

STYLING: HANNAH BASS; HAIR: LORNA BUTLER AT BAREFACE; USING DAVINES; MAKEUP: DIANA MAUER; THIS AND NEXT PAGE: CLOTHING, ALL NIKE; TENNIS RACKET, JEWELLERY AND WATCH, AL NABHANI'S OWN.



Beating The Odds

Trailblazer, go-getter, catalyst for change—whatever name you choose for her, **Fatma Al Nabhani** has forged an as-yet unexplored path as the GCC's first-ever female professional tennis player. Meet the heavy hitter making history and inspiring women across the Middle East.

*Words by Yi-Hwa Hanna
Photography by Juliet Dunne*

It's a scorchingly hot day in Dubai, and heaps of dust are swirling around the industrial Al Quoz area. That, combined with a painfully early start, is enough to sap the energy out of anyone. But not for athlete Fatma Al Nabhani. The Omani native—who just landed at Dubai airport a couple of hours earlier, fresh from a pitstop in her home city of Muscat after a whirlwind trip to Greece—is sat under the bright lights of the WH photo-studio all smiles and sunshine, nary a complaint about the fact that she's had a mere four or so hours of sleep.

Having a crazy schedule is something Fatma is used to, though. "I travel a lot—it's so hectic. I'll typically travel for two to three weeks in a row then take one week off—or sometimes less than a week—then we start again," she says. It might sound exhausting, but for Fatma it's all part and parcel of being a rising young

tennis champion who is competing in tournaments all over the world.

The GCC's first ever professional female tennis player, the bright-eyed 24-year-old's recent trip to Heraklion, Greece, just saw her soar back into the top-450 in the world rankings, as she nabbed both the \$10K ITF and doubles title. But boasting isn't her style—if you didn't know what

she did for a living, you'd have no idea that this charming and humble woman is the firestarter at the heart of a movement among women in the Middle East.

Being real is just part of who Fatma is though—her endless enthusiasm for every project she gets involved in, not to mention her seemingly boundless energy, are part of what got her to where she is in the first place. "I get my energy

from knowing that there are a lot of eyes and hopes on me," she says; "Unfortunately, I'm the only [female GCC] player out there, and people wait and look up to me and wait to see my results, so that gives me inspiration to work harder, get better results, and make my country and my region proud."

The skill for her sport seems to be hard-wired into her DNA, and it's instantly clear that the supportive environment in which she grew up was a strong influence in developing her unstoppable drive. "I grew up in a tennis family! My mum is the one who taught me the game, and my two older brothers as well. No one ever forced me to be a tennis player, but as they say, it just runs in

On Fatma's Workout Playlist



- Jessie J "Masterpiece"
- Ellie Goulding "Burn"
- David Guetta ft. Usher "Without You"
- Katy Perry "Firework"
- Calvin Harris "Blame"
- David Guetta ft. Sia "Titanium"
- Zedd ft. Selena Gomez "I Want You To Know"
- Avicii "The Nights"
- Taylor Swift "Shake It Off"



your blood," she explains.

Fatma began playing tennis when she was just four years old, and it's been a passion that's stayed with her throughout her entire life. "Professionally, it's always been tennis for me," she says. A naturally athletic soul, she enjoys playing pretty much any type of sports for fun and watching a variety as well; "None that have blood or hitting or any of that sort of aggressiveness, though!" she laughs. Growing up alongside Muscat's beautiful waters and sandy beaches, it's no wonder that when she's not battling it out with a racket in hand, she loves heading out to the shore. "If I want to play something with my family, it's usually beach-related," she explains, admitting that there are few places she prefers to get her sweat on in more, whether it's playing beach volleyball or just heading out for a run. She's also a keen fisher.

Spending time with her family is important to Fatma—this is a family girl through and through, not least because they've always supported her no matter how wildly large her

dreams have been. And it certainly hasn't been an easy ride. "When I started, I was the only one. Even when I was very young, when they used to run junior local tournaments, it had to be mixed for females and males because there weren't enough females to play in Oman and the GCC," she says. Training solo wasn't the only thing Fatma had to go up against—when she was a kid, the idea of a girl from the GCC growing up to become a professional athlete simply wasn't anything anyone had ever even considered. As if breaking the mould in terms of what a Gulf Arab girl could opt for as a future career wasn't hard enough, the cultural sensitivities and the famous Middle Eastern heat meant Fatma had yet more obstacles in her path—but stopping just wasn't an option. "When I was about 16 or so, since tennis wasn't so well-known in our region, not like it is in the USA or Europe for instance, I didn't have the right team or facilities to train with. Like [overseas] you would have



Beauty School

Beauty is a huge part of a Middle Eastern woman's culture, and with her glowing skin and impossibly shiny hair, Fatma is no exception

I try to take care of my beauty routine as much as I can—whenever I'm competing, training or travelling, I always make sure to wear sunblock. I also drink a lot of water, of course—it's the most important thing for your body, your beauty... and everything! When it comes to fashion, I've found a way to dress with a lot of style but in a way that suits me. Tennis shorts and skirts are very short, and I like to wear longer things, but I've managed to find my own style and a way to make it work for me, where I can be elegant and trendy in a way that's comfortable and suits my culture.

your tennis coach, fitness coach, physiotherapist, and so on. I grew up with none of that—it was just my mum coaching me," Fatma says. Her family's backing carried her through her training, both physically and emotionally: "I could never have done it without the support and care

of my mother. I owe a lot to her, and I have a lot of gratitude for that because she's the one who pushed me... she was my first coach! She's the one who put me on the right track to achieving my dream," she says, adding that her brothers have also always been a huge source of

"I get my energy from knowing that *there's a lot of eyes and hopes on me*; it inspires me to work harder /





A Taste of Home

When she's on the road, Fatma eats for optimum competition performance, but when she's home, there's nothing better than Arabic food...

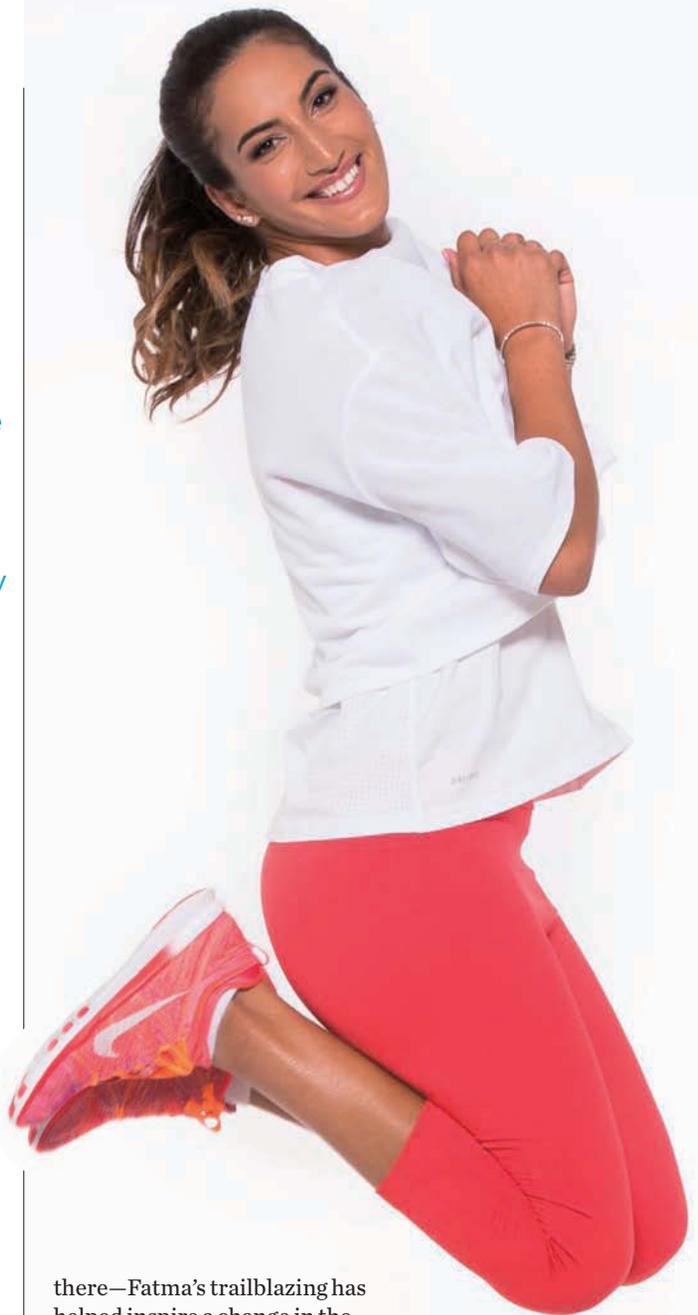
Whenever I travel, I maintain the same routine and I really take care of my nutrition. Whenever I travel, I'm competing or going to tournaments, so I'm on my competition diet—and I always stick to my routine. Whether I have a match at 3pm or 9pm, I'll wake up early to practise every day, and I'll opt for healthy meals like pasta with vegetables and either fish or chicken, or a small amount of beef. I don't eat a lot of junk or sweets, but I'm a bit low on iron so I have to always watch out for that. Whenever I'm home, it's like my holiday, so I can cheat and eat what I want. I love home cooking a lot—you know us in the GCC, we can't live without rice! I just can't wait to come back home and eat. I love Omani Shuwaa, for instance—I don't know if you've heard of it, but it's the most traditional dish.

encouragement to her. “Whenever I'm home, they're the ones that I practise with, and they also give me tips whenever I need them! My family has always supported me... I love them, my tennis family,” she smiles.

With them behind her, next came the support of her city. “It was really tough being the only one, but our community accepted that we're starting to have professional women athletes that are achieving amazing results all the time, so they were really supportive. It was a bit easier when people started accepting [the idea of] women in sports,” she says. As for that legendary Arab heat? Rather than using it as an excuse for why things were that much harder for her, Fatma instead decided to think of it as part of her training routine, prepping her for international competitions. “For instance, I'm going to

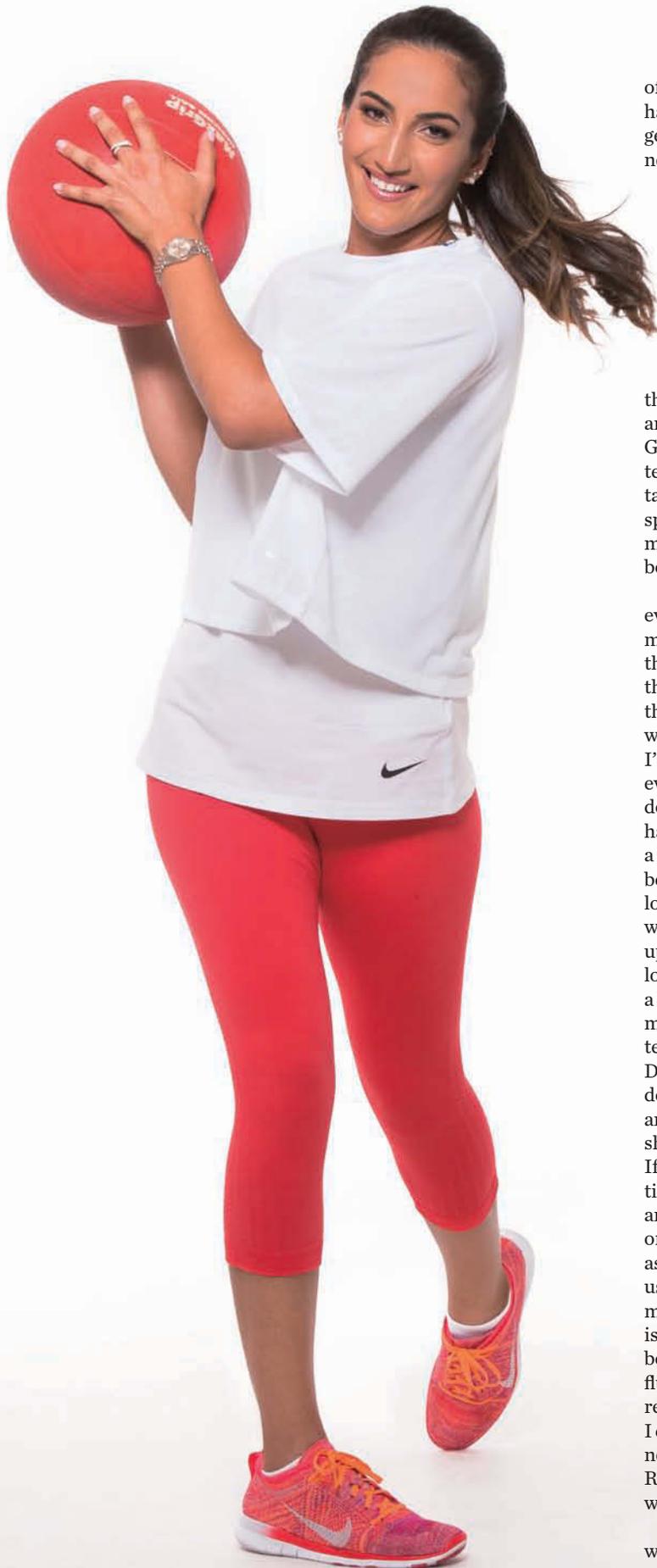
Indonesia next. Last time I was there, I was playing in a match for around three and a half hours in about 46°C! There are no excuses. For practise, we try and avoid the heat, but in matches you can't, and you can play in the peak times of heat. So in a way, the Middle East weather prepares me well!” she says. Oh, and in that crazy-hot, long match in Indonesia? She took home the gold medal.

It's not just in her wins that her hard work has paid off—although with 6 ITF single trophies and six more in doubles to her name at time of going to press, she certainly has enough to be proud of



there—Fatma's trailblazing has helped inspire a change in the way people view sport across the region. “It was a big challenge, doing something that people didn't really know or understand. But when we started to get results... now in Oman, tennis is the second sport after football and people know it and are playing it, and people have started to know who Federer and Nadal and all

“It is a lot of pressure, but in the end I did what my passion is, the thing that I love, and it all worked out”



of the top players are. I'm so happy people have started to get to know tennis, and that it's now big in Oman!" she says.

More than just hard work, Fatma also credits her success to her unrelenting passion, a whole lot of training, and, of course, her talent. "It is a lot of pressure, but in the end I did what my passion is, and the thing that I love, you know, and it all worked out, thank God. I mean it's not easy to be a tennis player; you have to be talented to play these kinds of sports, but as I said it runs in my blood and I'm very lucky to be able to do the thing I love."

Fatma trains twice a day, every day. "I wake up in the morning and run, then go to the gym. I'll practise in both the morning and evening, but the timing depends on the weather—in the summertime, I'll do a longer session in the evening. As a tennis player, I do a lot of cardio—you have to have really good stamina. I do a lot of strength training with body weight, but I don't do a lot of weights or added heavy weights, especially for my upper body, since I have to be loose and flexible. There's also a lot of footwork—that's the most important thing for a tennis player," she says. During Ramadan, her training does have to change a fair amount while she fasts, since she can only practise after Iftar. "We don't have much time, but I usually start from around 9pm until about 12am or so—basically I just don't run as much as I do normally. I used to run for the last 30-45 minutes before Iftar, but this is really dangerous for your body since it doesn't have any fluid in it at that point, and it's really bad for your muscles, so I don't do that anymore. And I never travel during Ramadan—I'm always at home with my family then!" she says.

Staying so committed even when the unique aspects of life as an Arab and Muslim woman

come into play are just part of Fatma's world—and when you factor in how much she has to travel, being super organised is key. The discipline required to be an athlete helps Fatma stay really organised and always on time, and she always takes care to manage her time right, from training, to time to rest. While an average day sees her train a lot—"I practise, practise and practise!"—she does always try to work in some time off, even if it's a half-day, to spend with her friends and family. "You do need this sometimes, or else you'll go crazy!" she laughs.

Aside from her wins—which are a huge motivating factor for Fatma ("Playing, winning and victory... all of these things keep me happy!" she says)—as a Nike athlete, she's also extremely proud to be tied to one of the biggest sportswear brands in the world. "I'm honoured to be a part of Nike... I've always been a Nike girl since I was young, and I'm so thankful for them being able to provide me with outfits that have helped me build my own style to play in!" she says. Indeed, Fatma's now signature style of a tennis skirt with matching leggings, usually in a vibrant print, has made her personal sporting look somewhat iconic in the region, with girls across the GCC seen mimicking it. "I'm so happy that I have my own style that I'm comfortable playing in, that at the same time respects my culture. I'm so grateful for that," she says. While cute workout gear may be a great motivational factor for women across the world, for those in the GCC, cultural sensitivities make activewear requirements a little more complicated than that, and Fatma knows this firsthand. "Now you can practise in style—the outfits are available for the Middle Eastern woman. There are longer sleeves and looser pieces, and they're still trendy. I think a lot of these things make it

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easier for women to work out or play sports here," she says. Fatma also credits apps such as the Nike Training Club in helping to create a change—"Now you can have an app on your phone that's like a personal trainer, so you can practise wherever you are and you don't have to go to the gym. It's like having a trainer in your pocket—a lot of things are easier than before. I've also seen a lot more women running and training in the park—things that maybe a few years ago, I couldn't remember seeing," she says, adding that it's not just the younger generation experiencing a shift in mentality. "When I go to the beach or park, I'll even see older women jogging or running, and waking up to exercise. It makes me so happy seeing women [here] getting into sports, but we can't say things like 'I don't have anyone to help me,' or 'I can't do this and that' anymore... everything is provided and available to us. There are no more excuses. The sports culture in the region is changing, and this is something I am really proud of and inspired by."

It's precisely changes like this that motivate Fatma to keep going, and that she is undoubtedly in large part responsible for, as the only regional female role model out there for young women from the GCC aspiring to explore a career in sports. "I have really seen changes, a lot. People now understand how important being fit or working out is. The biggest thing is that I want to show that it's not impossible for an Arab or Muslim woman to be at the top, or be a professional tennis player. We can do it. It is hard, because of where we come from, but it's not impossible," she says. Until that day comes though, there's not a lot of company at the top: "It wasn't easy for me at all, being the only one, and I don't want to be the only one out there because it's kind of

"MY MUM IS THE ONE WHO TAUGHT ME THE GAME. I COULD NEVER HAVE DONE IT WITHOUT HER SUPPORT; SHE WAS MY FIRST COACH!"

lonely. You don't have anyone to play with or train with that gives you the motivation that you can have with a partner who is playing with you and working out with you. It's always like I'm doing things alone, so... it is hard, but thank God now the culture and the generation is changing you know? The thought of sports—it is getting better and I hope there are more and more professional athletes coming up in the future." Fatma says she always likes to put small dreams before the big ones, but her biggest dream? To be one of the top players in the world. "If I were in the top 10 or top 50, I would be so happy!" she says.

With a lot of women in the region watching her and looking up to her, a lone figure cutting through previously uncharted waters, it's a lot of pressure, but Fatma is just grateful to be able to inspire a change. "I mean, it's a great feeling knowing [I'm inspiring people]—sometimes, you don't realise it yourself. Some days, I could be down and I say I don't want to play anymore, but I can't—if I pass just one day without playing, my hands get itchy and I want to hold the racket and get to the courts! If I ever feel depressed or down, or something's bothering me, tennis is the only thing that will cure it. It was never an option for me not to do this."

"It wasn't easy for me at all, being the only one out there, and I don't want to be, because it's kind of lonely. But thankfully now the culture is changing. The thought of women in sports—it is getting better."

