

Follow the money

With huge investment pouring into cycling from the Middle East, Felix Lowe asks what this growing involvement means for the future of the sport

Illustrations Rob Milton

‘Just look at that,’ David Lappartient beams as a group of riders completes another lap of the Hudayriyat Island circuit. ‘People who don’t know Abu Dhabi feel it’s artificial, but the reality is that they have a strong passion for cycling and they’re building a strong cycling environment.’

Laying foundations in the United Arab Emirates is part of the UCI president’s global vision. Behind him, cranes tower above the shell of a new velodrome that will host the UCI Track World Championships in 2029. A year before that, the sport’s best sprinters will do battle for the rainbow jersey along the sweeping curve of the Corniche waterfront that sits beneath the towering skyscrapers on the horizon.

Replica UAE Team Emirates kits and Colnago bikes are well represented this Thursday evening in late January. The

just been confirmed as host for the next three editions of the eSports Cycling World Championships, ending the UCI’s previous deal with Zwift.

California-based Zwift towers over MyWhoosh in user numbers, but serious investment – traced back to Sheikh Tahnoon bin Zayed, the son of the founder of the UAE – saw MyWhoosh offer its users the largest prize pot in cycling e-sports history, a cool \$1 million. And in a sport hampered by financial constraints, money talks.

If Lappartient claims the UCI’s deal with MyWhoosh is part of a ‘global strategy to enlarge cycling worldwide’, he also candidly admits to *Cyclist* that ‘the economy of our sport is not so strong. We need solid investors from this region with a long-term vision.’ This comes amid rumours of a new ‘Champions League’ of cycling funded by Saudi

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legendary Italian bike manufacturer was acquired by a UAE investment firm in 2020, three years after the old Lampre team was saved by Middle Eastern money. Inside the nearby flagship Colnago store, Tadej Pogačar’s yellow V3Rs from his maiden Tour de France win is on display – the same Pogačar now posing for photos with a group of young Emirati riders. The Slovenian superstar has been flown out from a training camp in Spain for the afternoon to join locals, UCI officials and journalists on a group ride.

Emblazoned across the back of Pogačar’s shorts is the logo of the company that is hosting us here in the Arabian Peninsula, 3,000 miles from cycling’s European heart. MyWhoosh, the Abu Dhabi-based virtual cycling app, has

Arabia’s Public Investment Fund (PIF). But what does this shifting of the sands mean for the sport – and could there be serious ramifications for cycling if things head south?

Finding the Emirati Tadej

Integral to Abu Dhabi’s growth is UAE Team Emirates and the UAE Tour, currently the only WorldTour race in the Middle East. Having a rider of Pogačar’s calibre fronting the team means investment has been associated with winning from the start. Domestically, the team is seen as a catalyst for growth by promoting cycling as a healthy and active lifestyle – driving participation with a tight focus on the young generation. 🚴



‘We’re more than a team,’ says general manager Mauro Gianetti. ‘We represent the UAE and have the whole country behind us. Our mission is to find an Emirati talent who one day will ride in the Tour de France.’ The Swiss cites 20-year-old Mohammad Almutaiwei, a promising sprinter from UAE’s Gen Z development team, as the most likely outsider for glory in the Abu Dhabi Worlds in four years’ time.

MyWhoosh CEO Akhtar Saeed Hashmi’s ambitions are a little bolder. ‘The end goal is an Emirati replacement for Tadej Pogačar,’ he says. Gianetti does not entirely rule this out. ‘Who would have thought 20 years ago that Slovenia would be the dominant country in cycling?’ he muses.

The decision to take on the Women’s WorldTour licence of Alé BTC Ljubljana in 2022 is already paying dividends, with UAE Team ADQ’s 22-year-old Safiya al Sayegh

the unveiling of the \$1.3 billion Yas Marina Circuit in 2009. The circuit is now part of the city’s armoury of riding options that also includes the Al Wathba desert track. The promise of 1,000km of bike lanes has helped Abu Dhabi become the first Asian location to receive the UCI’s ‘Bike City’ label – even if the fierce summer heat makes virtual cycling more appealing.

‘The growth is the reason I’m still here after eight years,’ says Bart van den Dries, MyWhoosh’s relationships manager. The 49-year-old Belgian rode with Frank Vandenbrouke as a youngster and helped train Jasper Philipsen before moving to Abu Dhabi to become brand manager at the Colnago store. He has since clocked 3,000 laps of the Yas Marina Circuit and says, ‘If you love cycling and you’re passionate about the industry, this is the place to be.’

‘In Abu Dhabi they’re building cycling from the top to the bottom without forgetting to have a vision for the bottom’

becoming the first Emirati woman road cyclist to qualify for the Olympics. This achievement highlights the UAE’s progress, according to British ex-pat Laurie McWhan, a purchasing manager in the oil industry.

‘Ten years ago you’d never see an Emirati woman on a bike. Now they’re cycling in groups,’ he says over coffee at the Abu Dhabi Cycling Club. A puncture may have ended his ride with a two-time Tour winner early, but McWhan is still on cloud nine. ‘When I moved out here 25 years ago, I’d never have thought I’d be cycling with Tadej Pogačar and watching WorldTour races and the World Championships – it’s like, wow.’

Keeping up with the Joneses

After Bahrain hosted the first Formula 1 Grand Prix in the Middle East in 2004, Abu Dhabi followed suit with

While Abu Dhabi is not the first Middle East city to host a World Championships, the UCI will pray that it doesn’t emulate the legacy of its predecessor. The second of Peter Sagan’s three world titles came in Qatar when he pipped Mark Cavendish in Doha in 2016 – months after Cav won the 15th and final edition of the Tour of Qatar, cancelled owing to lack of sponsorship.

Qatar’s error, according to the UCI’s head of off-road disciplines, was overlooking the development of a cycling culture of its own. ‘If you forget about the basics – like Qatar – then it will dry up,’ says Pieter van den Abeele. ‘But in Abu Dhabi they’re building cycling from the top to the bottom without forgetting to have a vision for the bottom.’

Since this blip, the Middle East has made serious inroads. Bahrain made its move the same year as the UAE with the team now known as Bahrain Victorious. 🚴

Widening the net

The Middle East’s growing influence in cycling

WorldTour teams UAE Team Emirates, Bahrain Victorious and Jayco-AlUla are funded by regimes from the Gulf Cooperation Council, with Liv-AlUla-Jayco and UAE Team ADQ represented from the Women’s WorldTour. Set up one year before the Giro d’Italia’s *grande partenza* in Israel in 2018, the men’s peloton also features a fourth Middle Eastern team in Israel-Premier Tech.

While the Tour of Qatar folded shortly after Doha hosted the 2016 Worlds, the

UAE Tour was created in 2019 after merging the Abu Dhabi Tour and the Dubai Tour. It has run for six editions and is currently the only WorldTour race in the Middle East. Other races include the AlUla Tour (formerly Saudi Tour) and the Tour of Oman, won this year by brothers Simon and Adam Yates respectively.

The 2022 Urban Cycling World Championships were held in Abu Dhabi and will return in 2024. Abu Dhabi will also hold the 2028 UCI Road and 2029 UCI

Track World Championships. MyWhoosh, the UAE-funded virtual cycling app, will host the next three editions of the eSports Cycling World Championships after the UCI ended its previous deal with Zwift.

Saudi Arabia’s Public Investment Fund has been linked to a \$250 million investment in the new One Cycling project aiming to reform and revamp the race calendar. Last year, it was reported that Neom, Saudi’s new city on the Red Sea, was exploring a takeover of Jumbo-Visma.



Bankrolled by the sovereign wealth fund, it was launched after Sheikh Nasser bin Hamad, the fourth son of the King, enjoyed a bike ride with Vincenzo Nibali. Saudi Arabia then entered the fray last year through the ancient oasis city of AlUla, which now co-sponsors Simon Yates' Jayco-AlUla team and the Liv-AlUla-Jayco women's team.

Explaining the phenomenon

The next phase of cycling's expansion across the Arabian Peninsula will likely be a two-up sprint between Mohamed bin Zayed and Mohammed bin Salman, the crown princes of UAE and Saudi Arabia. According to Professor Natalie Koch, a political geographer specialising in the Middle East, this battle to assert regional supremacy is key to understanding the sports investments in the area.

More generally, these investments are driven by the need for Gulf powers to diversify their economies away from oil and towards more sustainable areas of economic activity such as tourism and sport. Koch argues that hosting international sports events is part of the broader geopolitical puzzle of generating a demand for visitors. By creating hubs for globalised sport, business and entertainment, the region can create a multi-faceted image

less than half the reported £128 million bonus footballer Kylian Mbappé could earn if he signs with Real Madrid, while golfer Jon Rahm is set to earn triple that amount for jumping from the PGA Tour to LIV Golf.

'Cycling is low stakes compared to the higher amounts of capital you need for some of these football clubs or other acquisitions such as LIV Golf,' says Koch. 'A little money can go a long way, and from the Middle East investors' perspective, it's an extremely small amount of money.'

Even better, while football teams retain names and colours, buying a cycling team gives you naming rights and your national colours on the jersey. And although the spectre of sportswashing looms, Koch believes the potential for backlash is negligible, despite cycling's conscientious fan base.

'International media exposure is far lower with cycling than football – it's just niche media outlets. You may upset some people in the cycling community, but beyond that there isn't necessarily a huge threat.'

Chronic underfunding in women's cycling makes it an even easier target, hence the Saudi and UAE landgrab of the Women's WorldTour. It's moves such as this that, to some, give Middle Eastern investment a sour taste.

'It's a way of showing they are like Western countries. They want to break down the stereotype of the Gulf as a backward region'

of itself that extends beyond its traditional associations. A type of reputational laundering, if you will.

'Globalised sport is essentially dominated by Western countries, and that is especially true with cycling, much more than other sports,' says Koch, who was on the cusp of turning pro with Team Novo Nordisk before becoming an academic. Sports tourism is already a \$600 billion industry in the Middle East and is expected to grow by 8.7% by 2026 compared with global sector growth of 3.3% over the same period. The influx of Gulf money will not stop Europe being the home of cycling, but that's by the by, thinks Koch.

'Why do the Gulf governments want to get involved in this particular sport? To create a positive image within those countries and to build up this idea that the Gulf countries are moderate,' she says. 'It's a way of showing they are like Western countries. They want to break down the stereotype of the Gulf as a backward region that is not part of the modern, globalised world.'

A little goes a long way

In this bid to balance tradition with progress while working towards a post-oil future, cycling's very appeal lies in the precarious – and contextually cheap – financial structure. The estimated annual budget of UAE Team Emirates is

'It gives the impression that they care,' says Koch. 'They can say that they're developing women's sport to counter claims of misogyny.'

Koch completes this bleak outlook with claims that the push for cycling infrastructure is less about cycling and more about the hospitality and construction sector – with local merchants and developers, rather than cyclists, the real benefactors.

Sportswashing in the global laundromat

The use of sport for political reasons is far from unique to the Gulf states. 'Governments around the world, including those in Europe, have historically utilised sports investments for similar purposes,' Doctor Mahfoud Amara, director of sports science at Qatar University, tells *Cyclist*. In other words: one democratic Western state's sports diplomacy is another authoritarian regime's sportswashing.

Nevertheless, from the 2018 killing of US-based journalist Kamal Khashoggi to the execution of 81 men on a single day in 2023, it's undeniable that human rights in Saudi Arabia is a grave concern. The outlook is not much better in the UAE, where political parties are banned; Bahrain, where prisoners are still tortured; or Qatar, where same-sex relationships are illegal. Undeniable, also, is the

effectiveness of using the allure of sporting stars, teams and events to influence public opinion.

Sport's universal culture means people easily buy into it. Not only is it simple to get a lot of people onside very quickly, it's also an effective way of increasing a nation's GDP, as Bin Salman recently boasted while dismissing accusations of sportswashing. MyWhoosh CEO Hashmi is more diplomatic: 'People can say what they want – it's their freedom of speech. But it needs to be a fair and legitimate discussion, not just baseless allegations.'

Such a response butters no parsnips with Phil Lynch, director of the International Service for Human Rights.

'Cycling is – or should be – a sport characterised by values such as freedom of movement, freedom of expression, equality, diversity, sustainability and respect for the environment. These are not values strongly associated with the authoritarian regimes that rule the UAE, Saudi Arabia and Bahrain,' he says.

Lynch, whose passion for human rights is matched only by his passion for cycling, fears that significant investment from the Middle East will 'substantially muzzle the ability or willingness of pro cycling's major stakeholders to speak

out on fundamental issues such as women's rights, LGBTI rights, minority rights and environmental rights.'

Last year, Norwegian under-23 Time-Trial World Champion Søren Wærneskjold turned down a contract with UAE Team Emirates on 'moral and ethical' grounds. Meanwhile, commentator Ned Boulting made the decision not to cover the UAE Tour in 2022 and refuses to work in Saudi Arabia. In this light, it's not a stretch to say that a rider of Pogačar's ability, charisma and affability has been somewhat weaponised by his employers.

Yet the claim that the Middle East, through its sports engagement, is creating a platform upon which progress can be made is one that Brian Cookson, L'appartient's predecessor at the UCI, adheres to.

'I feel it's better to seek peace and harmony through sport than put up barriers, but maybe that's just the view of an old hippy,' says Cookson, who inherited the Qatar Worlds 'controversy' from his own predecessor, Pat McQuaid.

'At the end of the day, the wealth of these regimes pretty much comes from the developed world because we're buying their oil and gas,' Cookson says. 'Maybe it's not entirely unreasonable to expect some of that investment to come ☺'

'Cycling is just not the kind of sport that can sustain the kind of economic returns these investment funds seek'

Everything all at once

Gulf investment in other sports

British boxer Tyson Fury predicts Saudi Arabia will become the home of all sports within a decade. From WWE, horse racing and football to golf, tennis and Formula 1, there's no denying the Middle East's sporting power grab. Here's a rundown of the extent of this expansion

- 12 years after Qatar hosted the 2022 World Cup, Saudi Arabia will host the 2034 tournament as well as the Asian Cup in 2027, the Asian Winter Games in 2029 and the Asian Games in 2034.

- The purchase of Newcastle United set the Saudi Public Investment Fund back £305 million – around 50% more than it cost Sheikh Mansour's Abu Dhabi United Group to buy Manchester City in 2008. Other Gulf-owned English clubs include Aston Villa and Sheffield United.

- Qatar Sports Investments, a subsidiary of the Qatar sovereign wealth fund, bought Paris Saint-Germain for an estimated £100 million in 2012.

- Middle Eastern air carriers Etihad (Manchester City), Emirates (AC Milan, Arsenal and Real Madrid among others) and Qatar (PSG and formerly Bayern Munich) are heavily involved in sponsoring football teams.

- Cristiano Ronaldo is the poster boy of the new Saudi Pro League, reportedly earning £172 million

per year at Al-Nassr. The SPL spent a staggering £751 million in the 2023 summer transfer window, attracting the likes of reigning Ballon d'Or winner Karim Benzema and Neymar; a Women's Premier League also launched in 2022.

- Qatar-based broadcaster beIN Sports has gone from strength to strength since launching in 2012, giving a lifeline to veteran operators Richard Keys and Andy Gray.

- The PIF-funded LIV Golf has divided opinion since launching in 2022 to the tune of £2 billion, with Tiger Woods having turned down an alleged £627 million to join.

- Bahrain hosted the first Formula 1 Grand Prix in the Middle East in 2004 with Abu Dhabi following in 2009; Saudi Arabia and Qatar joined in 2021.

- Boxing's power base began to move east in 2022. Tyson Fury's undisputed heavyweight championship bout against Oleksandr Usyk will take place in May in Saudi Arabia.

- Qatar will host the basketball World Cup in 2027 and the Asian Games in 2030, a stepping stone to a likely bid for the 2036 Summer Olympics.

- In 2020, Tour de France organiser ASO announced a five-year deal to run the Dakar Rally in Saudi Arabia.

- The Dubai Tennis Championships has taken place since 1993 and the women's Abu Dhabi Open since 2021. A first professional event will take place in Saudi Arabia this year after a deal was agreed for Jeddah to host the Next Gen ATP Finals; talks to host the end-of-season WTA Finals are ongoing.

- The WWE has been promoting wrestling events in Saudi Arabia since 2014. The first women's match did not take place until 2019 owing to the country's limitations on women's rights.

- The Middle East was a hotbed for horse racing long before the Dubai World Cup was created in 1996. Launched in 2020, the Saudi Cup carries a record total prize pot of £25 million.

back into our culture.’ Lynch is wary of this stance. Not only do the reputational benefits outweigh any additional spotlight shone upon a nation, Lynch argues the level of repression in countries such as China and Russia, for example, has actually worsened since they hosted the Olympics and World Cup respectively.

Growth at one’s peril

Recent reports suggest that the PIF is considering investing \$250 million in the One Cycling project that aims to reform the race calendar and launch a cycling league. The news has been met with concern, with Boulting saying on X, formerly Twitter, ‘I hate the notion that Saudi money might soon deform the cycling calendar. And I hope they stay far hence.’

Cycling’s need for investment should not blind the sport from the truth, says Lynch: ‘Because of the lack of brand and values alignment, any Middle Eastern investment is likely to be relatively short-term and instrumental, contributing to, rather than addressing, the precarious financial structure of the sport.’

Lynch says that the argument of investment regardless of provenance ‘essentially boils down to this: we’ve built a model that relies on funding from authoritarian regimes and therefore we need to increase investment from

authoritarian regimes. What we need is some imagination and innovation to redesign the financial model.’

Koch concurs, citing LIV Golf’s sudden partnership with the PGA, its unsustainable economics and under-attended ‘joke’ tournaments: ‘I think you would see the same thing if One Cycling went forward. It’s bound to fail. Cycling is just not the kind of sport that can sustain the kind of economic returns these investment funds seek.’

For his part, Cookson recalls an old joke: ‘How do you make a million quid out of cycling? Start with two million.’ Unless ‘big hitters’ like the Tour de France get on board, he feels the project will struggle. And with Tour director Christian Prudhomme last month pouring cold water over any collaboration, it may not even get off the ground.

Build, build, build

Like all cities where construction is king, life in Abu Dhabi plays out to the constant churn of concrete and the deafening drone of drills. Its state-of-the-art velodrome will include a ramped road sweeping around the exterior to allow riders to access an open-air, roof-top track. Scheduled for completion in 2025, it will be the centrepiece of a sports hub that will transform Hudayriyat Island by the time the World Championships comes to town. Abu Dhabi’s

‘It’s all about profit. Whether it’s a big skyscraper or a new velodrome – they don’t care what happens to it afterwards’

Abu Dhabi’s cycling infrastructure

The hi-tech velodrome isn’t the first step, and nor is it scheduled to be the last

In November 2021, Abu Dhabi became the first Asian destination to receive the UCI’s ‘Bike City’ title. The UAE capital boasts 300km of tracks along the Corniche waterfront, at the nearby Al Wathba desert circuit and on Hudayriyat Island. While still in its construction phase, the latter recently hosted the time-trial in the UAE Tour, where American Brandon McNulty led home a UAE Team Emirates clean sweep on the podium.

Scheduled to open in 2025, the 3,500-seat Velodrome Abu Dhabi is the centrepiece of the Hudayriyat sports complex and will be the venue for the 2029 Track World Championships. It will be adorned with a rooftop track, connected to the ground via a 600m cycling ramp winding around the outer walls, giving 360-degree views of the Abu Dhabi skyline. Elsewhere in the city, cyclists of all ages, abilities and genders can ride on the Yas Marina Formula 1 circuit during four-hour slots twice a week – including free bike hire. As part of an ongoing commitment to transform Abu Dhabi into a world class cycling hub, future plans include over 1,000km of protected cycle lanes and the ambitious Abu Dhabi loop – a 109km track connecting key attractions across the city.

Should the heat be too unbearable, there’s always MyWhoosh.

powers that be clearly see this as a way of confirming its world-class cycling hub status, but according to Koch, the velodrome will still only ever be a ‘pet project’ belonging to a money-grabbing elite.

‘All across the Gulf, the entire political economy is built around the idea of build, build, build. If you slow down or stop then the financial interest of the ruling elites is challenged, so you need a constant parade of events to justify these efforts to build up and develop the country,’ says Koch grimly. ‘It’s all about profit. Whether it’s a big skyscraper or a new velodrome – they don’t care what happens to it afterwards because they got paid already.’

Right or wrong, this won’t stop Lappartient and the UCI doubling down on their expansion in the Middle East and, specifically, in the city that will host a ‘live’ final of the eSports Cycling Worlds in October. Nor will it stop the pursuit of their goal: invest, put people on bikes, expand.

‘Development here is not just a flash in the pan. The World Championships is clearly not the end of the story,’ the UCI president vouches. ‘I think we need to solidify this worldwide and potentially, tomorrow, why not open a satellite for the UCI World Cycling Centre here in Abu Dhabi? That could be something good for us.’

