

Barbar End Seven-Year Wait for Seventh League Crown

TDT | Manama

Barbar were crowned champions of the 2025-26 Khalid bin Hamad Bahrain Handball League yesterday after defeating Al Ahli 28-26 in a gripping final played before a sold-out crowd at Khalifa Sports City Arena.

The victory secured Barbar's seventh league title and their first since the 2018-19 season, ending a seven-year wait to return to the summit of Bahraini handball. Meanwhile, Al Ahli's wait for a record-extending 20th league title continues after a 10-year drought.

Barbar, who finished fourth in the regular season, booked their place in the final after a stunning best-of-three semi-final sweep over defending champions Al Najma. Al Ahli, who ended the regular season just one point ahead of them in third, also progressed with a sweep over Al Shabab.

The final also highlighted the contrasting leadership on the sidelines. Barbar were guided by Bahraini coach Hussam Madan, while Al Ahli were led by Serbian tactician Predrag Petljanski.

The championship clash attracted several notable sporting figures, including Ali Mohamed Isa Eshaqi, President of the Bahrain Handball Federation, HH



Madan, Showaikh, and Abdulqader lift the league title

Shaikh Salman bin Mohammed Al Khalifa, Vice President of the General Sports Authority, and HH Shaikh Isa bin Ali Al Khalifa, President of the Bahrain Olympic Committee.

Also in attendance were H.E. Abdulrahman Sadiq Askar, Chief Executive Officer of the General Sports Authority, as well as Bahrain basketball stars Mustafa Rashid, his brother Ali Rashid, and Ali Meelad.

The opening stages were fiercely contested. Mahmood Al Jawhar and Salman Al Showaikh both threatened early for Barbar, but Al Ahli goalkeeper Hussain Mahfoudh produced several important saves to keep them at bay.

Abdulla Ali opened the scoring for Ahli in the third minute before Al Showaikh responded from the wing. He then struck again moments later to put Barbar ahead, while goalkeeper Isa Khalaf added to the lead with an impressive goal-to-goal effort after Ahli left their net unattended.

The momentum swung repeatedly throughout the first half. Ali Mirza helped Ahli draw level at 3-3, while Mohammed Ayyad and Al Jawhar kept Barbar in front during a tight opening period.

Ahli gradually found their rhythm and, after trailing for much of the half, moved ahead through Yousif Al Qassimi. Youngster Qassim Qambar then con-

tinued his strong form from the semi-finals and helped Ahli establish a three-goal cushion at 10-7.

Despite several key stops from the Barbar goalkeeper, Ahli maintained control late in the half and carried a 12-10 advantage into the break.

Ali Mirza extended Ahli's lead to 13-10 shortly after the restart, but Barbar refused to allow the game to drift away. Mohammed Ayyad and Al Showaikh led the fightback, while strong defensive work and key saves kept the contest within reach.

Barbar eventually erased the deficit when Al Showaikh levelled the score at 14-14 with an emphatic penalty throw. Moayyed Samir then completed

the turnaround on a fast break, while Hassan Al Fardan and Ayyad kept the pressure firmly on Ahli.

The contest remained deadlocked entering the final quarter. Mohamed Al Maqabi was shown a red card for Barbar after an accidental defensive challenge, but the dismissal did not disrupt their momentum.

Ali Mirza briefly gave Ahli a 22-21 lead with just over 10 minutes remaining, only for Al Showaikh to respond from the penalty line. Barbar then regained the initiative as the match entered its decisive stages.

With the tension rising, Al Showaikh fired home to make it 25-23 before Moayyed Samir

struck at a crucial moment to restore a one-goal advantage after Ahli had narrowed the gap.

Youngster Ahmed Ayyad then scored to make it 27-25 before Ali Abdulqader effectively sealed the title with a powerful strike for 28-26 with less than a minute remaining.

A huge late save preserved Barbar's advantage as the closing seconds ticked away, with celebrations already beginning to build among the club's supporters.

When the final whistle sounded, Barbar's players and fans erupted in celebration as the club completed a memorable campaign and secured a long-awaited return to the top of Bahraini handball.

Zverev powers into French Open semis, Kostyuk to face Andreeva

● Zverev defeats teenager Rafael Jodar

● Kostyuk beats compatriot Svitolina

AFP | Paris

Alexander Zverev breezed past Rafael Jodar to stay on course for an elusive Grand Slam title at the French Open, where Marta Kostyuk and Mirra Andreeva will meet for a place in the women's final.

Zverev, the highest-ranked player left in the men's draw, put an end to Spanish teenager Jodar's impressive Roland Garros debut, easing to a 7-6, (7/3), 6-1, 6-3 win yesterday.

The 29-year-old Zverev is the clear favourite for a maiden Grand Slam title. He has finished runner-up on three occasions, including at the 2024 French Open.

"I want to win the matches that are ahead of me, that is my goal, that is my aim," said Zverev,

who has only dropped one set en route to the last four.

It is the fifth time in six years he has made it to this stage in Paris.

"I'm happy to be in the semi-finals, for now," he added.

Zverev will play the winner of the night-time encounter between Brazilian sensation Joao Fonseca and Czech youngster Jakub Mensik.

For Jodar, the grind of back-to-back five-setters appeared to take its toll as he struggled to cope after blowing a 5-2 lead in the opening set.

The 19-year-old Jodar was featuring at just his second major. He was ranked 707th in the world this time last year, losing in the first and second rounds of second-tier Challenger events in the United States during the 2025 French Open.

'Flashbacks'

Earlier, the in-form Kostyuk held her nerve to withstand a comeback from compatriot Elina Svitolina in the first all-Ukrainian women's quarter-final at a Grand Slam in the Open era,



Germany's Alexander Zverev plays a backhand return to Spain's Rafael Jodar

winning 6-3, 2-6, 6-2.

The 23-year-old Kostyuk extended her unbeaten run on clay this season to 17 matches to reach her first Grand Slam semi-final.

"I'm very happy I found a way. It was very difficult in the first

two sets," said Kostyuk, who again dedicated her victory to the people of Ukraine.

The country was hit by hundreds of Russian drones and dozens of missiles early Tuesday, killing at least 18 people.

"We had another difficult

17

matches is Marta Kostyuk's unbeaten run on clay this season after reaching her first Grand Slam semi-final

night in Ukraine, especially in Kyiv where so many people died, so I want to give this match to Ukraine," said Kostyuk.

Svitolina, 31, fell at the quarter-final stage at Roland Garros for the sixth time. It is the only major where she has not reached the last four.

Kostyuk has been an outspoken supporter of Ukraine during the ongoing war with Russia. Her next opponent is Russian teenager Andreeva, who she beat in the Madrid Open final last month.

"I usually never care who is on the other side of the net. I'm there to play tennis and do my job, and that's it," said Kostyuk.

Andreeva breezed into her

second French Open semi-final earlier in the day with a 6-0, 6-3 rout of Romania's Sorana Cirstea, who plans to retire at the end of the season.

The eighth seed needed less than an hour to dispatch the 36-year-old Cirstea, appearing in the last eight in Paris for the first time since 2009.

Andreeva beat Cirstea en route to the title in Linz earlier this year, but made short work of her opponent under the roof on Philippe Chatrier as rain and strong winds arrived in Paris after last week's heatwave.

"I'm super happy that I'm going to be playing in semis again," said Andreeva.

"I felt like it was one of my best matches so far this tournament."

Andreeva atoned for the disappointment of her quarter-final loss to French outsider Lois Boisson 12 months ago.

"I was just trying to have flashbacks only about the weather and only about the court with closed roof, not about how I played. I'm happy that I could turn it around," she said.