

ANEESA AL MAHMOOD BAHRAIN'S DAWN OF DRESSAGE

By Nada H. Abdelmoniem

ANEESAA AL MAHMOOD, A PROMISING YOUNG ATHLETE REPRESENTING THE KINGDOM OF BAHRAIN, IS EMBARKING ON AN INSPIRING JOURNEY OF GROWTH AND ACHIEVEMENT IN THE HORSE WORLD. ANEESA'S PASSION FOR HORSES AND RIDING TOOK HER TO THE NETHERLANDS, A COUNTRY WIDELY REGARDED AS THE HEARTLAND OF DRESSAGE, WHERE SHE NOW TRAINS RIGOROUSLY WITH RENOWNED TRAINER, RIEN VAN DER SCHAFT, AND WHERE SHE INTENDS TO FOLLOW HER DREAMS OF BECOMING A TOP INTERNATIONAL DRESSAGE COMPETITOR. WITH HER DEDICATION AND UNWAVERING COMMITMENT, ANEESA IS STEADILY MAKING HER MARK IN THE SPORT, EMBODYING THE SPIRIT OF MATURE COMING-OF-AGE IN THE COMPETITIVE WORLD OF EQUESTRIAN DRESSAGE.

HERE, SHE TELLS US ABOUT HER JOURNEY THAT REFLECTS BOTH HER PERSONAL DETERMINATION AND THE GROWING PRESENCE OF TALENTED RIDERS FROM THE MIDDLE EAST ON THE GLOBAL STAGE.





THE HORSES:

I currently have two special horses in my life, Skye (Special For You) and Handsome. Skye is a 2015 gelding by Finest x Weltino. My parents and I bought him back in 2022 when he was just 6 years old. He's always been a very special horse to me, I don't think I have ever met such a horse with such a sweet and honest character. Together with him I competed in my first competitions in Europe, both in Germany and the Netherlands.

Handsome is a 2012 gelding by Tuschinski x Farrington, he was bought during the summer of 2023 by my Bahraini Sponsor, Sheikha Noora bint Hamad Al Khalifa, the owner and head of the team at Al Fursan. Handsome is my main competition horse at the moment, I rode my first Prix St. George test and made my international debut in the Young Riders division with him. He's a horse that challenged my riding to the next level and taught me the importance of partnership in training and how that carries over into the show ring. Together we are aiming for the Asian Championships in November.

PURSUING A CAREER IN DRESSAGE:

I have been obsessed with this sport since I watched the 2008 Beijing Olympics on TV! Horses were already my favourite animals thanks to my mum, but watching dressage at that level on the screen was the confirmation for me. Since then, I always knew what I wanted and I never gave up on the dream. The drive to becoming a professional rider only grew over the years, and the more I trained and matured as a rider, the more passion and determination I had to make it come true.

STEPPING UP TO THE PLATE:

Growing up in Bahrain, I was fortunate enough to ride and compete on numerous horses and ponies through Al Fursan. However, I did not have access to advanced training facilities and experienced coaches like riders my age did in the West. Bahrain's dressage community was and still is limited. This disparity meant that I had to be resourceful and dedicated, often seeking opportunities during my summers abroad to enhance my skills.

Securing sponsorship in the Middle East, especially for disciplines like dressage, posed another significant hurdle. Many sponsors preferred investing in more popular sports such as showjumping or endurance racing. This made it challenging to find financial support for my training and competitions. My parents were incredibly supportive, doing their best to assist me, but as many in the sport know, it can be financially demanding. Especially once I moved to Europe in 2021 to chase my dream of becoming a professional rider.

I secured my sponsorship with Al Fursan team in 2023, which I am forever grateful for. Sheikha Noora believed in my dreams and goals of representing Bahrain internationally, and with that belief and support, I was able to make the first steps of my international career with our special horse Handsome.

KEEPING FIT AND EVENT PREPARATIONS:

Both the horses and I train all year round, we are fortunate enough to have access to competitions throughout the full year. The horses have a con-



sistent schedule both for training and recovery. I keep myself fit through running and workouts. Just enough to keep myself feeling good in the saddle and on the ground.

Preparing for a dressage event involves a holistic approach to ensure both horse and I are in optimal condition. First and foremost, it's crucial that the horses are feeling their best. This means prioritising proper recovery post-training leading up to the event. Utilising products like ice boots, circulation socks, and pads can aid in reducing inflammation and promoting circulation.

Additionally, the horses receive consistent

supplements and a supportive feeding regimen tailored to their training needs. We aim to maintain consistency in their diet unless we feel the horse requires extra support leading up to the competition.

Personally, I prefer to keep the routine consistent leading up to the event. This means the horses will get their usual days off and lighter training sessions throughout the week. We aim to make training at home more challenging than the competition itself, ensuring that the horses don't feel additional pressure or difficulty in the ring. Riding the test should feel like a piece of cake compared to practice at home.



I prefer to braid and prepare my horses on my own before competition. This ritual is deeply important to me, as it allows for quality time with my horse and provides an opportunity to assess their energy and mood before the competition. This personal connection helps me gauge how my horse is feeling and ensures we are both mentally and physically prepared for the event, it also gives me time to go through the test in my head over and over again.

HORSE SELECTION AND CHEMISTRY:

Very good point. I do a lot of sales and handling of dressage horses to clients all over the world. Because I have tried so many different horses with and for my clients, it has taught me so many different feelings. I am very much a rider who believes in a "click" with your horse. It's not only about sitting on a horse that's been well educated, or 100%

healthy. It is about the connection and communication I can feel while riding. Every single horse is different, just like every rider is different.

I might sound crazy, but picking a horse is just like picking a life partner, it's about finding one with whom you can share a deep understanding of each other's needs and personalities. It's about finding a connection that goes beyond the surface, and choosing someone who compliments you and helps you become your best self.

As for the chemistry, I spend a lot of time with my horses as I find it to be vital. Whether it is grooming, hacking, hand walking, grazing in the fields, or just hanging around their stable. They are my best friends, even when training is tough, they know how to make me smile. They are my point of peace, and I find it important that they feel the same way about me. Dressage is nowhere without companionship.



TRAINING STRATEGIES:

We are very focused on the basics of riding, and the importance of riding one's horse in a "natural" and efficient way. Being able to use one's seat and feeling to ensure the horses are moving in the correct direction and making the correct connection. Starting in his hindlegs and ending in his ears, you want that connection going forward through your hands and between the horse's ears. We believe in using a forward aid to find the horse's balance and "pull" forward. Correct riding over using too many helping aids to help the horse find its natural strength.

Each horse is different, and not all strategies work on every horse. But our concept of riding remains the same.

A ROLE MODEL IN THE MIDDLE EAST:

I'd love to bring my representation of Bahrain and the Middle East to another level. I'd love to bring back the importance of partnership in the sport, and build a pathway for future young Middle Eastern riders, both girls and boys. I'd love to show that there is a possibility to turn passion into a "successful" career. Be a correct example of how one can reach the top of the sport, without making any shortcuts.

I want to be a good example of how riding and training should go, especially during these times when there is such a negative look towards animal welfare in dressage. Horses will always and forever be number one for me, and I find it crucial to promote how important it really is.

PRACTICING OTHER SPORTS:

I played many sports growing up. I was that kid that was always outside. I used to train and compete in the National U16 football team in Bahrain, where I participated in two Arab championships over the course of three years. After my football career was over due to an injury, I decided to follow my older brother Siddiq's footsteps into Triathlon where I spent two years on the National team and competed at two Asian/Arab Championships. I made two podiums.

Alongside football and triathlon, I was always riding. It wasn't easy juggling multiple sports at the same time, and going international for dressage at that time was just a faded dream. Riding was always what I enjoyed most. Although I have many

fond memories of my time in football and triathlon; I learned so much and made many good friends. To be honest, my times in football and triathlon make me a better rider - much of that training carries over to the saddle. Rider fitness is hugely underrated.

My daily life was incredibly busy. I was enrolled in the full IB (International Baccalaureate) programme in high school, which was demanding. Mornings began with swimming practice before school, followed by a quick breakfast in the car on the way to school. Lunchtime was spent in the car again, heading to the stables. After riding, I'd either go running or cycling with the triathlon team. It was a hectic time of my life, not always easy to balance. But on the bright side, I never had to worry about fulfilling my CAS Hours for IB.

My career in triathlon came to a stop once the COVID pandemic hit, the only place I was still allowed to be during the quarantine was the stables. So once restrictions opened up again, riding had become my main priority.

ADDITIONAL INTERESTS:

I have a liking towards Formula One, and am a fan of the sport. I've worked part time in the past for Red Bull Bahrain at the Formula One Grand Prix. I absolutely enjoy the sport and being able to be so close to the circuit. I also enjoy playing Padel with friends and family (whenever I have time in my schedule).

I also enjoy my time in the kitchen, cooking and baking. Something I learned very early on from my mother. Trying different recipes, but also seeing how friends and family enjoy it always brings a smile to my face.

ASPIRING AND ADVANCING:

I see myself making tough decisions, I see myself changing and evolving over and over again. Because if there is anything I have ever learned from the sport, it is that you never stop learning. There is always something you don't know, and you will be humbled over and over again. I have many dreams and plans for the future; competition wise we are working towards the Asian Championships in No-



BEST RESULTS:

One of my biggest achievements so far was being able to represent Bahrain and the Middle East for the first time at an International Young Riders competition in Aachen, called Aachen Youngstars. It was an amazing feeling to be able to ride in an Arena I've only ever seen online, and to represent my country and region.

We have many more memorable results at local shows in the Netherlands, with scores over 68%. I guess one of the things we are most proud of is our growth through the levels last summer. Starting the summer in Z2 and ending the summer in our first local Young Riders shows (PSG). We took our time growing through the levels, and let our training show how easy it can be to fly through the classes once you are ready.

FAMILY AND SUPPORT:

My family plays a big role in my career, they have been my number one supporters since day one. They helped me source horses, groom at competitions, watch training at home, etc. Even though we all live on different sides of the world, they never fail to show up for me when I need them.

My mum has always been my main source of support and inspiration, she has taught me everything I needed to know to be the person and athlete I am today. Even though I don't come from a "horsey" family, she always stood behind me and helped me with all the opportunities that have been presented to me. She is my best friend, and my cheerleader. She taught me to always be positive, loving and most importantly a good person. 🐾

Aneesa was born on 15th of September 2003.

Photos courtesy of Madushots

vember 2025 in Thailand and the Asian Games in 2026 in Japan. Between these big competitions, we also look forward to making our way in the U25 class here in Europe. Long-term goals are the World Equestrian Games, and of course the big dream of competing at the Olympics for my country.

Career wise, I'm looking towards expanding my team. Creating my "own" base here in Europe, training with young horses and sales horses. I'd love to extend my dressage sales, and take on more clients. Build up my career and name in the sport, and who knows, maybe head back to the Middle East in the future to set up an equestrian facility and training stable for riders in the region.



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