

Persian Gulf Pro League wrap-up: Esteghlal undone by late equalizer; Persepolis, Sepahan close gap on top

Sports Desk

Meisam Majidi netted a 92nd-minute equalizer to rescue a point for Aluminium Arak at home against Persian Gulf Pro League leader Esteghlal as the two sides settled for a 1-1 draw on Monday.

French summer signing Kevin Yamga gave the Tehran-based Blues the lead from the spot with 12 minutes into the game after a cleared header hit the arm of former Esteghlal midfielder Esmail Sharifat in the box.

Chances were few and far between in a game featuring two teams that had jointly conceded seven goals after 12 rounds of matches before the encounter, and the home side had to thank another ex-Blues' player to salvage a draw.

Majidi beat center-back Aref Aqasi to the ball before his strike from the edge of the box went in off the post – nine minutes after he had come off the bench.

The draw kept Farhad Majidi's men – still unbeaten in the league – on top of the table with 29 points, but Persepolis and Sepahan took advantage to cut the deficit to one and four points respectively.

At Tehran's Azadi Stadium, Siamak Nemati bagged the winner 10 minutes into the second period – after Payman Babaei had canceled out an Issa Al-e Kassir's opener for Persepolis in the first half – as the defending champion – seeking a sixth consecutive title – walked away with a 2-1 home victory

over Tractor.

In Mashhad, a run of three consecutive defeats came to an end for Sepahan, which, despite dominating the game, had to wait 67 minutes to break the deadlock against Padideh – rock bottom in the table – when Farshad Ahmadzadeh headed home on an inch-perfect cross by Danial Esmailifar.

Substitute Shahriar Moghanlou sealed the 2-0 victory for the visiting side right at the death, tapping in from close range after young keeper Babak Salamat had initially denied an Esmailifar's effort.

Elsewhere, in-form Mes Rafsanjan beat San'at Naft Abadan at home 3-0 – courtesy of goals by Mehdi Hosseini, Faraz Emam-Ali, and Mohammadreza Hosseini – to overtake Aluminium for the fourth spot on goal difference.

Amir Qalenoee's Golgozar Sirjan beat Naft Masjed Soleyman 2-0 – thanks to second-half strikes by Reza Shekari and Navid Aa'shouri – while Havadar and Nassaji Mazandaran shared the spoils in a goalless contest in Karaj.

Zob Ahan celebrated a second win on the bounce as Milad Jahani scored in each half to hand his team a 2-0 triumph at home over newly-promoted Fajr Sepasi.

In Ahvaz, Javad Nekounam's Foolad Khuzestan was denied all three points, as Payman Ranjbari drew Paykan level with three minutes left from normal time after Brazilian Luciano Pereira had put the host in front right before the interval.



MOHAMMAD ABBASI

Aluminium Arak players celebrate an equalizer during a 1-1 draw against Esteghlal in the Persian Gulf Pro League in Arak, central Iran, on January 3, 2022.

Newcastle United seek to hijack Lyon's move for Zenit striker Azmoun



GETTY IMAGES

Premier League club Newcastle United have made fresh enquiries for Zenit St Petersburg's prolific striker Sardar Azmoun.

The 27-year-old Iranian international is out of contract in the summer and has been in talks over a move to Lyon, the Daily Mail reported.

However, despite outlining terms over a four and a half year contract, the French side were unwilling to pay more than £3 million to sign him this month.

That has left the door ajar for Newcastle who are looking for cover while Callum Wilson recuperates from a calf injury. Azmoun has scored 11 times this season and impressed with goals in the Champions League against Chelsea and Juventus.

Newcastle are finalising discussions over a fee for Atletico Madrid's Kieran Trippier but have been rebuffed in their initial £30m bid to sign centre back Sven Botman from Lille, who says the Dutch defender is not for sale.

Djokovic will defend Australian Open title after exemption from vaccination

Novak Djokovic ended speculation over his Australian Open title defence by announcing on Tuesday that he would compete at the season's opening Grand Slam event after receiving a medical exemption from getting vaccinated against COVID-19.

The world number one, who had declined to reveal his vaccination status, said previously that he was unsure whether he would compete at the Jan. 17-30 tournament in Melbourne due to concerns over Australia's quarantine rules, Reuters reported.

"I've spent fantastic quality time with my loved ones over the break and today I'm heading Down Under with an exemption permission. Let's go 2022," the Serbian said on Instagram.

Organisers of the Australian Open had stipulated that all participants must be vaccinated against the coronavirus or have a medical exemption granted by an independent panel of experts.

Tennis Australia said last month the panel would consist of doctors from the



ASANKA BRENDON RATNAYAKE/REUTERS

fields of immunology, infectious disease and general practice and that the move was agreed in conjunction with the Victoria Department of Health.

Applicants that pass an initial stage will be subject to a second review conducted by a government-appointed panel before the application is sub-

mitted to the Australian Immunisation Register.

Djokovic's father Srdjan had told a Serbian television channel that his son would probably pull out of the major, saying Tennis Australia's stance on mandatory jabs was tantamount to "blackmail".

Djokovic pulled out of the Serbia team for the ATP Cup in Sydney to raise further doubts over his participation in the year's first Grand Slam.

"I'm ready to live and breathe tennis in the next few weeks of competition. Thanks everyone for the support," Djokovic added in his post, which was accompanied by a picture of him in an airport.

He heads to Australia having trained in Marbella, Spain over the last few days.

Djokovic has won a record nine Australian Open titles, including the last three, and is in a three-way tie on 20 majors with Roger Federer and Rafa Nadal in the all-time list.

Bulls earn eighth victory in a row, Warriors win despite Curry's off night

The Chicago Bulls secured an eighth NBA win in a row by defeating the Orlando Magic 102-98 but Stephen Curry had an off night as his Golden State Warriors side beat the Miami Heat 115-108.

Trae Young scored a career-high 56 points in the Atlanta Hawks' 136-131 loss to the Portland Trail Blazers, BBC Sport reported.

Ja Morant scored 36 points as the Memphis Grizzlies beat the Brooklyn Nets 118-104.

And the Detroit Pistons stunned champions the Milwaukee Bucks 115-106.

Jordan Poole came off the bench to score 32 points for the Warriors, recording five assists with two rebounds in just 26 minutes.

But it was a less successful night for Curry – the NBA's reigning scoring champion – who had to settle for a season-low tally of nine points.

A COVID-ravaged Heat side, missing 10 players, looked to the scoring of Jimmy Butler – but af-



KAMIL KRZACZYNSKI/USA TODAY SPORTS
Bulls forward DeMar DeRozan (11) is fouled by Magic guard R.J. Hampton during an NBA game at United Center, Chicago, IL, US, on January 3, 2022.

ter he grabbed 22 points, he was forced off with an ankle injury as

his team suffered a second successive defeat.

Elsewhere, point guard Young was in excellent form for the

Hawks. The 23-year-old hit seven three pointers and found the basket with all 15 of his attempts from the free throw line but it wasn't enough against a Portland side for whom Anfernee Simons took 43 points.

Norman Powell, Jusuf Nurkic and Nassir Little all added more than 20 points to earn victory for the Trail Blazers, who now have 14 wins and 22 defeats for the season.

In their match against Orlando, the Bulls were inspired by DeMar DeRozan, with 29 points, and Zach LaVine, who scored 27, but struggled to shake off opponents who consistently hit back to cut their lead.

Morant becomes the first player in franchise history to score 30 points or more in four straight matches as he inspired the Grizzlies to victory over the Nets, their fifth in a row.

Meanwhile, Saddiq Bey scored a career high 34 as the Pistons beat the Bucks for their first successive wins of the season.