

Frankly Speaking: Is tennis the next ‘Grand Slam’ for Saudi sports?

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Arab News

February 18, 2024

DUBAI: Tennis is fast becoming a popular sport in Saudi Arabia with thousands of young people, including women and girls, signing up to clubs and taking part in tournaments across the Kingdom, Arij Mutabagani, president of the Saudi Tennis Federation, has said.



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Appearing on Arab News' current affairs show "Frankly Speaking," Mutabagani said one only had to look at the numbers to see the sport's huge potential, raising the possibility of the Kingdom taking part in — or even hosting — major tournaments.

"Saudi Arabia has gone through a great transformation, especially when it comes to the world of sports and female participation," said Mutabagani.

"The numbers speak for themselves. We have increased female participation in sports. Now, we have 330,000 females registered in sports and around 14,000 female participants in tennis."

Much of this success is down to government initiatives introduced under the Vision 2030 reform agenda, which has made investment in sport and the promotion of public health and well-being top priorities.

"We have a huge program with the Ministry of Education in partnership with the Sports For All Federation, where we would like to introduce tennis as a new sport to children," said Mutabagani.

"We started in 2023 with 30 schools across Saudi Arabia. We've increased it to 90 schools, later in 2023 and 2024. We are expanding to 400 schools." The initiative is gender neutral and split between boys' and girls' schools, she said.

"Back in 2019, we had no female participation in clubs. Now, we have seven clubs that have female participation," she added, noting that the newly created women's national team has already played in 20 events.

"We've had an increase in participation. We had 90 females playing in 2019. Now, we have 700 females registered playing tennis."

The Saudi Sports for All Federation is responsible for the development of community sports and the promotion of a healthy lifestyle across the Kingdom, in line with the country's long-term development plan for social and economic progress, Vision 2030.

"We've seen tennis introduced in clubs," Mutabagani told Katie Jensen, the host of "Frankly Speaking." "In 2019, we had zero clubs participating in tournaments. Now, we have seven clubs that have female participants. We have increased the number of tennis tournaments for females. We had three. Now, we have 20. You can see there is big progress."



Saudi youngsters such as Yara Alhogbani are leading the way in building a thriving tennis community in the Kingdom. (Supplied)

Despite these successes, tennis legends Chris Evert and Martina Navratilova recently said a lack of gender equality in Saudi Arabia ought to prohibit the Kingdom from hosting big events like the Women's Tennis Association Finals.

In a statement, Princess Reema bint Bandar Al-Saud, the Saudi ambassador to the US, rejected Evert and Navratilova's "beyond disappointing" arguments.

"Like many women around the world, we looked to the legends of tennis as trailblazers and role models... glimmers of hope that women truly could achieve it all," she said.

"But these champions have turned their back on the very same women they have inspired and it is beyond disappointing."

Undeterred by Evert and Navratilova's comments, Mutabagani invited the tennis stars to visit the Kingdom to witness firsthand the transformation in Saudi sports and the huge strides in women's participation.

"Be part of this journey in changing and transforming tennis and especially female participation. We will learn a lot from them, and they'd just have to come and see for themselves," she said.

"They've done so much for tennis and for female participation, and gender equality and getting equal prize money. I respect that everyone is free to say and comment.

"But I would really like to invite them to come to Saudi Arabia and really see the progress. We are in a phase of change. We are trying to change."

Mutabagani hopes the Kingdom will soon host a tennis major event or Grand Slam, as it will further encourage Saudis to take up the sport.

"Everything and anything is possible," she said. "Bringing this kind of international event to the country will only shed more light on the sport of tennis. It will make it more popular.

"The players will have role models to look up to. It will inspire a new generation to really work harder and train harder to become champions in the future, and be able to compete in these tournaments in their country."



Appearing on "Frankly Speaking," Arij Mutabagan told host Katie Jensen one only had to look at the numbers to see the sport's huge potential in Saudi Arabia, raising the possibility of the Kingdom taking part in, or even hosting, major tournaments. (AN Photo)

She added: “We’re working hard on it. We’re working closely with the WTA and the ATP to try to make this possible and happen, hopefully in the near future.”

While nothing is set in stone, Mutabagani is hopeful that the WTA or ATP will choose the Kingdom to host a Grand Slam.

“We are trying to have and build a long-lasting relationship with the official governing bodies of tennis, whether it’s ATP, WTA or ITF,” she said.

“We successfully delivered the Next Gen finals last year in Jeddah, so we started this relationship with the ATP. Now, we’re also trying to build up the relationship with the WTA.”

Grand Slam championships, the most prestigious tournaments in professional tennis, are organized by the WTA and ATP, and overseen by the International Tennis Federation.

Mutabagani predicts these pro events will help to increase participation in amateur sports across Saudi Arabia, particularly among the youth.

“We’re still in discussions,” she said. “But our goal is to build all of these relationships for the long term that will help develop tennis in Saudi Arabia, whether it is big events or lower events, from challenges to futures, because that will improve the level of our local tennis players.”

Saudi Arabia has sought to increase its sporting presence by establishing the LIV Golf series, signing top soccer players like Cristiano Ronaldo and hosting the 2023 Next Generation ATP Finals.

“Tennis has taken a very important part in the transformation of sports in Saudi Arabia,” said Mutabagani. “We have seen that by the increased number of events specifically in tennis. In 2022, we started hosting the first international junior tournament that took place in Riyadh.”

The Kingdom hosted its first professional tournament in 2019 with the Diriyah Tennis Cup. It parlayed its success from 2019 to 2022 into the Next Gen ATP Finals, which are being hosted in Riyadh from 2023 to 2027.

The Six Kings Slam men’s tennis exhibition will feature international tennis stars Rafael Nadal and Novak Djokovic plus three other Grand Slam winners in October.

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Princess Reema bint Bandar, Saudi Arabia’s ambassador to the US, rejected calls by tennis legends Chris Evert and Martina Navratilova for a ban on holding the Women’s Tennis Association Finals in Saudi Arabia. [Click here to read more.](#)



Given the sport's relative novelty in Saudi Arabia, there were some initial doubts about how popular tennis events would be. However, Mutabagani says the players have been thrilled by the number of spectators turning out to matches.

"They have been extremely happy with the audiences," she said. "We had the full stadium for the exhibition match in Riyadh. Tickets were sold out and the audience was really, really engaged.

"We've noticed that the audience understood the game of tennis, which is very important."

Top international players typically begin playing in sports academies or clubs as young children. The Kingdom will need experienced coaches, trainers and specialized facilities to retain its own top talent.

"Our main aim is to start with the grassroots and introduce tennis to all the population, and then grow it from there and concentrate on the high performance," said Mutabagani.

One young Saudi tennis star to emerge is 19-year-old Yara Al-Hogbani.

"She is a great ambassador for the sport, and inspiring the new generation of little kids, whether boys or girls," said Mutabagani.

Al-Hogbani played in the Mubadala Abu Dhabi Open this year with top international players like Ons Jabeur, a Tunisian who is WTA number six, and Naomi Osaka from Japan — the first Asian player ranked number one in the world.

“(Al-Hogbani) worked very hard from a very young age,” said Mutabagani. “She has two other siblings who are also national players.”

She played with her oldest brother, Ammar, at the Asian Games in Hangzhou in 2023, making history as the Kingdom’s first professional mixed doubles team. Their middle brother, Saud, plays at Wake Forest University in the US.

Al-Hogbani also met tennis legends like Novak Djokovic and Rafael Nadal, the newly minted ambassador for the Saudi Tennis Federation, during the Next Gen ATP Finals in Jeddah in December. Nadal has committed to helping Saudi Arabia develop its young talent.

“It has given her the chance to feel what it is to be at those high levels and it has inspired her to work harder, try harder and to reach higher levels in the future,” said Mutabagani. “Having these chances can turn somebody’s future around and they can ... be stars for the next generations.”

Asked what her message would be to young Saudis who are considering taking up tennis, Mutabagani, herself a lifelong tennis player, said: “I would tell them to really grab a tennis racket, try the sport, play tennis, be the Next Gen champion, be a role model on the court and off the court.

“Because tennis is a life learning experience, it teaches us to be great human beings before being sportsmen. So, be an ambassador for tennis in Saudi Arabia on and off the court.”



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FRANKLY SPEAKING *The* Interview

with Katie Jensen



Arab News Dubai

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All photos

ARIJ MUTABAGANI
PRESIDENT OF THE SAUDI TENNIS FEDERATION

Is tennis the next 'Grand Slam' for Saudi sports?

• Hundreds of thousands of women and girls are now taking part in sports, says Saudi Tennis Federation president

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She added: "We're working hard on it. We're working closely with the WTA and the ATP to try to make this possible and happen, hopefully in the near future."

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