

**Exclusive**

# 'Bahrain changed my career'

Departed coach Nandinho reflects on breakthrough in the Kingdom

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TDT | Manama

Recently departed Muharraq head coach Fernando Manuel de Jesus Santos, popularly known as 'Nandinho', has described his time in Bahrain as the most meaningful chapter of his coaching career. The Portuguese tactician bowed out following a successful spell that produced domestic dominance across three seasons with Al Ahli and Muharraq.

His Bahrain journey began with Al Ahli, where he guided the "Eagles" to the 2023-24 His Majesty the King's Cup, marking his first trophy in the Kingdom. He then took charge of Saudi side Al Bukiryah during the 2024-25 season before making a mid-season switch to Muharraq in January 2025, a move that immediately transformed the domestic landscape.

In his first season with the "Red Wolves", he delivered the Nasser bin Hamad Premier League (NPL) title, ending the club's seven-year wait for the league crown. He followed that with a sensational 2025-26 campaign, retaining the league title and extending Muharraq's record to 35 league titles. He also won the King's Cup, ending a six-year drought and taking the club's record tally to 20 cup triumphs.

Speaking to The Daily Tribune, Nandinho said the turning point in his career was not just the titles themselves, but the sense of validation that came with finally converting years of work across multiple countries into silverware.

"The main difference in my career here is that I won titles. In Portugal, Spain, and Saudi Arabia, I had good spells and strong performances, but I didn't get trophies over the line. In Bahrain, I finally did, and that made this experience very special," he said.

Beyond the silverware, the 53-year-old pointed to a deeper personal connection, describing how quickly Bahrain became more than just another coaching stop.

"The people are extremely kind. I was very well received at Al Ahli and again at Muharraq. I felt at home from



Coach Santos poses with Muharraq's league and cup trophies

the beginning, and now Bahrain feels like a second home," he said.

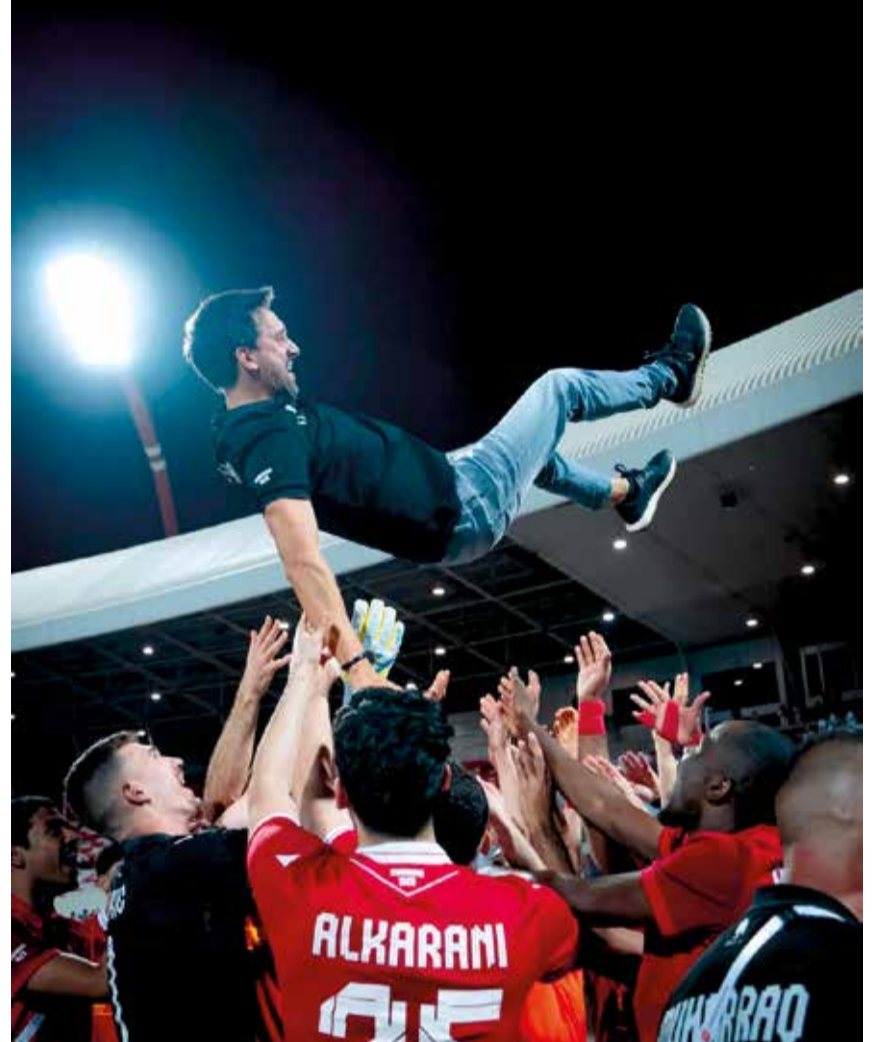
He also reflected on the football culture in the country, noting both its growing passion and structural gaps that still need long-term investment.

"In Europe, football is lived differently. The passion is stronger in places like Portugal, Spain, and Italy. Here, it is different, but there is still a clear passion for the game," he said. "To grow further, Bahrain needs stronger youth development, better academies, and improved facilities. That will help raise the level and allow the national game to compete more consistently in Asia."

Nandinho's 16-month spell at Muharraq was defined by rapid impact and sustained success. He established himself as the architect of multiple milestones in Bahraini football, culminating in a memorable title double.

"There is no single trophy that stands out. Winning is always special, but winning the league with Muharraq after seven years and the King's Cup after six, both in the same season, was historic for the club," he said. "We wrote a golden chapter together."

He also credited the collective mentality within the squad, including players, staff, and management, for helping



Muharraq players honour coach in championship celebrations

the team overcome challenges across both campaigns.

"We built more than a team. We built a family," he said. "From the start, we knew unity would be essential. Even in difficult moments, including criticism, we stayed focused. The support from the board was especially important. They were always present with strong backing, even when things were not easy."

Supporters, he added, played a key role in pushing the team through difficult stretches of both seasons.

"The fans were like a 12th player. They pushed us in tough moments

and gave us energy when we needed it most."

Despite his departure, Nandinho left the door open for a future return to Bahrain, a country he says he remains deeply attached to.

"I felt very welcome here from day one. Bahrain is like a second home to me. I don't know when, but I am sure I will come back one day — whether to coach again or simply to visit friends."

His exit brings down the curtain on a highly successful chapter at Muharraq, with the club now set to begin the search for a successor after a trophy-laden era under his leadership.

## Al Najma face Sharjah in must-win Asian club clash



Bahrain's Al Najma handball squad

TDT | Manama

Al Najma will aim to secure their first points of the 28th Asian Men's Club League Hand-

ball Championship when they take on UAE side Sharjah SC tonight at 8pm in Kuwait.

Competing under new head coach Abdulrahman Mohamed, Al Najma are chasing a third

Asian club title. They previously lifted the championship trophy in 2017 and 2023, finished runners-up in 2015 and 2022, and claimed third place in 2001.

**Standings**

#	Team	MP	Won	Tied	Lost	GF	GA	GD	Pts
1	Burgan SC (KWT)	3	2	1	0	80	71	+9	5
2	Al Khaleej (KSA)	3	2	1	0	94	89	+5	5
3	Kuwait SC (KWT)	3	2	0	1	88	82	+6	4
4	Al Duhail (QAT)	2	1	0	1	57	54	+3	2
5	Al Arabi (QAT)	3	0	2	1	75	80	-5	2
6	Al Najma (BRN)	2	0	0	2	51	59	-8	0
7	Sharjah SC (UAE)	2	0	0	2	48	58	-10	0

The Bahraini giants head into the contest after back-to-back defeats against Kuwait SC and Al Duhail, but have shown encouraging signs against strong opposition. Veteran star Mohammed Habib Ahmed has led the way, including a 10-goal performance against Al Duhail that earned him player-of-the-match honours.

Tonight's clash carries added importance, as both Al Najma and Sharjah are still searching for their first points of the campaign. Kuwait's Burgan and Saudi Arabia's Al Khaleej cur-

rently lead the standings with five points from three matches, while Kuwait SC are close behind with four. Qatar's Al Duhail sit fourth with two points from two games, and Al Arabi also have two points from three outings.

With the top four teams advancing to the semi-finals on June 15 and the medal matches scheduled for June 17, a victory would provide a timely boost to either side's hopes of reaching the knockout stage and keeping pace with the teams above them in the standings.

## Man Utd to face AC Milan in Poland friendly

AFF | London

Manchester United will complete a busy programme of pre-season friendlies against AC Milan in Wroclaw, Poland, the English giants announced yesterday.

The game will take place on August 15, not long before the Premier League season starts later that month, with United looking to build on last term's encouraging third-place finish under manager Michael Carrick.

United open their pre-season against Wrexham in Helsinki on July 18 before facing Rosenborg in Trondheim, Norway the following Friday.