

Red flag raised: Where did it all go wrong for Persepolis?



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The latest defeat in the Persian Gulf Pro League left Persepolis supporters facing the harsh reality of a shift in power in the Iranian top flight.

The Tehran Reds entered Friday's so-called 'Iranian Clasi-co' against Sepahan knowing any outcome other than maximum points would end their slim title hopes.

However, Ismail Kartal's men looked all over the place in the opening stages, conceding twice inside 11 minutes, and were then toothless and clueless in the final third as Sepahan walked away with a

fourth successive win against its familiar foe this season to stay within touching distance of Tractor in what will be a two-horse title race with three games remaining.

It was the latest episode in a dreadful campaign for the Reds, who had crashed out of the AFC Champions League Elite and the Iranian domestic cup and face the prospect of finishing the season without a trophy for only a second time over the past eight years.

The writing was perhaps on the wall for Persepolis – seven-time league champion over the past eight season – even before the Reds began the new campaign.

Persepolis had to part ways with Iranian international goalkeeper Alireza Beiran-

vand, and wizard winger Mahdi Torabi – two linchpins of the Reds' decade-long domestic dominance – as well as fullback Danial Esmailifar – all three joining Tractor – but the club failed to recruit effective replacements for the key trio.

Spanish boss Juan Carlos Garrido still got off to a flying start to his reign on Persepolis bench but the physical strain of a hectic calendar and the new head coach's training methods began to catch up with the Reds' ageing squad as a run of poor results led to the Spaniard's dismissal in December.

The introduction of former Fenerbahçe manager Kartal in midseason did little to turn the Reds' fortune around,

with Persepolis managing five wins, conceding four defeats, in 13 outings across all competitions under the Turkish boss, who has been lamenting the lack of quality and frustrating injuries within his squad throughout his short spell.

With a number of star players in Vahid Amiri, Omid Aalishah, Soroush Rafiei, Morteza Pouraliganji, Issa Alekasir, Masoud Rigi, and Giorgi Gvlesiani well into their 30s and past their prime, a summer of shakeup looks inevitable for Persepolis and Kartal, or they will have to watch Tractor and Sepahan build on their financial superiority to dominate the Iranian club football in the coming years.



Persepolis skipper Vahid Amiri reacts during a 2-0 defeat against Sepahan in the Persian Gulf Pro League at the Azadi Stadium, Tehran, Iran, on April 18, 2025.

● ALI SHARIFZADEH/IRNA

AVC Men's Volleyball Champions League: Foolad Sirjan eyeing third continental crown



● MASOUD AKBARI/volleyball.ir

Sports Desk

Foolad Sirjan will be looking to build on its dazzling year-long form when beginning its title defense at the AVC Men's Volleyball Champions League – starting May 11 in the Japanese cities of Hirakata and Kyoto. Fresh from a second successive crown at the Iranian Premier League, Foolad will fancy a comfortable run in Pool C – also featuring Chinese Taipei's Taichung Bank and Nakhon Ratchasima QminC of Thailand. Behrouz Ataei's men will begin their bid for a third Asian title against the Thai champion on the opening day of the competition, before taking on Taichung Bank two days later. A top two finish in the pool will

send Foolad into the quarterfinals, where a much tougher test will await Ataei's men, who will likely face home-favorite Osaka Bluteon or Chinese club Shanghai Bright for a last-four place. Iranian opposite Ali Hajipour, who won the MVP prize in the Iranian league finals against Shahdab Yazd, as well as veteran middle-blocker Mohammad Mousavi and prolific outside-hitter Amirhossein Esfandiar will be the men to watch in the Foolad squad in the Asian event. Ataei announced in an interview on Friday that French stars Earvin N'Gapeth and Trévor Clévenot are also set to join Foolad on short contracts ahead of the visit to Japan. N'Gapeth and Clévenot played key parts in France's Olym-

pic gold-winning run on home soil last summer, as they were named the joint best outside-hitters of the dream team, with the former also picking up the Most Valuable Player award in Paris 2024.

Ataei, who stepped down from his role as Iran head coach midway through a dreadful Olympic qualification campaign in October 2023, has enjoyed a turn of fortune in his career since taking over the Foolad job, leading the club to double domestic league titles, plus the Asian success and the Iranian Volleyball Cup trophy over the past 12 months. Foolad also made it to semifinals at the FIVB Club World Championship last December, before leaving Brazil with an impressive bronze medal.

Lakers lose to Timberwolves in play-off opener

BBC-The Los Angeles Lakers slumped to a 117-95 defeat at the hands of the Minnesota Timberwolves in the opening game of their NBA Western Conference first-round play-off.

Jaden McDaniels top scored with 25 points for the sixth-seeded Timberwolves, who were the only away team to win in the opening matches of the best-of-seven post-season series.

Naz Reid scored 23 points off the bench while Anthony Edwards added 22 points, eight rebounds and nine assists for Minnesota, who led by 27 points at one stage.

Lakers star LeBron James, who is chasing a fifth title in his 22nd NBA season, failed to score in the opening quarter for the third seeds but went on to

hit 19 points.

Luka Doncic, in his first post-season game with the Lakers after arriving from the Dallas Mavericks in February's high-profile trade, top-scored on 37.

In the other Western Conference first-round game, reigning NBA Most Valuable Player Nikola Jokic scored 29 points and added nine rebounds, 12 assists and three steals as the Denver Nuggets edged past the Los Angeles Clippers 112-110 in overtime. In their Eastern Conference match-ups, the New York Knicks scored 21 unanswered points in the final quarter to pull away for a 123-112 win over the Detroit Pistons, while the Indiana Pacers defeated the Milwaukee Bucks 117-98.

Sports Desk

Iran's Ali Meskini settled for a bronze medal at the third Karate 1-Premier League event of the season, finishing third in the men's kumite -60kg contests in Cairo, Egypt.

Meskini bounced back from a last-eight setback against Japanese Hiromu Hashimoto to come out victorious (7-3) against Colombian Juan David Forero and share the third podium with Germany's Florian Haas.

Hashimoto went on to grab the ultimate prize of the class, thanks to a 7-3 victory over the host's Ziad Aly.

Meskini began his campaign in Cairo with an 8-5 win against Kazakhstan's Zholaman Bigabyl in Pool 3, and then defeated Frenchman Rayyan Meziane 7-4, before a stalemate against Abdallah Hammad of Jordan saw the Iranian progress to quarterfinals as the pool winner.

Meskini's compatriots Bahman Asgari and Amirreza Borzouei, meanwhile, left the Egyptian capital empty-handed.

Former world champion Asgari won two bouts and lost one to miss out on a knockout place in the men's -75kg contests – the same outcome for Borzouei in the -67kg class, after he managed only one win, against Italian Rosario Ruggiero, in three outings to finish third in the pool.

Karate 1-Premier League: Iran's Meskini settles for kumite bronze



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