

PERFORMANCE MODEL BEHIND QATAR FOOTBALL

THE ROAD TO 2022

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HOW IT ALL BEGAN: A CONTEXTUAL APPRAISAL

We believe that any project should start from an understanding of the culture and habits of the Country where it will be implemented.

Recent estimates indicated Country's population accounted for 313,000 Qatari citizens, and approximately 6,500 football registered players at the Qatar Football Association (QFA). When compared with other countries, these data suggested the Country local population size constitutes a substantial limitation for talent identification and used in the past as a reason to justify unsuccess.

Notwithstanding this, the Country's geography, and the population density distributed, to a great extent, in the city of Doha, plus one of the highest GDP per capita worldwide, and a new strategic vision in the Qatar football industry become strengths that shaped the start of our journey toward 2022.

In this context, the QFA and QSL (Qatar Stars League), under the Qatar Olympic Committee on the one hand, and Aspire Academy, under the Ministry of Culture and Sport on the other, represent the three main stakeholders of football in Qatar.

Aspire Academy was founded in 2004. It is one of the world's leading sporting

academies nurturing elite young athletes in football and other sports while also providing them with secondary education following an integrated educational programme to pursue their dreams of becoming champions in sport and life (Figure 1).

THE ELEMENTS OF SUCCESS

Following an operational framework in place since 2010, the Qatar Football Model allowed to enhance the performance of individual players and contributed to making National Teams and Clubs competitive at an international level, ultimately leading to significant accomplishments.

The U19 Asian Cup success in 2014 in Myanmar was the preamble anticipating the glorious campaign at the 2019 Asian Cup in the UAE, with the Qatar National Team lifting the trophy for the first time in its history.

In recent years, all the Qatari National teams qualified for AFC championships at the youth level, another attestation of achievement substantiating further the foundations and consistency of the project.

Regardless of the level, these achievements were founded on three fundamental pillars:

- a strategic vision

- targeted investments
- stability of management and technical staff

The centralization of the elite athletes' pool contributed to Aspire Academy becoming a leading institution in fulfilling a long-term athlete development plan, with the pursuit of integrating processes and data at youth and senior levels following the same vision.

A number of important investments in state-of-the-art facilities, cutting-edge technology, and high-level experts from around the world turned the vision of establishing the perfect sporting environment into a consolidated entity. The investments were fruitful and impactful thanks to the stability of technical staff led by a consistent management team focused on fulfilling the organizational vision. This methodological continuity over the years was vital to establishing strong roots in athletes' development.

GET THE BASICS RIGHT: THE STRATEGIC PILLARS

Informed by a contextual analysis of weaknesses and strengths of football in Qatar at the early stages of the project, we defined 7 strategic pillars founded on a player-centered model.

Figure 1: Main stakeholders of football in Qatar.



We appreciated that conceptualization of a scheme of development aiming always to find a way to stimulate self-awareness in all the proposed activities was the best approach to support the active engagement of Qatari football players in understanding the learning process.

They became active protagonists of a process in which identifying their personal goals and determination of training plans become agreed routinely with their coaching staff. Therefore, we defined all the strategic pillars with the objective to support players' awareness in mind.

The combined efforts of all relevant stakeholders, together with the fulfilment of strategic objectives guided by our 7 pillars, were fundamental to be effective within the path of this self-evolving journey. Given the long-term project's goals, such an approach did not aim for immediate results but provided a founding platform for a broader and more tangible impact in the medium term.

1. Data Collection

To benchmark players, we introduced standardized assessments evaluating the main physical performance capacities including endurance, strength, and speed. In addition to this, an important investment facilitating country-wide instalments of optical tracking systems in all stadiums provided us with technical, tactical, and physical data of players during match-play. The same systems were also installed in Aspire Academy pitches.

Over these years, all these data have been collected and analyzed to define position-specific benchmarks for players of all teams across the Country. In collaboration with the QSL, and to improve players' commitment and stimulate them to reach their maximal performance, we established a Salary Evaluation process. It consists in objective evaluations of the key parameters of players performance. Training attendance, minutes played, National team call up, physical and technical match data, and physical assessments were linked with the

salary-related evaluation classified by seven distinct thresholds (from higher to lower) given the individual performances and playing position.

2. Recruitment

Staff recruitment was another important aspect for building a sporting environment of excellence to nurture of talent pool.

High-level academic background, years of experiences at football professional Clubs/Federations, and strong ethical values were the key principles to be



Image: Aspire Academy. Doha, Qatar.

selected as part of the Football Performance & Science department at Aspire Academy. In keeping with the eclecticism of the contemporary population in Qatar, the cultural diversity represented the added value to our Institution in combination with solid knowledge base and high-profile expertise at the service of a world-class team.

3. Training Facility

Founded in 2004, Aspire Academy has grown into a distinguished Academy that is today recognized as the world’s leading sports academy in the development of youth athletes. Since January 2018, the Aspire Academy Football Performance Center become the National Teams Headquarter and a leading training facility for youth and senior player development.

Aspire Academy is in the forefront of sporting and academic development of student-athletes. The Aspire Academy Football Performance Center spans 38,000 square meters established on innovative concept to address the needs of players and staff in the era of modern football. The Aspire Academy Football Performance Center provides a unique environment bridging the gap between science and practice trough the integration of technical, performance and medical areas. The dynamic interconnection between the different areas inside the center was conceived to facilitate an efficient multiway

flow of players and staff from the offices to the training space. Founded on a player-centered model, with the sports scientist analyzing the athlete mostly on the pitch, the Football Performance Center is a step toward the future of football, replacing and advancing the traditional concept of the sports science labs. The Football Performance Center is considered a state-of-the-art facility equipped with cutting-edge technology at the technical staff service to provide elite athletes with the optimal training environment and contribute to player performance enhancement.

4. Training Methodology

The Aspire Academy training methodology is based on an evidence-informed approach taking into consideration the progressive differentiation of the growth process during the development of our student-athletes. With the scouting process starting from the Talent & Feeders generations (6-to-12 yrs.), student-athletes enter the full-time curriculum together with School activities contingent on selection within a decision-making process by different departments’ authorities at our Institution. The typical weekly schedule of student-athletes at Aspire Academy involves six school classes and double training sessions three days per week, whereas morning classes and afternoon training sessions only in the other days. Official competitions with their respective Clubs take place every weekend.

Moreover, to give them the opportunity to compete against international teams at the youth level, Aspire Academy organizes, at regular intervals, friendly matches and tournaments.

In this context, the physical performance curriculum of our athletes is broken down into in 4 different levels:

- Basic Motor Skill (9-12 yrs.): coordination and basic motor skills acquisition by means of multi-sport activities and unstructured games.
- Skill Acquisition (13-14 yrs.): to acquire and explore, in more detail, advanced coordination skills through football games and sports-specific activities.
- Athlete Construction (15-16 yrs.): a special focus on strength and conditioning, with complementary drills and exercises to facilitate mental training.
- Player Specialization (17-18 yrs.): Using the game model to improve the player on a physical, technical and cognitive level, respecting their individual needs.

5. Data Integration

The alignment of advanced technologies, the development of a training register, and standard operating procedures for data collection among the different stakeholders (QFA, QSL, and Aspire Academy), made the data sharing possible between Clubs and National Teams. This process granted

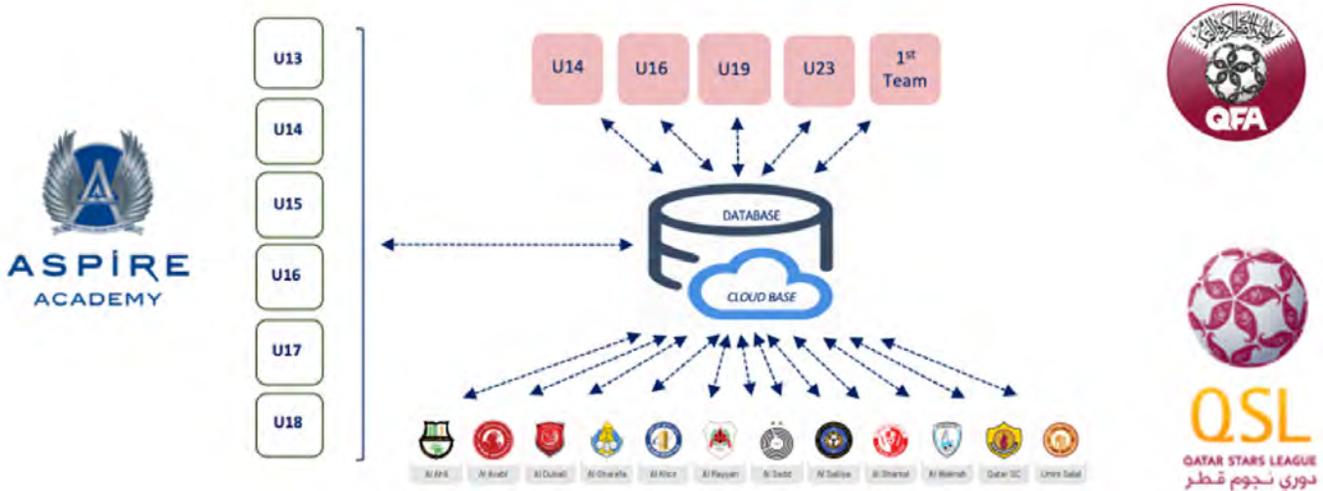


Figure 2: Data Management Framework.



Figure 3: Qatar Football Analytics Dashboard.

to follow up the longitudinal tracking of players' development. The huge amount of data collected during the years, within a centralized cloud-based system, allowed us to define benchmarks for player position and identify individual targets (Figure 2).

During the season 2016-17 we released the Qatar Football Analytics Dashboard, an integrated data management system, that, for the first time, enabled coaches and players of the Country to access their respective data via an interactive and smart solution streamlining information relevant to player and team performance.

Information regarding physical assessments, training register, training load, match analysis, wellness and match videos were integrated in this dashboard (Figure 3).

The introduction of a Performance Analyst in all the Clubs/National Teams guaranteed the quality of data collection and its continuity despite the turnover of the coaching staff over the seasons.

Tracking growth, assessing biological maturation, and finalizing an injury surveillance system were additional information collected at Aspire Academy and shared between different staff for optimizing players performance.

Establishing such a process brought us a tangible competitive advantage.

6. Knowledge Sharing

With the aim to support the continuous professional development of our technical staff and to expand the breadth and impact of Aspire Academy, we launched the Aspire in the World Fellows programme in 2014. The Aspire Fellows is a community of professional football clubs and their staff who engage regularly to promote best practice in elite football training and performance.

Since its inception, the Aspire in the World Fellows involves representatives of 40 Clubs and 10 Federations from 5 Continents. Members of this community also exchange their knowledge and experiences at our annual Aspire Academy Global Summit on Performance and Science. Over these years, the Summit has been an itinerant event and featured valuable contributions and participation of well-renowned guest speakers from the football world.

Since 2017 edition held in London, this global community finalised together series of research projects aiming to address target areas relevant to players performance enhancement.

A dedicated online portal, the Aspire Fellows web platform (<https://fellows.aspire.qa/>) was invaluable for us to foster ongoing discussion and aiding the transition

for our community to work together. The platform also enables the Aspire Fellows to share content on their own Club/National Teams training methodologies, application of technology, research, and other relevant content. To date, the platform features our Summit Sessions, Presentations and Exclusive Interviews where the Aspire Fellows and public audience can access more than 330 videos with interviews from top experts around the world in the field of football performance.

7. Applied Research

The strength of Aspire Academy is to conduct applied research activities which impact the development of elite Qatari athletes. Research efforts were also made in collaboration with key domestic (e.g. Qatar Olympic Committee, QSL and QFA, QNRF, Aspetar) and international stakeholders contributing to the professional development of staff working in sports performance-related fields. This diversified skillset along our research infrastructure has allowed Aspire Academy to achieve a strong credibility and track record in research in the field of sports performance.

Aspire Academy has produced peer-reviewed research since 2005. Until 2021, a Scopus search for "Aspire Academy" as

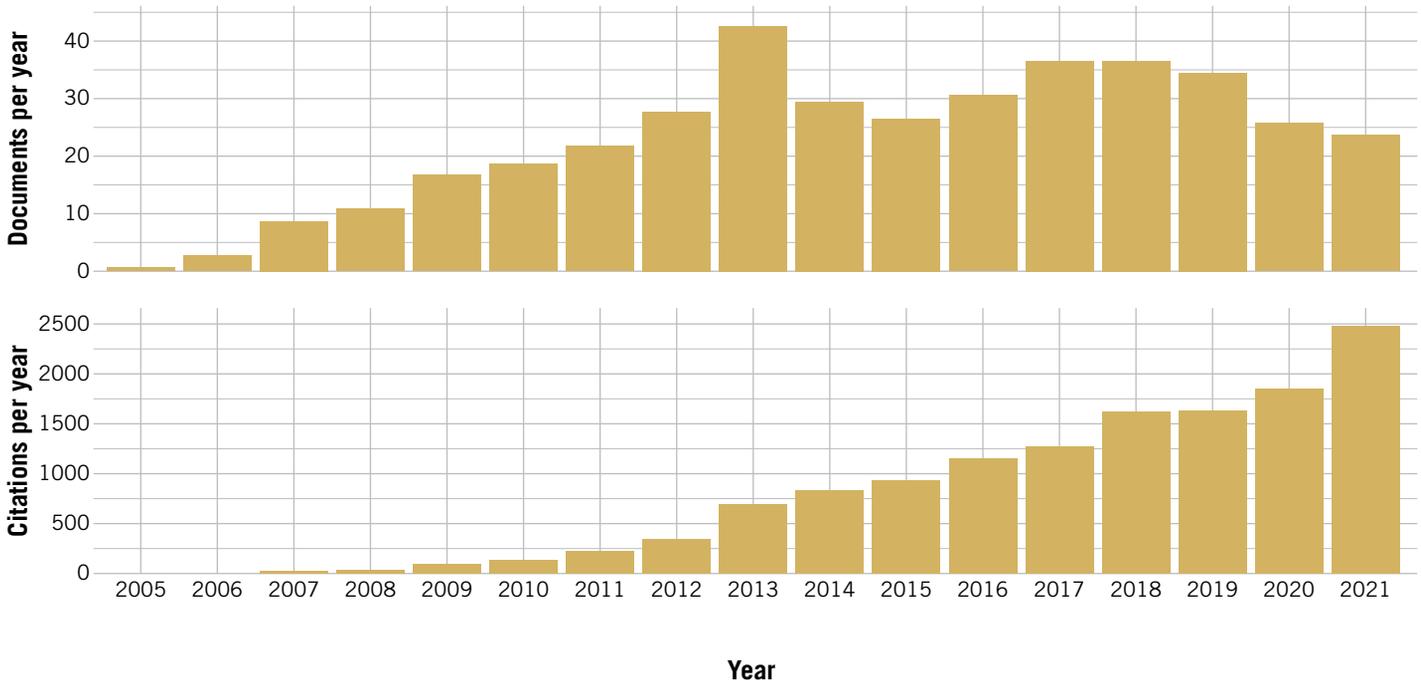


Figure 4: Aspire Academy research profile.

Institution name revealed 411 scientific publications indexed in scientific journals for a subtotal of 13,164 citations in peer-reviewed publications since then (Figure 4).

THE TIME IS NOW: TOWARDS THE FIFA WORLD CUP QATAR 2022™

During this long journey, Qatar prepared the players and the team to compete for the upcoming FIFA World Cup Qatar 2022™.

The Qatar First National Team sealing the 2019 Asian Cup Trophy for its first time at a senior level, while also previously in 2014 with the U19 generation with the same pool of players, was an attestation of the extraordinariness of this long-term programme.

Aspire nurtured almost 75% of the Qatar First National Team players pool since they joined the Academy in the U13 generation, with the continuity of the same coaching staff back in 2008 as a key element promoting their development. This could be considered as a case study in the football industry.

To highlight further the success of the Qatar football model, along the achievements of this team, a number of good results were realized by different National teams (U17, U19, U23) in Asian competitions.

The vision of reshaping the state of football in the Country, the investments

made in people to build human capital, infrastructures, innovation, and the solid interconnection among the three leading Institutions (QFA, QSL, and Aspire) were the secrets behind what the Qatar National Teams achieved in recent years and the foundations beyond 2022.

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