



The rise of Diriyah Club to First Division

**A blueprint for sports
transformation in Saudi Arabia**





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01

Introduction

Founded in 1976 and revitalised in 2024 under Diriyah Company's leadership, the Diriyah Club embodies a rare blend of heritage and ambition, showing how a community-rooted institution can be transformed through modern governance, strategic investment and performance discipline.

Its recent achievements, including promotion to the Saudi First Division after winning the 2024-25 Second Division with 74 points and securing the championship trophy, demonstrate the impact that clear vision, institutional strength and professional standards can achieve when aligned. But Diriyah Club's story goes far beyond the pitch. It reflects Vision 2030 in action: a model of how national ambitions for culture, sports, tourism and heritage can converge through coordinated governance.

The club now sits at the intersection of Saudi Arabia's wider giga-project agenda, offering replicable lessons for other Saudi sports entities and global peers on governance excellence, commercial readiness and community integration.



This report outlines Diriyah Club's transformational journey and positions the club not just as a success story, but as a model for the Kingdom's next generation of sports institutions heritage-led, globally ambitious, and built for enduring excellence. It also seeks to:

- Highlight the Kingdom's ambition to build world-class leagues and elevate Saudi clubs to the global top tier
- Show how clubs can evolve into sustainable, professionally managed institutions anchored by strong governance and operating models
- Emphasise the balance between on-pitch performance and off-pitch governance and why both are essential for long-term competitiveness
- Illustrate how sports can serve national priorities – driving tourism, promoting heritage and strengthening Saudi identity



02 Diriyah's evolving sporting landscape

In 2017, the Diriyah Gate Development Authority (DGDA) was created to preserve and regulate Diriyah as a global heritage and cultural destination. In 2022, Diriyah Company was established to develop tourism, culture, hospitality, real estate and sports within the purview of the larger Diriyah heritage site.

Diriyah Club became part of this shift through the national Sports Clubs Investment and Privatisation Project. Its ownership was transferred to Diriyah Company in July 2024, followed by the appointment of a new board chaired by H.H. Prince Khalid bin Mohammed Al Saud. Integrating the club under the giga-project positioned it as a strategic asset at the intersection of heritage, tourism and Saudi Arabia's sports transformation.

The evolution of Diriyah Club reflects Saudi Arabia's new sports model of heritage-led, corporatised and aligned with Vision 2030's privatisation agenda. Its journey from a local club to a PIF-backed strategic asset demonstrates how sports entities are now designed to operate simultaneously as competitive teams, commercial enterprises and cultural ambassadors.

The Diriyah Club Sports Company transformation is not an isolated initiative; it is the activation of a deeper vision. As part of a giga-project with global ambitions, the club needed to reflect not only sporting excellence but national values, economic logic and social relevance. To achieve this, the organisation codified its identity through five themes.



The Diriyah Club Sports Company transformation is not an isolated initiative – it's the activation of a deeper vision. As part of a giga-project with global ambitions, the club needed to reflect not only sporting excellence but national values, economic logic and social relevance. To achieve this, the organisation codified its identity through five themes.

These themes act as strategic filters for all decisions, investments and performance goals.

Heritage and pride:

Leverage Diriyah's historical legacy as a differentiator in branding and storytelling

Elite performance:

Build a high-performance culture across football and priority sports, targeting competitiveness at national and international levels

Innovation and differentiation:

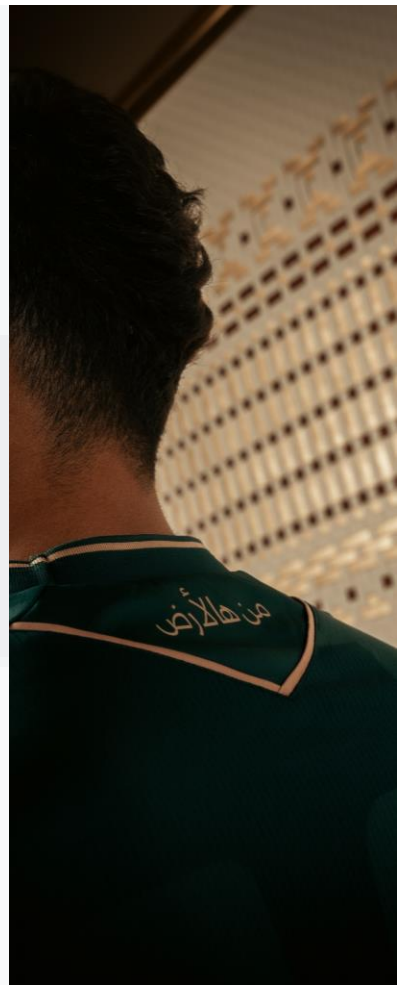
Apply sports science, data analytics and modern training methodologies to accelerate athlete and organisational development

Sustainability and discipline:

Operate as a financially viable, well-governed enterprise aligned with PIF's long-term investment logic

Fan and community engagement:

Create a loyal, passionate fan base while fostering youth participation and grassroots growth





To operationalise its strategic themes, Diriyah Club also executed a set of seven interlinked priorities. Together, they bridge vision and action, ensuring strategic intent is translated into measurable results:

Compete and win

Drive elite results in football as the commercial and competitive anchor.

Embed governance excellence

Institutionalise corporate governance, risk management and accountability structures.

Broaden the sports base

Expand the club's sports portfolio by integrating heritage, combat, and community sports, supported by inclusive programmes and events that promote health, wellbeing and participation.

Build commercial foundations

Develop sustainable revenue streams through sponsorships, media rights and diversified offerings.

Develop infrastructure

Deliver world-class training, competition and fan facilities on allocated land plots.

Celebrate Diriyah's legacy

Position the club as a cultural-sporting ambassador of Saudi heritage.

Mobilise fans and community

Activate programmes that link the club to Diriyah's community and Saudi youth at large.

Diriyah Company developed the club's strategy, and ambition themes were identified to guide investment decisions, talent planning and sporting focus. Together, they form the blueprint for Diriyah Club's next stage of growth as a heritage-rooted, globally competitive sports institution.

Post-transfer milestones: A foundation for change

Since the ownership shift, the club has undergone structural recalibration and achieved tangible results:

Governance strengthened

New board chaired by H.H. Prince Khalid bin Mohammed Al Saud, supported by three committees with strong governance frameworks, structured reporting and early key performance indicators (KPI) tracking.

Assets enabled

Two land parcels have been allocated (22,000m² and 53,000m²) to support future infrastructure development and community outreach.

Competitive success

The club's first football team won the 2024/25 Second Division League and secured promotion to the First Division (Yelo League) with 74 points.

Institutional development

Core corporate functions were established, including a project management office (PMO) to oversee strategic initiatives, alongside human capital, finance functions, governance and procurement Management.

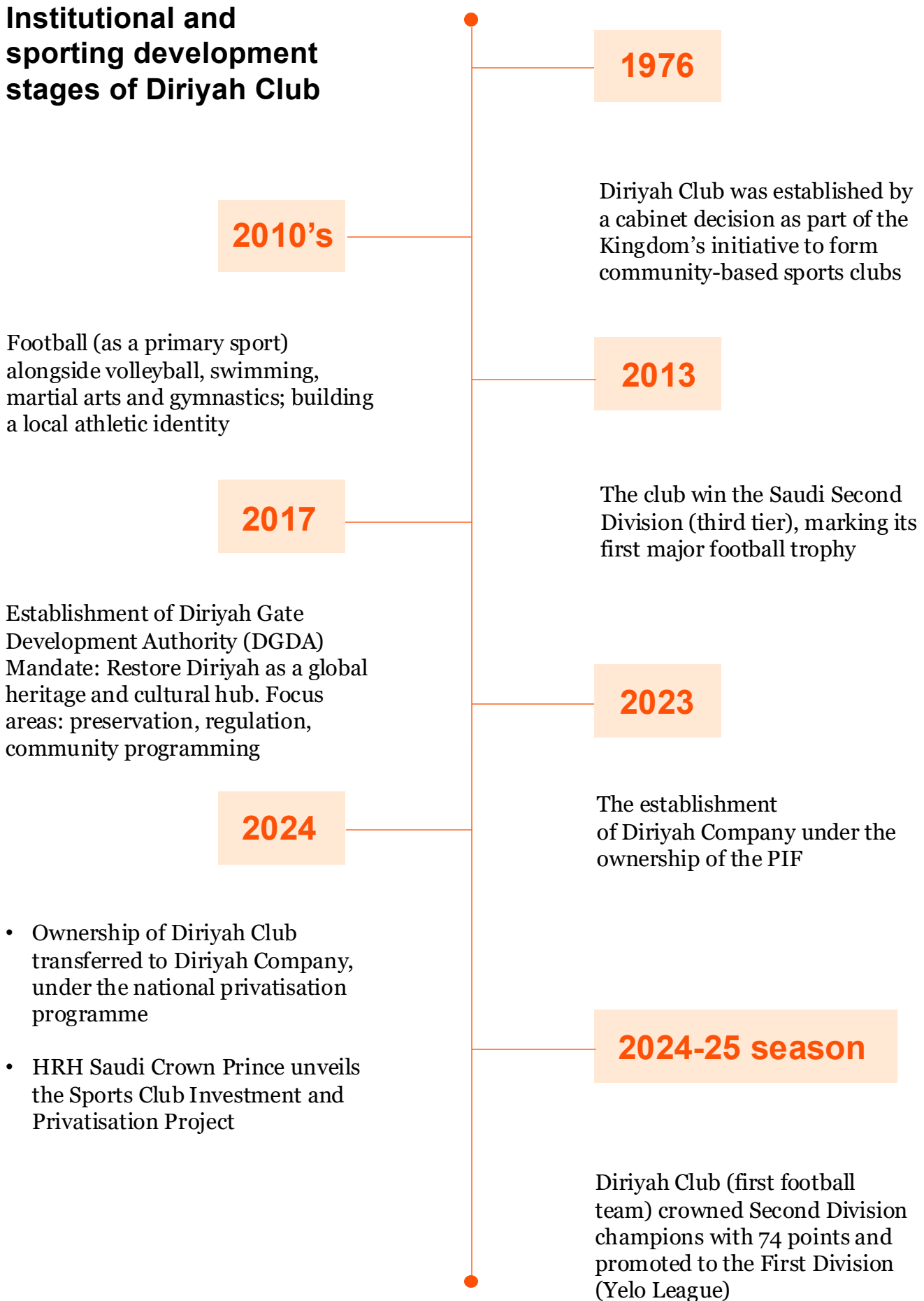
Brand and commercial expansion

Full club rebranding and the launch of online and physical merchandise stores to strengthen market positioning and fan Engagement.

These achievements demonstrate unusually fast mobilisation of governance, assets and performance infrastructure within months and highlight the club's newfound sense of urgency and drive.



Institutional and sporting development stages of Diriyah Club



Diriyah Club at the heart of Saudi Arabia's global sports ambition

Diriyah Club's transformation is unfolding within a broader national shift. The Kingdom is aiming for the Saudi Pro League to become one of the top-performing leagues globally and is rapidly moving from state-run sports structures to a corporatised, investment-driven model where clubs operate as professional enterprises with transparent governance, commercial accountability and performance standards. Under this full privatisation programme, with new regulatory frameworks and major infrastructure investment, Saudi clubs are being re-engineered to compete for global fans, revenues and influence, while still serving national economic and cultural priorities.

The Saudi Pro League's privatisation programme has enabled a league-wide uplift in player quality. In the 2023–24 summer transfer window, Saudi clubs collectively spent approximately US\$957 million, ranking second globally after the English Premier League in net transfer expenditure. In this evolving landscape, Diriyah Club represents the new model. Once a local community team, Diriyah Club is now repositioned as a strategic asset aligned with mega-projects, tourism ambitions and the commercialisation of Saudi sport. Its journey mirrors the Kingdom's shift from legacy club structures to globally competitive, professionally managed sports institutions built for long-term impact.



Vision 2030 as a key driver

Saudi Arabia's sports ecosystem at a glance



Sport is positioned as an economic, cultural and social pillar

The contribution of sports to Vision 2030 objectives of strengthening Islamic and national identity, offering a fulfilling and healthy life, growing and diversifying the economy, increasing employment, enhancing government effectiveness and enabling social responsibility

The growth of sport is supported and regulated by national and sub-national strategies – led by the National Sports Strategy and then further detailed, cascaded and tailored across the ecosystem by its various stakeholders

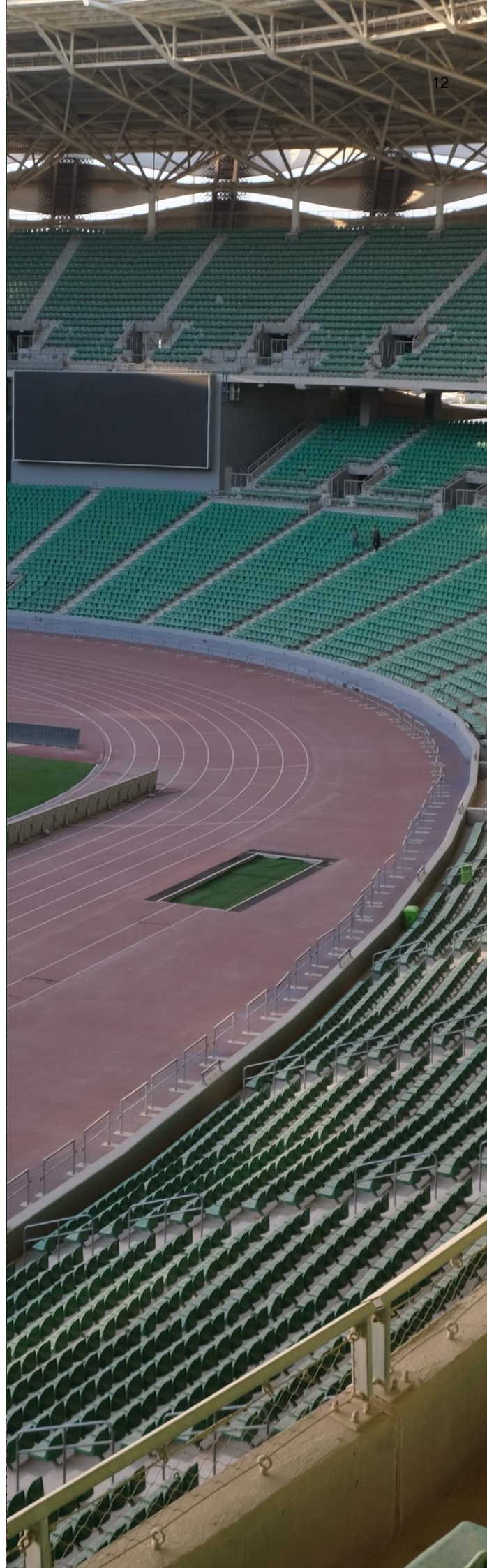
Major investment in infrastructure, talent pathways and elevating overall management practices into global benchmark levels

Bidding and winning the hosting rights to globally renowned cornerstone sports events, including the FIFA Club World Cup 2034, Esports World Cup 2025, Asian Cup 2027, Asian Winter Games 2029, and the FIFA World Cup 2034



A multi-layered national ecosystem

- Public entities: Ministry of Sports, General Entertainment Authority and Ministry of Education
- Saudi sports federations and clubs
- Regional authorities: Major regional development bodies and giga-project authorities across the Kingdom
- Investment institutions: Major public investment vehicles and leading private-sector investors
- Sports stakeholders: 170+ clubs, academies, coaches, athletes, league organisers
- Supporting enablers: International bodies, education sector, private sector, sponsors and media platforms



Privatisation is underway

The National Sports Clubs Investment and Privatisation began in 2023, seeing the privatisation of many clubs to date including Diriyah, AlUla, Al-Zulfi, Al-Kholood, Al-Ansar, NEOM and Al-Qadsiah.

Rapid market growth

Saudi Arabia's sports sector contribution to GDP has significantly grown, increasing from US\$2.4bn in 2016 to US\$6.9bn in 2019, with further growth to US\$7.2bn in 2023³

The Saudi sports sector's current market value is approximately SAR 32bn (US\$8.5bn), a significant increase from SAR 5bn in 2016⁴

Positioning of the Saudi sports sector internationally

Saudi Pro League is currently airing in 180+ countries

Massive international recruitment and rising sponsorship revenues

Major global events: FIFA Club World Cup 2023, Esports World Cup, Formula 1 and FIFA World Cup 2034

15+ new and upgraded stadiums planned across several Saudi regions in response to global, regional and national momentum⁵

Sports tourism growing: 2.5m visitors between the start of 2021 and March 2025⁶



03

The transformation playbook: From heritage roots to a global competitor

Diriyah Club is being designed as a next-generation sports institution: one that merges heritage and high-performance, economic viability and national alignment, local roots and global outlook. Its playbook can inspire other Saudi clubs seeking to move from legacy to leadership in the Vision 2030 era.

Four phases of change

The short-term transformation acceleration plan for Diriyah Sports Club outlined a set of immediate actions to kick-start the club's modernisation, supported by the establishment of core functions and operational support.

This effort ensured that foundational capabilities such as strategy execution through the PMO and the core corporate engine comprising human capital, finance and procurement were in place to enable effective execution. These structures provided the backbone for sequencing the four transformation phases, creating a clear link between planning and delivery.



2024-25: Set the foundation

- Establish professional team structures and governance committees
- Kick-start the operational model with emphasis on compliance and financial discipline
- Immediate focus on competitive performance in football

2026-28: Professionalise

- Expand technical excellence (sports science, data, analytics)
- Build organisational capacity in administration, operations and talent pipelines
- Strengthen revenue streams (sponsorships, broadcasting, fan monetisation)

2029-31: Differentiate

- Invest in elite capabilities across priority sports
- Develop a unique brand narrative anchored in Diriyah's heritage
- Position the club as a hub for innovation in Saudi sport

Post 2031: Internationalise

- Achieve global sporting reputation and international partnerships
- Target commercial viability at par with global benchmark clubs
- Reinforce Diriyah Club as a cultural-sporting brand on the world stage



04

Enablers of success: Technical and administrative excellence

4.1 Technical enablers

Squad development and key players

Diriyah Club Sports Company's recruitment strategy demonstrates a deliberate balance between seasoned international and national experience and promising domestic talent. The inclusion of players such as Moussa Marega, André Tavares, Arthur Rezende, Walid Abdullah and Abdulaziz Alshahrani, many of whom have previously competed in the Roshn Saudi Pro League, has not only enhanced the squad's technical capabilities but also introduced leadership and mentorship for emerging local players. This hybrid approach to squad building, blending experience with homegrown talent, mirrors the successful models adopted by leading European and international clubs that have ascended from lower divisions to top-tier leagues.

The club adopted a structured recruitment and integration framework, ensuring technical, behavioural and leadership alignment across the squad – a model designed for continuity rather than short-term gains.

Coaching and training methodologies

The club appointed Fabiano Flora as head coach following his historic achievement of leading Al-Khoolod Club to their first-ever promotion to the Saudi Pro League. Under his guidance, Diriyah Club continued its upward trajectory, securing promotion to the First Division and reinforcing its commitment to building a competitive and sustainable football programme. Following promotion, the club strengthened its local technical staff with the appointment of Dougie Freedman as Sports Director, bringing in his extensive experience in player recruitment and strategic squad development to strengthen Diriyah Club's long-term vision for success. Diriyah Club is investing in sports science technology (GPS tracking, accelerometers and individualised workload analytics) to professionalise training regimes.



Performance analytics and match preparation

Data-driven decision-making is now at the core of Diriyah Club's competitive model. Leveraging advanced tools such as Opta, Sportian, BeSoccer, Wyscout and Catapult, the club utilises metrics including expected goals (xG), player heatmaps, positional tracking and opponent profiling to inform tactical preparation, performance optimisation and recruitment.

As there were no TV broadcasts during the 2024–25 title-winning season, Diriyah Club utilised VEO Sports Technology to record matches, allowing coaches to review player performances and enhance tactical analysis.

Match-by-match adaptability

The club used scenario rehearsals and real-time feedback loops to adapt during matches; a practice increasingly seen at top tier clubs, where live data dashboards inform in-game adjustments.

With the introduction of Opta Vision across Saudi clubs, Diriyah's technical team is positioned to integrate real-time tactical analytics into matchday operations as it transitions to Division 1.

Infrastructure investment and player readiness

The Al Khalidiya Sports Facility, the club's main training facility, is undergoing a comprehensive revamp focused on enhancing all support, hospitality and service areas while maintaining the football pitch without intervention. Existing spaces, including VIP areas, maintenance facilities, seating and perimeter walls, will be modernised with high-quality finishes and rebranded elements that reinforce the club's identity. All works will be carried out in alignment with the club's operational requirements and branding manual and in full compliance with Saudi Building Code, Civil Defence regulations, HSE standards, FIFA requirements and all stakeholder expectations.

These upgrades underscore the club's ambition and make it clear to the players that Diriyah is committed to building a squad ready to compete at the highest level.

4.2 Administrative enablers

Governance and leadership

The transfer of ownership of Diriyah Club Sports Company to Diriyah Company has been accompanied by a deliberate restructuring of governance. A new board of directors, chaired by H.H. Prince Khalid bin Mohammed Al Saud, was appointed alongside specialised committees to oversee executive decision-making, nominations, remuneration and technical operations. Complementing this structure, a sporting director was appointed to professionalise the club's football operations and ensure alignment between technical strategy, player recruitment and overall organisational objectives. These governance principles are benchmarked against global best practices adopted by leading privatised clubs such as Borussia Dortmund and Ajax Amsterdam, where clear separation between governance and day-to-day management is a cornerstone. By aligning with these standards, Diriyah Club aims to strengthen accountability, enhance financial discipline and establish a solid foundation for sustainable competitiveness.

Strategic planning and organisational agility

Diriyah Club's project management office (PMO) ensures cross-departmental alignment, provides real-time visibility on key initiatives and reinforces accountability at all levels. The PMO supports agile decision-making, enabling the club to adapt swiftly to performance data, operational needs and stakeholder expectations.

Integrated within the governance framework, the PMO links strategic OKRs and KPIs, fostering transparency and efficiency. This structure promotes cross-functional coordination, risk-based planning and continuous performance evaluation, ensuring strategic focus and operational agility throughout the organisation.

Human capital and capability building

Diriyah Club strengthened its human capital processes by supporting the operations of the human capital function, including recruitment and development of the right expertise and skills to enable the club's strategy and activate its organisational structure. In addition, a structured knowledge transfer programme was implemented to build internal capabilities, foster continuous learning and empower the Human Capital team to drive excellence. These initiatives professionalised the club's operations, clarified accountability and cultivated a culture focused on results and high performance.

Community integration

As part of its transformation, Diriyah Club is embedding its sporting identity within Diriyah's wider cultural and community ecosystem, aligning with DGDA's youth and heritage initiatives and creating touchpoints that foster loyalty, pride and sustained fan engagement.



05

Driving impact across Saudi Arabia's sports transformation

PwC's capabilities powering sports transformation

PwC Middle East has played a central role in designing and delivering the transformation of the sports sector in Saudi Arabia, working alongside several key entities within the Saudi sports ecosystem to build the institutional foundations, governance discipline and operational capability required to thrive.

The firm's integrated suite of sports-specific tools, methodologies and delivery models are designed to accelerate transformation across the sports ecosystem and has enabled entities to translate strategic ambition into executable operating models, optimise costs and enhance performance across the full value chain.

PwC also supports the development of agile organisational structures and sports talent ecosystems, implements data-driven platforms and innovation aligned with global digital trends and strengthens financial sustainability, operational effectiveness and transparency. These capabilities underpin the firm's work with Diriyah Club, ensuring delivery of both immediate transformation outcomes and long-term institutional resilience.

PwC Middle East works with key entities across Saudi Arabia's sports ecosystem to translate strategic ambition into sustainable, well-governed and operationally effective institutions

PwC's integrated methodology: Supporting clubs across the full maturity lifecycle

PwC's ability to support sports entities in general and sports clubs in particular is rooted in the firm's deep understanding of how sports clubs operate and evolve. Its approach is tailored specifically to the lifecycle of Saudi sports clubs, recognising that each stage – early formation, institutional strengthening, commercialisation and long-term competitiveness – requires distinct capabilities and interventions.

The lifecycle begins with mandate definition and strategic positioning, where the club's purpose, value proposition and alignment with national sports objectives are established. This is followed by institutional setup and governance structuring, ensuring clarity in roles, accountability and operating models.

The next phase focuses on strategic and operational planning, translating ambition into an actionable roadmap and initiatives. As the club matures, PwC enables commercialisation and investment readiness, optimising revenue streams, partnerships and brand equity. Over time, long-term master-planning ensures infrastructure, talent pathways and resources scale in line with future ambition. The cycle culminates in performance monitoring and impact evaluation, with clear KPIs and dashboards to embed continuous improvement and sustained growth.

Because of this end-to-end methodology, the firm is uniquely positioned to accompany sports organisations throughout every stage of their maturity journey, providing strategic insight, operational tools and transformation expertise that translate vision into lasting performance and impact.

Sports clubs progress through a defined maturity lifecycle, requiring distinct capabilities at each stage to achieve sustainable performance

PwC and Diriyah Club's successful partnership model

Acting as both advisor and implementation partner, PwC enabled the club's transformation programme to help position the club as a model for sustainable sports excellence in the Kingdom. The support extended across critical functions, including the establishment and operationalisation of the PMO, with clear KPIs, performance dashboards and monitoring mechanisms. It helped put in place the operating systems that enabled faster decisions, clearer accountability and compliance with First Division League requirements and Private Sports Club Governance Initiative KPIs, developing a leading infrastructure model for the club.

In the area of human capital, the firm defined recruitment plans and processes, supported the onboarding of the leadership team to ensure institutional continuity and capability. In finance and procurement, the firm designed finance policies and procedures, implemented high-level procure-to-pay cycles and operated the procurement and contracts department, managing procurement lifecycle and compliance. Finance and procurement KPIs and objectives and key results (OKRs) were also introduced to ensure governance and performance alignment.

Additionally, PwC played a pivotal role in the success of the Second Division League final match on 14 April 2025, by providing project and event management support and delivering strategic outputs. These efforts collectively enabled Diriyah Club to meet KPI targets under the Ministry of Sports' governance model and lay the foundation for long-term operational excellence.

Strong programme delivery and event management capabilities supported both league compliance and high-profile match execution.



06

What's next?

Diriyah Club's promotion marks a major transition to a new operating model focused on institutional maturity, squad depth and advanced technical and commercial capabilities. The immediate priority is to consolidate foundations built during privatisation and governance reforms into a resilient structure that supports elite competition. Short-term goals include securing Saudi Pro League promotion, elevating governance standards, meeting league licensing requirements for 2025-26 and enhancing facilities and merchandise operations. These steps aim to position the club as a top-tier competitor while embedding data-driven management, standardised policies and strong stakeholder engagement.

Looking ahead, Diriyah Club seeks to become a benchmark for professional sports under Vision 2030 through technology integration, strong governance and community engagement. Plans include advanced talent scouting, global best-practice coaching and sports science-driven training environments, alongside diversified revenue streams from sponsorships, media rights, events and retail. Infrastructure development will feature a permanent stadium meeting international standards and dedicated youth facilities. Fan engagement will centre on building a passionate community rooted in Diriyah's heritage, leveraging digital platforms, grassroots programmes and immersive experiences to create loyalty and pride. These efforts aim to transform promotion into long-term institutional excellence and financial sustainability.



07

From vision to victory

Diriyah Sports Club's rise is an example of how Vision 2030's privatisation and transformation agenda can translate into institutional excellence. By combining Diriyah Company's leadership and heritage-driven ambition with clear governance and operating frameworks, the club has established a professional model where governance, performance and community impact evolve in unison.

Through the partnership with Diriyah Club, PwC Middle East has focused on contributing to the establishment of fundamental functional departments and supporting operational activities. As Diriyah Club enters Division 1 and continues its journey toward global recognition, its transformation stands as a blueprint for sustainable sports development in Saudi Arabia, where ambition is executed through structure and success is driven by partnership.



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