down and looked to his box, shaking his head. Trailing a break and 4-5, he went off court with a physio to receive treatment.

Although Djokovic lost the first set, he seemed to quickly recover his movement and won three sets to eliminate the No 3 seed. Djokovic said painkillers helped during the match, but he will



Novak Djokovic struggles with an injury during his Australian Open last-eight victory over Carlos Alcaraz in Melbourne, Australia, on January 21, 2025.
● CLIVE BRUNSKILL/GETTY IMAGES

know more when they begin to wear off. "I've done tests with the physio when I had the medical timeout. He strapped me and then the doctor gave me some medication. That kicked in after 20, 30 minutes. It did help, then I had to take another dose in the beginning of the fourth."

Alcaraz said he failed to capitalise on his start and he noticed Djokovic was struggling in the second set but he failed to take advantage. "Then the third and fourth set, I didn't see anything bad from him," Alcaraz said. "I'm not saying he made a show. I'm just saying I don't know."

The high-calibre quarter-final was the first of the tournament between two top-10 players and the first between the pair since the Paris Olympic gold-medal decider last year. That was won by Djokovic to complete his so-called "golden slam" of all four majors and the Olympic title.

Djokovic said the match on Tuesday was worthy of a higher stage than a quarter-final. "Every set was super close, the crowd was into it, so much energy on the court, it was amazing," he said. "It felt like it was finals of a slam. I wish it was."