

'Our job is not yet done'

Bahrain head coach Sam Vincent talks about how qualifying for the FIBA Asia Cup 2021 is just the first of many steps in the greater scheme of raising the level of Bahrain basketball; the Kingdom's potential on the game's international stage despite being one of the smaller countries in Asia; and the national team's goals in their upcoming tournaments

● **Coach Sam Vincent outlines four major steps for Bahrain as it looks to build on recent success in FIBA Asia Cup 2021 qualifying**

● **Bahrain to target for semi-finals in continental showcase this August, and then to go all out to capture elusive first GCC senior men's title in December**

● **Bahrain rise six places to 101st on latest edition of FIBA World Ranking, released yesterday by global basketball's governing body**

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Bahrain may have successfully qualified for the continent's biggest basketball competition held just once every four years, but the job is not done and there are bigger goals that must be targeted for the overall benefit of the game in the Kingdom, says national team head coach and 1986 NBA champion Sam Vincent.

Last month, the Bahrainis closed out their qualification bid for this year's FIBA Asia Cup in style, finishing their group campaign with a 4-2 win-loss record, which included wins against India and Iraq—both bigger and more experienced teams who are classified much higher than Bahrain on the FIBA World Ranking.

Coach Vincent now hopes that nationals can ride their momentum from their qualifiers' success into other much greater achievements, which would help in the long run for the continued overall development of basketball in Bahrain.

"One part of the job is done," says Coach Vincent, a former point guard who won an NBA title with the Boston Celtics playing alongside basketball legends such as Larry Bird, Kevin McHale, Robert Parish, Bill Walton and others.

"There are three or four parts: the first part was securing the invitation to the tournament, which we've done now. The next part is having a real top-notch training camp programme in place so that we can go and get our guys in great shape, really fit, and compete against some real strong competition so that we can get our confidence on another level and be able to go out and



Coach Sam Vincent

perform.

"The next part is the actual performance at the [FIBA Asia Cup], taking that preparation and taking that confidence, actually going into Jakarta and executing on all the things that we worked on... and the fourth and final piece is, after building this momentum and having this success, creating a programme that can sustain it and move forward."

Sustained development

Coach Vincent stresses on the importance of further pushing for a higher level of basketball both in the local game and for the national team, with the aim of one day being regarded amongst basketball's powerhouses in all of Asia.

"It's not a matter of putting all this hard work, time, effort, energy into something like a roller coaster that goes all the way up and then the next day comes all the way down; it's got to be sustained," he says. "There's got to be development programmes in place, scouting of the next generation of top players, and collegiate development opportunities for kids to go overseas and play. It's got to be a system and to me those are the four parts.

"We've only taken care of the first part. It's a complete vision of taking it from where it currently is to a much higher elevated level to where Bahrain can be recognised in the world as a strong basketball country that's competitive internationally, but also developing good-level talents that are playing around the world."

Cornerstones

Coach Vincent is excited to see that there are already a number of young players in the Kingdom who are the cornerstones of the future, such as national team forward Muzamil Ameer



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COACH SAM VINCENT

and guard Mustafa Hussain, to name a few.

Both Muzamil and Mustafa are already with schools in the United States where they are able to improve their basketball prowess as student-athletes.

"I definitely feel like there are a couple of very solid legs in place," Coach Vincent says. "Muzamil is a very strong candidate. He is a very good player and he'll have a chance to play collegiate basketball in the US. Time depends on how hard he works and where he goes, but he's very talented.

"Mustafa is also now in the US and he's playing, growing and gaining more experience.

"When you look at the cornerstone of those guys, there is a good foundation of youth now getting exposure outside. Maybe you need to find one or two more, but I think you have a good foundation in place, and you just need to continue to build on it."



James Samuel Vincent was a former point guard in the NBA. He played seven years in the league and won an NBA title as a rookie in 1986 with the Boston Celtics, where he teamed up with the likes of Larry Bird, Kevin McHale, Robert Parish, Bill Walton, Dennis Johnson, Danny Ainge and Rick Carlisle

'Hefty' challenge

For the upcoming FIBA Asia Cup, Coach Vincent has set a target of reaching the semi-finals—a challenge he admits is "hefty" for Bahrain considering the plethora of talent in Asian basketball—but he is determined to have the national team strive for that plateau.

"That's a pretty hefty goal, but it's something that I've set as my target, something I want the guys to strive for," he explains. "That's what I'm excited about: can I actually take Bahrain to the final four of FIBA Asia? Out of all my basketball challenges and everything I've done; this is the one I'm embracing with two hands to really accept the challenge. Can it be done? I believe that we do have some strong pieces in place."

The 57-year-old tactician says that the Kingdom's internationals have already been able to show what they can do against more heavily favoured opponents. In their FIBA Asia Cup qualifying group alone, Bahrain were the lowest-ranked team.

In the FIBA World Ranking, released yesterday by the sport's global governing body, the Bahrainis had risen six places to 101st after previously being ranked 107th.

Despite this, Bahrain are still behind qualifier opponents Lebanon (59th), as well as India (76th) and Iraq (79th), both of whom they defeated in each of their respective meetings.

"This is a clear indication of how big our victories were because we're beating teams that are ranked much higher than us," says Vincent, whose guidance and leadership—along with the work of

the national team's staff—has been the driving force of Bahrain's rise on the world ranking.

"When we play a country where they have millions [in population], I consider it a pretty major achievement to win those games. We go into most games as the underdogs. In population we're smaller and we have less international experience, but we fight and that's what I'm trying to encourage the guys [on], to learn how to stay tough and fight hard.

"And it doesn't matter if it's in sports or if it's some other career path. These skills that they learn are transferable to other areas that are going to be important as they leave sports and get into other areas. I think our guys are doing that and so far they're doing a pretty good job."

GCC championship

Aside from the FIBA Asia Cup, Coach Vincent also has his sights set on the GCC championship at the end of the year and leading Bahrain to that elusive first-ever Gulf title at the senior level.

"I think it's pretty unfortunate that Bahrain has never won the GCC," he says. "When I look at what I'm trying to accomplish—the final four of the Asia Cup is primary, but then there is the World Cup [qualifying] that we were invited to as well—out of both of those, winning the GCC is probably my biggest target.

"This is going to be a pretty important next seven, eight, nine months for basketball in Bahrain. If we can accomplish some of the things that we're striving for, I think we could get recognition and maybe more support."



Bahrain guard Hesham Sarhan in action for the national team in the recently concluded FIBA Asia Cup 2021 qualifiers

HOLDERS Ahli to face Muharraq in Khalifa bin Salman Cup quarters

● **Tournament draw held last night, as Manama take on Riffa in other game in last eight**

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Holders Al Ahli have been drawn against bitter rivals Muharraq in the quarter-finals of this year's Khalifa bin Salman

Cup in basketball.

The draw for the single-elimination competition was held yesterday at the Zain Basketball Arena in Um Al Hassam.

Bahrain Basketball Association (BBA) president Waleed Al Alawi was on hand along with a limited number of officials. Ahli head coach Ahmed Jan and skipper Mohammed Qurban were also among those present.

Both Ahli and Muharraq have byes for the competition's pre-



BBA officials and club representatives at the draw with the Khalifa bin Salman Cup

liminary round and are through straight to the last eight. Manama and Riffa have also been awarded this privilege, and are to face off in the quarter-finals on the other side of the tournament bracket.

In the opening phase, Sitra will face Samaheej while Al Najma will take on Al Ettihad. The winners of those games will then go head-to-head, with the victor in that game taking on the winner of the Ahli-Muharraq clash

in the semi-finals.

On the opposite side of the bracket, Al Hala take on Isa Town and Nuwaidrat face Bahrain Club in the preliminaries. The winners of those games will then lock horns, with the victor in that contest moving on to the final four to face the team advancing from the Manama-Riffa contest.

The BBA announced that the BBA Cup's first stage will get underway on Saturday.