

Persian Gulf Pro League:

Tractor hammers Havadar to close gap on top

Sports Desk

Tractor thrashed bottom-side Havadar 4-0 at home to move within one point of Sepahan on top of the Persian Gulf Pro League table on Saturday.

Sepahan, meanwhile, was held to a 1-1 away draw against Shams Azar but stayed atop the standings with 39 points.

Mahdi Limouchi gave Sepahan a 31st-minute lead, finding the net from the spot for his eighth goal of the campaign, only to see his strike cancelled out by Ehsan Mahrouqi five minutes later as the home side, rejuvenated under new coach Seyyed Mahdi Rahmati, moved up to 12th in the table with 18 points – three points clear of the relegation zone.

In Tabriz's Yadegar-e Imam Stadium, Tractor bounced back from last week's defeat against Persepolis in style, scoring three in the first half through Mahdi Torabi, Saeb Mohebbi's own goal, and Croatian striker Tomislav Strkalj, who joined Limouchi on top of the league's leading marksman chart.

Seyyed Mahdi Hosseini rounded off Tractor's commanding performance with a fourth goal in the 81st minute – four minutes after being introduced as a substitute.



Tractor's Mahdi Torabi (red) scores during a 4-0 victory over Havadar in the Persian Gulf Pro League in Tabriz, Iran, on February 1, 2025. **ATA DADASHI/FARSNEWS**

Tractor opened a three-point gap on Foolad Khuzestan, which had played to a 1-1 draw at home against fourth-placed Persepolis on the preceding night, while Havadar

is rock bottom with nine points. Elsewhere, Golgozar Sirjan continued its impressive run with a 2-1 win against Nassaji Mazandaran in Sirjan to stand fifth with

28 points. Omid Hamedifar headed home Abolfazl Razaqpour's corner-kick in the 64th minute – 12 minutes after Nassaji's Siamak

Nemati had been dismissed for a second booking – and then Tajikistani substitute Amadoni Kamolov's effort from behind the box hit the post and went in off

Nassaji keeper Luan Polli's shoulder to double the advantage for Mahdi Tartar's men.

Mehrdad Rezaei's point-blank header pulled one back for the visiting side in the third minute of added time, but it proved too little, too late as Nassaji remained second from bottom in the table with 15 points.

In Isfahan, Zob Ahan and Khaybar shared the spoils in a 2-2 stalemate at the Fooladshahr Stadium.

Fariborz Gerami and Omid Latifi scored for Zob Ahan either side of strikes from Kahybar's Faraz Emam-Ali and Mohammad-Javad Mohammadi inside three minutes in the second half.

Zob is sixth in the table with 24 points, with Khaybar in 13th on 17 points.

Chadormalou won a first game in nine league outings, beating Malavan 1-0 at home, courtesy of Ali Khodadi's goal seven minutes from normal time.

The home side is eighth with 23 points, while Malavan – without a victory in eight games – dropped to 10th with 20 points.

AFC Champions League Elite:

Persepolis facing daunting Al Hilal test, Esteghlal eyeing Al Shorta win

Sports Desk

The scale of the opposition will be in stark contrast for Tehran archrivals, Persepolis and Esteghlal, when they resume action in the AFC Champions League Elite.

Sitting sixth in the 12-team table, Persepolis will have to visit Riyadh's Kingdom Arena to take on West Zone leader Al Hilal on Tuesday, with eight-placed Esteghlal playing bottom-side Al Shorta at Tehran's Azadi Stadium on Monday.

The game in the Saudi capital will be the second for new Reds manager Ismail Kartal, whose team played to a 1-1 away draw to Foolad Khuzestan in the Iranian top flight on Friday, and the Turkish boss will be looking to keep his side in contention for a top-eight finish, and thus, a knockout place ahead of the final game in the league phase against Cristiano Ron-

aldo's Al Nassr on February 17.

The Iranian league champion will be without injured trio Oston Urunov, Vahid Amiri, and Milad Sarlak, while skipper Omid A'lishah and Moroccan fullback Ayoub El Amloud are doubtful after missing the Foolad game.

Midfielder Mohammad Khodabandelou is available for selection after serving a one-match suspension against Foolad, with Turkish striker Serdar Dursun, who signed from Alanyaspor last week, expected to be named in the squad.

Al Hilal, meanwhile, will have to do without injured Serbian striker Aleksandar Mitrovic, who has bagged 20 goals in 24 games across all competitions this season.

A first win of the campaign for Persepolis, which has six points, came against Al Shorta last time out in the competition, thanks to Giorgi Gvelesiani's spot-kick deep into stop-

page time, and a fourth loss in seven games could see the Reds drop out of the top eight before the final day.

Esteghlal – a single point behind Persepolis – could mount the pressure on its city rival, should the Blues walk away with maximum points against Al Shorta today.

Esteghlal is yet to win a game in the competition since beating Al Gharafa 3-0 at home on the opening day back in September, but will be eager to build on Thursday's 2-0 victory over Esteghlal Khuzestan, which ended the club's six-game winless run in the domestic league.

Interim coach Sohrab Bakhtiarzadeh took charge of the Blues bench for a second spell against Es. Khuzestan – after South African Pitso Mosimane had walked away from his job on Wednesday – and knows an Asian last-16 spot could well prove his credentials for the job until the end of the season.



● AFC

James stars for Lakers amid Doncic trade reports



● FRANK FRANKLIN II/AP

BBC – LeBron James inspired the Los Angeles Lakers to a 128-112 win over the New York Knicks amid reports Dallas Mavericks star Luka Doncic could soon become his new team-mate in a huge three-way trade deal.

James scored 33 points, 11 rebounds and 12 assists as the Lakers ended the Knicks' five-game winning streak at Madison Square Garden.

Shortly after the game finished, reports emerged that five-time NBA All-Star Doncic could be joining James on the west coast.

ESPN reported Anthony Davis, an NBA title winner with the Lakers in 2020, would head to

Dallas as part of the deal, along with guard Max Christie.

The Mavericks would also get a 2029 first-round draft pick, while Maxi Kleber and Markieff Morris will head to the Lakers. The three-way trade also reportedly includes the Utah Jazz, who would get Lakers guard Jalen Hood-Schifino and a pair of second-round picks in this year's draft.

Slovenian Doncic, currently sidelined with a calf injury, has averaged 28.1 points, 8.3 rebounds and 7.8 assists per game for the Mavericks since being traded from the Atlanta Hawks in 2018.

The 25-year-old has been an NBA All-Star for the past five seasons

and finished as the league's top scorer in 2024 to help his side reach the NBA finals.

Though Doncic could be seen as James' long-term successor, the 40-year-old showed he can still compete at the highest level with a standout display in New York.

"He led tonight with his spirit, his force, his voice," said Lakers coach JJ Redick.

"Obviously he played a fantastic statistic game, but from the beginning it was very clear that he was on a mission."

Elsewhere, reigning NBA Most Valuable Player (MVP) Nikola Jokic scored 28 points with 13 rebounds and 17 assists as the Denver Nuggets won 107-104

against the Charlotte Hornets, who suffered a fourth successive defeat.

Aaron Wiggins scored a career-high 41 points as Western Conference leaders the Oklahoma City Thunder beat the the Sacramento Kings 144-110.

Kyle Kuzma scored 31 points as the Washington Wizards ended a 16-game losing streak with a 105-103 victory at the Minnesota Timberwolves, while the Utah Jazz ended an eight-game losing run of their own with a 113-99 home win over the Orlando Magic.

The Atlanta Hawks were beaten 132-127 by the Indianapolis Pacers, despite 34 points and 17 assists from Trae Young.