

Persian Gulf Pro League roundup: Esteghlal, Persepolis win as two-horse title race heats up



MNA
Amirhossein Hosseinzadeh (blue) scores Esteghlal's winner in a 1-0 victory over Tractor in Tabriz, Iran, on February 18, 2022.



MOHAMMAD HASSANZADEH/TASNIM
Persepolis striker Hamed Pakdel (red) scores during a 2-0 victory over Aluminium Arak at the Azadi Stadium, Tehran, Iran, on February 18, 2022.

Missed chances

Third-placed Sepahan blew the chance to mount the pressure on the leading duo in Friday's early kickoff, sharing the points with Havadar in a goalless encounter in Tehran.

It was a similar scenario as in many games this season for Moharram Navidkia's side, which again enjoyed the majority of the ball throughout the match but failed to capitalize on its dominance.

The draw meant that the Isfahan-based giant now trails the top by 11 points and, with 12 games to spare, a serious title challenge looks unlikely for Navidkia's men.

Mes, meanwhile, missed out on closing the gap on Sepahan to a single point after finishing 1-1 at home against Javad Nekounam's Foolad.

Shahin Tavakkoli headed home the opener for the host late in the first half, only to see his strike canceled out by Mohammadreza Khal'atbari in the 69th minute.

Mes still felt lucky to leave the pitch with the minimum point after goalkeeper Davoud Noushi-Soufiani saved Luciano Pereira's effort from the spot in the sixth minute of the stoppage time.

Elsewhere, Mojtaba Haqdoust and Mohammad-Mehdi Mohebbi scored late in the game to lead fifth-placed Paykan to an away 2-0 win against Zob Ahan, which went down to 10 men after Hossein Shanani received his marching orders for two bookable offences inside three minutes midway through the second half.

In Mashhad, where Nassaji Mazandaran temporarily plays its home fixtures, in-form midfielder Saeid Sadeqi assisted a first-half opener for Shayan Mosleh and then doubled the lead for Gol Gohar with a spot kick in the 63rd minute, before Karim Eslami pulled one back for Nassaji with 20 minutes from normal time, as Amir Qalenoqi's side beat Nassaji 2-1 to go equal on points with Paykan.

Fajr Sepasi and San'at Naft Abadan shared the spoils in a goalless stalemate in Shiraz, while rock-bottom club Padideh celebrated a first victory of the season, claiming an away 1-0 win over Naft Masjed Soleyman, also struggling in the relegation zone, courtesy of a Mohammadreza Fallahian's 93rd-minute strike.

Sports Desk

The latest round of the Persian Gulf Pro League fixtures saw the top two, Esteghlal and Persepolis, walk away with maximum points, while the chasing packs, Sepahan and Mes Rafsanjan, settled for draws against Havadar and Foolad Khuzestan.

In Tabriz, Esteghlal prodigy Amirhossein Hosseinzadeh bagged the winner for the Tehran-based Blues with 20 minutes left on the clock, chipping the ball over keeper Mohammadreza Akhbari, as Farhad Majidi's men beat their host Tractor 1-0.

The result – a remarkable 13th clean sheet of the season – saw Esteghlal extend its unbeaten start to the campaign to 18 games, retaining the top spot of the table with 44 points – three clear of

archival Persepolis, which were in action later in the day.

Yahya Golmohammadi's men walked into the game against Aluminium Arak – the only team to have inflicted a defeat over the Reds this season – at Tehran's Azadi Stadium knowing that, with Gol Gohar Sirjan and Mes Rafsanjan coming their way in the next nine days, any result other than a victory would have further hindered their quest for a record-extending sixth successive title.

Hamed Pakdel had to come off the bench to break the deadlock for Persepolis in the 76th minute – his second goal as a substitute in five days – keeping his cool in a one-on-one situation when Mehdi Abdi's flick touch fell into his path.

Reza Asadi, also a late introduction, sealed a 2-0 win for the host right before the final whistle as he was the first to

the ball on a clearance by Aluminium keeper Hossein Pourhamidi to score from the edge of the box.

Golmohammadi, who was full of praise for his players for showing "the character of the champions", still acknowledged that "it was a really tough match as we gave away the ball too easily under their pressure on numerous occasions. Thank God we managed to pull off three massive points."

The match was also a first outing in a Reds' shirt in nearly five years for high-profile fullback Ramin Rezaeian, who joined the club on the winter transfer window's deadline day.

"Ramin delivered a relatively decent performance, but it will take some time before he fully fits in the team. He will surely make bigger contribution in the near future," Persepolis manager said of his winter addition.

Hamilton does not want last year to define F1 career, coming back 'stronger'

Lewis Hamilton said the controversial end to last year's Formula One title fight made him consider his future but he does not want it to define his career.

The Mercedes driver lost out on an eighth world title in controversial circumstances at last year's final race in Abu Dhabi, BBC reported.

"There was a moment when I lost a little bit of faith in the system," said Hamilton.

"But I am generally a very determined person.

"And while moments like this might define careers, I refuse to let this define mine."

Hamilton was leading in Abu Dhabi and on course for a record eighth world title when race director Michael Masi failed to operate the rules correctly during a late safety-car period.

That resulted in Hamilton being passed by Red Bull's Max Verstappen on one final lap of racing after a restart.

The F1 governing body, FIA, has conducted an inquiry into what happened and on Thursday announced a series of changes to address it – including removing Masi as race director.

Hamilton said he had retreated to the comfort of his family as he sought to process what had happened.

"I never said I was going to stop," he said. "But it was a difficult time for me and I really needed to step back.

"It was a time where I really needed to step back, focus on being present. I had my family all around me creating great moments.

"Eventually I got to a point where I decided I was going to be attacking again coming into another season."

Hamilton welcomed the FIA's moves, but added that they had to be converted into concrete actions.

"It's good to see the FIA are making changes," he said. "Accountability is key. We have to use this moment to make sure this never happens to anyone ever again.

"We have to make sure we are seeing those changes, and (that) rules are applied fairly, and accurate and consistently." He said he did not bear any ill feelings towards Verstappen.

"This has nothing to do with Max," he said. "Max did everything a driver would do given the opportunity he was given.

"He's a great competitor and we will go into another battle like we did last year and we will grow from our races and experiences we had last year.

"I don't hold any grudges with anyone. That is never a good thing to carry around with you. I move forward. I don't dwell on the past."

He admitted that it was "still difficult to fully understand everything" that happened in Abu Dhabi, but said he wanted "to come back stronger".

"Through these experiences, you can turn these emotions into power and strength and that's what I'm doing," he said.

"If you think what you saw at the end of last year was my best, wait till you see this year."



PA
Lewis Hamilton poses for a photo at the launch of the new Mercedes-AMG F1 2022 car.

ROC look to retain Olympic ice hockey title while Finns seek golden first



ANNEGRET HILSE/REUTERS
Egor Iakovlev (44) of the Russian Olympic Committee celebrates scoring a goal during a penalty shootout against Sweden in the ice hockey semifinal at the Winter Olympics in Beijing, China, on February 18, 2022.

The Russian Olympic Committee (ROC) will try to bring their turbulent Beijing Games to a triumphant finish in the men's ice hockey final today when the defending champions face off against Finland.

A doping storm engulfing 15-year-old ROC figure skater Kamila Valieva has enveloped that sport along with the entire Winter Olympics, Reuters reported.

An ROC ice hockey triumph will not lift those clouds entirely but would be celebrated by the hockey loving nation and number one fan, Russian President Vladimir Putin.

Russia have not retained the Olympic ice hockey title since the glory days of the 'Big Red Machine' when a Unified Team won gold at the 1992 Albertville Winter Games after the former Soviet Union took the honours at Calgary 1988 and Sarajevo 1984.

Finland have made regular appearances on the podium, returning home with a medal from five of the previous seven Games, but they have never reached the top step.

Twice before the Finns have contested the final, at the 1988 Calgary and 2006 Turin Olympics, and will be hoping it is third time lucky.

When Finland defeated Sweden in Stockholm in 1995 to win the ice hockey world championship for the first time the team received a fighter jet escort home.

A win today and the players can expect an even more rousing welcome.

"It's huge, of course," said Finnish forward Sakari Manninen

about playing for gold. "Going to an Olympic final is like a dream.

"You dream of those kind of moments, but at the same time (I try to) focus on the right things."

Attacking flair

The ROC were expected to bring plenty of attacking flair to Beijing but have reached the final on defence and goaltending.

While they have generated only 13 goals, five of those coming in a 6-5 loss to the Czech Republic, that was more than enough offence to register four wins to get them to the final.

The ROC have leaned heavily on the play of netminder Ivan Fedotov, who made a spectacular start to the Games by recording back-to-back shutouts of Switzerland and Denmark before getting shelled by the Czechs.

But the hulking goaltender was back at his stingy best when it mattered by holding Denmark in the quarter-finals and Sweden in semis to a single goal.

The ROC will need Fedotov back at his best against the Finns who feature two players tied for the Beijing Olympics scoring lead in Manninen and Teemu Hartikainen.

"We are going to keep that in our (dressing) room," said ROC's Damir Sharipzyanov, when asked what the game plan was for Finland. "We know how they play, they know how we play.

"It is going to be interesting.

"We got to the final and now it is the game of our life."