

Persian Gulf Pro League: Uzbek impact inspires Reds to triumph in snow-hit Iranian Clasico

Sports Desk

Uzbekistan internationals Oston Urunov and Igor Sergeev were on target as Persepolis defeated Sepahan 2-1 in a snow-affected Iranian Clasico at home on Friday, leapfrogging their familiar foe to the top of the Persian Gulf Pro League table. Esteghlal, meanwhile, missed the opportunity to go top of the standings following a goalless stalemate against Zob Ahan at Isfahan's Fooladshahr Stadium later in the day. The result saw Esteghlal drop to fourth in a tight title race, in which the top five teams are separated by only two points.

Urunov masterclass

Sepahan started strongly at Tehran's Pas Qavam Stadium and was somewhat unlucky not to take the lead before halftime after wasting a couple of clear-cut chances through Mohammad Mahdi Lotfi and Kaveh Rezaei.

However, the halftime introduction of Sergeev and Montenegrin midfielder Marko Bakić inspired the Capital Reds' much-improved performance in the second half, with Urunov breaking the deadlock in the 53rd minute. The Uzbek winger was played in behind the Sepahan back-



Persepolis striker Igor Sergeev (R) celebrates his goal during a 2-1 win against Sepahan in the Persian Gulf Pro League in Tehran, Iran, on January 23, 2026.

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line by Milad Mohammadi before his composed strike from inside the box found the bottom corner – the first goal conceded by Sepahan in seven visits to Persepolis.

Sepahan had goalkeeper Seyyed Hossein Hosseini to thank for producing a heroic save to deny Mohammad Amin Kazemian

in the 70th minute, but there was more to come from Urunov two minutes later. The winger wizard swept past two Sepahan defenders and provided his international teammate with a delicate back-heel touch before Sergeev slotted home from close range to open his Reds account in his second appearance

since joining the club earlier in the month. His celebrations were cut short minutes later as he was sent off after a VAR review in the 95th minute for stamping Sepahan center-back Mohammad Danehshar. A second VAR intervention saw Sepahan awarded a 99th-minute penalty for a

foul by goalkeeper Payam Niazmand on Majid Aliyari. Portuguese midfielder Ricardo Alves sent Niazmand the wrong way from the spot to reduce the deficit, though it proved to be just a consolation as Persepolis completed a league double over their rivals, having been winless against Sepahan in the league for 1,335

days before the reverse fixture last August.

Persepolis leads the table with 31 points from 17 games – level on points with Sepahan but ahead on head-to-head record.

"The three points were crucial in our quest for the title. My team didn't perform as I wanted in the first half, but we improved tactically in the second half and capitalized on our chances," said Persepolis head coach Osmar Loss Vieira.

"We made the halftime substitutions to create a '3 vs. 2' overload against the opponent's midfielders in the center of the pitch. I asked my players to push higher, press the opponent's defensive line, and fortunately, we scored from exactly that kind of situation. With better transitions and more precision in the final third, we could have scored four or five," added the Brazilian.

Sepahan boss Moharram Navidkia, meanwhile, rued the missed chances in the first half and refused to blame the weather conditions for the defeat.

"It was a game of two different halves. We were exceptional in the first half and created numerous chances, but unfortunately, we failed to convert them. We should have finished the game in that first period," Navidkia said.

"After their well-taken goal, our team's structure fell apart. We tried our best to calm our players down, but the lads were no longer playing in their positions," added the club legend.

"It's true we played much better in the first half, but I am not going to blame the snowy weather for our second-half collapse, as it is part of football. My players were desperate to make up for the defeat in the reverse fixture, but when you are playing against opposition of that caliber, it is crucial to stay focused until the very last second and not let emotions get the better of you," Navidkia said after his team failed to win in the league for a third consecutive game.

Elsewhere, second-half goals from Mahdi Tirkadi and Pouria Shahrbadi helped Golgohar Sirjan continue its impressive run of form with a 2-0 home win against Fajr Sepasi, moving Mahdi Tirkadi's men to fifth in the table – level on 29 points with third-placed Tractor and Esteghlal but behind on goal difference. Esteghlal Khuzestan played to a goalless draw at home against Paykan, mirroring the result between Chahromalou and Shams Azar Qazvin at Yazd's Shahid Nassiri Stadium.

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Iran remained on course for a consolation ninth-place finish in the Asian Men's Handball Championship after hammering Australia 37-17 in Da'ya, Kuwait, on Friday.

A second rout of Australia in the competition lifted Iran to the top spot in Group IV of the Martyr Fath Al-Ahmad Al-Sabah Cup – where seven teams fight for 9th-15th places – drawing level on four points with China ahead of the meeting between the two sides at the Kuwait Handball Association Hall today.

Mehran Rahnama scored a game-high eight goals for Iran, with Alireza Dadvand adding seven, while Taha Shokouhipour, Reza Ezzati, and Omid Enayatjoo chipped in four apiece. Timothy Anderson and Alex Verdier each scored five to top the scoring for the Aussies.

Iran opened the tournament with a 24-22 loss to four-time bronze medalist Saudi Arabia in Group D of the preliminary round but rebounded to thrash Australia 39-13 in its second outing in the 22nd edition of the event.

A draw against Japan in its final preliminary game would have been enough for Iran to secure a main-round spot. However, Spanish head coach Rafael Guijosa's men relinquished a five-goal lead in the second half, with Daisuke Tanaka's winner at the death sealing a 30-29 victory for the two-time champion, which finished runner-up to Saudi Arabia in the group.

Iran still managed to recover to beat India 39-16 in its Group IV opener on Thursday.

Elsewhere, South Korea defeated Iraq 35-30 to sit atop the main-round Group I table with three points, leading on goal difference over Japan, which edged out the host country 28-27 earlier on Friday.

In Group II, Bahrain defeated defending champion Qatar 31-28 to sit atop the table ahead of today's crunch encounter against Saudi Arabia, which is second on two points after beating the United Arab Emirates 33-19.

The flagship continental event also serves as a qualifier for the 2027 World Championship in Germany, with the four semifinalists securing berths.

Asian Men's Handball Championship:

Iran on consolation course after second Aussies thrashing



IRIHF

UIAA Ice Climbing World Cup:

Safdarian, Beheshtirad secure all-Iranian one-two in men's speed

Sports Desk

Iranian climbers Mohammadreza Safdarian and Mohsen Beheshtirad claimed a gold and silver medal, respectively, in the men's speed competition at the second UIAA Ice Climbing World Cup event of the 2026 season in Saas-Fee, Switzerland, on Friday.

After clocking the third-best qualification time of 9.93 seconds, Safdarian produced a blistering ascent of 8.60 seconds in the final to add another World Cup gold to the one he won in the season opener in Cheongsong, South Korea, a fortnight ago.

In his previous three visits to the resort in the Swiss Alps, Safdarian had collected a gold, silver and a bronze, with a mesmerizing sub-eight second climb earning him the World Cup title last season.

Beheshtirad, who took bronze in Cheongsong, secured silver this time with a time of 9.06 seconds, despite having recorded the fastest time overall (8.55 seconds) in qualification. Florian Gantner of Liechtenstein finished third in



Iran's Mohammadreza Safdarian won his second men's speed gold of the 2026 UIAA Ice Climbing World Cup season in Saas-Fee, Switzerland.

UIAA

9.14 seconds.

The Saas-Fee event deployed a solo format – climber against the clock – rather than the usual head-to-head duel, with each finalist given three attempts.

Mojtaba Hashemi was the other Iranian competitor in the men's speed event but narrowly missed the 16-man final, finishing 17th in qualification with a time of 13.94 seconds.

In the women's speed contest, Mahin Khalil represented Iran. She posted 28.46 seconds to qualify for the final and ultimately finished 10th with 20.47

seconds.

Mongolia's Selenge Nyamdoow won the women's title in 11.29 seconds, followed by Liechtenstein's Lorena Beck (13.13 seconds) and Czech climber Aneta Louzecka (13.29 seconds).

The three-day competition in Saas-Fee featured 137 athletes from 19 countries across the men's and women's speed and lead disciplines.

The third World Cup event of the season will be held in Longmont, Colorado, USA, from February 20-22, followed by the season finale in Edmonton, Canada, from February 26-28.