

A LETTER FROM

DOHA, QATAR

Living a Dream

– Written by Omar Al Sayrafi, Qatar



Photo: © Nebojsa Popovic

It's hard to visit Qatar these days, or to walk by its downtown or marinas without noticing that the country is still living under the influence of a big, life changing event that took place here recently. It's not easy to talk to a Qatari citizen or a resident and they don't refer to this event in their conversation as a historic point and dividing everything into "before" and "after" that event.

THE DREAM

The FIFA World Cup 2022 is now around six months old. But it will likely live for more than six decades in the history of football. Football fans still talk about Pele's first world cup in 1958 and they will unlikely forget Messi's first world cup quicker. There are many other reasons for FIFA 2022 Qatar to last long in the memory of football, as it was a first and last of its kind. It was the first World Cup in the Middle East, the first in winter, the first in air-conditioned stadiums, and the first where two matches taking place at the same time and in different venues could be attended on site! This sounds impossible but it was proven in the smallest country ever to host a FIFA World Cup (although you had to choose which half to attend of each match!). Also, the 2022 version was the last FIFA World Cup with only 36 teams competing in it before it's going to be 48 teams, starting from 2026. This fact has also given Qatar 2022 special

records which will never be beaten, such as the highest number of goals scored in a World Cup of similar number of teams, as well as sharing the highest number scored in a final match.

Usually, football World Cups tend to have remarkable impacts on host countries, but probably Qatar was the country most impacted by hosting the World Cup. I remember in 2010, when I was watching the live announcement of the winning bids to host the FIFA World Cup 2022 and 2018, the words of a representative of one of the competing countries (I will go back to him in the end of this article). He said in an interview when asked about what increases his country's chances to host the world cup: "if we are asked to host it next week, we are ready. We have venues, hotels, and infrastructure". Before this statement, and before it was known who would be hosting the World Cup, this was a big, beautiful dream for most Qataris. A dream we believed in, to a level that allowed us to be here now on the short list, waiting for the big announcement. At that time, I, like many other Qataris, understood that this was a dream; but what we never understood was why hosting a FIFA world cup had to be a dream for our country and for the Middle East. Why was it always something related to other parts of the world and we here could only watch it on TV and dream about

it? It could absolutely not be due to a lack of passion for football, which is the most popular sport in the vast majority of middle eastern and Arabic countries. Probably because history showed that the FIFA World Cup has never come close to our region – it has traveled around the World but never been in the center.

A DREAM COMES TRUE

Sometime later, history finally smiled on us, and it was officially announced that the FIFA World Cup 2022 will be in Qatar, and thus officially announced that the dream has come true! A storm of excitement and happiness hit the people of Qatar and the Middle East and many smaller dreams started to grow between the population who couldn't believe that they were going to host the world in a few years - some still couldn't believe it even few days before the opening ceremony!

Immediately, the era of The World Cup started in the country and no voice was louder than the football voice for over a decade. Twelve unparalleled years in the history of the small country kicked off with new laws, new strategies, new massive projects, changes in businesses and the job market, increases in population demographic changes and a growing excitement amongst locals and expats alike.

THE JOURNEY

The mission was very big for the small rich country. It was estimated that almost half of the globe will be watching the event on television, and an increase of more than 50% of the population was expected. It worth mentioning though that this event was not just a random step for Qatar. Indeed, in 2008 Qatar launched its national vision of 2030 which included four pillars: human development, social development, economic development, and environmental development - the World Cup was a perfect opportunity to achieve a big part of this vision in a relatively short timeframe. The rate and scale of development in all perspectives was amazing. Qatar today is absolutely not like it was twelve years ago. This perhaps doesn't sound so impressive as twelve years are long enough for any country to change, but let's first have a look at the scale of some of those changes from different perspectives:

INFRASTRUCTURE, A JUMP INTO THE FUTURE

Starting with infrastructure, Qatar now has more developed cities beside the capital Doha, thanks to the World Cup's reach. It also has a very advanced metro network which was not there before the World Cup. Doha has a new modern downtown, Msheireb, and even a new entire municipality, Lusail, which hosted the final match. Hamad international Airport is now one of the best and most beautiful airports in the world. The new Doha port has become a tourist landmark. A new huge highways network links the cities and many new parks, hospitality and entertainment facilities have sprung up.. Of course there are also eight amazing stadiums which all have sustainability and legacy plans. This huge infrastructure development was a great legacy for the country and it was achieved in a short time, taking into consideration the massive projects and the amount of work. However, infrastructure was not the only benefit for Qatar and its people from hosting the World Cup.

A CULTURAL WINDOW

Qatar has always been a multi-cultured country with hundreds of different nationalities in the Qatari workforce. However, the demography of the country is quite unique. Qatari citizens make no more than 12% of the total population of

around 2.6 million! Therefore, and despite the huge cultural variation created by the expatriates who make the other 88% of the population, Qataris are, generally, a single-cultured population sharing the same traditions, the same religion, and the same geo-environmental background. The conservative nature of this small population makes it more challenging to open to other cultures despite being surrounded by many different cultures, and that the Qatari citizen is usually well traveled. Now that the World was coming to Qatar, the World's eyes started to become widely open and critical of Qatar and Qataris. Likewise, Qatar and Qataris started to become more open to know more about the arriving guests, and what they were thinking about the hosts. With this mutual interest now established, the cultural interaction started even before the football, but thanks

to football. Local cultural organizations and activists started actively showing and talking about Qatari traditions and culture via different local and international channels, which was interesting for others to know and explore. Moreover, many of the already small Qatari population had roles in the work and preparation for the World Cup, but this was still not enough for the massive project. Therefore, Qatari personnel found themselves - just as in normal life - surrounded by a majority of expatriates who came from many different countries to help and work together with Qataris. Very quickly, Qataris realized that this is an event for the World, but made in Qatar. In order for Qataris to deliver what they had promised, they had to understand and support others, in the same way others had to understand and support them in a necessary two-way process. As someone



© Simon Holmes - FIFA/Getty Images



who worked in World Cup venues, it was amazing to see very different cultures meeting and working together every day and how quickly everyone adapted to new cultures. For instance, it's unusual to see inside World Cup venues (and probably unlikely to be seen again soon), scenes like non-Muslims stopping the music during the prayer call, or the workforce performing Friday prayers in stadium's open squares, Qatari traditional clothes (thobe for men and abaya for women) side-to-side with other outfits, and many other examples of how football can still shine and impress regardless of the language or the culture of where it's played – because football is a language, and football is a culture.

“HUMAN RIGHTS”

Ever since the preparation for the World Cup kicked off in Qatar, talk about human rights and particularly labourers' rights never stopped in the international media. With all the massive infrastructure projects mentioned above, is not surprising to know that hundreds of thousands of workers worked on these projects. Subsequently, is also not surprising to know that significant numbers of jobs were provided, which also can lead to a number of related opportunities, successes, disappointments,

injuries and even cases of death. However, as soon as all these preparations started and the number of labourers started to increase, the need for new laws and regulations became obvious. These new regulations started being developed from the early beginning. Then in 2017 Qatar signed an agreement with the UN International Labour Organisation and a number of new laws have been passed, not only in Qatar, but also in the region, affecting labour disputes, businesses and human rights. This cooperation is continuing, and the legacy of these laws will remain.

“MIDDLE EAST SMILES AGAIN”

Probably one of the greatest outcomes of the FIFA World Cup 2022 is that the Arab world and Middle East now have more self-confidence than ever. The far and recent history of this region is unfortunately not so happy. The region has experienced a lot of difficult times between wars, crises, disasters and political unrest. All this has resulted in a kind of disappointment, desperation, and low self-esteem and lack of trust in the ability of middle eastern and Arabic countries to achieve high-end, world class projects. FIFA Qatar 2022 put a smile on that sad face and brought back the absent confidence to the people of this area and

sent a message to the world that we also share the same motivations, passion and dreams, and nothing is actually too big for us if we are given the opportunity.

It was indeed an event for all Arabs and the Middle East. Many of these countries opened their doors for world cup guests and many people from neighbouring countries came to Qatar. Furthermore, for Arabic teams it was like playing at home, and the results speak for themselves. This success has also opened the door for more ambitions and so far, two requests from Middle Eastern countries are submitted to host a future World Cup.

FIFA Qatar 2022 was a literal translation of one of the core principles of football, which is football for all, and all have the right to be part of it.

PLAYING FIFA WORLD CUP, AS A DOCTOR

Sometimes, only the most difficult dreams come true. When I was a young football player, just like any football player in the world, my biggest dream was to play in the World Cup. When I reached the under eighteen youth team with Al Sadd club, I decided to quit football for medicine, and my dream had to stop there. But I never knew that sports medicine retained a line between me and my dream. A few years

before the World Cup, a miracle happened and I found myself indeed playing in the World Cup, not as a footballer, but as a doctor. I was very lucky and honored to be assigned as a venue medical manager of one of the world cup stadiums, Al Thumama.

As a former football player, football has influenced all my moves and approaches, I have always reminded the medical team I worked with that we are just another team participating in this world cup and the medical team is no less important than any football team in this tournament. We also aim to win, and just like the winning team, we must train hard, for long hours, travel long distances, be in our positions on time and understand the rules.

ORIENTATION

Obviously, participating in the FIFA World Cup is not a routine or a frequent experience in anyone's career. In fact, this event was a lifetime experience for the vast majority of the workforce who were privileged to be called up for it. As a first, and probably last, and certainly biggest experience for most of the medical team, there was an absolute need for the team to be well oriented. Oriented to football, to the tournament, and to the venue which in reality looks like a small city expanded on a massive space with many floors and access-restricted areas. With thousands of workforce working in at least twenty other functional areas, medical was only one of them. Whilst we as healthcare providers are used to some level of autonomy and independence in our workplaces, in World Cup venues, this is not actually the case. We have to closely work with other important functional areas, and comply with a unique system. For example, in a 40,000 capacity stadium such as Al Thumama, we had over 130 healthcare providers including doctors, nurses, paramedics and medical support staff, running 11 medical sites and 9 ambulances and covering all floors and areas, and yet we were not the biggest team in the venue.

GO FOR GOLD

In order to provide a proper orientation for all medical staff, (over 3500 serving all venues) as well as other crucial trainings, an online platform was created and called "Go for Gold", emphasizing the main goal for the medical team: to achieve the medical equivalent of winning the World Cup.

"Go for Gold" aimed to provide answers to all the questions that might come to mind for someone who is having a first-time experience in providing medical services in a sports event, not just in a World Cup. The courses answered questions such as: What is the FIFA World Cup? Why is important? Why are we treating players differently? Where is my location? How do I get there? What is my scope of service? How do I communicate with my team? How do I do my documentation? How do I set up my clinic? And many other small and big questions. The online platform worked perfectly as a manual and reference for all medical coverage-related topics. However, on-site training and workshops were also provided repeatedly for all staff on different subjects.

SPORTS MEDICINE

Sports medicine in Qatar experienced a golden era during the FIFA World Cup 2022. It was a perfect opportunity for this young specialization in the country to shine locally and internationally and interact with other, older, medical specialties.

Aspetar, the leading sports medicine and orthopedic hospital in the region, played a large role in the World Cup and received a remarkable number of World Cup players and provided them with the highest quality of sports medicine services in all disciplines. In fact, here was another unique 'first': it was the first time there was a single hospital dedicated to player care during a FIFA World Cup.

WHAT'S AFTER THE WORLD CUP?

From day one of the preparations for the World Cup, Qatar established a committee to manage and supervise the event; this committee was not called anything related to football, world cup or even sports. It was called The Supreme Committee for Delivery & Legacy. The committee is still there and continues, because whilst the World Cup has been delivered, the legacy of the World Cup for the country is endless and will live long in the coming generations through all the perspectives mentioned earlier in this article. Qatar is still living the dream and will continue to do so. Qatar has united the world through football in its small, yet warm Majlis for one unforgettable month. Qatar has inspired many other nations to believe in their dreams too. Today Qatar can host any similar, or bigger, event –

even if it is after a week, as that gentleman from another country said during the announcement ceremony. This idea alone shows us how much impact the FIFA World Cup and football has had on the country.

This tournament has provided a huge impetus to the country in terms of implementing the national vision. The base is now stronger, the journey will continue, the hard work will continue, and the dreams will not stop after today.

We are also optimistic that in achieving this seemingly unattainable dream, Qatar has inspired many other countries who until 2022, also believed that hosting the FIFA World Cup will never be an option for them, to continue to dream big and believe anything is possible.

From Qatar, we wish the next hosts who will achieve this dream for the first time, Australia and New Zealand, the very best Women's World Cup in 2023!

Acknowledgement:

Special thanks to my dear colleagues: Celeste Geertsema, Liesel Geertsema, and Peter Dzendrowskyj, for their input and inspiration.

Omar Al-Seyrafi M.D.

*GP Sports Medicine Physician
Aspetar Orthopedic and Sports Medicine
Hospital
Doha, Qatar*

Contact: omar.alsayrafi@aspetar.com