

World Cup-Asian Cup qualifiers to hot up

Group C leaders Iraq take on Hong Kong while Iran face off with Cambodia this evening in a pair of crucial games, as Bahrain watch intently from the sidelines

● **Iraq currently lead Group C with 14 points while Iran are second with 12 points, each with two matches still to play**

● **Bahrain are idle tonight but continue to train under the supervision of head coach Helio Sousa ahead of final qualifier on Tuesday**

TDI | Manama

Iraq and Iran will be looking to strengthen their stranglehold of the top two places in Group C tonight in joint-qualification for the FIFA World Cup 2022 and AFC Asian Cup 2023, while Bahrain watch intently from the sidelines.

Iran take on Cambodia at 5.30pm at the National Stadium in Riffa, to be followed by Iraq facing Hong Kong at 7.30pm at the Shaikh Ali bin Mohammed Al Khalifa Stadium at Muharraq Club in Arad.

Iraq will be hoping to maintain their lead on the group table where they currently have 14



Bahrain national team players during training

points, but cannot be complacent against Hong Kong who are fourth in the group with five points.

The Iraqis won their previous meeting against Hong Kong 2-0 in October of 2019.

Iraq's Slovenian head coach Srecko Katanec said yesterday that his team is ready for the match and that they know what they have to do. "The goal

is always to win and maintain our lead," he was quoted as saying.

Hong Kong midfielder Chan Shinchi expressed the players' pride each time they take to the pitch, which will be no different tonight. "We will definitely not give up in the next two matches, because the opportunity to wear the Hong Kong jersey is a rare opportunity," he said on the-



Bahrain head coach Helio Sousa, left, during training

afc.com. "As a player, you will cherish it, and you will fight for it when you are on the pitch."

The game will be the penultimate match for both Iraq and Hong Kong in qualifying.

Meanwhile, Iran will be hoping for a repeat of their 14-0 drubbing of Cambodia last October of 2019.

Iran have 12 points on the standings and are fresh from a 3-0 win over Bahrain in their previous game earlier this week. Cambodia lost 1-4 against Iraq that same evening and tonight's clash will be their final fixture in joint-qualification.

The Cambodians have just one point from their seven games so far, having lost six of them and drawing once. Iran are tied on points with Bahrain but have a superior goal difference.

The Bahrainis are not in action tonight but have continued to train under the supervision of head coach Helio Sousa at Al Ahli Club in Zinj.

Bahrain's chances of finishing in the top two of the group have slimmed but will continue to fight until the last ball.

There are eight groups in all in this round of joint-qualifiers, with five nations in each group. At the end of this stage of qualification, the eight group winners

and the four best runners-up advance to the third round of World Cup qualifying, and also secure their berths in the Asian Cup.

The next best 24 teams will compete in a separate competition for the remaining 12 slots in the Asian Cup.



Iraq national team players warming up during practice



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Today's games

5.30pm
Cambodia vs Iran
National Stadium, Riffa

7.30pm
Hong Kong vs Iraq
Shaikh Ali bin Mohammed Al Khalifa Stadium, Arad

Group C standings

	P	W	D	L	+/-	Pts
Iraq	6	4	2	0	+10	14
Iran	6	4	0	2	+19	12
Bahrain	7	3	3	1	+7	12
Hong Kong	6	1	2	3	-4	5
Cambodia	7	0	1	6	-32	1

Najma all set for Asian clubs handball championship

● **Bahraini champions to begin tournament tomorrow with first match against Al Arabi of Qatar**

● **Other Group A opponents include NZS Kazerun of Iran, Alsalmiya of Kuwait and Mudhar of Saudi Arabia**

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Bahrain champions Al Najma get their campaign underway tomorrow in the 23rd Asian Men's Club Handball League Championship in Jeddah.

The Bahrainis take on Al Arabi of Qatar in their first encounter, scheduled for an 8pm start as the last game of opening night.

Both teams are in Group A of the tournament's first round, along with NZS Kazerun of Iran, Alsalmiya of Kuwait and Mudhar of Saudi Arabia.

Group B consists of Al Wehda of Saudi, Al Qatten of Yemen, Mes Kerman of Iran, Al Duhail of Qatar, Al Kuwait



Al Najma's Komail Mahfoodh in action for the team (file photo)

Club of Kuwait and AGMK of Uzbekistan.

Najma, who are back-to-back league champions and winners of the first-ever Khalid bin Hamad Handball Cup, will play their next game against Kazerun on Monday, before taking on Mudhar on Wednesday. Their last group fixture will be against

Alsalmiya on Thursday.

The top two squads in each pool move on to the semi-finals, while the remaining teams play in classification matches on June 19. The bronze and gold medal games are then scheduled for June 21.

Najma have strengthened their side for the championship

with the signing of Bosnia Herzegovina star Neven Stjepanovic as the team's professional. The right back is a key player of European pro handball club RK Eurofarm Pelister, which competes in the Macedonian Handball Super League.

They will also be relying heavily on their deep roster of Bahraini internationals, who include Mohammed Abdulhusain, Mahdi Saad, Belal Basham, Hassan Al Fardan, Ali Eid, Mohammed Mirza, Mohammed Habib Nasser and Komail Mahfoodh, among others.

Najma head into the tournament as the only Bahraini side. They are the only club from the Kingdom to have won the championship in past editions, having taken the 2017 title when the event was played in Hyderabad, India. Najma have also won the silver and bronze medals once each.

Other Bahraini teams to taste some success in the competition are Al Hilal Club, who have won bronze twice before; and Al Ahli and Barbar, who had both one third place once each.

The clubs championship was supposed to be played last year, but was postponed by the AHF due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Ineos' Carapaz makes Tour de France statement at Swiss summit



Richard Carapaz celebrates as he crosses the finish line
AFP | Zurich

Ecuadorian rider Richard Carapaz won stage five of the Tour de Suisse yesterday to take the overall lead in the race at a summit finish at Leukerbad.

In a statement of intent for the Tour de France which starts in two weeks, Ineos' Carapaz showed dazzling form to seize the overall leader's yellow jersey with a gutsy stage win.

The 2019 Giro d'Italia winner caught Astana's Jakob

Fuglsang on the final ascent and edged a two-man dash for the line.

Thanks to his stage win, Carapaz now leads the race by 26 seconds from Fuglsang, with world champion Julian Alaphilippe in third at 33sec.

Carapaz is being supported at the Tour de Suisse by Ineos teammates Rohan Dennis, Luke Rowe and Eddie Dunbar.

Ineos have yet to name their final line-up for the Tour, but Carapaz as co-captain with Geraint Thomas looks likely.