

John McManus



Abstract:

It's just not cricket: what we can learn about Qatar's sports strategy by comparing the FIFA World Cup with other mass-participation sports

This paper sheds new light on the motivations and expectations of Qatar's hosting of FIFA 2022 Men's World Cup by comparing football with another popular sport in the country: cricket. In order to understand the particularities of how the FIFA World Cup is operationalised as a political, social and economic tool by Qatar, it is necessary to have more than a passing awareness of how other sports are administered in the country. And there is no better contrast than between football and cricket.

Cricket is the most popular sport on the Asian subcontinent. Due to the large numbers of South Asians, approximately 1.5 million or 55% of the overall population, the game is also played and watched widely in Qatar. Yet despite cricket's popularity, the facilities for playing and the institutional structure that governs the game are both lacking. For the World Cup, Doha has spent billions of dollars constructing 7 new football stadiums and dozens of world-class standard practice pitches. The Qatar Cricket Association, the government body organising the game, by contrast receives mere hundreds of thousands of dollars a year. There is only one full grass pitch for cricket in the country. The Qatar National Cricket Team are forced to work day jobs. Most cricketers play on scrubland with tennis balls.

Through ethnographic fieldwork at events, analysis of media coverage and interviews with administrators, players and fans, this paper compares and contrasts the varying fortunes of football and cricket in the Qatar public sphere. The comparison of the two sports reveals the need to nuance Qatar's stated policy of becoming a 'sports hub'. Cricket's relative neglect reveals that Qatar is content to be seen as a hub for certain sports only – often those that are truly global (like football) or played predominately in Western countries or by affluent people (such as tennis, golf or cycling).

The selectiveness of Qatar's sports policy taps into wider debates about multiculturalism and belonging in Qatar. There is a tension between those sports fans Qatar is looking to court – middle/upper class, affluent and often western – and those that make up most of its residents, most of whom are working class, earn low incomes and from Asia. Once this tendency is highlighted, I point to its presence across the sporting landscape in Qatar, including within the World Cup preparations. In recent months, Qatar has been receiving complaints over the absence of cost-effective accommodation options and expensive flights, which is pricing many 'normal' fans out of attending.

I conclude by suggesting that the neglect of low-income consumers of sport – especially in cricket – is a missed opportunity, both in terms of engaging and motivating a large proportion of Qatar's residents but also missing out on becoming a financial and logistical hub for some of the world's fastest-growing sports. The highly selective approach towards audience formation in sport can help us reflect more broadly on the viability of the larger post-carbon vision of the Qatari government: can tourism strategies that target only the upper classes be successful? Will a focus on high-end investments and education on its own enough once fossil fuels are phased out?

Bio:

John McManus is a social anthropologist whose research looks at migration, multiculturalism and popular culture in the Middle East and Europe. He is the author of *Inside Qatar: Hidden Stories From One of the Richest Nations on Earth* (Icon Books, 2022) and *Welcome to Hell? In Search of the Real Turkish Football* (Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 2018), awarded runner-up in the 2019 British-Kuwaiti Friendship Society book prize. John holds a PhD from the University of Oxford and is a former visiting scholar at Qatar University Gulf Studies Centre (2019-2021). His writing has appeared in the *New York Times*, the *Guardian*, the *Washington Post* and the *Financial Times*, as well as academic journals. Twitter: @johnmcmanus06