

# Al Najma, Manama Off to Winning Starts



Al Najma's Zachary Hadji celebrates after scoring a brace

**Hussain Almaskati**  
TDT | Manama

Bahrain's 2025–26 promotion and relegation play-offs kicked off last night, with four teams competing in a single round-robin league system for a place in next season's Nasser bin Hamad Premier League. The top two teams at the end of the mini-league will secure Premier League football; the remaining two will compete in the First Division next season.

Opening fixtures saw Al Najma take a 2-1 comeback win over Al Ettihad, while Manama got the better of Budaiya with a 1-0 victory to secure maximum points on matchday one.

At Al Ahli Club Stadium, Al Ettihad struck first in the 50th min-

ute when Mohammed Al Mohsin capitalised on a poor clearance from Al Najma goalkeeper Ammar Mohammed, taking possession and finishing emphatically from outside the box.

Al Najma responded eight minutes later through Zachary Hadji, who is notably the son of Moroccan football legend Mustapha Hadji. The equaliser came after Faisal Bodahoom slipped a through ball to Mohammed Abdulqayoom on the left by-line, who drilled a low cross into the area for Hadji to finish with a delicate backheel into the far corner.

Al Ettihad's hopes of regaining the lead took a massive blow in the 77th minute when Nigerian Fortune Gbobie was sent off for time wasting, receiving a second yellow card. Referee



Manama's match winner Nemanja Nikolic controls the ball

Ismaeel Habib did not hesitate and immediately gave him his marching orders. Not long after, Hadji got his brace to give Al Najma a 2-1 win and complete the comeback.

Ali Al Romaihi produced a wonderful piece of skill to get past his marker, then floated the ball into the middle of the box. Faisal Bodahoom headed it back across goal, and Hadji turned sharply to finish into the top corner without even looking at the net.

The result gives coach Mohamed Shamlan's side early hope of retaining their place in the top flight, while Al Ettihad will need to regroup to escape the First Division.

At Bahrain National Stadium, First Division side Manama edged Budaiya in the other

fixture of the night. Budaiya's hopes took an early blow when they were reduced to ten men in the 15th minute. After reviewing the incident, referee Ahmed Khalil issued Clement Ogbobe a straight red card for an elbow on Mehdi Abdullatif.

Manama made the advantage count just before half-time when Nemanja Nikolic reacted quickest inside the box after a partially cleared effort from Budaiya's Hamad Fuad. The Bosnian fullback guided his finish past goalkeeper Abdullah Frieih to seal the win.

The play-offs will continue this Monday when Budaiya face Al Najma at the National Stadium, while Manama take on Al Ettihad at Al Ahli Stadium. Both matches are again set for simultaneous 7pm kickoffs.

## Bahrain placed in Pot 3 ahead of AFC U-20 qualification draw



Bahrain's U-20 national football team line up ahead of kick-off

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The draw for the AFC U20 Asian Cup China 2027 Qualifiers will take place on Thursday, 28 May at the AFC House, marking the official start of the qualification pathway to Asia's premier youth football tournament.

A total of 44 teams will take part in the qualifying campaign, which will be staged from 25 August to 6 September 2026. The competition represents the 23rd edition of the AFC U-20 qualification process since its introduction in 1980.

This cycle introduces a revised format as part of broader AFC reforms designed to enhance competitive balance and ensure more evenly matched fixtures across youth competitions. The structure features a two-phase system incorporat-

ing promotion and relegation between stages.

In the Qualification Phase, 32 teams will be divided into eight groups of four. The eight group winners, along with the seven best second-placed teams, will qualify for the final tournament in China. The bottom-placed team in each group will be relegated to the Development Phase of the next cycle.

The Development Phase will feature 12 teams split into three groups of four. The three group winners, along with the three best second-placed teams, will be promoted to the Qualification Phase of the next edition.

Seeding for the draw is based on performances across the last three editions of the competition, as well as overall participation records in AFC competitions.

### Qualification Phase Draw Pots

**Pot 1:** Australia, Korea Republic, Japan, Saudi Arabia, Uzbekistan, Iraq, Islamic Republic of Iran, Jordan

**Pot 2:** Qatar, Indonesia, Syria, Thailand, Vietnam, Yemen, Kyrgyz Republic, Tajikistan

**Pot 3:** Oman, United Arab Emirates, India, DPR Korea, Cambodia, Bahrain, Malaysia, Philippines

**Pot 4:** Bangladesh, Turkmenistan, Kuwait, Lebanon, Palestine, Laos, Hong Kong, China, Afghanistan

### Development Phase Draw Pots

**Pot 1:** Chinese Taipei, Mongolia, Myanmar

**Pot 2:** Singapore, Guam, Maldives

**Pot 3:** Nepal, Brunei Darussalam, Bhutan

**Pot 4:** Macau, Sri Lanka, Northern Mariana Islands

# Morocco's golden generation back again

**Hussain Almaskati**  
TDT | Manama

The Morocco national football team is preparing for another FIFA World Cup campaign, set to take place across the United States, Mexico, and Canada in June and July. The Atlas Lions continue to establish themselves as one of the most competitive sides from both Africa and the Arab world.

This will mark Morocco's seventh FIFA World Cup appearance and their third consecutive participation, as they look to build on the historic legacy created at the 2022 tournament in Qatar.

At that tournament, the Moroccans produced one of the most remarkable runs in modern World Cup history, becoming the first African and Arab nation to reach the semi-finals before ultimately finishing fourth. Their campaign was defined by a record-setting defensive structure, conceding only one goal from open play prior to the



Moroccan players celebrate historic shootout victory over Spain at 2022 World Cup

semi-final stage.

The journey began in Group F, where Morocco topped the group after drawing 0-0 with Croatia, defeating Belgium 2-0,

and beating Canada 2-1. In the Round of 16, they produced one of the tournament's biggest shocks by eliminating Spain on penalties (3-0) after a 0-0 draw.

They then defeated Portugal 1-0 in the quarter-finals, with Youssef En-Nesyri scoring a famous header that sent Morocco into uncharted territory as the

first African and Arab nation to reach a World Cup semi-final.

Their historic run eventually ended with a 2-0 defeat to France in the semi-finals, followed by a 2-1 loss to Croatia in the third-place playoff. Even so, their achievement fundamentally reshaped expectations for African and Arab football on the global stage.

Since that breakthrough, Morocco have remained a strong force in international and continental football. Earlier this year, they reached the Africa Cup of Nations final against Senegal in a highly controversial clash, eventually losing 1-0 after extra time.

The match descended into chaos after Senegal's players staged a 15-minute walkout following a stoppage-time penalty awarded to Morocco, a decision that sparked furious protests. Urged back by captain Sadio Mané, Brahim Díaz took the spot-kick but missed a Panenka, and Senegal ultimately prevailed in extra time.

Months later, the Confederation of African Football (CAF) ruled that the disruption had compromised the final's integrity, stripping Senegal of the title and awarding it to Morocco. CAF's decision came after Moroccan head coach Walid Regragui had already stepped down, with Mohamed Ouahbi appointed ahead of the World Cup.

Morocco now enter the upcoming World Cup with a strong core of experienced players from that historic 2022 campaign. Achraf Hakimi and Hakim Ziyech remain two of the most influential figures in the squad. Both have accumulated 10 World Cup appearances across the 2018 and 2022 editions.

Now, with the North American tournament just weeks away, Morocco are no longer outsiders hoping to surprise, but a side already measured against football's elite. In every stadium they step into, the question is no longer whether they belong, but how far they can go this time.