



## EL ZAHRAA EXPERIENCE AN IMPRESSION OF THE 2013 CHAMPIONSHIPS

By Bridget McArdle McKinney  
Interviews by Nada H. Abdelmoniem

IT WAS MY FIRST TIME TO ATTEND THE WORLD-FAMOUS EL ZAHRAA ARABIAN HORSE CHAMPIONSHIPS; IN FACT, IT WAS MY FIRST TIME TO VISIT EL ZAHRAA STUD. ON ENTERING THE GATES TO THE COMPOUND I FELT A LITTLE LIKE DOROTHY IN THE "WIZARD OF OZ" TRANSPORTED FROM THE SCARY TORNADO-BLOWN BLACK-AND-WHITE KANSAS INTO THE BRILLIANT TECHNICOLOR WORLD OF PEACEFUL MUNCHKINLAND. HOW COULD THIS BE? HOW COULD THIS BEAUTIFUL GREEN OASIS EXIST AMID THE CRAZY TRAFFIC, DUST, NOISE AND POLLUTION OUTSIDE, RIGHT IN THE CITY?

As we drove down into the place through an arcade of fragrant eucalyptus trees, the senses are calmed and you begin to forget that that other world exists at all and the mind turns to the beauty of the horse as we pass corral after corral of mares, foals, and separately, stallions trotting, playing or slowly making their way to wherever they please.

Of course, back in 1928 when the Royal Agricultural Society, the predecessor of the Egyptian Agricultural Organization, sought to establish a permanent breeding farm for their pure Arabian breeding stock, they found an ideal location far out in the desert of Ain Shems, today a bustling densely-populated neighbourhood. At that time, I suppose, no one could ever have imagined that Cairo would grow to such an extent as to completely encase today's El Zahraa Stud.

The stud itself was created from the descendents of Abbas Pasha's breeding stock owned by Khedive Abbas Pasha Hilmi II, Prince Mohammed Ali Tawfik, Lady Anne Blunt and her daughter Lady Wentworth, the best of the best of the pure Egyptian Arabian horse, the foundation of the 'Straight Egyptian'.

Further up the avenue of eucalyptus, we approach the stately showing grounds and tented arena festooned in cool clean white cotton, tiered for the viewing tables, shaded, and catered. A VIP experience by anyone's standards, civilised, calm and cultured...until the first of the equine competitors bursts into the arena to the thumping high-decibel sound of techno-music and the roars, claps, horns, rattles, total cacophony of the gallery intended to whip the horse into a frenzy to show his 'fire'! The expert horse handlers do their best to calmly show off their charges in the best light despite the chaos and their focus and concentration under the circumstances were truly remarkable, as were the focus and concentration of the judges.

The judges hailed from France, Germany, Belgium, the Czech Republic, Italy, Switzerland and



Gold champion, International mares Mahala



Judges of the National Show with their trophies



Gold champion, International fillies Dahma Al Najdiah



Gold champion, International stallions Lahari



Mr. Mohsen El Gabry, Mr. Ahmed El Telawy & Prince Sultan bin Saud



Gold champion, International colts Sohaib

Poland and applied their extensive expertise to the task of discerning the subtle differences between the competing horses in each class to determine the ultimate champion. What do they look for? What little nuance of form or disposition makes a winner?

The horses are judged on 'type', head and neck, body and topline, legs, and movement. While the other rated aspects are reasonably clear, the aspect of 'type' we were told is an esoteric quality combining form, attitude, colour, and the 'X-factor', which the judges feel rather than see. That's what makes them judges and us observers!

This annual event gathers local and foreign breeders who are keenly invested in snatching the National and/or International Championship. Tensions run high, gossip and jealousy flow like sweet tea, charges and counter-charges are thrown, but everybody knows everybody and the legendary multi-generation breeder families and the winning breeding stars are always respected and honoured, and overall the feeling of good-natured camaraderie prevails.

The Egyptian Agricultural Organization (EAO) today regulates over 650 Straight Egyptian horse breeding farms which comprise over 8,000 purebred horses and El Zahraa Stud's renewed and re-invigorated breeding programme aims to keep the best of the Straight Egyptians right here in Egypt to produce a new generation of the preserved breed.

This unique line was almost lost twice. The first Arabians of this line arrived from the Arabian Peninsula in the early thirteenth century, imported by the Mamluk Sultan El Nassir Ibn Qalawun and Sultan Barquq. Then, in the early 1800's, Mohammed Ali Pasha, the founder of modern Egypt, increased the fold with the purest Arabian lines from Arabia, which over time devolved to his grand-son Abbas Hilmi Pasha I. Upon his death his heir unfortunately had little interest in the breed stock and sold or gave away much of it, so lovingly and carefully bred and kept. Fortunately, Ali Pasha Sherif bought

as much as he could, owning at one point 400 of this line.

However, upon his death in 1897, his horses were sold at public auction. In 1908 the horse breeding section was assigned to re-start the pure Arabian line and turned to the lines which had been sold after Ali Pasha Sherif's death. It is from these horses that the stud and the Straight Egyptian now descend.

Why do they do this? Why do they breed and preserve? Why would this ever be important when there is so much prevailing poverty and illiteracy? Indeed, when the Stud itself is surrounded by poverty? The breeders would tell you plainly, it is because it is heritage, it is meant to last, it is meant to be protected and preserved, it is the Egyptian line...

**MR. PETER GROSS**  
Breeder - Germany

We have been coming to Egypt for 12 years and we attend all El Zahraa shows. Organisation becomes better every time we're here; horse quality keeps getting better as well and I think foreign breeders should start considering coming back and competing. The legs of the horses I see are quite weak, however, and, as you see, the marks from the judges are generally low, just like all over the world, but this has nothing to do with the horses we have been seeing in the National Championships. I believe that the legs of Egyptian Arabians are no longer correct and that is something that has been going on for years. In Europe and the USA the horses run free in the wild and as such maybe the legs are better and stronger. In Egypt they stay in the paddock most of the time, grass is not available. But I have to add, the legs were a disaster 12 years ago; they really have developed at this stage.

**MR. HASSAN ABDO**  
Breeder - Egypt

Egyptian dressage is a popular Egyptian folk equestrian activity. We choose certain horses to perform the dances as not all horses have the



Gold champion, National colts Andaleeb Al Baidaa



Nada H. Abdelmoniem & Bridget McArdle McKinney



Gold champions, National fillies Amal Rabab



Gold champion, National mares Anbar Noor



President of the EAO presenting the Best Breeder trophy to Tarek & Ahmed Hamdy of El Farida Stud



Gold champion, National stallions Gamil El Gabry

skill, and those horses are generally different from racing or Arabian horses. It takes up to three years to train them; if a horse shows good results we take him into the ring, but if not, then he is deemed to have no potential talent. The talent usually runs in horses which come from lines that are known to do the folk dance. Actually, it keeps getting better these days; there is more competition and the best horses are judged. In the past unregistered balady [from the country-side] horses were used but now, registered Arabians are the big hit.

This folk dressage is popular abroad and several times we took the horses and we performed in Germany, the UAE and France. However with the [EU] ban, things have been bad. It sent the prices of Arabians to the sky. It's been a loss for all the breeders and it's beneficial for those abroad who are now importing horses from the Gulf as opposed to Egypt, the origin. We hope that officials lift the ban soon.

**DR. MOHAMED HASHIM ELDEEB**  
Chairman of the EAO

I was the Chairman of the EAO from February 2011 till 2012 and was then reassigned in July 2013. The EAO would hold two annual auctions but due to the political and economic crisis Egypt has been going through, as well as the ban on the importation of Egyptian horses, the organisation has not been producing the same amount of financial resources it did in the past. Let's take El Zahraa itself, it costs around 8,000,000 Egyptian pounds to annually keep it maintained, and this amount should be covered from exportation alone, but it is simply not happening. The EAO is a governmental institute, yes, but since 1970 it has been an established as a self-financed economic institution. What needs to be done to develop the EAO is to pick up on the projects that were started yet never completed, such as the equine hospital built from the donations of a Gulf businessman. It's there, but it lacks all the facilities.



Equicare booth at El Zahraa Stud Farm



The Organising Team of El Zahraa



A 12 x4 HT banner at El Zahraa Stud Farm

**MR. MOHSIN EL GABRY**  
*Breeder – Egypt*

El Zahraa is where the history of Arabian horses started; all those who breed Egyptian Arabians would pay respect to this place, the place where all breeders started their passion.

The ban has been a little beneficial for some of us breeders to tell you the truth. Some of the pure genes that used to be exported are now kept here in Egypt which has in turn increased horse production. But generally speaking, I believe this ban is about administrative paperwork and should be resolved soon.

**MR. PHILIP LOOYENS**  
*Handler - Belgium*

Handling horses has been a hobby for me; I've been doing it since I was eleven years old and I just love it. I handle horses all around the world and currently will be doing so around the Middle East as it's the winter season in Europe.

The trick to handling horses is a combination of a few things together and there is so much room for development for local handlers. Actually, things have changed a lot since I first came to El Zahraa. Handling is a long process of practice. For example, I personally do not like all the crazy plastic bag waving; they are supposed to stop doing it. If locally they want to be part of any positive process they have to



Everyone came to pay tribute to legendary Dani El Barbary; grooms, handlers, Presidents, breeders & Saleh caught one of those tributes with one snap



Dr. Mohamed Hashim Eldeeb presenting Dr. Nasr Marei with an honorary trophy

start with stopping that. Using one plastic bag is fine and only when it's waved with a bit of a feel, but when there are 20 handlers waving plastic bags at the horses, it's really not nice and it's overdone. It's probably worse for the horse than to anyone else!

**MR. KHALED EL NAGHAMSHI**  
*Breeder - Kuwait*

I started in El Zahraa in 1997 and every time I come there is some development. Arabian horses have problems with their legs; it is not just in Egypt, but worldwide. This could be enhanced with better production. We really urge those involved to exert more efforts with regards to the ban; it is such a shame that all these beautiful Arabians are trapped inside and not seen elsewhere.

**MR. BADR EL JABERI**  
*Omani Cultural Attaché:*

This is the first time for me at El Zahraa and I am very impressed by the horses and hopefully after the ban is lifted, it would be great to see the Sultanate participate with some of its Arabian horses. 🇦🇪

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