

Swimming in Qatar: Meet Doha's home team

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In a desert country where the average high temperature in summer is 40-41 C (105-106 F), and the swimming facilities are exceptional enough to have attracted the 2014 FINA World Swimming Championships (25m) and the FINA World Championships 2023, it would be logical to think that Qatar's national pastime was swimming.

But it's not.

In fact, the team is so small that, for this weekend's World Cup in Doha, its roster was culled from a national talent pool of just 35 boys and men ranging in age from 10 to 17.

Some, such as 17-year-old Yacob Alkhulaifi has been on the national team since age 6.

At 13, Alkhulaifi competed against professionals at the short-course world championships. By 16, he was a veteran of two long-course world championships. Last month, he competed at the Asian Games and, after the Doha World Cup, will head to Argentina in October for the Youth Olympic Games.

That's a lot of experience for a high school senior. But what the nation lacks is a champion.

Since Qatar's Olympic debut at the 1984 Los Angeles Games, it has claimed five medals (in athletics, shooting, and weightlifting) but no swimmer has placed higher than 36th.

"We have the facilities. We have the funding. All we need is someone to show the rest of the country that you can do it," Alkhulaifi said.



credit: Qatar swimming Twitter account

Alkhulaifi hopes to be that guy.

Three days a week, he rises at 4:30 a.m. for a 90-minute practice session at the Hamad Aquatic Centre. School begins at 7:00, and when it's over, he returns to the pool to train from 14:30 to 17:00. He has a single training session on three other days, and on Friday he rests.

Alkhulaifi, the son of two heart surgeons, grew up idolizing the 28-time Olympic medalist Michael Phelps and Chad le Clos, the South African who beat Phelps in the 200-meter butterfly at the 2012 London Games.

His older brother Noah, 19, was Qatar's lone male swimmer at the 2016 Rio Olympics. His younger brother, Yousef, 13, is already beating Yacob's national age-group records.

"Reaching the 2020 Olympics is my main goal," Alkhulaifi said.

"Right now, Yacob's the best in Qatar," said Yuriy Vlasov, one of the country's five national coaches. "But he needs someone to look up to. He needs someone to challenge him."



Yacob Alkhulaifi (QAT) credit: Courtesy Qatar Swimming Association

To identify swimming talent, Vlasov said, "*the national federation communicates with schools, the schools bring the kids to the pools for lessons, and from this program we collect kids to clubs.*" All told, there are nine clubs and four pools in the country.

"Since the team is so small, we do a lot of private coaching, but I believe swimming is teamwork," said Vlasov, who competed at the 1996 Atlanta Olympics for Ukraine and has been coaching in Qatar since 2001. "You have to see guys working hard every day, so it's a big opportunity to have World Cup in Qatar and to travel the World Cup tour and look at the top guys."

Last week at the World Cup opener in Kazan, Russia, for example, 2012 Olympic breaststroker Felipe Lima from Brazil seemed encouraging. After a morning heat, he came over to shake hands with Qatar's sole entry, 14-year-old Mohamed Mahmoud, in the middle of Mahmoud's interview.

It wasn't the Mahmoud's first World Cup, but it was first one overseas, and he recalled being 12 and 13 and having to race against the professionals back in Doha.

"*First [time] I saw them, I thought they were 15,*" Mahmoud said of the 190cm giants towering over his scrappy frame.

"I asked Chad le Clos, 'How old are you?'"

"Then I saw the [start] sheets, that people were [born in] 1990, 1992. I said, 'Oh, good.'"

With increased exposure, Mahmoud said, "I learned a lot from them, like how they warm up, techniques, types of shoulder stretches, knee stretches, also underwater skills. When they come to Doha, I get some ideas."

"When guys like Vladimir Morozov can talk to Mohammad," coach Vlasov said, referring to the two-time Olympian from Russia, "they start to understand all these details and they start to believe in themselves."

Similarly, Alkhulaifi heeds advice from his South African idol.

"Chad le Clos told me to train hard, stay focused, and that my main challenger should be myself," Alkhulaifi said.

Since there are only five or six Qataris in Alkhulaifi's age group, the last point resonates well. And while Alkhulaifi swam a personal best 56.94 seconds in the 100m butterfly at the Asian Games, he said that what he needs to get to the next level is "*motivation*," adding after a beat, "*I have plenty of that, but I need to stay organized and work consistently and consistently improve. Patience is key.*"

Next year, Alkhulaifi hopes to swim for a university in the United States, like his brother Noah did for a year at the University of Wisconsin.

"The goal is to compete for as long as I can and as many Olympics as I can do. On a global scale, it would be to promote swimming in Qatar," Alkhulaifi said.

"We have the ability. We have good potential. Give it a couple years and I think Qatar can be on the world stage in swimming," he added.

The 160cm, 50kg (5-foot-3, 110 lb.) Mahmoud is aiming high, too.

"I would like to compete in the Olympics, World Championships, and break records," he said in Kazan.

After swimming? Mahmoud thought for a bit and said, "*I'd like to be a pilot.*"
