

Bakhtiarizadeh named Esteghlal coach until end of season

Sports Desk

Former Esteghlal defender and Iran international Sohrab Bakhtiarizadeh has been appointed the club's interim head coach until the end of the season, the Persian Gulf Pro League side announced on Sunday.

Bakhtiarizadeh, 48, succeeds Portuguese coach Ricardo Sá Pinto, who was dismissed following Esteghlal's last-16 exit from the AFC Champions League Two on Tuesday.

The Tehran Blues conceded two late goals in a 3-2 defeat to Jordan's Al Hussein in Amman, bowing out 4-2 on aggregate from Asia's second-tier club competition.

"The club's board of directors

has always believed that utilizing loyal human assets emerging from the Esteghlal family constitutes a sustainable, identity-driven strategy for the future," the club said in a statement. "Accordingly, after considering the current circumstances and the technical committee's recommendations, the board has decided to appoint Mr. Sohrab Bakhtiarizadeh as head coach of Esteghlal Football Team."

The appointment marks Bakhtiarizadeh's third spell on the Blues' bench since October 2024.

He oversaw eight matches across two brief stints last season, recording four wins and two defeats.

The highlight of his previous

tenure came on the final day of the league stage of the AFC Champions League Elite in February last year, when Esteghlal secured a 2-0 away victory over Qatar's Al Rayyan in a must-win encounter to advance to the round of 16 ahead of domestic rival Persepolis.

Under Sá Pinto this season, Esteghlal registered 13 wins and eight defeats in 31 matches in all competitions. The club sits third in the Persian Gulf Pro League standings with 35 points from 20 matches, one point behind leaders Golgozar Sirjan and level with second-placed Tractor.

Esteghlal also remains in contention to defend its Hazfi Cup title and will face Khaybar Khorramabad in the quarterfinals.



● khabarvarzeshi.com



● Foolad Sirjan middle-blocker Mohammad Valizadeh (27) hits a spike during a 3-0 victory over Shahrdari Urmia in the Iranian Volleyball Premier League in Tehran, Iran, on February 23, 2026.
● VOLLEYBALL.IR

Iranian Volleyball Premier League:

Foolad tightens grip on top; Shahdab stunned by San'atgaran

Sports Desk

The latest round of fixtures in the Iranian Volleyball Premier League saw Foolad Sirjan strengthen its hold on top spot in the regular-season standings with a straight-sets victory over Shahrdari Urmia.

Coached by former national team boss Behrouz Ataei, Foolad claimed a 28-26, 25-13, 25-22 win to register its 15th victory in 17 matches.

The result moved Foolad to 43 points, four clear of sec-

ond-placed Shahdab Yazd.

Last season's runner-up Shahdab, beaten by Foolad in the championship series, suffered a surprise 3-1 defeat (29-27, 23-25, 29-27, 25-23) to San'atgaran Omid earlier in the day and remained on 13 wins.

The victory marked San'atgaran's ninth of the campaign, consolidating seventh place with 27 points and keeping the side in contention for a playoff berth.

Elsewhere, third-placed Foolad Mobarakeh Sepahan also stum-

bled, falling 3-1 (29-27, 25-23, 15-25, 25-22) to Tabiat Eslamshahr to stay on 32 points from 11 wins.

Paykan closed to within one point of third place after mounting a dramatic comeback to defeat Esteghlal Gonbad in a five-set thriller (23-25, 23-25, 25-23, 25-18, 15-11).

In other matches, Pas Gorgan beat fifth-placed Chadormalou 3-1 (25-19, 22-25, 25-19, 25-23), while Mehregan Noor rallied to edge Razin Polymer in five sets (23-25, 25-14, 25-22, 22-25, 15-13).

Saei poised for second term at Iranian Taekwondo Federation

Sports Desk

With former president Mohammad Pouladgar sidelined from contention, Iranian taekwondo legend Hadi Saei appears the clear frontrunner to retain the helm of the Iranian Taekwondo Federation when elections for the sport's national governing body are held on April 8.

Saei, who assumed the presidency in January 2022 at the age of 44 with a decisive mandate, has overseen a four-year tenure marked by sustained international success. His term culminated in Iran's most successful Olympic taekwondo campaign at the Paris 2024 Summer Games.

Under Saei's leadership, Iranian athletes claimed four medals in Paris, including a historic silver in the women's division through Nahid Kiani.

The gold medal, secured by Arian Salimi in the +80kg category, carried particular significance as it ended a 16-year wait for an Olympic taekwondo gold for Iran — the first since Saei himself triumphed at the 2008 Beijing Olympics.

Salimi rallied after dropping the opening round against Britain's Caden Cunningham to take the final two rounds, showcasing the resilience that has defined Iranian taekwondo in recent years. In doing so, he followed in the footsteps of Saei, who remains Iran's most decorated Olympian of the modern

era with two gold medals and one bronze.

The federation's achievements have extended beyond the Olympic stage. At the Hangzhou 2022 Asian Games, Iranian taekwondo athletes secured four medals, including one gold. The 2023 World Championships produced five medals, two of them gold. Across the Asian Games campaign, Iran ultimately collected eight medals in total across various weight categories, despite several early exits by medal hopefuls.

This consistent presence on major international podiums suggests Saei's tenure has provided relative stability and competitiveness at the highest level.

The upcoming election features 15 registered candidates but notably

excludes Pouladgar, who is ineligible after serving three previous terms. Among the most prominent challengers to Saei are Asghar Rahimi and two-time world champion and former Olympic bronze medalist Yousef Karami, both well-known figures within Iranian taekwondo.

Given Saei's administrative record, the federation's international results over the past four years, and the composition of the candidate field, the April vote is widely seen as a referendum on the federation's current direction. Whether members opt for continuity or a change in leadership will shape Iran's preparation for future Olympic and World Championship cycles.



● IRNA

Persian Gulf Pro League:

Last-gasp winner extends Foolad's unbeaten run

Sports Desk

Arash Akbarzadeh came off the bench to score a 97th-minute winner and help Foolad Khuzestan defeat Zob Ahan 2-1 at home in the Persian Gulf Pro League on Saturday.

A Nader Mohammadi own goal gave Foolad a 45th-minute lead against the struggling visitors, who had been reduced to 10 men following a straight red card for Pouya Mokhtari midway through the first half at Foolad Arena.

Zob Ahan still managed to restore parity two minutes later, when Pedram Qazipour's effort from outside the box found the bottom corner, leaving the score 1-1 at halftime.

Akbarzadeh's superb strike from the edge of the area, however, extended Foolad's impressive run to three wins and two draws in five games since Hamid Motahari was appointed as head coach in mid-January, replacing Yahya Golmohammadi.

The victory lifted Foolad to ninth in the table with 28 points from 21 games, while Zob Ahan remained second from bottom with 19 points. On Friday, Persepolis suf-



● Foolad Khuzestan players are pictured after the late winner during a 2-1 victory over Zob Ahan in the Persian Gulf Pro League in Ahvaz, Iran, on February 21, 2026.
● VARZESH3

ferred a third successive defeat in the Iranian top flight, falling 2-1 to Khaybar at home to remain fifth in the table with 35 points, while the visiting side moved up to eighth on 29 points.

Sixth-placed Chadormalou came from behind to stun leaders Golgozar 5-1 at home, with Fajr Sepasi edging out Shams Azar 1-0 in Shiraz.

Iralco and Paykan played to a 1-1 draw in Arak.