

# Persian Gulf Pro League roundup: Persepolis stunned by Sepasi; Esteghlal, Tractor draw blank

## Sports Desk

Persepolis missed the opportunity to go top of the Persian Gulf Pro League table after suffering a 2-1 away defeat to Fajr Sepasi at the Pars Shiraz Stadium on Sunday.

Hossein Shahabi, who was on target when the two sides played to a 1-1 draw in the reverse fixture, put the home side ahead eight minutes into the game, before Reza Shekari drew the visiting Reds level midway through the first half.

Persepolis desperately pushed for a second goal afterwards but it was the home side which restored the lead through former Reds striker Mahdi Sharifi in the 65th minute. Fajr held on to inflict only a second league defeat on Brazilian head coach Osmar Loss Vieira across his two spells on the Persepolis bench and move up to seventh in the table with 21 points.

A win would have seen the Reds

leapfrog Sepahan, which was held to a goalless stalemate at home the previous day, to top the table on goal difference. Instead, their second defeat of the league campaign saw them drop to third – level on 28 points with Tehran archrival Esteghlal.

Playing without their foreign star duo Jasir Asani and Munir El Haddadi, Esteghlal shared the spoils with defending champion Tractor at home later on Sunday to go second thanks to a superior goal difference.

Dragan Skocic's Tractor, meanwhile, was left lagging behind in fourth with 26 points after settling for a seventh goalless scoreline in 16 outings in the domestic league.

It also finished goalless between Shams Azar and Esteghlal Khuzestan in Qazvin. The point was enough for the home side to move out of the relegation zone on goal difference over Zob Ahan, which fell 2-0 to Paykan on Friday. Esteghlal Khuzestan sits

12th on 17 points.

In Arak, Golgozar Sirjan claimed a 2-1 away win against Iralco to go fifth – tied on points with Tractor.

Star winger Mahdi Tikdari bagged his fourth goal of the campaign from the spot in the 20th minute, only to see his opener canceled out by Iralco's Ali Vatandoust nine minutes later.

Pouria Shahrabadi scored the winner nine minutes after the break to lead Mahdi Tartar's Golgozar to a third successive league victory.

The Iranian top flight will resume on Thursday, with Tractor hosting bottom-club Mes Rafsanjan in Tabriz, while Esteghlal will visit Zob Ahan in Isfahan.

The eagerly-awaited fixture of the weekend's action, however, will see Persepolis and Sepahan go head-to-head on Friday in a crunch 'Iranian Clasic' at the Sardar Azadeyan Stadium in Qazvin, which will serve as the Reds' home venue for the day.



Fajr Sepasi striker Mahdi Sharifi (78) reacts after scoring the winner during a 2-1 victory over Persepolis in the Persian Gulf Pro League in Shiraz, Iran, on January 18, 2026.



● IRNA

## Iran targets top-three finish at Asian Para Games, NPC chief says

### Sports Desk

Iran is targeting a top-three finish in the medals table at the Aichi-Nagoya 2026 Asian Para Games in October, said Ghafour Kargari, chairman of the country's National Paralympic Committee (NPC).

Iran has finished in the top four in all four previous editions of the multi-sport event. Its highest position came at Hangzhou 2022, where Iran collected 131 medals – including 44 golds – to place second behind host China, which dominated with a remarkable 214 gold medals.

"Iranian athletes have already begun their training camps following the Asian Youth Para Games [in December], as we have set our sights on a top-three finish in Japan. Achieving this will require a collective effort and progress in technical and scientific areas," Kargari said on the sidelines of the NPC's 25th General Assembly on Monday. The assembly was also attended by Iranian Sports Minister Ahmad Donyamali,



● IRAN NPC

Mohammad Shervin Asbagan, the deputy minister for professional sports development, and Mahdi Alinejad, secretary-general of the National Olympic Committee.

"We are compelled to equip ourselves with the latest equipment and scientific knowledge to avoid falling behind our competitors. Our strategy is qualitative development with a focus on new sports and

athletes," added Kargari, who hopes a strong result in October will lay the groundwork for a milestone achievement at the Los Angeles Paralympics in two years' time.

"For the Los Angeles Paralympics, we have two goals: ranking among the top 10 countries and achieving our highest number of gold medals compared to previous editions," Kargari

said.

Iran's highest Paralympic gold medal count is 12, achieved at both Sydney 2000 and Tokyo 2020. Its best finish in the overall standings, however, came at London 2012, where Iran's 11 gold medals placed it 11th.

At the most recent Paralympic Games in Paris 2024, Iran won a record 25 medals – including eight golds – to finish 14th.

## Iranian fencers endure poor outings at FIE World Cup events

### Sports Desk

Iranian epee and foil fencers delivered disappointing results at the latest FIE World Cup events in Fujairah and Paris, indicating that significant work is needed before expecting notable achievements on the global stage.

The second World Cup event of the international season in Fujairah earlier this month marked Iran's return to top-level epee competition after a long absence. However, all Iranian competitors suffered early exits in the pool phase of both the men's and women's individual events.

In the women's division, Reihaneh Rezaei, Sara Seyyed-Rezaei, and Fatiemeh Khorasani each finished with two wins and four losses. The Iranian women's team was defeated 45-12 by the United States in the first round, finishing second-last among 29 teams.

In the men's individual event, Mohammad Rahimi and Ali Namazi each suffered four defeats in six

bouts, while Behnam Beik failed to record a single victory in the pool phase. The Iranian men's team was also eliminated in the first round after a 45-22 loss to Japan.

mains to be seen whether the National Olympic Committee of Iran will allocate quotas for the Aichi-Nagoya 2026 Asian Games to the epee and foil



● ISNA

Following the UAE event, the Foil World Cup in Paris saw Iran represented by Mahan Mirzaei in the men's draw. The Iranian's campaign also ended early in the pool phase after six consecutive defeats.

Given these results, it re-

disciplines. The Games are scheduled to begin on September 19 in Japan. While foil is unlikely to secure a spot in the Iranian delegation, epee may still have a slight chance of obtaining a quota for the multi-sport event.



● FFRIRI

## Iran Women's double friendlies called off

### Sports Desk

Iran's preparations for the upcoming AFC Women's Asian Cup in Australia have suffered a significant blow after two scheduled friendlies against Uzbekistan and Belarus were canceled.

"We had held talks with Uzbekistan and Belarus, and both had agreed in principle to either play in Iran or host us. The match-

es were scheduled for one week before our departure for the Asian Cup, but currently, neither option is feasible," Farideh Shojaei, the head of women's football at the Iranian Football Federation, told ISNA.

The official did not specify the reason for the cancellations, but it is believed to be driven by the escalating regional tensions and recent unrest in the country.

Team Melli Baanovan will begin its Group A campaign at the Asian Cup against South Korea – runner-up to China in the 2022 final – on March 2. They will then face the formidable hosts Australia, who reached the semifinals of the 2023 Women's World Cup, in Gold Coast three days later.

Iran will conclude the group stage against the Philippines, which

reached the semifinals in the previous edition, on March 8.

The top two teams from each group, plus the two best third-place finishers, will advance to the quarterfinals.

Iran made its Women's Asian Cup finals debut in 2022, exiting at the group stage after comprehensive defeats against nine-time champion China (7-0) and the Chinese Taipei (5-0).