

Persian Gulf Pro League: Foolad, Persepolis share the spoils in Kartal debut

Sports Desk

Turkish head coach Ismail Kartal was denied maximum points on his Persepolis debut as the Tehran Reds played to a 1-1 draw at Foolad Khuzestan in the Persian Gulf Pro League on Friday.

Persepolis striker Ali Alipour, the joint leading marksman in the Iranian top flight, missed a glorious opportunity to take his tally to eight goals for the season, as his spot-kick was parried away by Uzbek keeper Utkir Yusupov after the referee had deemed ex-Persepolis defender Ali Nemati to have handled the ball in the box with eight minutes into the game.

The visitors still took the lead late in the first half at the Foolad Arena, with Issa Alekassir heading home Saeid Mehri's deflected effort in the 39th minute.

The home side, which had a one-point lead over its guest prior to the kickoff, desperately pushed for an equalizer after the break and was rewarded for its brave performance with 11 minutes from normal time, when substitute Abolazl Zadeh-Attar was first to the ball on the rebound on a corner kick to head the ball into the back of the net – a second goal in seven league games for Foolad's academy product.

"Our strikers should have done better with keeping the ball in



the opposition half," Kartal said after the game, adding: "We controlled the game in the closing stages but just couldn't find the winner. I guess the draw

was a fair result in the end. We will now be focused on our next game against Al Hilal." The game was the first in a hectic fixtures list for Persepolis

and Kartal over the next 25 days – starting with a visit to Riyadh to face Saudi heavyweight Al Hilal in the AFC Champions League Elite on Tuesday.

The Capital Reds will then take on Golgozar, Sepahan in the Hazfi Cup, Al Nassr on the final day of the league phase in Asia, and Irarco, before squaring off



Foolad Khuzestan midfielder Farshid Baqeri (top) heads the ball above Persepolis striker Ali Alipour in a Persian Gulf Pro League game at the Foolad Arena, Ahvaz, Iran, on Jan. 31, 2025.

● MILAD ESMAEILI/ISNA

against Esteghlal in the Tehran Derby on February 27.

Esteghlal won a first league game in seven matches on Thursday, beating nine-man Esteghlal Khuzestan 2-0 at home.

Interim coach Sohrab Bakhtiarizadeh was back in charge of the Blues bench for a second spell this season, after South African Pitso Mosimane had walked away from his job over unpaid salaries on Wednesday.

The visitors went down to 10 men after Mohammad Abshak was shown a straight red midway through the first half, but the home supporters at the Shahr-e Qods Stadium had to wait until the 72nd minute, when Ramin Rezaeian broke the deadlock from the spot.

Es. Khuzestan defender Aram Abbasi also received his marching orders in the 88th minute and Rezaeian bagged his second goal of the night again with a penalty in stoppage time, as Esteghlal moved up to eight in the table with 22 points ahead of Monday's home game against Al Shorta of Iraq in the Asian elite clubs' competition.

Guardiola rues 'tougher schedule' after Madrid draw in Europe

THE GUARDIAN – Pep Guardiola could not hide his frustration with Manchester City's fixture schedule in February after being handed a daunting two-legged Champions League playoff tie with Real Madrid.

City's failure to qualify automatically for the tournament's last 16 means they have to face the current holders in order to reach that stage. City will host the first leg on 11 February before travelling to the Bernabéu on 19 February.

It is the fourth successive season that Guardiola's side have drawn the 15-time Champions League winners. City, who are preparing to face Arsenal in the Premier League today, also play Newcas-

tle, Liverpool, Tottenham and Leyton Orient in the FA Cup to make it seven games in 24 days. "The schedule is what it is," said Guardiola. "In the Premier League everyone has to play everyone but what normally happens is we have tougher schedules for the [Premier League] teams in Europe. It's tough playing against Real Madrid, the problem is in the middle playing Newcastle." He sarcastically added: "They are always so kind with the calendar, for many years it always happened that way."

Guardiola has previously argued English teams that compete in Europe should be afforded extra days' rest by the domestic fixture

schedulers. Now in his ninth season at City, he wearily accepts that is unlikely to happen.

"Are you asking me that question? Come on, don't make me say something impolite," Guardiola said in response to a further question about the fixture list. "I'm not complaining because we've had incredible success with this calendar. We accept it. We won the treble and the quadruple doing it like this. We survive and if we don't survive it's because the opponents are better."

"When I was training at Barcelona I followed the Premier League – because it's the most attractive league in the world – and Sir Alex Ferguson, José Mourinho, Arsène Wenger made

the same complaints. It's been this way for nine years. Do you think it's going to change? The broadcasters decide, they don't ask me."

Guardiola accepted that the extra games come as a result of City's own shortcomings, having won only three of their eight Champions League games to finish 22nd in the 36-team group phase. They beat Club Brugge 3-1 on the final match-day to snatch a playoff spot.

"We are happy because at 55, 60 minutes [against Brugge] we were out of the Champions League," he added. "It could be better, we could be in the first eight but we were not good enough, we don't deserve it."



● REUTERS

Wembanyama has double-double to help Spurs beat Bucks 144-118



● ERIC GAY/AP

AP — Victor Wembanyama had 30 points, 14 rebounds and six blocks and the San Antonio Spurs had a season high in points to overcome 35 points and 13 rebounds from Giannis Antetokounmpo and beat the Milwaukee Bucks 144-118 on Friday night.

Keldon Johnson added 24 points and Stephon Castle had 20 as San Antonio snapped a two-game skid and won for just the second time in seven games.

Damian Lillard had 22 points for Milwaukee. Khris Middleton added 21.

Wembanyama was 9 for 20 from the field in an dynamic

showing one day after being named to his first All-Star Game as a Western Conference reserve.

Wembanyama banked in a 34-foot 3-pointer that hit the backboard, bounced off the front of the rim, hit the backboard again and dropped in with 7:18 remaining in the third quarter. The 3-pointer drew loud gasps and cheers from the fans and left Milwaukee coach Doc Rivers with his arms raised in puzzlement.

Wembanyama closed out a 14-point quarter by making a running, one-legged 3-pointer. Middleton was 8 for 9 from the field for the Bucks, including 3

for 4 on 3-pointers, in 23 minutes off the bench.

Castle is averaging 16.8 points and 3.3 assists in his past nine games since returning to the Spurs' starting lineup. Wembanyama was held to two points on 1-for-4 shooting in the first quarter, but he had three blocks to help San Antonio end the period tied at 35. Wembanyama blocked Antetokounmpo's shots twice in 14 seconds in the opening two minutes of the game. Antetokounmpo avoided a third block by powering in a dunk over Wembanyama.

San Antonio shot 15 for 25 from the field in outscoring Milwau-

kee 45-30 in the third quarter.

Elsewhere, Jayson Tatum's jumper with 0.7 seconds left gave the Boston Celtics a 118-116 victory over the short-handed New Orleans Pelicans.

Nikola Jokic made the tie-breaking 3-pointer with 39 seconds left, Jamal Murray had 31 points and 11 assists, and the Denver Nuggets overcame Tyrese Maxey's 42 points to beat the Philadelphia 76ers 137-134.

Jokic finished with 28 points, 13 assists and nine rebounds, just missing what would have been his NBA-leading 22nd triple-double.