

Interview with MR. SAMI JASSIM ABDULLA AL BOENAIN

Chairman of IFAHR (International Federation of Arabian Horse Racing Authorities)
and General Manager of the QREC



photo by QREC

by Monika Luft, Irina Stigler ■ photos by Juhaim CP (QREC), Monika Luft, archive

The organizer of The Emir 24th International Equestrian Sword Festival, taking place under the patronage of the Emir of Qatar, H.H. Sheikh Tamim Bin Hamad Bin Khalifa Al Thani – the Qatar Racing & Equestrian Club, is celebrating its 40th anniversary this year. Established in 1975, managed by Mr. Sami Jassim Al Boenain with HE Sheikh Mohamed Bin Faleh Al Thani as the head of the Board of Directors, the QREC plays a major role in the international racing scene today. QREC was the pioneer of all racing organizations in the entire region, and one of the first to establish racing rules. On the day of the most prestigious race of the Festival, H.H. The Emir's Sword race, we speak to Mr. Sami Jassim Abdulla Al Boenain, General Manager of the QREC and Chairman of IFAHR, about his life with horses and the importance of the racing sport for the promotion of Qatar.

During the Gala Dinner at the Saint Regis Hotel in Doha you were introduced to guests from all over the world as a former

jockey and horseman. How long have horses been a part of your life?

It started when I was a small child, here in Qatar. I have loved horses ever since I saw them for the first time when I was about 6-7 years old. In 1977, I started riding when I was 9, at the Club's riding school. My first race was in 1980 on the old track here at Al Rayyan Park. I kept racing with my friends just for pleasure, on National Day or on any other special occasions. In 1985 I became a little bit too heavy for a jockey. So I started to participate in show jumping and also began training showjumpers for myself and my friends. First I only competed in Qatar but later on, I competed in many showjumping competitions abroad– in Syria, Jordan, Japan, Egypt. When my showjumping career ended, I started to involve myself with the racing aspect of the QREC again, this time in the office. I missed riding a lot, but I decided that if the QREC wanted to establish itself in the International World of Racing, Qatar needed to write the International rules of racing. In 1995 we



photo by QREC



photo by QREC



photo by QREC

were accepted as a member of IFHA (International Federation of Horseracing Authorities) and we changed a lot of regulations for racing in QREC to reach International standards. This raised the quality of races in Qatar to professional levels. I worked as a racing administrator and learned the handicapper tricks of the trade from Tim Thomson, who used to work with us and passed away recently. I learned how to rate the horses and all other technical parts of racing. In that time period I was racing secretary, a racing commentator, a steward... I have been everywhere, participated in every part of racing, from doing the entries and declarations, to chief executive. In 1997 I was appointed racing manager and I have been working in that position up to 2006. Next I became general manager

of the QREC, and I have been in that position for 9 years now. In my position as General Manager I also organized Arabian horse shows. So this is my entire experience in Qatar. Of course I also developed contacts abroad, with people and various organizations. I attended all important conferences – the Asian Racing Conference and the Paris Conference for the International Federation of Horseracing Authorities. I have good connections all over the world. Because we needed to create a federation for Arabian horse racing, in 1999 with other countries we decided to establish IFAHR, the International Federation for Arabian Horse Racing Authorities. I was elected vice chairman and served for two terms in this function. During the next elections in 2008 I was elected to chairman of IFAHR. At the 2014 WAHO conference in Qatar they appointed me consultant in the WAHO Executive Committee. And this is my international involvement. Horses have been a part of my life from a little boy to general manager and IFAHR chairman. I travelled to Europe, America, Australia, Africa and I feel that I have lived my life doing things I love. So I consider myself to be very lucky.

You have been dealing professionally with horses and racing for years, but do you also have your own, private horses?

Yes, I do have a couple of horses, but I stopped racing here in Qatar when I became a racing official. I cannot race my horses at the place where I work as a manager. I am here to work, not to race my own horses. I have some horses in Europe – three show jumping horses, one racing broodmare with her very athletic yearling by an Iraqi stallion who will start race training when he is 3 years old.. I also have one endurance horse. I love buying young showjumping horses, sending them to a good rider, who can develop them in a nice way to international standards. I buy horses using my eye. When I see a horse, I can say: yes, this is the one. And I must say, they often end up to be fantastic horses. A Dutch friend of mine gifted me one of his homebred part thoroughbred/part warmblood horses and this horse loves jumping and is a quite a successful cross country jumper. I also have a showjumping mare called Beauty Duna. When I bought her a year and a half ago, she had only jumped free with no rider on her back. And now she competes in ZZ class competitions. Another showjumper named, Wakra, a six year old, competes in M class but when I bought him a year and a half ago, he came straight out of the paddock and nobody had ridden him before. Now he is very good and he is still a baby! And I also have an endurance horse, in Holland, still young only 6, who just went for his first 40 km endurance ride. The trainer enthused about his heart rate, and considers him a cool dude.

So you have a very good eye for horses.

I hope so! I just use my experience.

Is this a type of talent, a gift from God? Or can you learn it? How do you know that a given horse has a chance at a sport

career, that another will be a great racehorse, while some other will be a man's best companion under saddle?

I think it's a gift from God. You just get a feeling. That's exactly what happened with Beauty Duna. All the girls, all the people love her, as she has a heart-shaped white marking on the front of her face. Everybody thinks we did it on purpose, but no, she was born like that. And I bought her because I saw something in her. She always jumped from her left rein. I wanted to see her doing it from her right rein. Show jumpers, when they are surprised, can go higher or refuse. I would choose the one that goes higher, that saves you in the competition. The best horse is the one who says: I am not sure about that, so I jump higher. If the horse refuses or if he flies flat, it's not good. So Beauty Duna was surprised when I asked them to let her go from the right rein. She went, she wasn't sure and then... she flies! So I said: ok, I'm buying her! Deal is done. Some months later her rider told me he loved her. And that she was a very talented filly.

Do you travel when your horses participate in competitions to cheer them on?

Yes, sometimes I go to Germany or Holland to watch them jump.

Are their performances very emotional for you?

Oh, yes! I love them. But the most important thing is the spirit. The competition starts at 9 or 10 am in the morning and lasts until 5 pm. People have a picnic or barbecue. It's a beautiful day for me, when I go. I see horses jumping, so it's just a wonderful time.

Is the beauty of the horse very important for you? Or do you only look at the horse's sport talents?

To me all horses have their own beauty. I will not consider any horse ugly. Horses can be beautiful in different ways. A "beauty" show is always nice to see, when they present themselves, and you see how proud they are of themselves. I love it. Animals have brains, they know what they are doing. In the opening ceremony, Lorenzo – have you seen what he is doing with the horses? He talks to them and they come to him. You see how intelligent these horse are. They know exactly what they have to do now. I know that there are some people against such horse shows. To me the horse is smart. Of course, it comes with experience, they will not do it when they are 6 or 7 or 8. They will do it over 12. To be honest, I feel I was happiest in my life when I was with horses. Of course, I am with horses now too, but it's not the same. And I love to be in the stable, I love to smell the horse.



When I am in the office, I count the time. When I am in the stable, I don't care about the time, it just flies.

Do you have a chance to spend at least a short while in the stable everyday?

Before yes, but not anymore.

The Club looks much different today than when you learned to ride here as a young boy. How big are these changes?

In the 70s we had a turf track and a sand track. It was bigger but old style of course. The equipment was not the same, no rails like now, no floodlights, nothing like that. In the 80s we did some changes to the track, in the 90s we made it a little bit smaller and in 2000 we tried to change everything to have a new racetrack like we have now – a sand track for training, a turf track for racing and a grass track. The grandstand could hold around 2,500 spectators maximum. Now we have a parking for 500 cars, floodlights and a TV screen. At that time we also added all the latest technology. Qatar is growing a lot. The population is growing very fast, many people come here to work in the field of gas, oil, infrastructure... So Qatar is full of people now. And many of them come to the races. During a normal race day we have 2,000–2,500 spectators, but sometimes, on a big race day, we have over 10,000 people, like tonight. I think there is a need in the future to have a bigger racetrack, a bigger area for people. I think what we have done in 2000 is beautiful, our racetrack looks good. As you know, we are only allowed to race between October and May, because after that time it's impossible, it's too hot. But even now we start racing at 5 pm. The sun is going down and it's much nicer for the horses.

In your opinion how significant are races and horses for the promotion of Qatar in the world?

We had to put Qatar on the map, so we sponsor some of the races abroad. We sponsor Qatar Prix de l'Arc de Triomphe, we created the Qatar Arabian World Cup the same day, the biggest race in the world for Arabian horses, in Longchamp, Paris. That gives Qatar good promotion. In the horse racing world they know Qatar now. I remember in the mid 90s, when I attended my first conference in Paris, a lot of people asked me what language do we speak, maybe Portuguese or Spanish, where is Qatar on the map. They maybe knew Saudi Arabia or Dubai, but not Qatar. I am talking about 20 years ago. But now, when you say Qatar, people know it everywhere. At least, horse racing people, which is what I am involved in. Even with the show now, they know Al Shaqab, they know Arabian horses. □

Interview with MR. TARIQ AL-SIDDIQI Deputy General Manager and Racing Manager of the Qatar Racing & Equestrian Club



photo by QREC



photo by QREC

by Monika Luft, Irina Stigler ■ photos by Juhaim CP (QREC), Monika Luft, archive

Just after the two festival shows and before the three day race meeting, Mr. TARIQ AL-SIDDIQI, Deputy General Manager and Racing Manager of the Qatar Racing & Equestrian Club, tells us what has changed since the first edition of the Festival in Qatar 24 years ago and what role the Arabian horse plays in promoting Qatar abroad.

This year The Emir 24th International Equestrian Sword Festival was held already for the 24th time. How much has changed during all these years?

If I compare today with what we had 24 years ago, it's a

completely new quality. Of course we have good facilities now, but we also compare the number of horses that participated then and the number of classes. And it's totally different now. The horses come from many countries, like f.e. Saudi Arabia, Ajman. Those 24 years ago the number of horses was small, maybe 50. The owners were not interested in shows. But now we have many farms, many owners of show horses and between 300 and 400 horses participating in the show. Some people breed only Straight Egyptians and some are interested in the beauty of all kind of bloodlines, such as Polish, Russian or Crabbet. In terms of races, we

With Patrick Swayze, at the WAHO Conference in Abu Dhabi, 1996.



archive photo

archive photo

archive photo

have a new grandstand, new tracks etc. In a few months a new area for the breeding barns will also be ready. As many as 500 horses will be able to find room there. This is an important project to us. Also many horses are participating in racing. During this big, 3 day event, 351 horses are taking part in the races. The prize money is very high. The highest prize, for the Emir's Sword race, is 3 million Qatari riyals. The prize money for the whole third race day, with 8 races, is of 8,600 thousand riyals. The total money for the 3 days is 30,500 thousand riyals. We are talking about around 8 million euro. The government supports the sport and people bring quality horses – this makes the event develop with each year. In the show we have cars as prizes, so there is a huge challenge and encouragement to compete. Nobody would want to work hard at breeding horses without the promise of a benefit. We also have good trainers, good jockeys like Frankie Dettori, who races here in Doha. All this has brought

huge changes. For the future we hope to have even more big things for the show and races.

You mentioned that Qatar places great emphasis on supporting sport. In 2022 this will be the place of the FIFA World Cup. Do you think that in the future Qatar can become the sport capital of the world?

Not in the future, we already are now! Qatar is the host of many competitions, for example handball some time ago. We have a race called the 2022 Cup during this meeting. Qatar tries to organize big events in different sports. Everybody can see how we organize them. Qatar is a small country, but we aim high.

Since we are speaking of promoting Qatar in the world – what role does the Arabian horse play in it?

As QREC we support many races abroad. In France we have



photo by Monika Luff

the Qatar Prix de l'Arc de Triomphe. We have some races in Stockholm, Belgium, Poland, England. All these things promote Qatar. We also support horse races abroad directly, as many Qatar owners take their horses to race in Europe when the racing season here ends in May. Our people race in France, England and Germany.

What do you personally prefer – shows or races? What stirs greater emotions in you?

I am fond of both. I was the manager of the show for 6 years, from 1994 to 2000. So I know the show very well, I also attended many ECAHO and WAHO meetings. But my very personal preference are the races. There is more action. But the show is nice, because you get to see the beauty of the horses.

Did you have a chance to see the two festival shows that just came to an end? If so, how would you describe the quality of this year's competition?

Yes, of course, I had been there all the time. The level was very high. We could see scores around 93 points. The judges gave „20s“ or „19,5s“ many times which means the quality of the horses was very high. I could see that sometimes it was difficult for the judges to make the right choice. But of course judging beauty is never easy, because something that one person likes may not appeal to another.

There were two shows – one for Straight Egyptians and the other for horses from international programs. Which of these breeding concepts is closer to your heart?

I like both. The beauty is what counts. There are big differences between the Straight Egyptian horses or the Polish or Russian. People choose what traits they want to breed for. For example Russian horses are good for movement. And the weak part of the Egyptian horse are legs, but they have better heads. Everyone has to know what exactly they want to breed.

When did horses become your profession?

I started in 1978 in the Club, I was racing as a jockey. I rode many races until 1993. Then I got the position of racing manager in the Club. I was also the general manager for the Qatar Racing Federation until 1998. In 2002 I was transferred to the Tennis Federation. I was the general secretary until 2007. Then I came back to racing because for me being with horses is different. I ride endurance, even last year I completed a long distance race. I like tennis, I play tennis just to keep me fit, but it's not the same. For me the horse is my life. I have been with horses for 32 years now. Even when my job was tennis, I still took part in endurance competitions.

How do you recall your first races?

I was 17 when I rode my first race. I came third then. Before we rode horses with no saddle. For us, young boys, it was easy, just for fun. But when I came to the Club to ride as a professional, I had to learn how to ride in the saddle, how to take jockey positions when riding. It seemed to me quite difficult, especially that I had no experience with Thoroughbreds at that time. They were very fast compared to Arabians. They were just flying. Of course we had trainers from England and France, so they taught us all this.

Horses completely fill out your life. Do you think about any other new challenges?

I travel a lot, I go everywhere attending meetings, races in Europe. Working in the Club gives me the opportunity to meet people, to see how things are organized in other countries, to exchange experiences. I've been to Japan, I've been to Hong Kong... I travelled around the globe. Now I have a new passion, I began to breed horses myself. Of course I am just at the beginning of this road. I bought a stud in France and the first horses are already there. I'm thinking about both show and racing programs. I'm already thinking about what stallions to choose for my mares. □