

Al Najma keep semis hopes alive

Bahrain champions claim third successive victory in Asian clubs handball in Isfahan

● Cuban professional Yoel Cuni Morales finishes as Najma's top scorer with five goals

● Najma take on RKOR Tashkent of Uzbekistan today in final preliminary round match

TDI | Manama

Bahrain's Al Najma kept their semi-final hopes alive yesterday in the 25th Asian Men's Club League Handball Championship, currently being held in Isfahan, Iran.

The Bahrainis claimed their third successive victory in Group B of the competition's preliminary round following a 36-33 triumph against home side Shahid Shameli Kazeroon.

Najma held a commanding 23-15 lead at the interval and extended their advantage to 10 goals, 32-22, with an Adel Mohammed effort 11 minutes into the second half.

But the Iranians valiantly fought back, getting to within four, 28-32, with less than 10 minutes to go. Najma, however, replied with three unanswered conversions from Bilal Basham, Montenegrin professional Vuk Lazovic and Hasan Mirza.



Najma's Mohammed Abdulhussain, third from left, celebrates with teammates as he receives his Match MVP award

GROUP B STANDINGS

	P	W	D	L	GD	Pts
Al Duhail (QAT)	4	3	0	1	28	6
Kuwait SC (KUW)	4	3	0	1	16	6
Al Najma (BRN)	4	3	0	1	14	6
Shahid Shameli Kazeroon (IRI)	4	2	0	2	-1	4
RKOR Tashkent (UZB)	4	0	1	3	-25	1
Junior Club (CHN)	4	0	1	3	-32	1

A Mohammed Ahmed goal then made it 36-30 with just over two minutes left to virtually ice the game for the Bahrainis, although Shahid Shameli scored the last three to reduce Najma's winning margin.

Najma goalkeeper Mohammed Abdulhussain was named the Match Most Valuable Player. He played a key role for the

victors and made a number of saves to help ward off their opponents.

Cuban import Yoel Cuni Morales finished as Najma's top scorer with five goals, while Mohammed Ahmed, Mohammed Habib and Qassim Qambar each had four. Mohammed Abdulredha, Adel Mohammed, Basham, Mirza and Mahdi Ha-



Najma players defend their Shahid Shameli counterpart during yesterday's game

bib all chipped in with three goals, while Tunisian Skander Zaied contributed two goals and Mohammed Mirza and Lazovic each had one.

Najma's win was their third in four tries, after losing to defending champions Kuwait SC in their opening game but then defeating Al Duhail of Qatar and Junior Club of China in their next two fixtures.

In other Group B games yesterday, Kuwait beat RKOR Tashkent of Uzbekistan 37-30 and Duhail routed Junior Club 40-26.

Those results put Duhail and

Kuwait in first and second place on their group table with one preliminary round matchday to go today. Najma are third, although all three clubs are on six points apiece, with goal difference determining their classification.

Shahid Shameli, Tashkent and Junior Club are fourth through sixth, respectively.

In today's contests, Kuwait face Junior Club, Duhail play Shahid Shameli and Najma take on Tashkent. These scores will determine the semi-finalists from Group B.

The tournament, organised by

the Asian Handball Federation (AHF), continues until Saturday.

The top two teams from each group following this single round-robin move on to the knockout semi-finals on Thursday, while the others will play in the classification fixtures. The gold and bronze medal games will then take place on the final day of the championship.

The winners of the Asian championship will qualify for the 17th IHF Men's Super Globe, to be held from October 17 to 23 in Saudi Arabia.

Najma are hoping to replicate or improve on their finish in last year's Asian clubs competition held in Hyderabad, India, where they won the silver medals.



Al Duhail of Qatar and Kuwait SC are in first and second place in Group B while Al Najma are third, with all three teams on six points apiece and goal difference determining their classification

Modric, Lloris among 'more than 10' Saudi targets: source

AFP | London

Saudi Arabia is hoping to lure a swathe of world-famous footballers including Luka Modric and Hugo Lloris, a source close to the negotiations has said, after snagging Cristiano Ronaldo and launching bids for Lionel Messi and Karim Benzema.

"More than 10" seasoned players including N'Golo Kante and Roberto Firmino have been approached, the source said, by the oil-rich kingdom which has ambitions of hosting the World Cup and is betting on sport to help revamp its austere image.

According to Saudi sources and state media this weekend, delegations flew to Paris and Madrid to secure the signatures of Messi and Benzema after their final games for Paris Saint-Germain and Real Madrid.

But the Saudis are also "in contact with more than 10 players, many of them won the World Cup or the Champions League, to join the Saudi league next season", said the source close to the talks, on condition of anonymity.

In addition to Messi, "the list includes Benzema, (Sergio) Ramos, (Angel) Di Maria, Modric, Hugo Lloris, Kante, Firmino, (Jordi) Alba and (Sergio) Busquets".

"Beside receiving quite lucrative offers they will play in a very competitive league," the source said, adding that the Saudis aimed to "seal most of the deals" before the new season starts on August 11.

Such a wishlist would have seemed unthinkable before the



Real Madrid's Luka Modric (L) and Sergio Ramos warms up ahead of a match (file photo)

Saudis pulled off the signing of Ronaldo, 37, in January on a two-and-a-half-year deal said to be worth more than 400 million euros.

Last month, a source close to the Messi negotiations said that his signature was a "done deal", describing the terms of the agreement as "huge".

Sovereign wealth fund

All the players listed are major stars at the tail-end of their careers, Firmino being the youngest at 31. Apart from French goalkeeper Lloris, who has a year left at Spurs, all are out of contract this month.

According to the sources, the contracts are being bankrolled by the Saudis' Public Investment Fund, one of the world's biggest sovereign wealth vehicles with more than \$620 billion in assets.

If the players sign, they will be divided between five Saudi clubs: Al Hilal, Al Nassr, Al Shabab, Al Ittihad and Al Ahly,

the sources added.

Modric, Ramos, Kante, Alba and Busquets appear the closest to signing, they said.

Modric, Real Madrid's influential midfielder, and Ramos, who is leaving Paris Saint-Germain, would join Ronaldo at Al Nassr, while Kante would play at Saudi champions Al Ittihad, the sources added.

The Saudi Pro League, which next season is expanding to 18 teams allowed to field eight foreign players each, is also set for a structural revamp with plans to privatise the clubs from September.

The clubs, currently public property under the supervision of the sports ministry, will be sold to private companies or businesspeople as part of plans to more than double the league's value to eight billion riyals (\$2.13 billion) by 2030.

"The Saudi Pro League... will be supported in its ambition to be amongst the top 10 leagues in the world," the official Saudi



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Press Agency said yesterday.

'Elevate the Saudi clubs'

A Saudi government official also confirmed to AFP that the authorities are holding negotiations with "world-class players".

"The objective is to establish a very strong and competitive league and elevate the Saudi clubs' levels," the official said.

The world's biggest oil exporter has already thrown hundreds of millions at sports deals including Ronaldo's signing, Formula One and the divisive LIV Golf tour.

Saudi Arabia, whose neighbour Qatar hosted the World Cup last year, has explored bidding for the competition including a possible tri-continental hosting with Egypt and Greece.

Under the "Vision 2030" project of its 37-year-old de facto ruler, Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman, Saudi Arabia is trying to diversify its oil-dependent economy by attracting tourists and investment.

Spurs set to hire Celtic boss Postecoglou: reports

AFP | London

Tottenham are set to hire Celtic's Ange Postecoglou as their new manager according to reports yesterday.

Postecoglou has reportedly agreed a two-year contract with Tottenham after leading Celtic to the treble in Scotland this season.

The 57-year-old had dodged questions on his future before and after Celtic's Scottish Cup final win over Inverness on Saturday.

Tottenham are desperate to find a new boss after a dismal season in the Premier League climaxed with failed attempts to hire Feyenoord manager Arne Slot and former Bayern Munich coach Julian Nagelsmann.



Ange Postecoglou

Neither club are commenting publicly but reports claim Postecoglou told Celtic principal shareholder Dermot Desmond on Saturday that he plans to join the north London club.

Postecoglou has won five domestic trophies, including successive league titles, since arriving at Celtic from Japan's Yokohama F Marinos in 2021.

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