

Q&A INTERVIEW

Championing Change Through Motorsport

A rising figure in Saudi Arabia's nascent sports sector on her rally career and the expanding role of women in athletics and business across the Kingdom.

FORMAT: Q&A | SECTOR: SPORTS & MOTORSPORT | MARKET: SAUDI ARABIA | SUBJECT: SAUDI MOTORSPORT

"The sport sector is one of the strongest booming sectors in Saudi Arabia; it is engraved in Vision 2030."

MASHAEL AL OBAIDAN · PRO RALLY DRIVER

What inspired you to become a professional rally driver?

When one lands in Riyadh, one may see beautiful buildings but the majority of what you see is desert. Our people are from the desert; our great, great grandparents lived there, and it is in our blood. What I like about motorsports is that it captures this essence and the love for speed that I was born with. To be honest, I had never thought about choosing this as a profession. However, when they announced that the Dakar Rally would occur in Saudi Arabia for the next seven years under the Vision 2030 initiative, I knew that I wanted to take my hobby and have it as a profession.

What was it like competing in the Dakar Rally and consolidating your presence on the world stage as one of Saudi Arabia's first female rally drivers?

It was an amazing feeling because it was hosted in Saudi Arabia. When something you really want badly and you dreamed about happens in your own country, the feeling is indescribable; I was filled with excitement and passion. I have been to the desert many times, but the Dakar Rally took us to magical places that we had not seen before. The Dakar Rally was pretty tough. The race lasts for at least 14 to 16 days. It is challenging for the driver, both mentally and physically, and for the vehicle. I did the Dakar Rally twice in Saudi Arabia and the goal is to keep on doing it until we nail the first position. We did the Baja Rally in Mexico in 2023 and came in third. The plan is to keep on pushing further and winning first in all championships. These rallies really show the love we have for our community and how international communities are also supporting Saudi Arabia. It means a lot to me to hit the podium and raise the Saudi flag based on our achievements. I am really proud to represent my country.

How has the country's nascent sports industry helped to promote female empowerment in Saudi Arabia?

The percentage of women in rallies is not large. I felt proud to represent my country in the toughest rally in the world, knowing that the percentage of women participating does not exceed 5%. The beauty of the sport is that men and women both get to compete. Once we wear the helmet, it does not matter what gender we are, it is about skills and making it to the finish line. My parents played a huge role in my development. I am thankful my father supported my hobbies and bought me all kinds of new gadgets to feed my personality. While I had a Barbie house, I also had a microscope and would go outside to analyze insects. I was the first woman to obtain a rally license in Saudi Arabia, which has paved the way for other women. While this is amazing and hugely significant, it often overshadows positive results in championships. We are now competing with world champions and doing very well.

While the motorsport industry is being led by an athlete, Prince Abdulaziz, many prominent women are also athletes that are leading the development of the local sector. They are empowering the younger generation, and empowering both women and men to compete locally and internationally. An example is Princess Delayel bint Nahar Al Saud who established the first soccer team in Riyadh when we were children. The ecosystem is beautiful. I aim to work on this momentum and keep on inspiring the younger generation. We are lucky to be living in an era with so many opportunities at our fingertips. The doors are open. Whether one wants to be an astronaut, a top athlete or working in business, it is important we take on new opportunities to enable our passions.

How significant is the sports sector under the country's new economic development roadmap?

The sport sector is one of the strongest booming sectors in Saudi Arabia; it is engraved in Vision 2030. Saudi's major investments in motorsports shows how keen we are on developing it globally. Saudi Arabia now has more than 90 sports federations, with each having at least 100 athletes and at least 10 of these athletes being considered pro athletes. However, to see these players compete internationally in the Olympics and other large events requires the support of the private sector. International companies are currently looking for exposure in Saudi Arabia. I look forward to seeing the private sector investing heavily in current and upcoming athletes. A good example of national support for sports is Saudi Arabia's first-ever E1 boat race in February 2024. It is a global championship and one that will be seen all around the world. I grew up close to the water; I am good at water activities such as jet skis and driving sport boats. I am an advanced scuba diver and a certified freediver. Free diving and scuba diving are my meditation. The momentum behind the upcoming E1 boat race is helping women to participate in public life beyond sports such as business. It shows how invested Saudi Arabia is in developing startups and new innovative ideas. In this sense, the impetus to develop sports, startups, innovation and clean energy are all part of the same push.



Mashael Al Obaidan
Pro Rally Driver

What other passions do you currently have outside of sports, such as public speaking and driving entrepreneurship?

I really enjoyed speaking at the Future Investment Initiative in 2023. It is a huge event with many large global companies in attendance; it is one of the largest investment events in the world. It was really important for me to show delegates and the world a true example of a Saudi woman, what we are achieving and what we are capable of. Additionally, I also love entrepreneurship. After graduating, I stayed in the USA for a while under a Saudi scholarship to understand the entrepreneurship ecosystem in places such as Los Angeles and Silicon Valley. Upon returning, I have worked alongside the US office of the Ministry of Investment and met with many large companies. Working with startups has played a major role in my life.