

Exclusive

'No pressure': Al Hayyam backs Bahrain to defend Gulf Cup crown

Hussain Almaskati
TDT | Manama

Bahrain national team defender and Muharraq captain Waleed Al Hayyam says the reigning Gulf Cup champions are not weighed down by expectations — they are embracing them.

In an exclusive interview with *The Daily Tribune*, Al Hayyam described a squad that has evolved from surprise package to established contender, as Bahrain prepare to defend their title at the 27th Gulf Cup in Saudi Arabia.

Bahrain open their Group B campaign against Qatar on September 24 in Jeddah, before facing the United Arab Emirates on September 27 and Yemen on September 30. All matches will be played at Prince Abdullah Al Faisal Stadium, with the top two teams advancing to the semi-finals. The final is scheduled for October 6 at King Abdullah



Waleed Al Hayyam lifts the 2024-2025 Gulf Cup alongside HRH Prince Salman bin Hamad Al Khalifa

Sports City Stadium.

On paper, Bahrain's path is far from straightforward. Qatar arrive with three Gulf Cup titles, while Bahrain and the UAE have both lifted the trophy twice, highlighting how closely matched the sides are in pedigree. Yet Al Hayyam insists the champions are unfazed.

"There is no pressure," he said. "It's a strong group, but we want to show we are the strongest team in it."

Bahrain head into the tournament as holders after their 2-1 win over Oman in the 2024-25 final, securing their second Gulf Cup title following their breakthrough in 2019. Those victories have reshaped expectations around the national team, turning them from outsiders into genuine contenders.

For Al Hayyam, that progress is built on stability rather than momentum — a principle reflected in his season with Muharraq.

As captain, he led the club to a domestic double, first winning the King's Cup against Riffa in April to end a six-year wait and claim a 20th title, before retaining the league championship on the final day of the season against Al Khalidiya, their 35th league crown.

"The strength was in the group. We are all one family. There is no single leader; everyone shares responsibility," he said. "We knew that effort would lead to results."

Muharraq's only setback came in February's Khalid bin Hamad Cup final, where they lost to Riffa on penalties, narrowly missing out on a treble.

"It's still a season to be proud of," Al Hayyam added. "Two trophies is a strong achievement, even if we wanted more."

For Bahrain, the challenge is to replicate that collective identity at regional level, where they have moved from chasing recognition to defending their status.

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Kooheji: 'Bahrain belongs among the best in MMA'

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Bahrain's Hamza Kooheji earned a unanimous decision victory over Morocco's Taha Bendaoud on Monday night in Dubai, advancing to the semi-finals of the PFL Mena 9: Pride of Arabia featherweight tournament. The three-round contest was scored 29-28 across all three judges in Kooheji's favour, a result he said "meant everything to him".

Fighting out of the highly-regarded KHK MMA Team, Kooheji controlled large portions of the bout with strong grappling exchanges and well-timed take-downs, steadily breaking down his opponent's rhythm over the course of the fight. The victory marked a strong statement on his PFL Mena debut, reinforcing his status as one of the Kingdom's MMA athletes on the regional stage.

Speaking exclusively to TDT after the fight, Kooheji said the win carried deep personal and national meaning.

"This win means everything to me. In every corner of the Arab region, we are showing that Bahrain has elite fighters who can compete and win at the highest level. My goal is to prove that we belong among the best in MMA across the region. Representing my country on this stage is not just important to me — it's my mission."

The victory also served as a response to his setback last



Hamza Kooheji applies pressure with Bendaoud pressed against the cage

November, when he suffered a fourth-round TKO loss in Bahrain to Serbia's Borislav Nikolic, who successfully defended the BRAVE CF bantamweight championship. Kooheji said he used that loss as motivation rather than discouragement.

"Every fight, especially after a loss, is about coming back stronger. After I lose, I always focus on improvement rather than dwelling on the setback.

The challenge is figuring out how to evolve from it. I make sure I learn, adjust, and use that experience to grow. I never allow a loss to break me, it only makes me stronger."

With the win, Kooheji now advances to the semi-finals, where he will face the winner of the other quarter-final clash between Algeria's Elias Boudegzame and Iraq's Hussain Salem, scheduled to take place in

Jeddah later this month.

Despite securing his place in the next stage, the Bahraini fighter insists his focus remains firmly on the bigger goal.

"I'm still fully focused. I'm not celebrating too much because the job isn't finished yet. I need to get straight back to training and stay locked in on the goal. My aim is clear — I want to win the belt by the end of the year."

Barbar and Al Ahli Strike First



MVP Salman Al Showaikh celebrates in Barbar's win over Al Najma

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Matchday 1 of the 2025-26 Khalid bin Hamad Bahrain Handball League Golden Square semi-finals began yesterday, as Barbar edged Al Najma on shootouts while Al Ahli defeated Al Shabab in tight encounters across both best-of-three ties.

In the first semi-final, Barbar defeated Al Najma 35-32 on penalties after a 31-31 draw in regulation time. Barbar started strongly, controlling the opening stages and building an 18-14 half-time lead, with Ali Abdulkader and Mohammed Jassim instrumental in establishing a four-goal cushion.

Al Najma responded after the break through Mohammed Habib, gradually erasing the deficit despite disciplinary setbacks. The reigning champions surged ahead in the closing stages and looked set to clinch it, leading 30-29 at 29:06.

However, a late twist turned the tide. Salman Al Showaikh produced a stunning equaliser with less than two seconds remaining to make it 31-31

and force a shootout. In the penalties, Barbar held their nerve as misses from Ahmed Jalal and Mohammed Habib proved costly, while Showaikh — who scored nine goals — was named MVP.

Barbar player Sayed Ammar Al Wadaei told TDT: "It was an excellent performance from us, we were the better team, alhamdulillah. One step remains. We will correct our mistakes and, insha'Allah, we will win the second match."

In the second semi-final, Al Ahli defeated Al Shabab 33-31 after controlling much of the match. Al Ahli dominated early, racing to a 25-18 half-time lead. Their opponents mounted a second-half fightback, cutting the gap to four goals with under six minutes remaining, but Al Ahli managed the closing stages effectively to seal a 1-0 series lead.

Game 2 takes place on Thursday, with Al Ahli facing Al Shabab at 5:30pm and Al Najma meeting Barbar at 7:30pm, followed by Game 3 fixtures on Saturday if required.

All matches are being held at Khalifa Sports City in Isa Town.