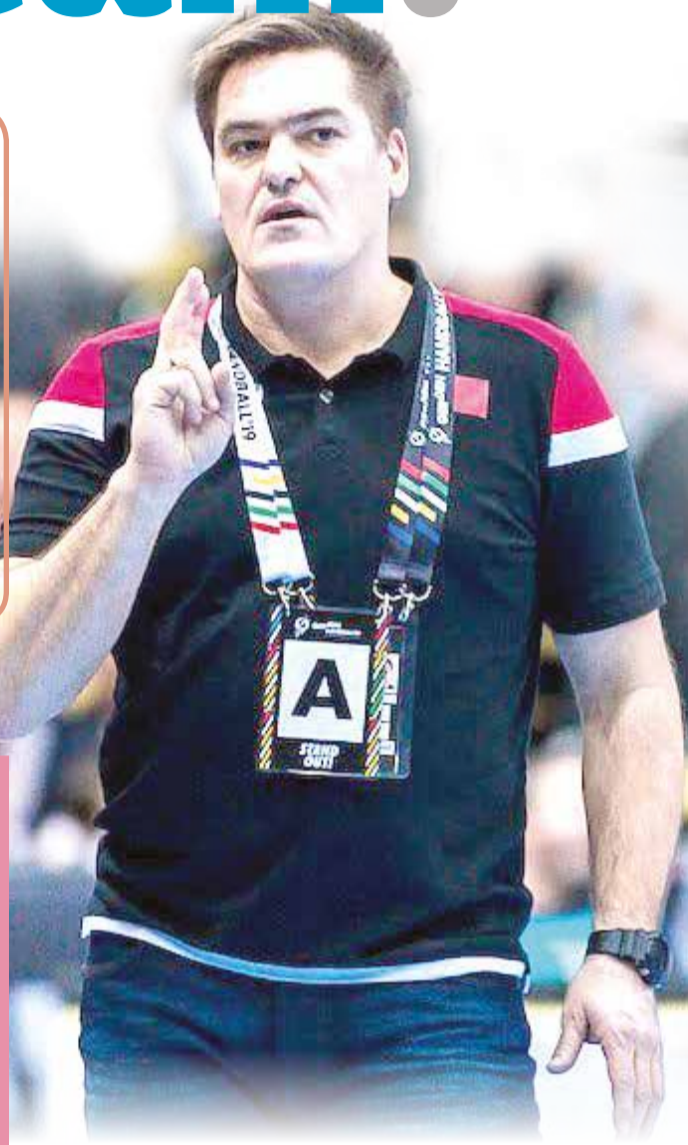


'Dare to dream!'



I know that we will fight as warriors all the time and give everything, so we hope we can make Bahrain proud

—ARON KRISTJANSSON



Flashback: Bahrain skipper Hussain Al Sayyad in action during the Olympic qualification tournament in 2019 (File photo)



Bahrain head coach Aron Kristjansson challenges men's national handball team players to reach for the skies as they head towards historic debut participation at the Olympic Games starting later this month in Tokyo

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Bahrain are in Group B of the Olympics' men's handball tournament group phase, alongside Egypt, Portugal, hosts Japan, world championship silver-medallists Sweden, and reigning World and Olympic champions Denmark

● The Bahrainis open their Olympics campaign against Sweden on July 24

TDT | Manama

Bahrain's national handball team head coach Aron Kristjansson has called on his players to "dream" and give it "all they got" when they make history later this month and fly the Kingdom's flag at the Tokyo Olympic Games.

The handball stars are the first-ever Bahrainis to qualify for a team sport at any Olympics, and Kristjansson urges them to seize the moment and make the most of this rare opportunity.

"It is huge for Bahrain to qualify for these Games," Kristjansson says. "We have 11 opponents and they are among the best teams in the world."

"The people of Bahrain should be very proud of the team. Bahrain is a small team in world handball and have made this great accomplishment to reach the Olympics."

"I know that we will fight as warriors all the time and give everything, so we hope we can make Bahrain proud."

The former Iceland international and world-renowned coach has challenged his players to not be satisfied with just being at the Games, but to go a step further and possibly upset their heavily favoured competition.

He adds: "If the team comes out of these five games playing good matches, playing good games, and pressing the teams, everybody giving all they got, [it will be a success]."

"We cannot say we should aim for something that is unrealistic, but we should have a dream. We should have a dream to go further to get some wins and try our best and make everybody surprised and proud of us."

Bahrain are in Group B of the

men's handball tournament's preliminary round and are set to face the sport's powerhouses in their five fixtures.

"In our group are the two teams that played the final in the last world championship, Sweden and Denmark, so this is a very tough group and we will

The Bahrainis take on Portugal on July 26, and then face reigning World and Olympic champions Denmark two days later.

have to stick very hard together to come out of it in a good way," Kristjansson explains.

"We have five games, very difficult all of them, and we will really have to be at our best to get good results."

"Sweden and Denmark are the strongest teams, also Egypt have developed very well. They played very well in the last world championship. Portugal is among the top eight in the world; they are newcomers, but a very exciting team. They have been playing very well the last two or three years, so they are a stronger team than many people think."

"We are looking at our game against Japan, who are one of our opponents in Asia, to try and

win. They have home advantage and have been training now for five months together. They will be a difficult game but there is the possibility we are looking for to get this win against Japan, and maybe surprise somebody else."

Kristjansson relishes Bahrain's role as underdogs, and is excited about the possibility of shocking the world at the Olympics. The top two teams from each pool advance to the last eight, and it is something Kristjansson believes is not necessar-

ily out of reach. "We are in a very difficult group, but you never know," he says. "This is sports. You have to aim for victory every time."

"We want to get the first win for Bahrain, and if you get the first win, maybe you can get one surprise also. Anything can happen."

"We are not the favourite for the quarter-finals, there are other teams favoured for that position, but we will do everything to make the people of Bahrain proud of us and to get some wins."

The Bahrainis have been training daily under Kristjansson's watch the past few weeks at the Bahrain Handball Association arena in Um Al Hassam. They are scheduled to leave for Japan on Friday. There, they will play a tune-up game against Argentina on July 19 as part of the final lead-up to the start of competition.

The Bahrainis open their Olympics campaign against Sweden on July 24. They then take on Portugal on July 26, and then face reigning World and Olympic champions Denmark two days later. Bahrain square off with fellow-Asian side Japan on July 30, before completing the preliminaries against Egypt on August 1.

Group A consists of Norway, France, Germany, Brazil, Spain and Argentina. The top four from each pool move on to the knockout quarter-finals.

Kristjansson heads to Olympics as coach after missing chance as Iceland international

Before becoming a coach, Aron Kristjansson was a top player who played for the Iceland national team for a decade.

In 2003, the now-48-year-old helped his national team qualify for the Athens Olympics in 2004, but in a cruel blow, he injured his knee following the qualification, forcing him to miss the Olympics and leading to his retirement as a player.

Kristjansson now gets to fulfill his Olympics aspirations leading Bahrain in Tokyo.

"Of course, it's something you aim for as an athlete—to reach the Olympics," he says. "We did it in the national team in Iceland in 2003, for the Olympic Games in 2004; unfortunately, I got injured and it ended my career just before the Olympics, so that was of course a very hard feeling to miss it."



Aron Kristjansson, left, during his younger years as a player

"Time moves on, you forget about it, but I'm thrilled like all the players about this qualification."

Kristjansson was the man who helped Bahrain qualify for Tokyo, but for several reasons, had to leave the team shortly after.

With the Olympics delayed because of the COVID-19 pandemic and Bahrain's head coaching post opening up, Kristjansson has found his way back and is now ready to finish the job he helped start.

"It was a very extraordinary situation for everybody in the world last year because of the pandemic and they moved the Olympics. Now, we as a team have the possibility to finish it, go there and to show our best," he says.