

The Desire to ASPIRE

An Interview with Dr. Thomas Flock,
Director General, ASPIRE



Thomas Flock

EDITORS' NOTE *With ASPIRE since its inception, Thomas Flock started his sports career as a high-performance athlete with a personal best of 10.4 seconds in 100 meters. During his university studies of sport sciences, pedagogy, and English, he coached athletics. He finished his PhD in sports sciences in Cologne, Germany, and then developed the Olympic Center of Munich into one of the world's leading elite sports institutions. During his directorship, the athletes won more than 80 Olympic medals. He cofounded and managed the marketing company representing all Olympic Centers in Germany and lectured at Munich University. He is the publisher of several books on elite sports.*

COMPANY BRIEF *ASPIRE (www.aspire.qa), Qatar's visionary sports academy, launched its academic curriculum in September of 2004. Its vision is to discover the best young sporting talents from the region, and transform them into world-renowned champions. This will, in turn, generate a sports culture in Qatar, where each generation of athletes inspires the next. The academy integrates training with an intensive, comprehensive intellectual education, giving athletes support they need to succeed, including services such as state-of-the-art facilities abiding by international standards; an outstanding educational institution for athletes; scholarships and grants to less-privileged athletes in developing countries; and short-term camp training options during the summer or winter break.*

What is the vision for ASPIRE and what progress has been made toward its goals?

The original idea and inspiration for ASPIRE came from HH Sheikh Jassim bin Hamad Al Thani, who recognized the enormous potential for good that a dedicated academy of athletic and educational excellence could have, both for the children of Qatar and for the sporting reputation of Qatar as a whole. Effectively, the decision to build ASPIRE turned what was a patch of unused land into one of the world's most advanced training and development institutions, capable of supporting sport at the highest level. It is designed to train young children, ages 11 and up, and provides them with access to the technology and techniques that produce genuine champions.

ASPIRE combines what you've called "a unique learning environment comprised of the largest indoor sports dome, the best facilities, and the most comprehensive sports education program on the planet." Could you elaborate on this?

The academy is distinguished by a philosophy that aims to develop whole students, providing them with full academic and sports development, so they have the widest possible range of opportunities in adult life. No expense has been spared in creating full educational and recreational facilities, advanced dormitories, an amphitheatre, lecture halls, seven outdoor football training fields, state-of-the-art weight rooms, and physiotherapy facilities. ASPIRE's unique mental test and training system, launched in February 2004, deploys a range of different psychological and personality tests, supported by advanced technology, to help identify potential champions and the specific sports disciplines in which they could excel. A dedicated mental training facility at the academy helps student athletes to develop better stress-resistance, concentration, and a stronger focus in their sport and academic lives. ASPIRE also offers some of the most advanced IT facilities for sporting performance in the world, and we continue to develop this infrastructure day by day.

How would you best describe what makes ASPIRE's training methods of young athletes unique?

ASPIRE's approach starts at the very beginning with one of the world's most developed talent identification programs for young people. The talent identification process reaches out to students from every public school in Qatar, and

many private ones, and offers them all a chance to compete for a place at ASPIRE. The process is split into three different stages – bronze, silver, and gold. In these different assessment stages, students are tested on body shape characteristics, physical characteristics (lower body power, upper body power, distance throw, speed, and endurance), agility, and motor coordination. Students in the top range of their testing groups are selected to move onto the next phase, from bronze to silver, and onto gold. In the final gold phase, the students with the most potential are invited to a training camp at ASPIRE where, under the supervision of expert coaches, the most promising are selected to join the ASPIRE family. There are no fees and living expenses, and tuition and athletic training are fully covered by the academy. We encourage students to either follow a dedicated sport or specialize in a particular discipline. Each sporting area has a dedicated, world-class team of coaches and specialists to support the development of the student athletes. As well as advanced sports development, ASPIRE also offers a very high level of education, to enable student athletes to adapt to the ever-changing world around them.

ASPIRE's sports dome and its 10 individual sports arenas were an important part of the recently completed Asian Games and are a key selling point in Qatar's bid to host the 2016 Olympic Games. Could you provide our readers with an overview of the sports dome and arenas?

The largest sports dome in the world is the centerpiece of ASPIRE's unique facility. Designed by world famous architect, Roger Taillibert, ASPIRE's campus covers more than 290,000 square meters, including the academy buildings, the world's biggest sports dome, and sports tracks and pitches. The state-of-the-art main structure features lecture halls, classrooms, science laboratories, a library, an amphitheatre, dormitories, and a medical center, as well as numerous recreational facilities. In addition to the two artificial and seven natural outdoor football pitches and outdoor running track, the sports dome covers a full-size football pitch and a smaller training pitch. The dome also includes an Olympic-sized swimming pool and diving area, as well as gymnastics and sports halls. World-class table tennis and fencing arenas, contact sports areas, squash courts, and state-of-the-art weight rooms complement the dome's enviable facilities. ●