

PLAYING THE HOST

BY CONNOR SEARS



As Qatar's sports scene grows, it's becoming more apparent that its true strengths in the international athletic community lie not in being a participant, but as a host.

Sports are a hot topic in Qatar right now. The successful, three-year-old tradition of National Sport Day, celebrated each February, keeps athletics on our minds every year, and the heavy planning leading up to the much-anticipated 2022 FIFA World Cup generates excitement as many larger-than-life football stadiums rise up across the country. And just as Qatar is building up its local athletic environment, so too is it fortifying its place in the world of international sports. Qatar's most striking reputation in international sports, however, is not as a participant, but as a host.

Qatar has been making a name for itself by hosting international athletic events for decades. The Qatar ExxonMobil Open, an ATP World Tour event, has been bringing top-tier tennis players from around the world to Doha since 1993. Some of the most accomplished European football clubs have flown into Qatar for friendly matches held in Doha. But where Qatar really

demonstrated its commitment to the art of hosting was at the 2006 Asian Games. Bringing in more than 10,000 athletes from all over the continent, the games provided Qatar with a reason – and, perhaps more importantly, a deadline – for building up its athletic infrastructure. Renovations to Aspire Zone in preparation for the Games helped turn Sports City into the athletic powerhouse it is today. Venues and resources sprang up in a manner not unlike what we are seeing now in preparing for the 2022 World Cup. And all that preparation paid off, because now Qatar is better equipped than ever to host huge international sporting events.

"Qatar built so many sports venues, and they were modern," says Fahad Nasser Al Nuaimi, General Secretary of the Qatar Golf Association (QGA) and coordinator of the Commercial Bank Qatar Masters, the annual international golfing tournament now in its 17th year. "Now, Qatar is ready to host any international sport. Seven years ago, if Qatar wanted to have an

international tournament, like in volleyball or in handball or in any sport, they needed time to build a venue and to prepare Qatar for the event. Now, Qatar can make the decision to have any sport event, and within one year everything's set. We have the sports venue, we have everything."

Building more than infrastructure

But the actual venues aren't all Qatar needs to host more of these large international sporting events. One other strength Qatar brings as a host is its growing hospitality industry. The already impressive, and always increasing, number of hotels built to support Qatar's ambitious tourism plans certainly come in handy when finding accommodations for international athletes coming here for tournaments, not to mention the abundance of exhibition space these events sometimes require. The short-course events for the 2014 FINA World Swimming Championships, awarded to Doha after Catania in Italy withdrew its bid to host, will need to work with 12 local hotels for accommodation and convention space, according to Khaleel Al Jabir, Director of Sports at the Qatar Olympic Committee (QOC) and President of the Qatar Swimming Association.

Of course, the country needs more than physical structures in order to become a world-class sporting event host. Larger events rarely want to take place in cities that are relatively unknown worldwide. To get the most participation and, as a result, revenue from a large event, the brand recognition of the city itself can be almost as important as the reputation of the actual event. So as Doha's prestige on the global stage begins to rise, more and more events are likely to come and take advantage of its facilities.

"As we move forward, we are receiving bigger and higher recognition," Al Jabir says. "Doha is becoming the sport destination of the Middle East."

"When they started the Qatar Masters, they started it just for tourism purposes, to show Qatar to the world," Al Nuaimi says. "Now the purpose is different. The Qatar Masters has become bigger, and more players ranking from the Top 20 participate in this tournament. It's a very strong tournament now in the European Tour calendar."

Qatar has built the venues needed to host more athletic events, and its global recognition has risen to the point that more notable tournaments have begun to see the country as a viable host. The only thing left to put on a successful event is the people



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to run it. The QOC is no stranger to playing the part of organiser. Every year, the committee publishes a calendar of sporting events for the entire year, and the number of these events increases with each new calendar, Al Jabir says. And with each event the country hosts, the organisers gain more of one essential resource: experience.

"Qatar national federations, with the support of the Qatar Olympic Committee, are successfully organising a number of national and international events on a yearly basis," Al Jabir says. "Our resources in terms of know-how, experience and expertise are our driving force for achieving successful results. The events industry and especially the sport ones are full of challenges, and we are always happy to cope with them and to make the difference."

On the home front

The country may be strongly equipped to take on the challenge of hosting large international sporting events, but what about local events? Facilitating a tournament for athletes from across the globe is one thing, but it's only half of the equation of turning Qatar into a centre of sports.

A recent survey in Qatar showed that a majority of respondents did not attend a football match in the past season. Many said that the stadiums were too far away or that the stadiums that exist lack certain facilities, but the bevy of new, advanced stadiums being constructed in advance of 2022 could help solve some of these issues. Some cited traditional values and obnoxious spectators as reasons why they decide not to go out to a stadium to watch a match, but others simply expressed a lack of interest in the game. Hosting events purely for Qatar residents could not only encourage a nationwide enthusiasm for athleticism but also combat the rising threat of obesity.



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General Secretary, Qatar Golf Association



"It really is about your community," says Jamie Cunningham, founder and CEO of Professional Sports Group (PSG), a London-based sports marketing agency with a regional office in Abu Dhabi. "It's about bringing people together to be the best they can be."

The Dolphin Energy Doha Dash is a series of running and walking events inspired by National Sport Day and organised by PSG. The event, held at the Losail International Circuit, encourages all members of the family to spend the morning of National Sport Day running along the race track side-by-side with other Qatar residents. The Doha Dash has proved a success, and despite early concerns about the distance up to Losail, more than a thousand residents showed up to support community building and general health in 2013, the event's first year, a number that almost doubled this year.

The Doha Dash is just one example of the influence of National Sport Day in encouraging the development of these kinds of local athletic events.

"I think National Sport Day is a great initiative," Cunningham says. "To see a government get behind it and say, OK, this is a day where we want employees to think about their well-being and think about community and teamwork and take part in a sporting event, that's a great initiative. Obviously, there are well-documented challenges of the region in terms of health and well-being, and to have a sports day that is encouraging sport in the fabric of society, it's fantastic."

Local events don't necessarily need to be confined to one day of the year, however. And as this athletic environment in the city begins to build, more nationwide events like the Ooredoo Marathon are bound to become a part of Qatar's yearly calendar.

"There's no doubt in the next ten years there will be a triathlon in Doha," Cunningham says. "Like every other major city worldwide, organising those style of events requires a whole level of infrastructure and support that's pretty huge, and Doha has actually shown that it's very good at getting around what you might say are the local challenges of doing that. I've got nothing but positive things to say about the way Doha has embraced sport full-stock."

Balancing the scale

With all the development that has happened over the past decade, Qatar is in prime position to become a recognised leader in hosting large sporting events, both domestic and global in scope. At the same time, many of its existing events are encouraged to step up the scale of their operations.

"Now the government here cares about these international tournaments," QGA's Al Nuaimi says. "And they want any tournament we have, any international event, we have to make it in good shape. Not just a small tournament and that's it. No. Any international event, we have to spend money – too much money – to make the tournament very big."

"In some respects," says Cunningham, "the challenge in Doha is that we have a lot of sporting events, and therefore the expectation of what an event can be in terms of numbers is something where I would say, yes, of course they are going to be having some fantastic, big events, but you also need to have community events to build up. I've personally seen all over the world that a 500-person running or cycling or swimming event in year one can become a 15,000-person event in year ten."

With a calendar that already extends eight years into the future with FIFA's arrival, though, Qatar's plans as an athletic host are long-term. More events are either founded or brought into the peninsula each year, and with each passing year comes another opportunity to become a more active part of the world of international sports.

"I've had meetings with the Qatar Olympic Committee, and I'm aware of their plans with its sports," Cunningham says. "And I think from actually that point of view that Doha is in very good, proactive hands."

"Now, people all over the world know Qatar," Al Nuaimi agrees. "Doha has become a kind of capital city of sports. We have so many international events every year in Doha, and now, especially that Qatar has won the 2022 World Cup, all the world knows Qatar." ■

FACT FILE

QATAR GOLF ASSOCIATION

87

GLOBAL RANK OF 1998 QATAR MASTERS WINNER (ANDREW COLTART)

28

GLOBAL RANK OF 2006 QATAR MASTERS WINNER (HENRIK STENSON)

9

GLOBAL RANK OF 2014 QATAR MASTERS WINNER (SERGIO GARCIA)

QATAR OLYMPIC COMMITTEE

85

NUMBER OF EVENTS ON THE QOC EVENT CALENDAR FOR APRIL 2013-MARCH 2014

11

NUMBER OF EVENTS IN MARCH 2014 ALONE