

Bahrain's title defence faces tough draw

Hussain Almaskati
TDT | Manama

Defending champions Bahrain face a daunting challenge in their bid to retain the Gulf Cup title after being drawn into a competitive group for the preliminary stage of the 27th Gulf Cup, which is set to take place later this year in Jeddah, Saudi Arabia.

The draw for the eight-nation tournament was held yesterday in Jeddah under the supervision of the Arab Gulf Cup Football Federation. Bahrain were represented at the event by Bahrain Football Association board member and national team supervisor Shaikh Ahmed bin Isa Al Khalifa, head coach Dragan Talajic, and former international Ali Saeed.

Bahrain have been placed in Group B alongside the United Arab Emirates, Qatar, and Yemen, who are still chasing their maiden Gulf Cup title. Mean-



Bahrain celebrate their second Gulf Cup triumph last January

Group A

Iraq (four-time champions)
Oman (two-time champions)
Kuwait (record ten-time champions)
Saudi Arabia (three-time champions)

Group B

Bahrain (two-time champions)
UAE (two-time champions)
Qatar (three-time champions)
Yemen



I am proud to represent my players, who achieved unbelievable things at the last tournament, and insha'Allah we will repeat that success again this year

DRAGAN TALAJIC

while, Group A features Iraq, Oman, Kuwait, and hosts Saudi Arabia.

The 27th Gulf Cup, also known as "Khaleeji 27," will be held from September 23 to October 6. Bahrain enter the tournament

as reigning champions following their triumph in the previous edition, staged between December 2024 and January 2025. That victory secured their second Gulf Cup title, adding to their maiden success in 2019.

In the final, Bahrain produced a dramatic comeback to defeat Oman 2-1 on Omani soil in one of the most memorable championship matches in recent years. Oman took the lead through Abdulrahman Al Mushaifri in the 17th minute before Mohamed Marhoun equalised from the penalty spot in the 78th minute. Just two minutes later, a defensive lapse led to an own goal by Mohammed Al Musalami, sealing a dramatic Bahrain victory and the Gulf Cup title.

Al Najma eye third Asian crown

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The Bahraini club Al Najma will begin its campaign in the 28th Asian Men's Club League Handball Championship, which also serves as a qualifier for the IHF Super Globe, when it faces Saudi Arabia's Al Khaleej on Saturday, June 6 in the preliminary round.

Held in Kuwait from June 6 to June 15, the tournament brings together Asia's leading clubs and carries added significance as it offers qualification to the 2026 Super Globe in Egypt.

Al Najma has been placed in Group B alongside Al Khaleej, Kuwait SC, and Qatar's Al Arabi SC, forming one of the most competitive groups in the competition. The team opens against Al Khaleej on June 6, meets Al Arabi SC on June 7, and concludes its preliminary round fixtures against hosts Kuwait SC on June 9.

The preliminary stage follows a single round-robin format un-



Action from Al Najma's victory in last year's final in Isfahan, Iran

der Asian Handball Federation regulations, after which all eight participating teams advance to the main round. Results from the preliminary matches are carried forward, meaning every game directly influences knockout seeding.



Al Najma celebrate their second Asian Championship title in 2025

In the main round, teams enter a cross-group elimination system. The top team in Group A plays the fourth-placed team in Group B, while the second-placed team in Group A faces the third-placed team in Group B.

The same crossover structure applies in reverse, with higher-ranked sides drawn against lower-ranked opponents from

the opposite group, progressing through knockout ties toward the final.

Group A also includes strong contenders such as the UAE's Sharjah, Kuwait's Burgan SC, China's representative team, and Qatar's Al Duhail SC.

Al Najma will aim to make a strong impression on the continental stage, with the tournament representing a key path-

way to the IHF Super Globe. The Bahraini side also arrives with a strong pedigree, having won the championship twice — first in 2017 in Hyderabad, India, and again in 2023 in Isfahan, Iran after a dramatic victory over Al Duhail SC.

They defeated Qatar's Al Duhail 31-30 after four periods of extra time, following a draw at the end of regulation time.

Arsenal Crowned Champions After City Draw

Hussain Almaskati
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Arsenal have been crowned 2025-26 Premier League champions after Manchester City were held to a 1-1 draw away at Bournemouth, a result that secured the title for the Gunners with one game remaining.

At the Vitality Stadium yesterday, Bournemouth took the lead before half-time through a superb strike from Junior Kroupi. Marcus Tavernier released Adrien Truffert on the left, and he picked out Kroupi, who took a touch and curled past Gianluigi Donnarumma into the far corner.

City equalised deep into stoppage time after a scramble in the box. Rodri's shot was blocked and the ball fell to Erling Haaland, who reacted quickest

to score and salvage a point.

The draw ended City's hopes of a late title charge, leaving them four points behind Arsenal with one game remaining, a deficit that is now mathematically insurmountable.

For Mikel Arteta's side, the title reflects a season of consistency and defensive strength. Arsenal conceded the fewest goals in the league, with goalkeeper David Raya playing an instrumental role behind a well-organised back line.

It is their first league title in 22 years, ending a long wait since the Invincibles era and val-

idating Arteta's project since 2019.

After three consecutive runner-up finishes, Arsenal finally broke through despite a difficult April that briefly saw them lose a commanding lead.

Four straight wins in the closing weeks restored momentum, while Manchester City

dropped points against Everton and Bournemouth, allowing Arsenal to regain control.

Attention now turns to the Champions League final against Paris Saint-Germain in Budapest, where Arsenal aim to complete a historic double after an unbeaten European run.

Victory would deliver the club's first European crown and arguably its most successful modern-era season, depending on the result at the Puskás Aréna.

Fans have waited for this campaign, celebrating domestic success and consistency against a dominant City side. The Emirates is expected to host celebrations, with a trophy parade planned if they complete the double.

Pep Guardiola reacts during Bournemouth match



Ronaldo, 41, leads Portugal into his sixth World Cup

AFP | Lisbon

Veteran Portugal striker Cristiano Ronaldo will lead his country into the 2026 World Cup this summer after coach Roberto Martinez named the 41-year-old in his squad yesterday.

The former Real Madrid and Manchester United star, now at Saudi Arabian side Al Nassr, is set to appear at a record sixth World Cup.

Portugal and Ronaldo, the all-time leading men's international goalscorer with 143 goals, have never won the competition.

Ronaldo could face former Barcelona rival Lionel Messi, who is also set to play at a sixth World Cup after leading Argentina to glory four years



Cristiano Ronaldo reacts during a match (file photo)

ago in Qatar. The Portuguese forward avoided a three-match ban despite being sent off against the Republic of Ireland in their last qualifying match for an elbow.

Spanish coach Martinez selected a 26-man squad with no major surprises, including Ronaldo's Al Nassr team-mate Joao Felix, and also named goalkeeper Ricardo Velho as an extra player in the group.