

Barbar, Al Ahli advance to league final

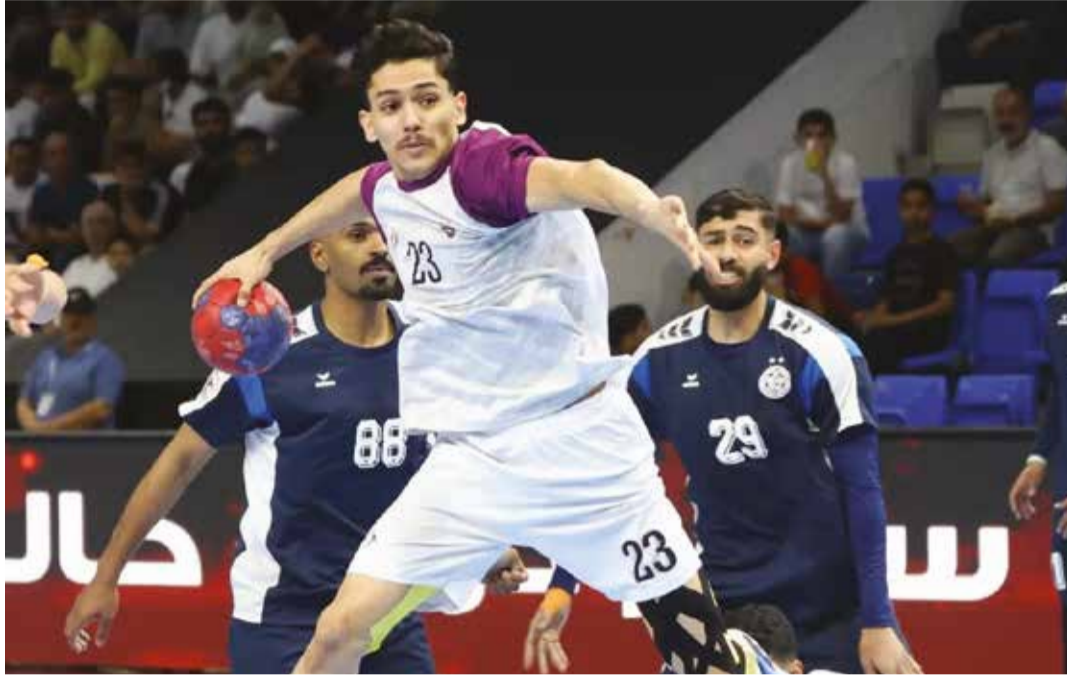
TDT | Manama

Al Ahli and Barbar booked their places in the final of the 2025-26 Khalid bin Hamad Bahrain Handball League yesterday after dramatic semi-final victories at Khalifa Sports City in Isa Town.

Ahli overcame Al Shabab 35-33 on penalties after a 31-31 draw in regulation time, while Barbar edged defending champions Al Najma 25-24 in a last-gasp finish. Both finalists completed 2-0 sweeps in their best-of-three series.

Ahli and Shabab opened the night with a tense battle. Ahli led 3-2 by the sixth minute and extended their advantage to 6-4, but Shabab responded strongly to move ahead 11-8 before taking a 14-9 lead into halftime after intercepting an Ali Eid pass and scoring on the fast break.

Shabab continued to fight in the second half despite losing



Action from Barbar's dramatic victory over Al Najma

Abdulla Al Salatneh to injury early after the restart. Midway

through the half, they over- turned a five-goal deficit to lead

22-21 and later scored twice in quick succession to move two

goals ahead with under three minutes remaining.

Ahli responded through Ali Eid, who converted a crucial free throw to level the game before goalkeeper Hussain Mahfooz produced a last-second save from Jassim Khamis to force shootouts.

In the shootout, Ali Merza opened for Ahli before Jassim Khamis missed Shabab's first attempt wide of the post. Qassim Qambar converted Ahli's second throw, while Mahfooz later denied Al Salatneh with another key save. Mohammed Hameed added Ahli's fourth successful throw before Yousif Ahmed calmly converted the winning attempt to seal a 35-33 triumph and send Ahli through to the final. Mahfooz was named MVP for his impressive goalkeeping.

Later in the evening, Barbar overcame defending champions Najma in another closely con-

tested clash.

Salman Al Showaikh levelled the score at 4-4 early in the first half after cutting in from the right wing, while Barbar goalkeeper Isa Khalaf made a crucial save moments later to preserve a narrow 6-5 lead. Najma held a 16-15 halftime lead before the second half became a back-and-forth battle.

Barbar moved ahead 22-21, but Najma regained the lead at 24-23 entering the closing stages. Barbar equalised in the 29th minute before Khalaf made another close-range save in the final seconds to preserve parity.

Moments later, Hassan Al Fardan scored the winner after battling inside the goal area to receive the ball and finish in the dying seconds. The goal sparked celebrations as Barbar continue their pursuit of a seventh league title. Khalaf was named MVP after his extraordinary display in goal.

Ailing Sinner **crashes out** of French Open

Sinner's exit leaves the French Open men's draw dramatically more unpredictable

● Sinner lose after two-set lead

● Heat issues disrupt top seed

● Cerundolo stage stunning comeback

● Osaka safely reaches third round

AFP | Paris

Jannik Sinner succumbed to an apparent bout of heat-stroke and a remarkable Juan Manuel Cerundolo comeback to crash out of the French Open yesterday, blowing the men's tournament wide open.

The world number one was cruising when leading by two sets and 5-1 in the third set before suddenly struggling with his movement as he lost 18 points in a row.

Sinner took a medical timeout, complained of feeling "dizzy" and left a sweltering Court Philippe Chatrier for treatment, but after returning still slipped to a 3-6, 2-6, 7-5, 6-1, 6-1 loss to world number 56 Cerundolo.

"I was little bit lucky, I feel sorry for him," said Cerundolo.

"I don't know what happened, he was cramping, maybe the pressure. I feel sorry for him and hope he recovers."

Sinner suffered his earliest exit from a Grand Slam since the 2023 French Open, as Cerundolo completed one of tennis' biggest shocks in recent years and set up a last-32 tie against either Spanish youngster Martin Landaluce or Czech Vit Kopriva on Saturday.

The unseasonably hot weather has caused problems for players all week in Paris.

Czech Jakub Mensik collapsed on court with cramps after his win on Wednesday,



Italy's Jannik Sinner acknowledges the crowd as he reacts to his men's singles match defeat to Argentina's Juan Manuel Cerundolo

30

consecutive matches had been won by Jannik Sinner before his shock French Open defeat

while Novak Djokovic called for matches to be moved to later in the day.

The 24-year-old Sinner was the latest to wilt under the blazing sun, seeing his 30-match winning streak, after taking titles in Rome, Madrid and Monte Carlo, Miami and Indian Wells, come to a shuddering halt.

The Italian will now have to wait until next year, when injured rival Carlos Alcaraz will likely be back in action, for his next chance to complete the career Grand Slam.

The top seed was in total control and romping towards the most routine of victories before

he suddenly started to struggle physically, losing three consecutive games to love. He asked the chair umpire what his options were when 0-40 down in the next game, before being evaluated by a physio, saying he felt dizzy and needed to vomit.

Sinner gingerly returned to the court after treatment to applause from the crowd but continued to melt in the 32C heat and departed the stage again after Cerundolo took the set.

After a nine-minute delay, the cramping Sinner hobbled back out but quickly saw the fourth set slide away as Cerundolo levelled the tie.

The unheralded Argentinian appeared inspired by the opportunity to knock out the world's best player and raced to victory against his deflated opponent, who was left bent over double after every lengthy rally.

The underdog was left to celebrate a sensational win after clipping away a forehand winner to reach the third round of a Slam for the first time.

"I tried to play my best, I'm

going to keep trying to play my best. The clay is my best surface and I hope to be ready for the next match," added Cerundolo.

Sinner's compatriot Flavio Cobolli, the 10th seed, reached the third round for a second successive year with a 6-4, 6-4, 6-4 win over China's Wu Yubing.

He will next face American Learner Tien after the 18th seed fought back to defeat world number 151 Facundo Diaz Acosta of Argentina 7-5, 4-6, 3-6, 7-6 (7/4), 6-3.

Osaka safely through

Osaka edged closer to a possible last-16 meeting with Sabalenka after reaching the third round for the first time in seven years by beating Croatia's Donna Vekic 7-6 (7/1), 6-4.

The four-time Grand Slam champion will face a tough test from American teenager Iva Jovic on Saturday when both players will be hoping to reach the fourth round at Roland Garros for the first time.

"Today was really tough," said the Japanese star. "But I was glad to be able to finish in two because every game felt really, really close."

Osaka's run to the US Open semi-finals last year is the only time she has made the second week of a major since her last Grand Slam triumph at the 2021 Australian Open.

Road to AFC U20 Asian Cup begins



Bahrain's U-20 national football team line up before a match

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Bahrain have been drawn in Group D of the AFC U20 Asian Cup China 2027 Qualifiers, alongside Jordan, Tajikistan, and Afghanistan, following the official draw held at the Asian Football Confederation (AFC) headquarters in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia.

The Kingdom of Bahrain will host the group's qualification matches from August 25 to September 6, with all fixtures set to be played in a centralised league format.

The competition will determine which teams progress to the continental finals in China, scheduled from March 24 to April 10, 2027.

This edition of the qualifiers introduces a new competition system approved by the AFC earlier this year as part of broader reforms to age-group tournaments. The revised format is designed to raise competitive standards across Asia and ensure more balanced, technically demanding encounters between national teams.

Under the new structure, the qualification campaign will be played over two stages and will feature a promotion and relegation mechanism. A total

of 32 national teams are split into eight groups of four.

The eight group winners, along with the seven best second-placed teams, will advance to the 43rd AFC U20 Asian Cup finals, while the bottom-placed team in each group will drop into the AFC's developmental stage for the next edition of the qualifiers.

The group stage features a wide spread of contenders across Asia. Group A includes South Korea, Kyrgyzstan, the Philippines, and Lebanon. Group B brings together Uzbekistan, Syria, India, and Bangladesh. Group C consists of Iran, Vietnam, North Korea, and Palestine.

Group D comprises Bahrain, Jordan, Tajikistan, and Afghanistan. Group E features Saudi Arabia, Qatar, Oman, and Hong Kong China. Group F includes Iraq, Thailand, the UAE, and Turkmenistan. Group G contains Japan, Yemen, Cambodia, and Kuwait, while Group H is made up of Australia, Indonesia, Malaysia, and Laos.

With the advantage of playing on home soil, Bahrain will be aiming to make full use of familiar conditions as they push for a place in the prestigious continental tournament.