

NAEL NASSAR EGYPT'S NEXT OLYMPIAN

By Nada H. Abdelmoniem

TWENTY-TWO YEAR OLD EGYPTIAN RIDER NAEL NASSAR HAS STUNNED THE SHOW JUMPING WORLD WITH HIS CONSISTENT AND REMARKABLE WINS, HIS PRECISION AND HIS HUMBLE CHARM AND CHARISMA. UPON FIRST OBSERVING NASSAR RIDING OPHELIA DURING THE 2009 4* ARAB LEAGUE SHOW IN SYRIA AND WINNING THE 'CAT A' COMPETITIONS THROUGHOUT THE FOUR-DAY EVENT, IT WAS EVIDENT THAT EGYPT WAS PRODUCING A WORLD-CLASS EQUESTRIAN AND OLYMPIAN-IN-TRAINING. THEN, AS NOW, NASSAR HAD STYLE, HARMONY AND REFINED ALERTNESS WHEN RIDING, AND ABOVE ALL, HE HAD TALENT. HERE'S NASSAR'S ACCOUNT OF WHAT HE HAS BEEN ACHIEVING IN THE PAST THREE YEARS.





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Thani for Qatar. Al Sharabatly withdrew and his spot was taken by Qatar's Bassem Mohammed. Then comes Nassar deservedly earning a seat for Egypt as an extra rider riding outside his region and as the leader of the North American West Coast League, by earning at least equal points to the qualified riders for that region.

Born in Chicago, "the City of Big Shoulders", raised in Kuwait, studying Economics at Stanford University in northern California, fluent in four languages, this cosmopolitan native Egyptian showed promise from an early age. Standing now above six feet, most of his earlier mounts were on the small side, leading some of his fellow competitors to label them 'bicycles'. To this, in our HT interview with Nassar published in the 2009 summer edition (issue 29) he said, "I think having small horses just makes it more fun and challenging. Getting through a 1.45m course with a horse almost small enough to be deemed a pony is very rewarding".

Also from our interview, about taking in and training a new horse, here are some words of experience from someone so young: "I'd say it always starts with the flatwork. When you get on a new horse, you don't just attack the fences right away. You begin with feeling the canter under you, so that you have a slight idea of what you will be dealing with when fences come into play. Some horses are very handy and comfortable in the stride, others are elephants. Some have the blood of a thoroughbred; others are as cold as an ox. If you're able to get a good feeling of the horse as a whole and have roughly good control on the flat, your job already becomes that much easier. When jumping, while you continue to familiarise yourself with the horse's temperament, you start to concentrate on the feeling of the jump itself. You want to feel the horse's mouth, acceptance of pressure from the leg,

Just two years after Nassar's win in Syria and while still studying in university, he steadily kept making his mark in several international competitions. He managed to capture the attention of the audience and the accolades at the 2012 Winter Equestrian Festival in Wellington, Florida, when he seemed to come out of nowhere in Week 7 to win the \$15,000 Artisan Farms Young Rider Grand Prix, then progressing from there to win the entire 2012 Artisan Farms Young Rider Grand Prix Series.

Then, in July 2012, he blew past the likes of Olympians Beezie Madden, Reed Kessler and McLain Ward at the Spruce Meadows North American Tournament to win the \$35,00 Progress Energy Cup, a course technically tough with quite a challenging time limit. With his Belgian Warmblood

stallion, Raging Bull Vangelis S, Nassar beat more than 40 other experienced riders, advancing to a jump-off of two to earn his first win at Spruce Meadows in the only double clear of the class, and to earn Egypt its first win ever in Spruce Meadows.

Nassar showed every sign of continuing on this trajectory as he came into the 2012 autumn and winter, at the \$50,000 HITS Grand Prix in March 2013. And yet for all this, he remains humble, grateful, simple, and genuine.

From the twelve FEI World Cup Arab League Qualifiers that took place in the 2012/2013 season, two Arab riders qualified to represent their nations during the FEI World Cup Final in Gothenburg, Sweden (WC): Abdulllah Al Sharbatly for Saudi Arabia and Sheikh Ali Al



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Nassar & RB Vangelis during the WC class in Gothenburg

tidiness, scope, light-footedness, concentration, and joy. The most successful horses are those who you feel enjoy jumping.”

During the WC in Gothenburg, while Nassar and Vangelis had unlucky rounds, with his small horse Lordan, he excelled and they were placed in several classes. In the following interview, he spoke to us about how the whole event went, and how this time Lordan was the star.

How did it feel when you realised that you qualified for the Rolex FEI World Cup in Sweden?

I was very excited as this has been my goal for a year. It’s also sweet that I can achieve what I’ve been aiming for and also extra sweet that the show is in Sweden as my lifelong groom Linda Algeborg

is Swedish; we were both pretty excited. We were also hoping that it would go a little bit better than it went for us, but we are still happy to be here.

You had two down on the first day of the WC class; what went wrong there?

Vangelis and I decided to go for it as obviously we are not here just to be here. It was a speed class and I took a tough inside turn to this big Swedish oxer. I ended up a few centimetres too close there and unfortunately had my first rail of the weekend. At the second inside-turn, I thought I had a good shot. I honestly believed that we would leave it up. Maybe I rushed the first half of the turn and put him on a tough angle, but that’s kind of what needs to be done when you are going against the clock. Sometimes

you ride well and luck just isn’t on your side. Not to mention that Vangelis came up completely lame a week before the final. He tweaked his neck in the paddock and it took a serious toll on the rest of his body. Maybe that’s a reason for his uncharacteristic nature this weekend, maybe not. That’s just how this game is sometimes.

What are your comments about the technicalities of the courses?

The speed class wasn’t too tough if you weren’t trying to go fast which is usually how it’s supposed to be. There were quite a few clears and the courses were a little bigger than I expected on the first day. As for the second round on the Friday, I thought we rode really nicely for a WC round and we all saw 17 clears which is a lot more than what



Nassar testing Lordan against the clock during the international competitions in Gothenburg

should happen in a WC class. It was great for the crowd of course but the riders were disappointed. I thought the courses were big in general, not too technical except for one or two lines where you really had to adjust; otherwise everything was nice and smooth.

You have been featured on the cover of an American magazine called 'Horse & Style' with the caption "Best of the West" immediately before the WC; do you think there were a lot of expectations?

That's a good question. It's my first WC and I am still a young rider, there couldn't have possibly been too many expectations even though I won the US West Coast League and beat Rich Fellers, the winner of the 2012 WC. I don't think people had a lot riding on me and I just tried to

ride like I would at any other show. We will be back in form soon enough and I couldn't really pay too much attention to what people thought; I generally always expect a lot from myself anyway. I think I rode the best round I could have possibly ridden, Vangelis was simply not up for it this weekend.

In the USA, are the crowds as big as the one we saw here at the WC?

Not even close.

Did the crowd play a role?

I was hoping the crowd would play a bigger role, maybe wake Vangelis up a little bit, but he was completely unfazed by it. And to be honest, even though there were 10,000 spectators and once you go into the arena the whole place is lit up as if you are on a stage, once I went in I didn't

really look at them and tried to block everything else out.

On Friday in the international competitions you were placed third with Lordan; you beat the times of several riders such as Edwina Alexander-Tops and Christine McCree; there were only around 12 clears and your two clear rounds were carefully executed. What was your plan before going in?

My current trainer Piet Raijmakers and I had agreed that Lordan and I would go for it; Vangelis wasn't having a good weekend as I mentioned earlier but Lordan was my remaining choice. I thought it was a really nice jump-off and was built really well for him. I was a little slow from fence one to two; this is where I think I lost at least the second place. But then I picked it up and had

a really short turn back to the oxer and got my rhythm, from there I just came flying home. It was super fun, probably one of the most enjoyable rounds I cleared.

Was that the first time you really tested Lordan against the clock?

Probably. I tried to go faster and he usually gets more careful as I go quicker, it's just sometimes he gets too careful and spends too much time in the air – and then I end up going a little slower than I want to. But he felt great throughout the weekend; he attacked the fences, he was confident and he was responding well.

Tell us more about Lordan and Vangelis?

Vangelis still feels young and fresh, not this weekend obviously! Hopefully he can still jump until he is 18 so we should still have a few more years in him. I acquired Lordan at the end of his sixth year. He got hurt when he came to us so I couldn't start riding him until the end of his seventh. Then, things moved quite fast after his rehab and getting back to being sound, and we took him to a couple of national shows where he was all over the place. Subsequently I threw him straight into the young horse championships; he was just really responsive. Things went uphill afterwards: he won the young riders series in Florida in 2012 as an eight-year-old and I also had him jump some 150 classes there at the end of the circuit as well as some of the WC qualifying classes where he won one in Thermal. He is really stepping up. He is a lovely horse, small, compact with a lot of blood and I really enjoy riding him.

And how have things been shaping up with your trainer Piet Raijmakers?

They are great. He is always bubbly, friendly, outgoing and at the same time he is a legend. He's won two Olympic gold medals and as many Grand Prix as you can think of. And



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you can see that he is really well respected by all the riders from the sport, people are always asking for his advice. It is a privilege to be with him. And it has been reassuring to have him here with me as I haven't had a trainer for about a year now. As much as I enjoy not having one as it helps me develop, it's still great to have someone give you some pointers, help you while warming-up and helping right before a competition.

When will you graduate and tell us about the support you get?

I have one more quarter left as I took two quarters off, one in the fall of 2011 to prepare for the Pan Arab Games, and one in the spring of 2013 to prepare for the WC Final at Gothenburg. I'll graduate in December. As for my support group, I have a great one, my parents first

and foremost. The people in Egypt have been great as well. In the USA, even though I came out of nowhere and stole a few classes, they are still friendly and nice to me. I qualify to shows as an extra athlete so I am not really stealing any of their spots which is a plus. To be honest, I've been really lucky as it's really important to have a good support group behind you. 🏆

FACTS:

- North America is allowed a total of ten riders for the World Cup Final; seven from the East Coast, and three from the West Coast. Rich Fellers was already qualified as he had won the World Cup Final in 2012, consequently he was exempted from the requirement of qualification points. Nassar needed to have at least 77 points to qualify, which is the score of the 3rd ranked US West

Coast rider excluding Fellers. As it turned out, Nassar's score wound up totalling a colossal 94 and topped all of the US West Coast riders including Fellers.

- During the fourth day of the international competitions at Gothenburg, in a very technical and big course, veteran names such as Meredith Michaels-Beerbaum, Luciana Diniz and Mclain Ward could not give the Gothenburg Horse Show crowd any clear rounds. Following nine starts and no clears, Nassar and Lordan trotted into the arena with calculated calm. They jumped a flawless clear round and were the first to do so and qualify for the jump-off, and were the good luck charm for the riders who followed as only then, the crowd started to see some clears.

- Also, during the fifth and final day of the international competitions at Gothenburg, Nassar's WC horse Vangelis finally awoke and they were placed a strong second.

- Post WC, Nassar was placed 2nd with Raging Bull Vangelis at CSI2* Grand Prix of Drammen, 4th at CSI2* Grand Prix of Bonheiden, and 2nd with Lordan at CSI3* Grote Prijs van de Provincie Gelderland.

- Nassar's current Longines FEI World Ranking is 98.

- Nassar and Lordan have qualified for the 2014 World Equestrian Games that will be held in Normandy, France.

HORSES:

Raging Bull Vangelis S, Belgian Warmblood Stallion, 15 years old; **Lordan**, Hannoverian Gelding, 9 years old; **Dunsoghly Junior**, Irish Gelding, 11 years old; **Baraka**, Oldenburger gelding, 6 years old (Lordan's brother); **Alva**, Holsteiner Warmblood mare, 5 years old; **Dalaya**, KWPN Warmblood mare, 5 years old; **Zayn**, Holsteiner gelding, 4 years old.

Gothenburg Horse Show Results:

CLASS 6 PRESENTED BY AGRIA, APRIL 26, 2013 - 1m50 WITH ONE JUMP-OFF:

RANK	RIDER	HORSE	COUNTRY
1	Roger Yves-Bost	Castle Forbes Vivaldo	FRANCE
2	Marcus Ehning	Campbel	GERMANY
3	Nael Nassar	Lordan	EGYPT
4	Edwina Tops-Alexander	Vienna Olympic	AUSTRALIA
5	Christine McCrea	Wannick WH	USA

Gothenburg Trophy Presented by Carpe Diem, April 27, 2013 - 1m55 WITH ONE JUMP-OFF:

RANK	RIDER	HORSE	COUNTRY
1	Ludger Beerbaum	Chaman	GERMANY
2	Marcus Ehning	Plot Blue	GERMANY
3	Rolf-Göran Bengtsson	Casall La Silla	SWEDEN
4	Rich Fellers	Flexible	USA
5	Nael Nassar	Lordan	EGYPT

CLASS 10 PRESENTED BY VOLVO, APRIL 28, 2013 - 1m45 AGAINST THE CLOCK:

RANK	RIDER	HORSE	COUNTRY
1	Rolf-Göran Bengtsson	Corcega La Silla	SWEDEN
2	Nael Nassar	Raging Bull Vangelis S	EGYPT
3	Katherine Dinan	Glory Days	USA
4	Ludger Beerbaum	Crespo PKZ	GERMANY
5	Sheikh Ali Al Thani	Sieshofs Abraksas	QATAR

Other Prominent Results:

1st place: Damascus (Syria), Abu Dhabi (UAE), Gera (Germany), Wellington (Florida, USA), Spruce Meadows (Calgary, Canada), Langley (Canada), Burbank (LA, USA), Thermal (California, USA). 2nd and 3rd places: Pan Arab Games (Doha, Qatar) and Lexington (Kentucky, USA). Other placings: Doha (Qatar), Dubai (UAE), Kiel (Germany), Odense (Denmark), Lanaken (Belgium), and others.

- Full results and figures from the WC in Gothenburg: <http://tinyurl.com/mmqe9gj>

- HT full reports about the WC in Gothenburg: <http://tinyurl.com/m37gnpw>

- Nassar's clear rounds: <http://tinyurl.com/luznrer>, <http://tinyurl.com/myv9f99>, <http://tinyurl.com/l6zyjq5>

- HT Nassar's 2009 interview: <http://tinyurl.com/cbfbccv>

- HT Nassar's LIVE interview: <http://tinyurl.com/mabfr29>