

# All to play for as Iranian top flight enters final stretch

## Sports Desk

There will be all to play for at both ends of the table when the Persian Gulf Pro League season enters the final four rounds of fixtures today.

Despite a 2-2 draw at Chadormalou last time out, Tractor remains the favorite to lift a maiden league crown, holding a decent lead in the three-horse title race.

Sitting two and four points clear of nearest rivals Sepahan and Persepolis, respectively, with a game in hand, Tractor will be looking to get back in the winning ways against in-form Malavan on Friday.

The chasing duo, meanwhile, will square off at Tehran's Azadi Stadium later on Friday, eager to keep their slim title hopes alive, while a runner-up finish and a place in next season's AFC Champions League Elite will also be on the line.

Tractor will have to visit fourth-placed Foolad Khuzestan on April 25 – in a rescheduled fixture from Matchday 22 – and then play away to Shams Azar and Esteghlal Khuzestan either side of a home game against relegation-threatened Nassaji Mazandaran.



● SOHEIL SAADATMANDI/FFRI

Sepahan, which will shift focus to Iranian Hazfi Cup last eight after Friday's trip to Tehran, will host fifth-placed Golgozar Sirjan on return to league action before facing bottom-club Havadar (away) and Esteghlal (home).

Two of the relegation candidates will come Persepolis's until the end of the season.

Persepolis, which have dominated the domestic league with seven titles in eight seasons, will play at Mes Rafsanjan – third

from bottom – having lost the reverse fixture 3-1 at home last December in former head coach Juan Carlos Garrido's final game on the Reds bench.

The two-time defending champion will also visit Khaybar in the penultimate

round, before concluding its below-par campaign against Havadar at home.

### Survival battle

Separated by five points, three teams will be hoping to extend their stay in the Iranian top-tier league for

next season.

A defining encounter will see Mes host Havadar today, with Nassaji –three points above Havadar – closing watching before playing away to Khaybar on Thursday.

All too familiar with the

relegation threat in recent years, Nassaji, which has former coach Saket Elhami back in the dugout, will then welcome Havadar to the Vatan Stadium on May 2, with tricky tests at Tractor and at home against Zob Ahan also coming its way. Mes, meanwhile, will square off against Zob Ahan (A) and Khaybar (H). Havadar head coach Omid Ravankhah will hope to see his men build on an impressive form of late in the closing stage of a dreadful season.

Havadar is rock bottom with 19 points – seven of which have been collected in the previous three outings – with a game in hand, and will be looking to close the gap on safety following today's game and the rescheduled visit to Esteghlal on Monday.

Nassaji (A), Sepahan (H), and Persepolis (A) also await Havadar.

Elsewhere in the league, Golgozar welcomes Esteghlal to Sirjan today, and Irasco and Chadormalou go head-to-head in Arak on Thursday.

Also on Thursday, Zob Ahan and Esteghlal Khuzestan meet in Isfahan, with Foolad hosting Shams Azar in Ahvaz's Foolad Arena on Friday.

## Iran's Alamian up by 63 spots in ITTF Rankings

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Iranian table tennis player Nima Alamian moved up by a remarkable 63 spots in the latest ITTF World Ranking – released on Tuesday.

The second-best leap among the top 200 players saw Alamian sit in the 153rd place in the Men's Singles Ranking with 116 points – thanks to a last-four finish at the WTT

Feeder Havirov tournament in Czechia earlier in the month. Alamian defeated German world No. 69 Steffen Mengel in the quarterfinals but suffered a loss to Bahrain's Ammirreza Abbasi in a five-game thriller.

Alamian's older brother, Noshad, remains the highest-ranked Iranian in World Men's Ranking, standing 54th with 525 points.

Navid Shams moved down by four spots to sit 165th, with Iranian prodigy Benjamin Faragi dropping by three places to the stand 178th – sixth in the boys' singles under-17 ranking.

Lin Shidong retained the top spot in the ranking with 8325 points, followed by fellow-Chinese Wang Chuqin (6925pts) and Tomokazu Harimoto (4725) of Japan.



● RÉMY GROS/WTT



● GETTY IMAGES

## Concacaf opposes 64-team World Cup plans for 2030

**BBC** – Concacaf president Victor Montagliani has criticised a proposal to expand the 2030 men's World Cup to 64 teams.

The plans, put forward by South American governing body Conmebol, have also drawn opposition from Uefa president Aleksander Ceferin and the Asian Football Confederation (AFC).

The tournament will be hosted by Spain, Morocco and Portugal, after the opening matches are held in Argentina, Paraguay and Uruguay.

The 2026 World Cup, which will take place across the United States, Mexico and Canada, has already been expanded from 32 to 48 teams.

But Conmebol said it wanted to add more participants to mark the

competition's 100-year anniversary.

"I don't believe expanding the men's World Cup to 64 teams is the right move for the tournament itself and the broader football ecosystem, from national teams to club competitions, leagues, and players," Montagliani told ESPN.

"We haven't even kicked off the new 48-team World Cup yet, so personally, I don't think that expanding to 64 teams should even be on the table."

Concacaf is the governing body of football in North America, Central America and the Caribbean.

The decision to expand the 2026 World Cup to 48 teams was taken in 2017 following a unanimous vote at a Fifa congress.

Fifa's 75th congress will be held in Paraguay on 15 May, when Conmebol's proposal could be discussed.

If the proposal is accepted, the 2030 edition would consist of 128 matches, double the number played under the 64-game format used from 1998 and 2022.

In March, Ceferin described the proposal as a "bad idea" while AFC president Sheikh Salman bin Ibrahim Al-Khalifa said it would cause "chaos".

"If the issue remains open to change, then the door will not only be open to expanding the tournament to 64 teams," said Salman.

"But someone might come along and demand raising the number to 132 teams. Where would we end up then? It would become chaos."