

Muharraq, Khaldiya kick off ACL Two campaigns

Bahraini giants launch Asian group stage matches today

- Muharraq take on Al Wehdat
- Al Khaldiya face Qatar's Al Ahli
- ACL Two group stage runs till December

TDT | Manama

Bahrain's Muharraq and Al Khaldiya are set for their opening fixtures in the 2025-26 AFC Champions League (ACL) Two, Asia's second-tier club competition. Both clubs will play their first matches today in the group stage. Muharraq, crowned champions of the 2024-25 Bahrain Premier League, return to continental action in the ACL Two's new format. Twice winners of the competition in its former AFC Cup form (2008 and 2021), they are drawn in Group A alongside Al Wehdat (Jordan), Al Wasl (UAE), and Esteghlal (Iran). The Reds open against Al Wehdat at Shaikh Ali bin Moham-

med bin Isa Al Khalifa Stadium in Arad, with kick-off set for 9:15 PM. Muharraq's squad includes Sanad, Jameel, Waleed, Benaddi, Morellato, Sherogi, Alhardan, Tobares, Almaloed, Sofiane, Lazar, Hanan, Rabea, Hussain, Diarra, Jaafar, Lutfalla, Olivera, Albanna, Santos, Alkhukasi, Juninho, Rezende, and Simoes. King's Cup holders Al Khaldiya return for a second straight ACL Two season. Drawn in Group B with Al Ahli (Qatar), PFC Andijon (Uzbekistan), and FC Arkadag (Turkmenistan), they kick off today against Al Ahli at Al Thumama Stadium in Doha, starting at 7 PM Bahrain time. Both Bahraini sides compete in the West Asia region, which



Muharraq players bond ahead of match at The Avenues, Bahrain

also includes Sepahan (Iran), Mohun Bagan (India), and Al Nassr (Saudi Arabia). East Asian groups feature teams from China, Japan, South Korea, and Australia. The group stage continues until December 24, with knockouts early next year and the final on May 16, 2026.

PSG fear impact of injuries as they put Champions League title on the line

Reigning champions host Atalanta amid concerns over squad fatigue and mounting injuries

- Title defence begins under injury cloud
- Heavy 65-game season taking toll
- Dembele, Doue sidelined with injuries
- Only minor squad reinforcements added

AFP | Paris

There is the sense that the new season gets up and running for real this week for Paris Saint-Germain as they begin their defence of the Champions League title amid doubts as to how much longer their squad can handle being pushed to the limit by a crowded calendar. PSG host Atalanta on Wednesday for their first game in Europe, three and a half months after their stunning 5-0 destruction of Inter Milan in last season's final in Munich. Luis Enrique's team will also entertain Bayern, Tottenham Hotspur and Newcastle United in the league phase, with trips to Barcelona, Bayer Leverkusen, Athletic Bilbao and to Lisbon to face Sporting on the horizon too. Those are tough games, although PSG's poor start in last season's Champions League has shown that they might not need to be at their very best immediately.



Paris Saint-Germain's Moroccan defender #02 Achraf Hakimi lifts the trophy as Paris Saint-Germain celebrate winning the 2025 UEFA Super Cup final

The French champions lost three of eight league phase games last season, but still won Europe's elite club competition for the first time following a dazzling run of form from the turn of the year. The concern now, however, is that last season's exertions could catch up with them and seriously jeopardise their chances of retaining the trophy. The Parisians played 65 games during 2024/25, in a season spanning 11 months. That included 17 matches in the Champions League and seven in the Club World Cup, where their

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PSG players played over 1,000 minutes last season, highlighting the heavy workload and potential risk of injuries and fatigue

marathon campaign concluded with a 3-0 loss to Chelsea in mid-July. Three weeks later they were back for pre-season training, and

a week after that they started the new campaign against Tottenham in the UEFA Super Cup. Fast forward a month and PSG -- who won the Super Cup on penalties -- have won their first four games in Ligue 1 but it looks like the recent efforts are beginning to catch up with them. Ballon d'Or favourite Ousmane Dembele and Desire Doue are out for several weeks with muscle injuries suffered playing for France, while Khvicha Kvaratskhelia, Lee Kang-in and Lucas Beraldo came off hurt in Sunday's 2-0 victory over Lens. "It happens to everyone. It

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PSG played 65 matches across 11 months last season - including 17 Champions League games and 7 Club World Cup matches - before starting this campaign just three weeks later

is a bit of a difficult time for us because we have a lot of players injured," said Luis Enrique, the coach with his own arm in a sling after fracturing a collarbone in a cycling accident. "I am calm about it and I hope we will manage to overcome it." It is not solely luck that PSG avoided serious injuries last season, owing much to the coach's management of the squad. **Hakimi in the red zone?** Nineteen PSG players played more than 1,000 minutes in 2024/25, the same number as Real Madrid and Barcelona for example. But the Club World Cup, often played in searing heat and involving numerous long journeys across the United States, had to take a toll. PSG used 19 players in that competition, while Chelsea fielded 27 -- the French side looked rinsed in the final and

were torn apart. If they do go to the latter stages of the Champions League again, PSG are looking at playing at least 55 games this season, including the FIFA Intercontinental Cup in December. And there is a World Cup coming at the end of the season, where a large bulk of PSG's players will be present. The year is set to be even more intense for Achraf Hakimi, who played more minutes than anyone else for PSG last season -- he will also feature heavily for Morocco as they host the Africa Cup of Nations in December and January. Hakimi has no natural understudy at right-back at PSG, who surprisingly opted not to add significant depth to their squad in the transfer window, signing only one new centre-back in Illia Zabarnyi, while Lucas Chevalier replaced Gianluigi Donnarumma in goal. "Injuries to high-profile players are only one visible part of the workload crisis facing professional football and are not surprising," said global players' union FIFPro last week. "The impact is not felt just by the players but increasingly also by clubs, national teams, fans and national competitions." Yet despite the concerns, there is huge excitement at PSG as they put their title on the line in Europe. "It is a special moment. We know how difficult this competition is, but we are relaxed about it and we are hoping to put in a good performance in our first game," said Luis Enrique.