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### AN INTERVIEW WITH CAL SOUTH'S CHRISTINE BIRD ABOUT QATAR'S WINNING BID FOR THE 2022 WORLD CUP

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**INTERVIEW: CAL SOUTH'S CHRISTINE BIRD TALKS ABOUT HER EXPERIENCES IN QATAR**

Interview by Rik Tod Johnson | Cal South Soccer Magazine

December 3, 2010 (FULLERTON, CA) - While Wednesday's announcement of Qatar's winning bid for the 2022 FIFA World Cup came as a massive shock to much of the American public and perhaps much of the world, one Cal South staff member has a unique perspective on the country and its abilities to run a large-scale sporting event.

Christine Bird, Cal South's new Assistant Director of Marketing and Sales, served on the organizing committee for the 15th Asian Games in Qatar in 2006. In her role as Venue Operations Manager of the Khalifa Stadium, Bird was on-site for three months and was responsible for all aspects of stadium management, including events, security, media, and the opening and closing ceremonies. Bird has also managed international sporting events around the world, including the Olympic Games in Athens, Atlanta, Turin and Vancouver, and has held lead organizing roles with US Soccer Federation and USA Water Polo.

The 15th Asian Games, officially known as the XV Asiad, was one of the largest and most elaborate sporting events ever staged, and was held in Qatar's capital city of Doha from December 1-15, 2006. Doha was the first city in its region and only the second in Western Asia (following Tehran in 1974) to host the Asian Games. There were 46 disciplines from 39 events contested and it was the first time that all 45 member nations of the Olympic Council of Asia took part in the Games.

We talked to Bird about her experiences working in Qatar during the Asian Games, and asked her for some insight into what American soccer players might expect when playing in a World Cup there:

**Your resume is rich with international sporting experience. How did you end up in Qatar working for the 15th Asian Games in 2006?**

It was through my connections of working other events such as the Winter Olympics in Turin. Some people I worked with in Italy had gone straight to Doha after the Olympics. I have to admit I was hesitant going there being an American female. When there was an offer of a three-month contract, I decided I was curious to see the Middle East and experience it for myself. My goal was to leave behind the preconceptions and live and work among the locals to learn the culture.

**While Qatar is one of the wealthiest countries in the world thanks to their oil reserves, it is smaller in size than Connecticut, making it the smallest country ever chosen to host a World Cup. How did this affect the staging of the Asian Games, and what does it bode for the 2022 World Cup?**

Well, there are positives and negatives to staging a large international event within such a small area. The chief positive is the transportation. It is much easier for both organizers and spectators to get to many different events even within one day. This would have been a challenge for the World Cup in the United States, with vast travelling times for fans wanting to follow their team around the country.

The negative was that most of the venues needed to be built from scratch as they did not exist for such a small country. This takes time and resources, not only for the construction but also for the hosting of test events prior to the main event. Organizers want to make sure the facilities are adequate for pedestrian flow, safety, and for the specific sport's demands.

Qatar has the financial resources to build the facilities, and is very good about bringing in highly experienced consultants to manage the work. I will just be curious to see how Qatar handles the massive amount of crowds that follow this event even if they do not have a ticket to the event. Germany did an amazing job of having viewing parties for those that just wanted to be close to the action but were not able to get a ticket inside the stadium.

**With such a small population (just over 1.6 million citizens according to a 2010 census), the 2022 World Cup will be heavily dependent on ticket sales to foreigners, perhaps more than previous World Cups. What can tourists expect when traveling to Qatar? What are some of the cultural differences of which they should be aware?**

Yes, I have to note I was very excited to see that US citizens were second in numbers of attendance to this summer's World Cup event in South Africa. That speaks volumes to those that believe soccer is not popular in the US. FIFA makes certain requirements on host nations regarding entry tourist visas, so Qatar will follow those rules.

I encourage people to go to Qatar and see it for themselves. Qatar is very accepting of western culture. For example, women are not required to have their heads covered as many of the surrounding countries do. I felt very safe and enjoyed exploring the sites such as the spice markets. There are restrictions on alcohol consumption that foreigners will need to be aware of and respectful of the regulations.

**Qatar can reach temperatures of over 120°F in the summer, which is the time of year when the World Cup is contested. While Qatar has announced they will be building brand new indoor stadiums with air conditioning for the event, how should our athletes prepare for the overall experience of visiting and playing in Qatar at that time of year?**

The weather must have been the hardest negative aspect that the bid committee must have had to face with the voting FIFA executives. I arrived in October and was very much affected by the high temperatures. My colleagues would tell me stories of what it was like living there in the summer time with temperatures around 125 degrees.

This will be a challenge for both the organizers and the athletes. I can't imagine not only building all new air controlled climate stadiums but also training facilities to accommodate all the teams. As Chuck Blazer of CONCACAF was quoted, "You can't air condition the country."

**What were the positive things you took away from your experience in Qatar? What were the negatives?**

Well, I feel privileged to have been able to have the experience of living and working in a culture that is so different from the one I was brought up in. I learned that the assumptions you make based on your background can be enlightened when someone can explain the situation in a different way.

For example, Qatar has a large population of Indian and Pakistani labor force. I assumed that their living and working conditions were not adequate as they are nothing like what they are in America. After discussing this with a volunteer from India, he clarified for me that he was happy to have a job where he could send money home to his family. In India, he would not be able to find a job that paid as well.

I can't say I agree with all the cultural differences, but I believe I came away with a better understanding. I'm sure Qatar will put on a spectacular event for all to enjoy. They are very proud of their country and the rich history of the area which I'm sure will be exhibited for all at the World Cup in 2022.

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