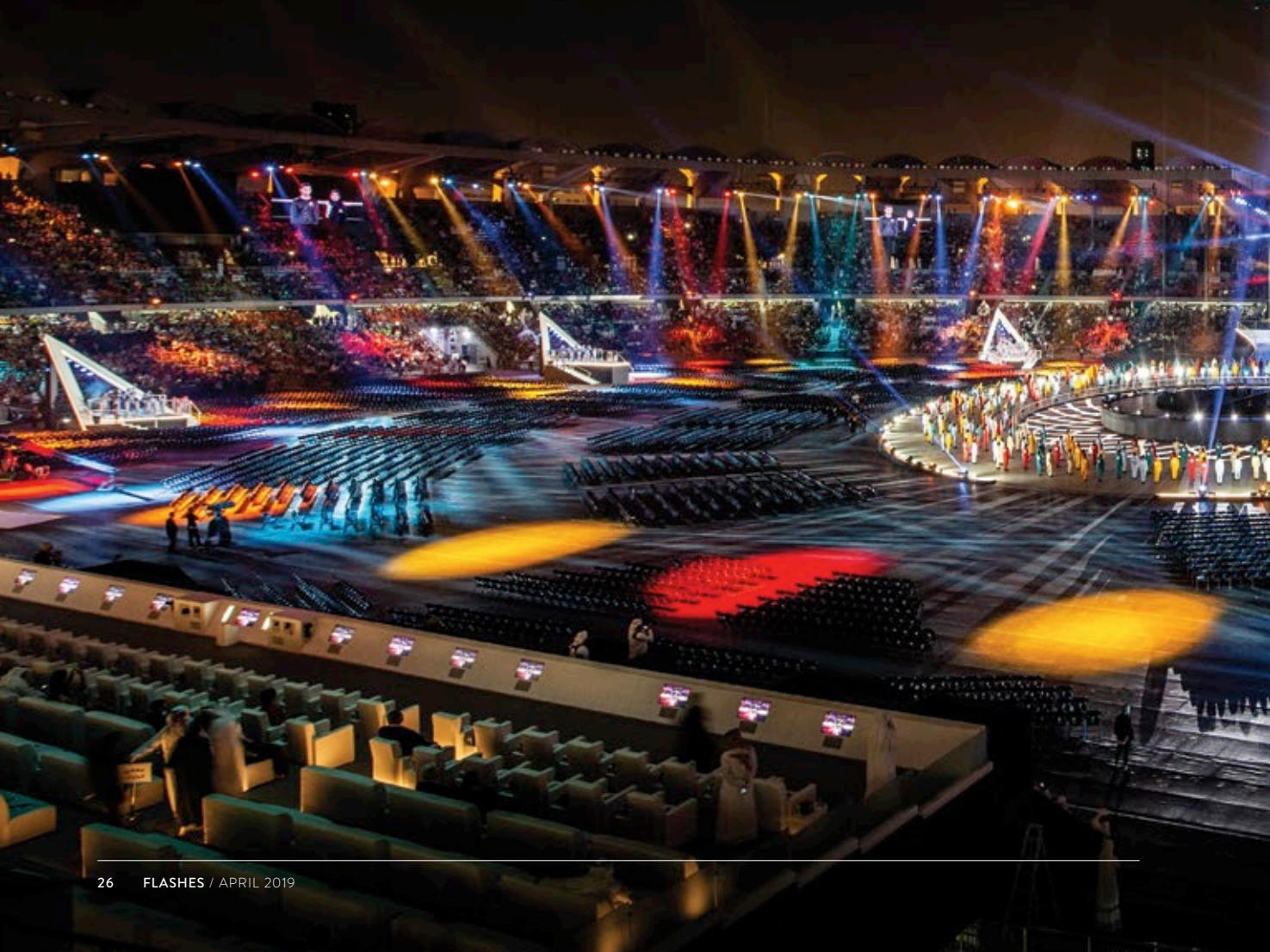


# THE SPIRIT OF INCLUSION SHINES **BRIGHT** IN THE UAE

*The Special Olympics World Games Abu Dhabi 2019 may be over but its legacy of inclusion will live on throughout the UAE, the region and beyond.*





When His Highness Sheikh Mohamed bin Zayed Al Nahyan, Crown Prince of Abu Dhabi and Deputy Supreme Commander of the UAE Armed Forces first announced that Abu Dhabi would host the 2019 Special Olympics World Games back in 2016, a commitment was made to ensure the games would become the most unified Special Olympics in the organisation's 50-year history.

Not only would the games be a sporting event the nation could be proud of, bringing together 7,500 athletes from 195 countries, they would bequeath a legacy of inclusion. That meant inspiring long-term change and ensuring the impact of the games was felt by future generations through long-term programmes and initiatives.

The task of bringing that legacy to life fell to the Local Organising Committee (LOC), which has been working to establish the foundations for change ever since the games were first announced three years ago. Its primary goal? To ensure the games would be the most visible component of a much larger commitment

by the nation's leadership to create a more inclusive, just and unified society.

"The World Games will play a fundamental role in helping to reshape the attitudes of the public and how they interact with colleagues, family members and members of society from people of determination," says Khalfan Al Mazrouei, Managing Director of the Special Olympics World Games Abu Dhabi 2019. "The nation's leaders have lent their full support to the games and its goals by participating in community events that bring together members of society in a show of unity."

The largest sports and humanitarian event to be held in the world this year, the games saw athletes compete in 24 sporting events. Amongst them was the UAE's largest ever team of Special Olympics athletes at a World Games, with more than 320 sportsmen and women competing. They were cheered on by an estimated half a million spectators and supported by 3,000 coaches, 1,500 officials and 20,000 volunteers.

"Each of the 7,500 athletes who are taking part in the games is an example of the wonderful spirit





*“The legacy of the Special Olympics World Games Abu Dhabi 2019 will be measured in the way people’s perceptions of intellectual challenges are changed, in the opportunities that are made available for people of determination in everyday life and in their contributions to society”*

**KHALFAN AL MAZROUEI,**  
MANAGING DIRECTOR OF THE SPECIAL OLYMPICS WORLD  
GAMES ABU DHABI 2019

of the Special Olympics,” said Al Mazrouei during the games last month. “They have been empowered through having the opportunity to show the world what they are capable of. Their performances on the field of play will be an inspiration to people of determination everywhere.”

It is this inspiration and the focus on legacy that will arguably have the greatest long-term benefits. For example, a number of important initiatives are being rolled out, including the first real comprehensive study of people with intellectual disabilities in the UAE, an arts and culture programme to promote inclusion through the arts, and capacity building in the healthcare sector to promote more inclusive health practices.

The LOC’s Community and Legacy Committee is spearheading these initiatives and has sought to engage with 100,000 youth through the Special Olympics by working in partnership with education organisations.

“The UAE has a proud tradition of tolerance that continues to welcome and accept people of all races, religions and backgrounds, including people of determination,” says Al Mazrouei. “It is an unfortunate fact that around the world people with intellectual challenges are more likely to suffer from undiagnosed or untreated health conditions, social exclusion and a lack of understanding and respect.

Making sure people of determination can lead their lives to the best of their ability is of paramount importance to the Special Olympics, the World Games Abu Dhabi and the UAE.”

It’s a commitment that is respected by society at large, says Karim Younes, Regional Managing Director of Sports Marketing at Horizon FCB Sports. “The sporting event by itself is a beautiful story that turned into an international movement,” says Younes. “But most importantly it involves special needs and empowers social inclusion, which has been at the heart of the UAE society for some time now. It has been additionally reflected in the country’s support for its Special Olympics’ athletes, and appreciation for the role of sports in joining communities together.

“Social inclusion is an integral part of the UAE Vision 2021. The country has been a forerunner across the Arab region in defending and promoting







**Left:** The Community and Legacy Committee sought to engage with 100,000 youth through the Special Olympics by working in partnership with education organisations

the rights for differently abled people, promoting the integration and inclusion of people with different needs in the society. Choosing Abu Dhabi as the host city was therefore the right choice and enables the emirate to build a profound and lasting impact for the movement itself, for the cause it has been advocating, and for its flagship sporting events.”

The UAE’s commitment to long-term change is not just countrywide, it’s regional, with the Special Olympics UAE playing a major role in the expansion

of inclusion and opportunity throughout the Middle East. Special Olympics programming is also being introduced through the nation’s expanded educational and rehab facilities, and nearly 6,000 athletes are participating in sports and fitness activities.

It’s a matter of leadership, with the UAE expanding Special Olympics activity throughout the Middle East and North Africa. Abu Dhabi, for example, hosted the MENA Special Olympics IX MENA Games last year – the third time it had hosted the regional games. The 2018 edition was the most unified in the history of the Special Olympics MENA, with inclusive teams featuring athletes with intellectual disabilities playing alongside typical colleagues in basketball, tennis, table tennis and football competitions.

“The legacy of the Special Olympics World Games Abu Dhabi 2019 will be measured in the way people’s perceptions of intellectual challenges are changed, in the opportunities that are made available for people of determination in everyday life and in their contributions to society,” says Al Mazrouei. “This legacy will shape a brighter future for athletes and individuals with and without intellectual challenges.

“The UAE’s National Vision 2021, alongside Special Olympics, aims to build a future that is filled with opportunities for people of determination so that they may lead their lives to the fullest and contribute to society side-by-side with colleagues, friends and family. The World Games Abu Dhabi 2019 is a powerful and inspiring catalyst for change that will touch every corner of the world.” †

