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Sports, status, and the Sultanate

With events like the Tour of Oman and the Asian Beach Games, the Sultanate has been building its image as an international sport destination

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f you are reading this column on an LG or Samsung monitor, or if you drove to work today in a KIA or Hyundai, it would not take much to convince you of South Korea’s successful entrance into the world economy. Thirty years ago it may have been a bit more difficult. The country was in the process of rebuilding itself since signing a ceasefire with North Korea in 1953. By the 1980s, the capital Seoul, had made miraculous gains. The population had swelled from 650,000 to 10mn and economic indicators marked consistent growth throughout the post-war period.

What does Oman of today have in common with the South Korea of 1980s?   
A crucial, albeit symbolic step that lies on any country’s   
path to international recognition: sports.

Seoul won its bid to host the 1988 Summer Olympics, and as a result South Korea was thrust into the international media spotlight. The country occupied the centre of attention again in 2002 when it joined Japan in hosting the FIFA World Cup. These sporting events crowned Korean economic achievements, providing the invaluable albeit intangible prize of international prestige.

Lately, states in the Gulf region have been attracting an increasing amount of international sporting events, and in turn, gaining exposure on the world stage. When FIFA announced the success of Qatar’s bid for the 2022 World Cup, the Gulf state stole headlines across the globe. In recent years, both Abu Dhabi and Bahrain have constructed Formula 1 tracks, attracting international enthusiasts to their respective Grand Prix events.

**Niche markets**

The Sultanate for its part seems to have its sights trained on niche markets in the sports industry. One such market, cycling, is experiencing increased growth. Recently, the country hosted the second annual Tour of Oman, a 5-day race covering 850 km. In addition to raising Oman’s profile for future cycling events, the Tour should be helpful in promoting tourism. And, if nurtured, a cycling tourism market could easily blossom, taking advantage of the Sultanate’s dramatic views and mild winters. Currently, Muscat will compete with Richmond, Virginia and Quebec City, Quebec to host the 2015 UCI World Road Race Championships. A successful bid for the event, which dates back to 1927, would only boost Oman’s cycling credentials further.

In addition to cycling, Oman is also exploring its potential in golf. In a government-backed mixed-use development currently under construction called The Wave, planners have been working to complete the nation’s first PGA-rated course. The Wave’s management is already in talks about hosting a PGA tour event at the course, which was designed by golfing legend Greg Norman. “Greg has designed it as such so that if we wanted to hold a full PGA event, we could do so,” Michael Lenarduzzi, CEO of The Wave, told Reuters. “We have had some initial discussion about potentially holding a PGA event [in Oman].” A tournament such as this would be a boon for both Oman’s status as a golf destination and the broader economy. The government’s tourism strategy focuses predominantly on expanding its offering for high-spending visitors, so building a reputation as a golf destination certainly seems prudent.

The Sultanate has also been building on one of its most notable natural features, its beaches. This past December, Oman hosted the 2010 Asian Beach Games, a week-long competition of 42 nations across 14 sporting events. Omran, the government’s tourism development arm, was tasked with overseeing construction of the facilities for the competition. “We’ve had some small projects before but this is the biggest ever,” Omran’s vice president of construction, Nasser Saif al-Maqbali, said last week. “The deadline was set in stone, and it was extremely difficult to meet, but we were successful.” With 2,000 km of largely pristine coastline and year-round sunny weather, the country stands to gain from investing in facilities to accommodate athletes.

Hosting these sporting events serves two important functions: building up the necessary infrastructure for hosting future sports events as well as strengthening the country’s tourism offering. When Barcelona hosted the 1992 Summer Olympics, the city underwent a lasting transformation that boosted its economy and those of surrounding regions. Visitor numbers increased in subsequent years, making Barcelona one of the most-visited cities in Europe. As the Sultanate promotes itself as a sports destination to tourists around the world – whether they are cyclists, golfers, or beach footballers – it too stands to gain from increased infrastructure investments and visitor numbers.