

**Qatari women leaders in business and sports -
The experiences of Maha Al-Ansari**

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Abstract

Very little is known about women leaders in business and sports in the Gulf Region. Maha Al-Ansari is the Founder and CEO of Knockout Boxing, the first female-only boxing studio in Qatar. The case traces her personal history, highlights her experiences living in Japan, examines the challenges faced setting up and running her businesses in Qatar, and focuses on the distinctive strengths and leadership skills acquired as a basketball captain and as part of Qatar's National Team. The case study will prompt discussion about work-life balance, the significance of culture, and the traditional and transitional roles and responsibilities of women in a highly diverse and rapidly evolving nation. It can also be used more broadly to compare leadership and gender between different cultures.

Keywords entrepreneurship; women-led businesses; sports leaders.



MAHA AL-ANSARI, Founder and CEO of Knockout Boxing and former professional basketball athlete

Introduction

The primary purpose of this case is to provide an introduction to Qatari women in sports and an overview of the issues and challenges faced by women leaders as they grow in professional sports and sports business. The context of the case study includes business issues, cultural issues (Japan and Qatar) and individual and organizational life cycle transitions.

This case study touches on the following topics:

- The importance of fostering leadership skills through sports from an early age
- The influence of sports on professional life
- International exposure and cultural identity in molding character

- Stereotypes about women in leadership and in sports in the region
- Introducing challenges faced by women-led businesses
- Importance of women in sports and their influence on future generations

Hearing Maha Al-Ansari (27), Founder and CEO of Knockout Boxing, the first female-only boxing studio in Qatar, answer the question: “How would you describe your experience becoming a professional athlete and a businesswoman?” is as inspiring as it is an enriching learning experience. Not only did Maha spend most of her formative years in Japan - the daughter of the former Qatari ambassador to Tokyo for nine years in the early 2000s during which she completed most of her schooling - she also became the captain of Qatar’s National Basketball Team at 18 and graduated as valedictorian of her class in Journalism at Northwestern University at 22 years of age.

In 2015, Maha received the highly prestigious Education Excellence Award from His Highness the Amir, Sheikh Tamim bin Hamad Al Thani. The Award is considered the highest academic honor for individuals and educational institutions in Qatar. However, she does not shy away from recognizing family, friends, colleagues and mentors who have provided support in her journey and she credits them as being fundamental to her success.

She is keenly aware of the importance of family responsibilities - as daughter and a sister - and of the essential foundation of her cultural heritage and Muslim faith. She therefore set herself an additional goal: to be an active role model for women in

business in Qatar, a role she took both seriously and with pleasure from a fairly young age.

Her journey of becoming a professional basketball athlete

The importance of fostering leadership skills through sports from an early age

Maha shared an episode that illustrates just how important the role sports played in her life from a fairly young age. It was Ramadan, Maha Al-Ansari, a fifth-grade student living with her parents in Tokyo, was nonetheless practicing basketball with her school mates until the dawn of day. It was important for her to become a better athlete in basketball. “Aren’t you timing out to break your fast soon?” asked her coach. Without saying a word, but remembering she had not eaten all day, she ran to the bench, drank a sip of water, took a few bites of a snack and minutes later, with relentless determination and drive, went straight back to the game. Until today she is amazed by how much passion for sports she had since early on. She credits her love for sports to her upbringing in Tokyo, Japan where schools place a significant attention on sports, saying “In Japan, physical education is taken very seriously as a subject - for example, as important as math and science. If you’re in school, you could never skip physical education, because it was a very serious subject. So, that’s where I really found my love for sports.”

When she came back to Qatar while still in the 10th grade, she continued practicing sports at the Qatar Academy. The level of quality of the sports programs

offered in schools combined with the opportunity to compete with other schools and travel are a tremendous incentive for the practice of sports, according to Maha. After she graduated from Qatar Academy, she joined the Northwestern University's basketball team. She became a talented basketball player, scoring 35 points against Texas A&M. Maha reflects on the impact that practicing sports had on her social and professional life, granting her success not only while in university, but until this day. She acknowledges that it was tremendously beneficial not only for teamwork and conflict resolution skills, but also for creating great opportunities to learn more about the people and colleagues she studied with and expanding her network.

The influence of sports on professional life

Maha became captain of the Qatar National Basketball Team when she was 18 years old, where she played for almost two years representing Qatar on different international stages. She joined the national team whilst in university. Ahlam Al-Mana, the then president of the Qatar Women's Sports Committee had been promoting women's basketball and seeking skilled athletes to join the national team. She invited Maha, who joined the team as a power forward, practising four times per week. The power forward of a basketball side holds down the interior offense of a team and steps up to become the primary scorer within a team's offense. The head coach was Eric Carr and coach assistant Dora Eperjessy. Maha recounts her first major championship with the national team, the 2011 Pan Arab Games, as one of the most amazing experiences of her life. Her team competed against Kuwait, the UAE and Jordan and although they

did not win medals, her time with the national team reinforced her competitive and disciplined nature. Today, Maha still takes training very seriously, and works out and plays sports recreationally with her friends every single day. She says “I just love playing sports whether it’s competitively or not. It is just a very big part of my life.”

While still in university, Maha Al-Ansari’s did an internship in New York City at the SDM Magazine’s Sport Illustration Department. Her position in sports was very clear and her plan was to make sports central, not only in her personal life but also in her professional career in journalism and as a businesswoman. Upon her graduation, she took a role with BeIN Sports in the Journalism Department, and quickly transitioned to Marketing. She was the first Qatari to work in English Journalistic production at the conglomerate. For four and a half years in BeIN, Maha had the opportunity to share her love of sports with a much larger audience from inside the studio, and from outside, with students from her alma mater, where she has shared experiences about sports, journalism, business and leadership.

Her journey to becoming a business leader

The most important experiences that provided Maha Al-Ansari the opportunity to develop the necessary skills to later become a successful business leader was being a captain of sports teams: “I was a captain in most of the teams I was on.” She keenly shares that what she loved the most about being a captain was the fact that she was leading so many different people towards one common goal by really allowing each one to be their best. She believes that “together people can achieve so much more.

Everybody has their strengths, everybody has also their weaknesses, but when you work together and really tap into the strengths of each individual you can achieve amazing things.” It is easy to see how since Maha was very young, and through sports, she was developing a leader’s mindset. However, she also knows the challenges that come with being a leader: “If you want to make everyone happy, you should go sell ice-cream.” Sometimes she just had to focus on her goal and shut out any negativity or anything that could possibly be a distraction.

As a basketball team captain, Maha was very concerned with her team, their growth and wellbeing. This sense of responsibility has later contributed to shaping her experience as a business owner. She expressed that the sponsorship system in Qatar makes it harder for her to make decisions regarding her staff. As a business leader, she strives to empower and improve her team continuously, helping her staff to be strong and independent and making them realize their self-worth.

The influence of sports on professional life

Her legacy as national team’s captain and her time in NYC inspired her to start her own business. At Knockout Boxing, Maha now leads a team of five people, including trainers and administrative staff, on a journey to achieving commercial success and making an impact on women’s lives.

Maha started Knockout Boxing after she identified a market gap in female-only sports spaces. She had always been encouraging women around her to work out and to be active but realized that there was a lack of cool gyms and spaces that would fit the Qatari culture. She was unsatisfied with inconvenient low-peak female-only hours in traditional membership-based gyms. What she envisioned was a fitness environment where women were at the center and not a secondary audience to the mixed or the male-only audiences. She was also convinced, having experienced it herself, that boxing and physical training releases stress, improves mental health and can help women become a better version of themselves. And she wanted her studio to be commitment-free, so that people could drop-in anytime they want for classes and not feel burdened by monthly payments. So, she filled the market gap, and continued to encourage not only friends and family to stay active and workout, but all women in Qatar.

She prides herself in having started her business single-handedly, fulfilling all registration obligations, planning the finance and logistics and hiring personnel. Maha was 24 years old and had no business partners when she officially launched Knockout Boxing in Qatar. Although she received tremendous support from her family and friends, she acknowledges that the mental toll, often overlooked, really comes into play. There were days she thought to herself: "Can I really do this? I had so many doubts, but my friends and family really pushed me to keep going and achieve this at the end." But Maha finds her inspiration from athletes. She looks at their determination. Even when they lose a game, they get up and go again. "Losing is part of life", she says, but "you

have to think of it as a big long marathon. If you fall, you get back up and you keep going. You just really have to keep pushing."

Introducing challenges faced by women-led businesses

Today, like most small business owners, Maha is facing big financial losses due to the pandemic. However, she believes that the COVID-19 pandemic has changed our environment and ecosystem permanently and that successful businesses are those that learn to adapt. So, to deal with the uncertainty post-COVID, Maha had a really good look at her business and is now thinking of possibly expanding with more branches, something she would not have thought about if it were not for the five months that her premises were closed. She also quickly moved to the digital space, offering group courses and personal training online by tweaking different aspects of the business. Her advice to other women in business is "If you own a business right now, you just focus on surviving, just come out of the other side, like don't think of profit, don't think of major success because it's difficult during these times, and everyone is going through so much, so just keep swimming, just try to stay alive, don't drown, and if you come out of this alive on the other side, that to me is a big win."

Her journey as a woman in sports and business

While Maha is aware that her identity as a woman seems to present unintended challenges in her athletic career, work and business, her experiences never made her

feel she had any limitations imposed on her as a result. Maha has a personality that has never allowed her to internalize stereotypical comments about being a woman in sports. She encourages other women to never allow such comments to stop them. “Having more muscles than an average women may make people think that you are more masculine, that you should be thin, or have very curvy features. So, when you don’t have that, you hear some comments. I don’t care frankly.”

However, she feels that being a professional athlete – as a man or a woman - is not something that is as celebrated in Qatar as it is elsewhere yet. She says, “If you look at other countries, being a professional athlete is huge. It’s like you’re a celebrity almost.” She attributes that to culture and population size, particularly – since the Qatari local population is very small, it is difficult to build a solid base of athletes. But she offers a suggestion to tackle this issue: to work at grassroots and school levels to instil the importance of sport, and the amazing things people can achieve through it.

And for girls and women she advises them to believe in what they have to offer, and what they are bringing to the table. If they believe and keep pushing, then they can achieve great things, and influence people around them. “Part of being a great leader is to influence people to really believe what you believe in, and that has to start from within you.”, she adds.

How Japan Influenced her Identify

Maha considers Japan her second home. She spent most of her formative years (age 6 to 16) in Tokyo, time that forged deep connections and learnings that have impacted her for life. Growing up and going to school has imprinted such a big mark in her that she says “Insha’Allah, if I do have kids in the future, I will definitely take them to Japan growing up because what I learnt there was truly amazing.”

According to Maha, Japan is a totally different place from the rest of the world. People there indeed function in ways that inspire the rest of the world. They are disciplined, determined, respectful to one another and to rules and to a just society. They love their country and wish to truly make it better from within. That is where Maha says her discipline and relentless determination really began. Then she brought it back to Qatar, and these traits helped her get through university, compete at the professional level and face obstacles in business. She still regularly connects with friends and visits Japan.

Readapting to the Qatari way of living was not easy, she candidly confesses. Japanese people are very systematic with very specific ways of performing tasks, while Qatar has a completely different culture, language and way of working and doing business. When asking what was the main thing she learned from having lived in Japan, Maha answers “discipline”. Her former boss used to frequently tell her precisely that. She was rarely distracted by dreams, ideas and her energy and Japan taught her to tackle one goal at a time, with focus and determination.

Teaching notes

The primary purpose of this case is to provide an introduction to Qatari women in sports and an overview of the issues and challenges faced by women leaders as they grow in professional sports and sports business.

The context of the case includes business issues, cultural issues (Japan and Qatar) and individual and organizational life cycle transitions. The case can be used with different audiences:

- 1) Students, executives, sports and education leaders familiar with or living in Qatar or the Gulf Region
 - a. A discussion of the importance of fostering leadership skills from an early age
 - b. The influence of sports on professional life
 - c. International exposure and cultural identity issues and the relevance for youth and on women.
- 2) Students, executives, sports and education leaders not familiar with Qatar or the Gulf Region

- a. Introducing the region, breaking down stereotypes, finding commonalities
- b. Exploring women-led business issues
- c. Understanding experiences of women in sports and key influences.

Questions:

1. In your opinion, what is the importance of sports in fostering leadership skills in children and adults?
2. In what ways can sports activity from a young age impact professional choices and trajectories later in life?
3. What are the different stereotypes about women in sports in the region and what is the role of men in building a more gender-inclusive culture within sports communities?
4. What are the differences and similarities between challenges faced by women leaders in business and sports?

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