

EXCLUSIVE

Talajic backs Bahrain to retain Gulf crown

Hussain Almaskati
TDT | Manama

Bahrain head coach Dragan Talajic believes his players have what it takes to defend their Gulf Cup crown, but expects a stern test when the kingdom begins its campaign in Jeddah later this month.

Speaking exclusively to TDT ahead of the 27th Arabian Gulf Cup, the Croatian reflected on lessons from the past year and the importance of bringing through younger players.

The tournament runs from September 23 to October 6, with the Reds opening Group B against Qatar on September 24 before meeting the UAE three days later and Yemen on September 30.

“It will be difficult, but we will enjoy it,” Talajic said.

Family mentality

His side travel to Saudi Arabia aiming to lift the trophy for a third time after dramatically securing their second in Kuwait in January 2025, coming from behind to defeat Oman 2-1 in the final.

For Talajic, however, that achievement belongs first and foremost to his players.

“I don’t want to talk about what it means to me personally. I’m not here to think about myself,” he said. “I’m the head coach of Bahrain, of the beautiful kingdom of Bahrain.

“I’m so proud of this trophy, but the credit goes to my players.”

Their character was evident in the final, when they trailed



A jubilant Talajic celebrates Bahrain’s Gulf Cup success in Kuwait

for more than an hour before two late goals completed the turnaround.

“I really like all my players like my sons,” he said. “I always say we are like one family, and we have to be.”

That bond will be tested again in Jeddah, although the circumstances have changed. This time, they arrive as defending champions rather than challengers, placing a target on their backs.

“We need to protect our trophy and bring it back home again,” Talajic said. “It will be very difficult.”

Yet the 61-year-old remains comfortable with the underdog tag, describing his team as a “dark horse” and insisting they will take the competition one game at a time.

Since their triumph in Kuwait, the nationals have gained valuable experience through the 2026 World Cup qualifying campaign, despite ultimately falling short.

“We have learned we can play good football against big teams, but we need to improve,” he said.

“We have quality. But the most important thing is the mind. Winning mentality. We have to trust in ourselves.”

That belief also shapes how he views his leading players. Mohamed Marhoon was instrumental in their previous title success, but the coach does not want the team’s fortunes resting on one individual.

“Maybe Marhoon will be there again. Maybe it will be someone else,” he said. “We need some

players individually to do something extra. But I don’t believe in individuals. I believe in groups.”

World Cup dream

While the immediate challenge is retaining their crown, Talajic also has one eye on the longer-term ambition of finally reaching a World Cup.

Part of that challenge will be managing the transition to a new generation as several of his experienced players get older. The coach revealed that four or five youngsters are already pushing for places in the senior side, with others coming through the youth ranks.

“The future is bright. We are on the right path,” he said.

For that progress to continue, though, young players also need



Bahrain head coach Dragan Talajic ahead of his interview at the BFA headquarters

opportunities at club level.

Talajic understands why top clubs like Muharraq, Al Khaldiya and Riffa recruit foreign players, but admitted the limited opportunities for local talent concern him.

“When you see so few Bahraini players on the pitch, imagine how I feel,” he said. “This is my job as the national team coach.

“Please, give my boys a chance. They also deserve to be part of the success.”

He stressed that those opportunities must also be earned, challenging his players to fight for regular starting places at their clubs.

“Our dream cannot only be a dream. It must be our target,” he said.

Making history

Before then comes the chance to make more history.

Talajic was keen to credit former coach Helio Sousa for delivering the country’s breakthrough title in 2019, saying the Portuguese was the first to “put his name in the history of Bahrain”.

Having added a second crown under his own reign, the Croatian now has the opportunity to become the first coach to win the Gulf Cup twice in a row with Bahrain.

“Two times in a row will be something special,” Talajic said. “But we have to be honest. Go step by step.

“I believe in big support from Bahraini people. Bahraini people deserve to be happy.”

Balew makes athletics history

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Bahrain’s Birhanu Balew made history on Saturday by winning the men’s 5,000 metres title at the 2026 Diamond League final in Brussels.

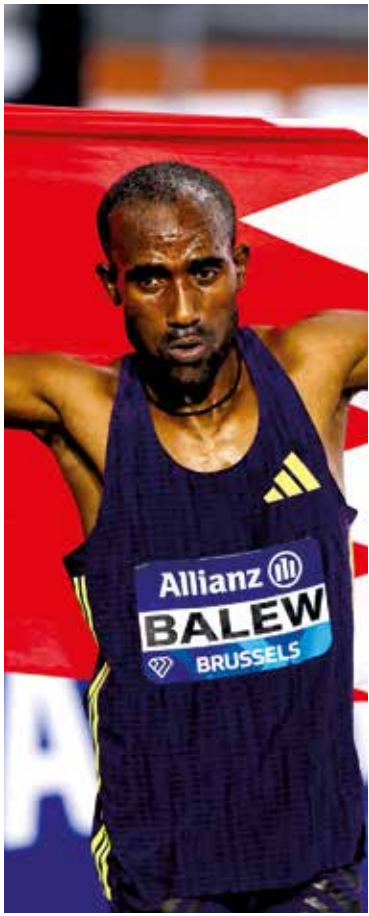
The 30-year-old crossed the line in 12 minutes 45.70 seconds, setting new Asian, Arab and Bahraini records while also clocking the fastest time in the world this year.

The kingdom’s distance-running star improved his previous Asian record of 12:47.73, set in Oslo in June, and finished ahead of Burundi’s Egede Ntakirutimana, who ran 12:46.73. Kenya’s Cornelius Kemboi placed third in 12:47.29.

The victory earned him the first Diamond Trophy of his career and made him the first Bahraini male athlete to win a Diamond League title.

Balew joins Salwa Eid Naser, Ruth Jebet and Winfred Yavi among Bahrain’s Diamond League champions.

He will now turn his attention to the Asian Games in Aichi-Nagoya, Japan, later this month.



Birhanu Balew celebrates with the Bahrain flag after his victory in Brussels

Spikers beaten again in Japan

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Bahrain suffered their second successive defeat at the AVC Men’s Continental Championship after going down 0-3 (15-25, 15-25, 23-25) to hosts and defending champions Japan yesterday.

The kingdom’s spikers faced a formidable challenge against the world number six side at Kitakyushu City Gymnasium in Fukuoka, with 6,639 spectators in attendance.

Japan controlled the opening set, winning both 25-15, before Ivan Joksimovic’s men produced a much stronger showing in the third.

The Bahrainis stayed with the home side throughout the first set and pushed them until the closing stages, but Japan eventually held firm to take it 25-23 and complete the straight-sets victory.

The Japanese enjoyed a clear advantage in attack, scoring 45 points to Bahrain’s 29, while also leading 9-3 in blocks and 5-1 from serve.

Mahmoud Abdulwahed was once again Bahrain’s leading scorer with 10 points, matching his tally from their opening defeat to Australia.

Hashem Mohamed and Abdulla Mohammed added seven points apiece, while Ran Takahashi led all scorers for Japan with 19. Captain Yuki Ishikawa contributed 12.

The defeat leaves Joksimovic’s side without a win after their opening two Pool A matches, having also lost 0-3 to Australia on Friday. Japan, meanwhile, sit top of the group with two wins from two.

Bahrain now turn their attention to their final preliminary-round encounter against Oman on Wednesday at 4am, Bahrain time, as they look to keep alive their hopes of reaching the quarter-finals.

The top two teams from each of the three pools advance automatically, along with the two best third-placed sides.

Elsewhere yesterday, Iran defeated India 3-0 (25-20, 28-26, 25-18) in Pool B, while Chinese Taipei recorded a 3-0 (25-19, 25-22, 28-26) victory over Qatar in Pool C.

The quarter-finals will be played on September 10 and 11, followed by the semi-finals on September 12 and the medal matches a day later.



Bahrain’s Ahmed Saleh serves against Japan

Arsenal deliver statement fightback to end Chelsea’s flying start

AFP

Arsenal delivered an emphatic response to Chelsea’s emergence as potential Premier League title contenders with a 2-1 win that ended their rivals’ unbeaten start yesterday.

Mikel Arteta’s side trailed to Morgan Rogers’ second-minute goal in a pulsating London derby at the Emirates Stadium.

But the champions showed why they are firm favourites to retain the title with a blistering response to that early setback.

Kai Havertz bagged the equaliser against his former club midway through the first half and Martin Odegaard netted Arsenal’s winner soon after the interval.

It was a statement of intent from second-placed Arsenal, who have won all three league matches to sit behind leaders Manchester City on goal difference.

The Gunners’ mature display underlined their desire to win the club’s first back-to-back titles since the 1930s.

For Chelsea boss Xabi Alonso, the defeat ended his three-game winning run in all competitions since taking charge at Stamford Bridge in the close-season.

Alonso will realise just how much work Chelsea still have to do before they are in position to end a title drought dating back to 2017.

Chelsea’s shaky defence is prone to costly miscues, while their vaunted attack found it harder to flourish against Arsenal than in their free-scoring wins over Ful-



Arsenal’s English defender #04 Ben White (L) vies with Chelsea’s Spanish defender #29 Pep Chavarria (R) during the English Premier League football match.

ham, Luton and Brighton.

Arteta and Alonso have known each other since their days as childhood friends in the Basque region of Spain.

The chaotic matches of their youth on a gravel pitch in the Berio district of San Sebastian would have seemed calm in comparison to the blood and thunder their teams brought to a raucous corner of north London.

Chelsea beat Arsenal in the race to sign Rogers from Aston Villa in the close-season after the Gunners refused to match the Blues’ £117 million (\$158 million) bid for the England midfielder.

Rogers showed why Chelsea made him the most expensive British player in history as he put the Blues ahead after just 77 seconds.