

Mahran hat-trick powers Bahrain victory

Hosts overcome Tajikistan after power failure interrupts dramatic Asian U20 qualifier

Hussain Almaskati

A power failure interrupted Bahrain's 3-2 victory over Tajikistan in their AFC U20 Asian Cup 2027 qualifying opener last night, with play halted in the 85th minute at Khalifa Sports City Stadium in Isa Town.

The hosts were protecting a slender 2-1 advantage when the disruption brought proceedings to a temporary standstill, with spectators remaining in the stadium to support the kingdom's junior men's national team.

Play eventually resumed and Ali Mahran completed a superb hat-trick in the 90th minute to give Ali Aamer's side some breathing room, before Tajikistan struck in stoppage time to ensure a nervy finish.

The Bahrainis nevertheless held firm to secure three valuable points in Group D and begin their bid for a first appearance at the continental finals since 2016 on a winning note.

Mahran had needed just five minutes to open the scoring following a rapid transition from defence to attack.

Jassim Qassim launched a long ball towards the right flank, where Mohamed Rashed picked it up before delivering a cross into the area for Mahran to meet with a diving header.



Ali Mahran celebrates his third goal of the night

Tajikistan responded strongly and were level eight minutes later through Azizbek Murotov.

A cross towards the back post caused a scramble inside the penalty area before the ball fell to Murotov, who showed good footwork to evade a challenge and calmly finish to make it 1-1.

The visitors enjoyed the better of the proceedings following their equaliser and applied sustained pressure as the half wore on.

But it was the nationals who struck against the run of play just before the interval.

Substitute Abdulrahman Bassam swung in a corner that was

knocked backwards by a Tajikistan player and fell kindly into the path of Mahran, who applied the finishing touch from close range for his second of the night.

Aamer's men had opportunities to extend their advantage after the restart.

Bassam came agonisingly close in the 65th minute after creating space for himself inside the area, only for Tajikistan goalkeeper Abubakr Rahmonqulov to stick out a leg and deny him from point-blank range.

Mahran then came within inches of completing his hat-trick when his header from an-

other corner crashed against the crossbar.

Tajikistan continued to push for an equaliser and had an appeal for handball waved away following a corner before the floodlights went out with five minutes to go, bringing the contest to a temporary halt.

Once play resumed, Mahran finally secured his treble in the 90th minute, finding the net to put the hosts 3-1 ahead.

Tajikistan refused to go quietly and pulled one back in stoppage time to set up a tense finale, but Aamer's charges saw out the remaining moments to seal a 3-2 triumph.

Earlier in the day, Jordan also opened their Group D campaign with three points after edging Afghanistan 1-0.

That sets up a meeting between the two opening-day winners on Thursday, when Bahrain take on Jordan at 8.30pm, while Afghanistan face Tajikistan earlier at 5pm.

The final round of matches will be played on Sunday, with Jordan facing Tajikistan at 5pm before the nationals complete their campaign against Afghanistan at 8.30pm.

The eight group winners and seven best runners-up will qualify for next year's AFC U20 Asian Cup in China, which will be held from March 24 to April 10.

Man City sign Palmeiras winger Allan on five-year deal



Palmeiras' Allan in action (file photo)

AFP | London

Brazilian winger Allan has joined Manchester City on a five-year deal from Palmeiras for a reported fee of £34 million (\$46 million).

Allan, 22, came up through the ranks at Palmeiras, starting off in the Brazilian club's academy before making 96 first-team appearances.

This season, he has scored four goals and contributed three assists in 21 matches in Brazil's top flight, which Palmeiras are currently leading.

"This is a surreal moment for me. Manchester City, with everything they have won over the past 15 years,

are one of the most attractive clubs in the world for players," Allan told the Premier League club's website yesterday.

"To be able to sit here today and say I have joined them is the proudest moment of my life.

"I love Palmeiras and always will -- but the decision to come to City was an easy one. I want to be the best footballer I can be and the conversations I've had with the people at City so far has convinced me there isn't a better place for me to fulfil my ambitions.

"My intention is to help City continue winning trophies. If I can do that, it would be a dream come true."



Messi calls time on Argentina career

It 'hurts' says World Cup winner as he retires from international football

- Decision comes after World Cup final loss
- Played 207 matches for national team
- Scored 125 goals for Argentina

AFP | Miami

Lionel Messi said yesterday he was retiring from international football after leading Argentina to a second successive World Cup final in July.

The 39-year-old forward who won the World Cup in 2022 and dragged his nation to the final in the United States only to lose to Spain, said the decision had been painful.

"It was a decision that hurt and still hurts deep in my soul but I understand that it is the right time," Messi wrote on Instagram.

"I swear I always gave everything, not just in the last few years when we

It was a decision that hurt and still hurts deep in my soul but I understand that it is the right time. I swear I always gave everything, not just in the last few years when we won everything but before that too, and I always fought and gave my all for this shirt

LIONEL MESSI

won everything but before that too, and I always fought and gave my all for this shirt," he added.

Messi led Argentina to World Cup glory four years ago by winning the final against France in a penalty shootout in Doha, but his side were defeated 1-0 by a superior Spain side in the 2026 final in East Rutherford, New Jersey.

Following the death of his father Jorge in August, Messi had said he had "serious doubts" about continuing to play football of any sort for "much longer".

"I don't know what I'll do without

you, I don't know how to go on. I just played football, and now I have serious doubts about continuing to do so for much longer," he said then.

Messi's contract with Major League Soccer club Inter Miami runs until the end of the 2028 season.

He has played 207 times for Argentina and is also Argentina's leading scorer, with 125 goals.

Messi also won two Copa Americas during his 21-year international career.

In this year's finals, Messi had inspired Argentina to another final by scoring eight goals and also providing two assists in the dramatic late comeback against England in the semi-finals.

But the dream of lifting the trophy again proved one match too far as the South Americans were defeated by Spain in the MetLife Stadium in a match that ended in ugly scenes.

Midfielder Leandro Paredes and several of his Argentina team-mates have received bans and fines for their part in clashes with Spain players after the final, Paredes for grabbing Eric Garcia by the throat and wrestling Gavi to the ground.

Messi, meanwhile, was pictured in tears after receiving his loser's

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Messi's decision came after his father's death in August, which made him doubt continuing football, and he was pictured in tears after receiving his loser's medal

medal. He said afterwards that the pain of defeat was "immense" and that it would "take a long time for this wound to heal".

In his statement yesterday, the eight-time Ballon d'Or winner said it was time for a new generation of Argentina players to take up the torch.

"I love, I loved, and I will always love being on the national team," he wrote. "I gave everything I had, I have nothing more to give, and besides, there are some very talented young players coming up behind me who deserve to be there."