

## Bahrain Clubs Exit AFC Champions League 2

Hussain Almaskati  
TDT | Manama

Bahrain's AFC Champions League Two journey came to a disappointing close last night as both Muharraq and Al Khaldiya fell at the final hurdle, missing out on qualification for the Round of 16 on a decisive final matchday.

What began with optimism ended in frustration, as fine margins, key moments, and late goals swung the balance against the Kingdom's two representatives.

Muharraq knew a positive result at Shaikh Ali Bin Mohammed Al Khalifa Stadium would secure progression, but they were undone by clinical finishing and a costly second-half red card as Esteghlal claimed a 3-0 win to leapfrog them into second place in Group A.

The hosts started brightly in Arad, but against the run of play, Esteghlal struck in the 15th minute. Saleh Hardani's low cross from the right bypassed the Muharraq defence, allowing Esmaeli Gholizadeh to stretch and slide the ball home from close range.

Muharraq continued to push but the turning point arrived on the hour when defender Waleed Al Hayyam received a second yellow card, leaving the Bahrain champions a man down.



Action heats up as Muharraq face Esteghlal in Arad



Al Khaldiya's Komail Al Aswad in action at foggy Arkadag Stadium

Esteghlal made the advantage ute, Duckens Nazon muscled his way through the defence

before finishing across Sayed Jaafar, who was deputising for injured first-choice goalkeeper Ebrahim Lutfalla. Five minutes later, Jasir Asani sealed the result with a superb curling finish from the right.

Esteghlal advanced on eight points, while Muharraq finished third, a single point short.

### Arkadag Edge Al Khaldiya

Al Khaldiya's hopes also ended in Turkmenistan, where FK Arkadag came out 1-0 winners in foggy conditions to snatch second place in Group B.

The decisive moment came just before half-time when Shamammet Hydyrow's long-range strike was spilled by Ricardo Silva. Although the goalkeeper blocked Yazgylych Gurbanov's first attempt, the midfielder reacted quickest to score from the rebound.

Al Khaldiya pressed after the break and came close through Ayoub Elamloud and Velmyrate Ballakov, but Arkadag held firm to see out the win. The result lifted Arkadag to seven points, one ahead of Al Khaldiya, who bowed out in third.

While the knockout stage beckons for others, Bahrain's representatives exit the competition with performances that showed promise, but also the unforgiving nature of football at the highest Asian level.

## Sitra Still Chase First Gulf Club Win



Sitra's Abdulwasea Al Matari advances with the ball

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Sitra's quest for a first Gulf Club Champions League victory continues after a 2-1 defeat to Al Qadisiya in Kuwait last night at Mohammed Al Hamad Stadium. The Bahrainis showed fight but were undone by clinical finishing and set-piece precision from the Kuwaiti side.

Al Qadisiya's Neeskens Kebano opened the scoring in the 29th minute, volleying home a rebound from Eid Al Rashidi's floated free-kick after Sitra goalkeeper Youssef Habib initially saved the effort.

Al Qadisiya doubled their lead in the 66th minute. Another delivery from Al Rashidi found Kebano, who connected with a low header that rocketed into the roof of the net, completing his brace.

Sitra responded quickly, pulling one back in the 72nd

minute. Vincent Emmanuel's curling cross from the left found Othman Al Hajj, who towered over his marker and sent a bullet header into the bottom corner. Despite the goal, the Bahrainis could not find an equaliser, and Al Qadisiya held on for the win.

The result leaves Sitra with two points from four games, sitting bottom of Group C behind leaders Zakho (IRQ), Al Ain (UAE), and Al Qadisiya (KWT). The team remains in contention mathematically but will need strong performances in upcoming fixtures to keep their knockout hopes alive.

Sitra return home to face UAE's Al Ain on February 10, 2026, before travelling to Iraq to meet Zakho on February 17. Coach Isa Al Saadoon's squad, including Youssef Habib, Vincent Emmanuel, and Othman Al Hajj, will aim to capitalise on home advantage and push for the first win of the campaign.

# Arsenal reach League Cup semis with shoot-out win over Palace

● Arsenal win 8-7 on penalties

● Kepa Arrizabalaga save final kick

● Kepa Arrizabalaga saved the final kick

AFP | London

Kepa Arrizabalaga was Arsenal's League Cup quarter-final hero with the decisive penalty shoot-out save that completed a miserable evening for Crystal Palace defender Maxence Lacroix on Tuesday.

Lacroix's own goal put Arsenal ahead with 10 minutes left at the Emirates Stadium before Marc Guehi snatched Palace's stoppage-time equaliser in the 1-1 draw.

That set the stage for a shoot-out in which both teams scored their first seven penalties.

William Saliba converted Arsenal's eighth kick and Kepa dived to his right to save Lacroix's effort and secure an 8-7 victory.

It was a cathartic moment for the Spanish goalkeeper, who infamously refused to be substituted before Chelsea's League Cup final penalty shoot-out defeat against Manchester City in 2019.

Kepa also missed a spot-kick in the Blues' 2022 League Cup final shoot-out loss to Liverpool.

The Gunners will play London rivals Chelsea in the semi-finals over two legs in January and February, with Manchester City facing holders Newcastle in the



Arsenal's French defender #02 William Saliba (L), Arsenal's Danish defender #16 Christian Norgaard, Arsenal's English midfielder #49 Myles Lewis-Skelly, Arsenal's Belgian midfielder #19 Leandro Trossard and Arsenal's Dutch defender #12 Jurrien Timber celebrate at winning the match

other last four clash.

"We generated a lot and should have scored many more goals. When you don't close the games, it can always happen that you concede," Arsenal boss Mikel Arteta said.

"We had some big individual performances. Kepa, his level of commitment with the group is just incredible.

"I think the players were so composed with the penalties and in the end, Kepa managed to save one. We are where we want to be."

Arsenal are into the League Cup semi-finals for a second successive year as they chase their first trophy since winning the FA Cup in 2020.

The north Londoners have

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The victory marked a major milestone for striker Gabriel Jesus, who completed his first start in 345 days following a grueling recovery from a ruptured anterior cruciate ligament

only won the League Cup twice, with their last triumph coming in 1992-93, before any of their

current squad were born.

After celebrating Christmas on Thursday, Arteta's men will turn their attention back to the title race with home games against Brighton and third-placed Aston Villa to close out 2025.

Winning their first English title since 2004 is clearly Arsenal's main aim this season, but lifting the League Cup in March would be a significant boost to a club starved of silverware in recent years.

Arteta made eight changes to the side that won at Everton on Saturday, but still fielded a strong line-up featuring William Saliba, Mikel Merino, Eberechi Eze, Gabriel Martinelli and Gabriel Jesus.

## Set-piece weakness costing Liverpool dear, says Slot



Liverpool's Dutch manager Arne Slot applauds the fans

AFP | London

Liverpool manager Arne Slot believes his side are damaging their own hopes of a top-four finish in the Premier League because of a poor record at set-pieces.

The reigning champions head into the busy Christmas and New Year period behind fourth-placed Chelsea on goal difference.

Liverpool have scored just three set-piece goals while conceding 11 in the league so far this season, with a frustrated Slot saying: "I know the importance of it, it gets more and more, and that's why we are so annoyed by our current record.

"It's a big frustration we are where we are this season because when we were halfway

through last season we had not conceded one set-piece (goal).

"It's impossible to be top-four, top-five with our set-piece balance, let alone winning the league."

The Dutchman added: "We are the only team in the top end of the table that has a negative set-piece balance (Manchester City are in fact on minus-one according to official data supplier Opta) -- not only are we negative, we are minus-eight and still on equal points with fourth.

"But if we are minus-eight -- Chelsea is I think plus-eight (actually plus-four) and Arsenal and United are very high (scoring 10 apiece) and if you look at that you could say how special it is we have as many points as we have if you have that set-piece balance.