

Persian Gulf Pro League roundup: Sepahan, Persepolis rebound to lead tight title race at midseason

Sports Desk

Sepahan and Persepolis have bounced back from slow starts to the season to lead a tightly contested title race as the Persian Gulf Pro League reached its halfway point on Thursday. Meanwhile, Esteghlal and defending champions Tractor – the other two members of the Iranian top flight's old guard – have struggled for consistency through 15 matchdays, with Chadormalou emerging as the surprise package in fourth place. There will still be plenty to play for when the domestic league resumes on January 16, with the top eight teams separated by just nine points.

Sepahan's 2-1 home defeat to Esteghlal on Thursday – courtesy of former Sepahan player Esmaeil Qolizadeh's 92nd-minute winner – marked only the third loss of the campaign for Moharram Navidkia's side. Despite the setback, Sepahan remain top of the table with 30 points, two clear of second-placed Persepolis.

After managing just two points from their opening four games – including home defeats to Persepolis and Tractor – Sepahan went on a remarkable run of nine wins in 10 matches, conceding only once, prior to Thursday's loss. That surge revived hopes of a first league title in 11 seasons.

Persepolis, meanwhile, endured a difficult start under new head coach Vahid Hashemian, who



● RASOUL SHOJAEI/IRNA

replaced Turkish coach Ismail Kartal in the summer for his first senior managerial role. A 1-0 victory over Sepahan on matchday two ended the Tehran Reds' 1,335-day drought in the so-called 'Iranian Clasico', but it proved to be their only win in a seven-game stretch. A 2-0 home victory over Zob Ahan in late September – following a 2-1 away defeat to Khay-

bar, Persepolis's only league loss so far – did little to secure Hashemian's future. The club hierarchy instead turned to former coach Osmar Loss Vieira to reverse the team's fortunes. Osmar, who guided Persepolis to the title as a caretaker midway through the 2023-24 season, has overseen a strong revival in his second spell. The Reds have won five of their last six matches and

remain on course for an eighth league crown in a decade. For Esteghlal and Portuguese head coach Ricardo Sá Pinto – also appointed for a second stint in the summer – the campaign has been marked by fluctuating performances across domestic and continental competitions. Esteghlal opened the season with an impressive 1-0 away win over Tractor in Tabriz, but

followed it with a seven-game winless run, including a 7-1 humiliation at Al Wasl in their AFC Champions League Two opener. A narrow 1-0 home victory over bottom-placed Mes Rafsanjani in mid-October sparked a brief recovery, with five wins in seven matches across all competitions. However, another four-game winless spell raised serious doubts over Sá Pinto's suitability for the role before the win at Sepahan – which cut the gap to the summit to five points – eased the pressure on the Portuguese coach.

Esteghlal will now look to build momentum behind a formidable attacking trio of Jasir Asani, Munir El Haddadi, and Alireza Koushki as they begin the second half of the season at home to Tractor on January 17.

One point behind Esteghlal in fourth place is Chadormalou, enjoying a fairy-tale run in just its second season in the Iranian top flight. An unbeaten home record has underpinned Saeid Akhabari's side's impressive campaign, with all three of their defeats coming away to Golgohar, Tractor, and Sepahan.

Lack of conviction and clinical finishing have plagued Tractor's title defense, leaving Draagan Skocic's side fifth with 23 points. When Tractor claimed their maiden league title last season, a prolific attack – led by league top scorer Amirkhossein Hosseinzadeh – proved decisive. Hosseinzadeh has once again been in fine form, leading the scoring charts with eight goals, but Tractor have been held to seven goalless draws in 15 matches – including back-to-back stalemates against Shams Azar and Malavan in their last two games. Despite securing a place in the AFC Champions League Elite round of 16 with two games to spare, Skocic's team has been drifting away from the domestic title race.

Tayyebi, Mohammadi shortlisted for Jako Futsal Awards



Iran's Hossein Tayyebi (L) and Baeqer Mohammadi have been nominated for the Best Men's Player and Goalkeeper prizes, respectively, at the annual Jako Futsal Awards.

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Iranian captain Hossein Tayyebi has been nominated for the Best Men's Player in the World prize, while Baeqer Mohammadi has been shortlisted for Best Men's Goalkeeper at the annual Jako Futsal Awards. The winners in all categories of the 26th edition of the prestigious awards will be announced by Futsalplanet.com on Wednesday. Both Tayyebi and Mohammadi played decisive roles in helping Iran win the gold medal at the Islamic Solidarity Games in Riyadh in November. Prolific pivot Tayyebi scored twice as Iran defeated Morocco 5-0 in the final, avenging their last-16

setback against the African powerhouse at the 2024 World Cup. Meanwhile, Mohammadi pulled off a string of heroic saves to keep the Atlas Lions at bay, capping an MVP-worthy tournament in the Saudi capital.

Tayyebi will face competition from Brazilian trio Bruninho, Marcel de Mendonça Marques, and Pito, as well as Morocco's Soufiane El Mesrar and Spain's Pablo Ramírez for the prize.

Mohammadi, meanwhile, will be joined by Brazilian goalkeepers Dennis Vasconcelos, Matheus Marcos de Lima Assunção, along with Argentina's Freijo Riveras and Uruguay's Mathías Gabriel Fernández Krigeris in the race for the award.

Tayyebi and Mohammadi will both be part of the Iranian squad at the upcoming AFC Futsal Asian Cup, which kicks off on January 27 in Indonesia.

The Asian powerhouse will begin its quest for a record-extending 14th continental crown against Malaysia in Group D, before facing Saudi Arabia two days later.

Vahid Shamsaei's men will conclude the group stage against Afghanistan on February 1 – a rematch of the 2-2 draw when the two sides met at the Islamic Solidarity Games. The top two teams from each of the four groups will advance to the quarterfinals.

Maqsoudlou, Tabatabaei retain top-50 spots in FIDE World Ranking

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Iranian grandmasters Parham Maqsoudlou and Mohammad-Amin Tabatabaei have retained their top-50 positions in the men's standard category of the first FIDE World Ranking of the year, released by the International Chess Federation. Maqsoudlou, Iran's No. 1 player, remained 28th in the world with a rating of 2708 – five places above his compatriot Tabatabaei, who is ranked 33rd with a rating of 2700.

Norwegian star Magnus Carlsen continues to lead the standard chess rankings with a rating of 2840, followed by American duo Hikaru Nakamura (2810) and Fabiano Caruana (2795).

In the women's section, China dominates the top spots, with Hou Yifan leading the rankings on 2613. Zhu Jiner is second with 2579, followed by Li Tingjie in third place on 2569. In Iran's men's standard chess rankings, Maqsoudlou and Tabatabaei are followed by Pouya Idani, Bardia Daneshvar, Sina Movahhed, Mahdi Gholami, Amirreza Pour-Ramzani, Reza Mohammadi, Arash Tahbaz, Arian Gholami, Seyed Khalil Mousavi, and Mersed Khodashenas, respectively.

Melika Mohammadi leads the Iranian women's rankings, followed by Mobina Alinasab,

Sara Davari, Anahita Zahedifar, Dorsa Mohammadibrahimkhan, Mitra Asgharzadeh, Tannaz Azali, Rosha Akbari,

Rezvaneh Haddadi, and Zahra Parvin to complete the top 10. In the world junior standard rankings, Daneshvar climbed three places from last month to reach 17th with a rating of 2598, while Movahhed also rose three spots to 18th on 2596. Reza Mahdavi jumped nine places to 56th, and Artin Ashraf surged 18 positions to 76th in the world.

In the junior girls' standard rankings, Melika Mohammadi moved up six places to 11th with a rating of 2342, while Sara Davari climbed 12 spots to claim 41st place globally with 2250. Meanwhile, Iran's national team rose one place to 17th in the latest FIDE rankings, with an average rating of 2572.



Iranian grandmaster Parham Maqsoudlou is 28th in the men's standard category of the latest FIDE World Ranking.

● ISNA