

# Up in the air: how can Qatar land its sporting strategy?

Qatar is well on the way to becoming an international sports superpower. An investor in a string of global properties and an increasingly prominent host of major events, the tiny state is already preparing to stage the 2022 Fifa World Cup, amidst a swell of controversy and no little bewilderment. *SportsPro*, with the help of experts from a variety of fields, looks at the five key questions facing Qatar as it prepares for its most important decade.

By David Cushnan and James Emmett

## How do you intend to build and use ten to 12 World Cup stadiums in a country of 1.9 million people?

In 2022, Qatar will stage the most compact Fifa World Cup in history. Just 1.9 million people live in a state with a land

mass of just over 11,500 square kilometres, with the vast majority located in and around the capital city, Doha, on the east coast. The decision to award Qatar the tournament, following a Fifa Executive Committee vote in December 2010, has generated a significant slice of controversy

and no little bewilderment. There may be few real doubts about Qatar's ability to build the ten to 12 stadiums required by Fifa, but filling them and using them beyond the end of a five-week tournament presents a far greater challenge for local organisers and Qatar's rulers. ►



## Qatar's 2022 Fifa World Cup stadium plan (as per 2010 bid)

### Al-Gharafa Stadium



**Location:** Al-Rayyan  
**Capacity:** 44,740  
**Cost:** US\$135 million  
**Matches:** Group matches

### Khalifa International Stadium



**Location:** Al-Rayyan  
**Capacity:** 68,030  
**Cost:** US\$71 million  
**Matches:** Group matches, round of 16, quarter-final, semi-final

### Al-Khor Stadium



**Location:** Al-Khor  
**Capacity:** 45,330  
**Cost:** US\$251 million  
**Matches:** Group matches, round of 16

### Al-Wakrah Stadium



**Location:** Al-Wakrah  
**Capacity:** 45,120  
**Cost:** US\$286 million  
**Matches:** Group matches, round of 16

### Al-Rayyan Stadium



**Location:** Al-Rayyan  
**Capacity:** 44,740  
**Cost:** US\$135 million  
**Matches:** Group matches

### Doha Port Stadium



**Location:** Doha  
**Capacity:** 44,950  
**Cost:** US\$202 million  
**Matches:** Group matches, round of 16, quarter-final

### Education City Stadium

**Location:** Al-Rayyan  
**Capacity:** 45,350  
**Cost:** US\$287 million  
**Matches:** Group matches, round of 16

### Qatar University Stadium

**Location:** Doha  
**Capacity:** 43,520  
**Cost:** US\$300 million  
**Matches:** Group matches, round of 16

### Al-Shamal Stadium

**Location:** Al-Shamal  
**Capacity:** 45,120  
**Cost:** US\$251 million  
**Matches:** Group matches

### Sports City Stadium

**Location:** Al-Khor  
**Capacity:** 45,330  
**Cost:** US\$251 million  
**Matches:** Group matches, round of 16

### Lusail Iconic Stadium

**Location:** Al-Daayen  
**Capacity:** 86,250  
**Cost:** US\$662 million  
**Matches:** Opening match, group matches, round of 16, quarter-final, semi-final, final

### Umm Salal Stadium

**Location:** Umm Salal  
**Capacity:** 45,120  
**Cost:** US\$251 million  
**Matches:** Group matches, round of 16, quarter-final



“Meeting the deadline, which can’t be extended unlike other programmes, would be the most challenging task,” says MR Raghu, a senior vice president of research for Kuwaiti asset management and investment firm Markaz, which has produced a report analysing the implications for Qatar of hosting the World Cup. “One has to be aware that large-scale infrastructure programmes have often been beset with cost overrun and timeline extensions.” Markaz’s report suggests that spending specific to the World Cup, including stadium construction, may add between one and 1.5 per cent to Qatar’s total gross domestic product value each year between 2015 and kick-off in 2022. Up to US\$3 billion has been earmarked for the construction of stadiums alone, although three of the 12 venues initially proposed will actually be extensive upgrades of existing buildings. “Most of the projects are expected to move from boardroom stage to implementation stage by 2015,” Raghu says.

The Markaz report also suggests that the World Cup, with its fixed deadline, could help ‘instil a sense of urgency and provide an additional incentive to attain the National Vision 2030’, the Qatar-wide plan designed to diversify the country’s interests away from oil and into areas such as tourism. Qatar’s infrastructural challenges extend well beyond a collection of undoubtedly snazzy soccer stadiums. A remarkable 43 per cent, or US\$140 billion, of the country’s total budget has reportedly been invested in infrastructure development until 2014. A US\$25 billion rail project – some projections have the number closer to US\$40 billion – is underway, designed to help combat Doha’s dreadful traffic problems, with phase one likely to be completed in 2019. There are plans for a US\$5.5 billion seaport while Doha’s new US\$11 billion airport, Hamad International, is currently in the midst of a soft opening, with carriers transferring from the existing international airport throughout this year. The plan is for the new facility to become a regional transport hub.

Tilman Engel, a German who specialises in developing and implementing marketing and business development strategies for Qatari

Over 2.9 million tickets were sold for the 2010 Fifa World Cup in South Africa and even then some stadiums were noticeably less than full; although Qatar’s population is expected to grow sharply by 2022, it is inevitable that

there will be a heavy reliance on regional and international fans purchasing tickets for World Cup games. An influx of half a million people has been mooted, which will bring additional infrastructural pressures.

SMEs, puts it this way: “Unlike many previous hosting nations, where the games have often been the defining purpose of all investments, the World Cup in Qatar is designed to serve as a catalyst to drive and deliver an even more ambitious goal.

“Unlike large-scale countries,” he adds, “stretching the effects of run-up and implementation across a large region and affecting relatively few people, every aspect of life, business, social relations and human interaction in Qatar will be affected for at least ten years and counting.”

The highly politicised debate over when exactly the World Cup will be staged in 2022 bubbles away – mid-year temperatures appear to make a summer competition untenable, despite the so-far untested Qatari promise of fully air-conditioned venues, while a move to winter would wreak havoc with existing soccer schedules and open up Fifa and Qatar to suggestions that the goalposts of the 2010 bidding process have been moved. Meanwhile, there are also now reports that Qatar has requested permission to build as few as eight stadiums. “It must be very galling for those bidders that lost to Qatar to suddenly see that they promised 12 venues and now they’re saying, ‘OK, we’ll let you only build eight,’” says Michael Payne, the former International Olympic Committee marketing director. “That’s not a change you see all the time in the Olympics – London didn’t want to build an extra venue because of cost, not 30 per cent or more of all your venues. This was a material commitment, presumably in the bidding, to say: ‘If you want the World Cup, you build 12 venues.’”

The huge investment in infrastructural development, for the World Cup and beyond, is also likely to have other implications, according to Engel. “The tremendous demands to field an additional workforce of several thousand educated, well-trained and highly motivated staffers, to fulfil all conceivable service, support, management and organisational requirements, which needs to be developed on top of the current workforce, also does have the potential to reshape the role of women, expatriate residents and workers in this society,” he says.



Doha 2020's Noora Al Mannai says the question is “when, not if” the city will host the Olympic Games

Post-tournament, Qatar’s bid included plans for several all-modular stadiums, which are to be dismantled and reconstructed elsewhere in the world afterwards. Precisely how that will work has not yet been fully disclosed, but Raghu says: “Various options are being analysed in order to avoid the ‘white elephant’ situation. 12 stadiums, with ten of them within a radius of 25 to 30 kilometres, would be too large for Qatar.” It is the same situation with the much discussed air-cooling systems Qatar outlined, but did not elaborate on, during its bid. “Proposed cooling technology for stadiums is yet to be tested; its reliability is unproven,” Raghu adds matter-of-factly.

### What can you do to convince the IOC to give you the Olympics where two previous bids have failed?

That Qatar wants to host the Olympic Games is not in doubt. It has tried and failed twice now, with Doha first missing out in the race for the 2016 Games and then suffering the ignominy of elimination from the 2020 race at the same applicant candidate phase in May last year. The International Olympic Committee (IOC), which scrutinised a report prepared by the Doha 2020 team, concluded that there were enough concerns about Qatar’s climate and its ability to fill venues not to take the bid forward to join Tokyo, Madrid and Istanbul in the final stage.

Additional concerns were raised about the negative impact on global

television audiences of waiting for cooler conditions in October, a move which it was warned would lead to competition with other year-round sporting events and could create a ‘weekend Games’ in those markets where viewers would have less leisure time than in July or August, when the summer Olympics are traditionally staged.

For the record, Qatar had planned to stage the 2020 Games between 2nd and 18th October.

“With so many sports venues already in place and budgeted for, we felt that we offered the IOC great certainty and a low-cost Games plan, as well as an exciting legacy vision, especially around developing women’s sport in the Middle East,” said Noora Al Mannai, the Doha 2020 bid chief plucked from Enterprise Qatar, a group set up to champion small and medium-sized Qatari businesses, as the decision was revealed. “However for Doha,” she pointedly added, “it will always be a question of when, not if.”

There is not yet any official word as to whether Doha will bid for the 2024 summer Games, or indeed how it intends to resolve the IOC’s concerns, but the Olympics is clearly the mega-event Qatar covets above all others. Some, however, believe it is simply not feasible. “I think overall it is becoming the poster-child or textbook in how to use sport to rebrand, or even create a brand to begin with, a nation through sport,” Michael Payne says of Qatar. “They have a very clear strategy in terms of going after major ▶



Fifa's award of the 2022 World Cup to Qatar has bound the country and scandal-hit body together

events, building a very solid sporting infrastructure in the country and frankly punching way above their weight by having a clear vision and strategy. That has also, I think, got to be set against a bit of a reality check that money can't buy everything and I think particularly where the Olympics is concerned they've obviously run an excellent communications programme on their bidding and lobbying in the past, but have stumbled on the technical issues. I am of the view those technical issues are insurmountable."

Payne continues: "The country is just too small to stage an Olympic Games. There's no amount of revamping of schedules or anything that will solve that particular problem. You need a country that has a population significantly bigger than the number of tickets that you need to sell – the Olympics need full stadia. You've got to be certain that a country is big enough to sustain and support filling all of these world championships at the same time. When Qatar struggles to fill the venues for one championship that's an issue."

Qatar's Olympic ambitions cannot be faulted and it clearly has a compelling narrative as the first Middle Eastern country even to bid for the Games. As Al Mannai, speaking to *SportsPro* in May last year, put it: "By bringing the Olympic Games it will shape the life of the youth, it will shape the future of the region. If the youth become more engaged in sport

it will build an industry, it will build jobs for them; it will give them opportunities to be recognised and become leaders in the future."

#### What's the strategy for dealing with the cynics?

As much as there is an understanding and appreciation of Qatar's ambition when it comes to sport within the sports industry, there is also a sense that the country is fighting a losing public relations battle when it comes to explaining its strategy to the wider public. Scepticism and cynicism are rife, particularly with regards to the 2022 World Cup. The perception Qatar is simply hoovering up major events and sports properties with no apparent regard for money has, so far at least, proved impossible to halt.

As Tilman Engel suggests: "In today's globalised news and social media world, the internationally perceived success of 2022 will also be determined by the way Qatar manages to engage proactively with internal and external stakeholders early on."

He adds: "Much of the international criticism is strongly influenced by a genuine lack of proper information on the overall scope of the World Cup in Qatar and its legacy for the National Vision and beyond. Leaving the field of shaping international public opinion open to just derogatory and semi-informed detractors contributes to create a biased image which will become more difficult to overcome

with each day and storyline taking us closer to 2022."

In finding itself wed to Fifa by staging the organisation's showpiece tournament, Qatar has also become slightly muddled up in the seemingly endless politics and controversies surrounding world soccer's governing body, a situation which has hardly aided the country's attempts to install itself as a credible new player on the global stage. Qatar has no shortage of PR companies, consultants and communication specialists upon which to call, but Michael Payne traces the root of much of the criticism of Qatar, particularly from the UK, back to December 2010 in Zurich.

"I think you've got to view the UK media and reaction in the context of having lost the World Cup – albeit it wasn't Qatar that beat them, it was Russia," Payne says. "England ran a very bad campaign but to the public and the media there was an element of 'they stole it from us' as there is when you've lost a match and disagreed with the referee's decision.

"I think on the broader international stage you've probably got a slightly more measured media reaction. That measured reaction continues to be: 'Here's clearly a country investing a lot in attracting major events; probably with Dubai it is setting the agenda a little bit for this new region, which has not had a history of hosting many events.'"

The near impossibility of communication with senior staff from Qatar's leading sports organisations, either inside or outside of the country, hardly helps its international positioning and messaging – a situation which may well change as its World Cup preparations really get into gear and the organising team becomes more public-facing.

The money-is-no-object claim, meanwhile, was brought up by Noora Al Mannai during Doha 2020's ill-fated Olympic bid campaign last year. "Bidding for different competitions makes people or opponents start taking things and using it against you," she suggested. "This is one of the overused stories used against Qatar. I'm sure everyone knows that the main reason behind it is not the money; the money is the tool that we can use in order to achieve our objectives –

without money we can't do it, nobody can do it without money."

Within the sports industry, publicly at least, there is an acknowledgement of Qatar's ambition and positivity about its efforts to ingratiate itself in the global sports structure. Denis Oswald, the president of World Rowing and an IOC presidential candidate, offered one such testament when he said: "I think they have a genuine interest in sport. Of course they are looking to large events, to get the visibility and to probably put their name on the map. But in addition they do a lot for the benefit of sport and are probably not getting much in return."

Oswald was speaking at the Securing Sport conference in March, held in Doha to reflect the Qatari investment in the International Centre for Sport Security (ICSS) organisation, a body set up to bring together key stakeholders in the fight against sports-related corruption and in the quest for greater safety. Also in attendance was Haroon Lorgat, the former chief executive of the International Cricket Council. "It's impressive, to say the least," Lorgat said when asked about Qatar's sustained investment in sport, "because not so long ago you would not have associated sport with Qatar. If one is not passionate, you're certainly not going to push this kind of investment into it. I'm impressed by their willingness to promote sport, to protect sport and what they're investing in sport."

"I think 2022 may well surprise a few people."

### Where do the foreign investments figure in the masterplan?

While Qatar has been very successful in attracting events to its own shores – the Asian Games in 2006, Pan Arab Games in 2011, plus annual events including WTA and ATP tennis tournaments, a European Tour golf event and a round of the MotoGP World Championship amongst them – it has also been plotting a course internationally. It is all part of the national brand-building effort and, again with reference to the 2022 World Cup, in some cases a clear attempt to try and ingratiate itself in the global 'football family'.

At around the same time as Qatar was awarded Fifa's biggest event in December 2010, it was also agreeing a multi-year,

## Breeding success

The racing of Arabian horses is popular across Qatar. The thoroughbred game, the highest level of flat racing and breeding, has not yet caught on as much as it has done in neighbouring Dubai, where Sheikh Mohammed has built a breeding and racing empire that dominates the sport the world over. But things might be about to change. In 2010, the Qatar Racing and Equestrian Club [QREC], under the direction of the Emir's direct descendants, signed the longest deal in horse racing, agreeing to title sponsor France's most prestigious race, the Prix de l'Arc de Triomphe, until 2022. The Qatar Prix de l'Arc de Triomphe is an overtly nation-building property within Qatar's growing sports sponsorship portfolio. Over the Channel in the UK, however, another strand of the Qatari royal family is practising a different model of sports investment.

British Champions Series was created in 2011 by the PR arm of British horse racing. Essentially, it yokes together the 35 best flat races across the British summer into a clearly defined series, and crowns those with a new day of racing, British Champions Day, designed to be the richest in the country and one day the most prestigious in the world. The goal was to create a narrative and an ease of understanding that would appeal to the casual British sports fan. Qatar Investment & Projects Development Holding Company (QIPCO), little-known in the UK but with multiple interests across the Middle East, stepped up as title sponsor for an initial two-year deal worth a small seven-figure sum.

Nominally owned by six brothers, all nephews of the Emir, QIPCO's racing investment is actually led by Sheikh Fahad (top right), the youngest



of the three adult brothers. Educated in the UK, the young Sheikh got a taste for racing as a teenager in 2009. He was at Newmarket when Makfi – sold for peanuts by Sheikh Mohammed's Godolphin racing empire – won the celebrated 2,000 Guineas, at a stroke adding millions to its value at stud.

Inspired, Sheikh Fahad persuaded his brothers to buy the stallion, and QIPCO-owned Qatar Bloodstock was born. When the chance came to own a premium chunk of British racing, which comes with myriad high-level hospitality benefits and represents a real reputational foothold in a quest to take on Godolphin and Ireland's Coolmore operation, it was seized. Adopting a strategy that should allow more consumer-facing brands to join them, QIPCO renewed the deal last year, at a much higher rate, until 2017.

US\$220 million agreement through the government-controlled Qatar Sports Investment (QSI) vehicle to sponsor FC Barcelona's shirts. The deal initially saw the logo of the Qatar Foundation – a not-for-profit government arm dedicated to education, science and community

development – sit alongside existing Barcelona partner Unicef. In November last year, however, it was confirmed that Qatar Airways would take Qatar Foundation's place on the front of the Spanish champions' shirts from next season in a second phase of the original ►

deal – an announcement which did not play well in the world's media.

In May 2011, Qatar took another step into the soccer world through its Al Jazeera Sports media company. The broadcaster acquired the French rights to Ligue 1 soccer for the next six seasons, paying €192 million (US\$276.6 million) in the process. Months later, in December, it added four of the five available Uefa Champions League packages in France, for €61 million annually, to continue the assembly of a formidable portfolio of soccer content in one of Europe's major markets. Al Jazeera has also entered the highly competitive US marketplace, notably acquiring US national soccer team games in August last year for its rebranded BeIN Sport network.

Most notably of all, QSI has moved into soccer club ownership. In June 2011 it bought 70 per cent of Paris Saint-Germain, one of France's leading clubs, from Colony Capital for US\$57.66 million. Ten months later it acquired the remaining 30 per cent for US\$39.4 million. Huge investment followed, with star players such as Zlatan Ibrahimovic, Lucas Moura and, ultimately, David Beckham joining a club infused by an injection of additional funding by a December 2012 investment to the tune of €150 million-plus by the Qatar Tourism Authority (QTA), which was dressed up as a sponsorship deal. French newspaper *Le Parisien* had the right idea when it suggested the state-owned tourist board's investment was less a sponsorship deal and more a 'vast publicity campaign intended to promote the image of Qatar'.

Away from soccer, Qatar has invested heavily in horse racing. Qatar Racing and Equestrian Club is in the midst of a five-year agreement with France Galop to sponsor the prestigious annual Prix de l'Arc de Triomphe in Paris. There have been smaller investments in rallying, where Qatar is sponsoring a team in 2013. Qatari brands are also moving into action. Earlier this year, Argentina and FC Barcelona star Lionel Messi became a global brand ambassador of Qatar-based, state-owned telecommunications firm Ooredoo, following its rebrand from Qtel.

There have also been grandiose gestures on the international stage which have failed to pay off, however, such as



Doha's Aspire Zone has attracted the attention of top teams worldwide, including Manchester United



The US\$58 million Losail International Circuit has hosted MotoGP's Grand Prix of Qatar since 2004



The Khalifa Tennis Complex hosts both the WTA's Qatar Total Open and ATP's Qatar ExxonMobil Open

the offer to effectively cover sponsorship, venue construction, media rights and prize money for the IAAF in return for the hosting rights for its 2017 World Athletics Championships. The IAAF instead gave the event to London, opting for the Olympic legacy rather than new-world narrative.

It is not just sport where Qatar has made huge international investments, of course. In recent years it has undertaken what a May report by Bloomberg described as a 'US\$60 billion-a-year spree' around the world, a series of major brand-building investments. The same report suggested Qatar is now likely





Paris Saint-Germain president Nasser Al-Khelaifi



Richard Gasquet (right) won 2013's Qatar Open

to rein in its global spending – which currently includes the holding of stakes in companies such as Volkswagen, Tiffany, and Barclays bank, as well as 95 per cent control of London's latest dramatic new landmark, the Shard, and full control of the city's famous Harrods department store – as it renews its focus on domestic

## “You see more and more interest and sport becoming a key part of government strategy and society.”

investment in infrastructure.

The Markaz analysis of the economic implications of the 2022 World Cup for Qatar suggests that the country will still be reliant, to some extent at least, on international companies for support. The report says: ‘GCC firms are actively expected to pursue the diverse opportunities in Qatar. Intra-regional trade would receive a major boost as most of the raw materials involved in the construction of many projects would be sourced from neighbouring companies. Large regional financial institutions would stand to benefit by offering financial services to the large number of projects.’

Markaz's MR Raghu adds: “The unprecedented nature of the project in Qatar calls for the involvement of foreign players, who may not be familiar with the Gulf business environment. As various infrastructure programmes are being unleashed across GCC, Qatar will be in a competition for resources. Making available the required resources at the right time, right cost and at the right quality would be challenging.”

### How do you sow the seeds to grow local stars with global appeal?

One of the criticisms often levelled at Qatar is that it has little sporting credibility or history to draw on, and it is certainly true to say that its focus on sport, at almost every level, has been a relatively recent one. The 2006 Asian Games, staged in Doha, are generally considered to have been the country's ‘coming out’ moment on the international – or at least continental – stage. The same year, however, saw the creation of the Qatar Professional Football League Development Committee, a board put together by the Qatar Football Association (QFA) to help professionalise the sport in the country. The body ultimately became the Qatar Stars League, which is now a 12-team annual competition run centrally by the QFA.

The attempt to professionalise sport in the country is at least matched, however, by the efforts being made at grassroots level.

Neither the QFA nor the Qatar Olympic Committee (QOC) responded to *SportsPro's* request for an interview but the QOC secretary general Sheikh Saoud bin Abdulrahman al-Thani did deliver a speech in May, to mark Qatar's Sport Excellence Day, in which he outlined Qatar's grassroots sports policy. “It is QOC's top priority to boost community sport and make sport into a lifestyle,” he claimed.

National Sport Day, he added, was “top of the list of our most important initiatives”. The annual event, which was staged for the first time in 2012, has been designed to widen the scope of community participation in sport, provide opportunities for all members of Qatari society to take part in activities, promote a sports culture in the country and to establish measureable criteria for social and individual sports participation amongst Qataris.

The event is next scheduled for 11th February 2014 and certainly features prominently on billboards around Doha, an indication of the importance attached to it by Qatar's rulers. “The event has enriched the culture of the community, government and non-government organisations with the values of sport,” Sheikh Saoud insisted. “It has helped in improving human health, mentally, physically and psychologically.

“Our second initiative is the Schools Olympic Programme, which is in its sixth year now. It is a pioneering programme targeted at the young generation and school students. At the educational institutions, our children study science and other subjects to enrich their minds but now physical activities have also been incorporated with a concept of ‘sound mind in sound body’.

“Besides these two major projects, ►

## Qatar Stars League

Club	Chairman	Established	Stadium	Sponsors
Al Arabi Sports Club	Hitmi Al-Hitmi	1952	Grand Hamad Stadium (13,000)	Adidas
Al Gharafa Sports Club	Sheikh Hamad Bin Thamer Al Thani	1979	Thani Bin Jassin Stadium (22,000)	Errea
Al Kharaitiyat Sports Club	Sheikh Hamad Al Thani	1996	Al Khor Stadium (12,000)	Oryx, Burrda
Al Khor Sports Club	Sheikh Khalifa Bin Ahmed Al Thani	1961	Al Khor Stadium (13,000)	Al Sultan Beach Resort, Adidas
Al Rayyan Sports Club	Sheikh Abdullah bin Hamad Al Thani	1967	Ahmed bin Ali Stadium (22,000)	NAS, Macron
Al Sadd Sports Club	Sheikh Mohamed Bin Khalifa Al Thani	1969	Jassim Bin Hammad Stadium (14,000)	Vodafone, Burrda
Al Sailiyah Sports Club	Abdullah Saeed Al Eida	1995	Ahmed bin Ali Stadium (22,000)	QIB, Nike
Al Wakrah Sports Club	Sheikh Khalifa Bin Hassan Al Thani	1959	Saoud Bin Abdulrahman Stadium (12,000)	Alijarah, Nike
El Jaish Sports Club	Hamad bin Ali Al-Attiyah	2011	Suhaim bin Hamad Stadium (13,000)	Napt, Nike
Lekhvia Sports Club	Sheikh Faisal Bin Ahmed Al Thani	2009	Abdullah Bin Khalifa Stadium (15,000)	Masraf Al Rayan, Burdda
Qatar Sports Club	Sheikh Hamad Bin Saheem Al Thani	1961	Suhaim bin Hamad Stadium (12,000)	QNB, Adidas
Umm Salal Sports Club	Sheikh Faisal Bin Ahmed Al Thani	1996	Grand Hamad Stadium (13,000)	Nike

there are several activities and programmes which have been organised to serve all communities across the country, including youth centres and firgan playgrounds. Recently, Al Wakra Firgan playground was officially launched to be the first developed playground. There are 15 projects as of now, apart from four sport and social centres for ladies, as well as multiple sport activities for all age groups. All these programmes, initiatives and activities are being carried out in the light of Qatar 2030 National Vision and based on the sport strategy plan 2011 to 2016.”

Michael Payne believes such investment is essential and has implications even at the top of the sporting food chain, when it comes to globally recognised events like a Fifa World Cup. “You’ve got to invest

in the local culture, environment and education with the younger generation to create true fans and participants as much as chasing the big headline-grabbing events that are for rebranding the nation,” he says. “These events only work if there’s ultimately a strong, passionate local fanbase. You can stage an awful lot of world championships – I think there would be no question about Qatar’s ability to stage any individual world championship – but you’ve got to make sure the experience on the ground is that you’ve got packed stadiums.

“The message would be make sure you’re investing so you can get to that position where you have got that credible fanbase, because it’s not credible to say, ‘We’ll fly all the people in,’ and it’s a short-term play if you’re holding all these events



Qatar’s first female Olympians in London in 2012

and you can’t fill the venues.”

The national sports initiatives and the investment in sporting infrastructure such as the Aspire Zone – a remarkable centre of state of the art facilities which has proved attractive enough for many a European soccer club seeking warmer climes during the winter – hint at that longer-term play.

“The fact they are playing and have a greater role as a regional hub and have built great facilities, providing they’re all being used, serves sport very, very well globally,” Payne concludes. “You see more and more interest and sport becoming a key part of government strategy and society when, as a region, the Middle East until very recently didn’t care that much about sport – not in the way that, say, Asia or Africa did. Asia, the Koreas of this world, really discovered the sports agenda two or three decades ago and invested in it and the Middle East is now discovering the same potential.”

Cultural issues are also a factor. Qatar sent female athletes – swimmer Nada Arkaji, table tennis player Aya Majdi, shooter Bahiya Al-Hamad and sprinter Noor Al-Malki – to the Olympics for the first time only last year. As its seemingly unstoppable rise to the top table of world sport gathers pace, Qatar has much work to do – and in a variety of very different areas. ■