

A SPECIAL VIEW OF THE OLYMPICS



By Mohamed Nafei



Dear Readers,

I am writing to share with you certain observations and lessons I have learned after having watched the Equestrian Olympic games in Sydney.

We, in the equine field, all watched the finals of the individual showjumping event on the last day in Sydney. It is inarguably the most difficult and trying event of showjumping.

The reason why that is so is because the event needs far more than just a good horse and a good rider. It takes a compatible blending of elements to get any rider to the top of the game as a medalist.

These elements, in my opinion, are:

- A good Olympic rider on a good Olympic horse
- An Olympic trainer
- Years of proper planning and training
- The full financial, moral and psychological support of the riders' native country
- Team work between the rider, trainer, vet, groom and blacksmith, etc.

If we use the Brazilian team as an example, Nelson Pessoa is considered both one of the best trainers and riders in Olympic history. As captain of the team, he organized and trained his riders conscientiously and professionally. He chose the best riders and horses and set a standard of excellence that they all displayed. The perfect synchrony of the team was evident as they won three medals.

Coincidentally, Nelson Pessoa's son, Rodrigo, was also on the Brazilian Team. During the individual final round, he was disqualified while jumping Baloubet, his horse, over a very basic oxer. Here we draw our lesson: Even a world champion can make a simple mistake. It is wise to learn from it and never be overly confident.

Another lesson we learn is from the British team. They have always been Olympic champions but have ceased to be since they have started to ride more commercially, preferring profits over prestige. They no longer invest in good horses, Olympic trainers or training camps before the events.

The third lesson is that of the Dutch team. They were remarkable in their technicality elevating the sport to a science, leaving no room for luck. Good training and a very technical system has assured them medals in almost every Olympic event.

Lastly, I would like to focus on the Arab citizens that competed in Sydney.

Egypt's André Sakkakini

His result was 20 FLT which, in my view, is comparable to the results of both John and Michael Whitaker and many others. Bearing in mind the advantages that riders from other countries have. André is to be considered a one-man show in a difficult sport. He has no team, no trainer, no special vet. He received no type of support from his country or the press. He is the owner, trainer and the rider of his horse "Careful," whom he trained for four years before the Olympics.

He covered the costs of his accommodation in Sydney as the Egyptian government refused to do so, suggesting that he stay at the Olympic village some 30 miles away from the equestrian camp.

I think it is fantastic that even as a one-man show André was able to be among 45 riders that had qualified for the finals in individual showjumping.

Just a small note that Egypt has spent hundreds of thousands of dollars on the training of Rania Elwany in the U.S.A and she had just passed the first two qualifications.

Khaled Eid of The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia

I have no words to express my happiness with my hero, an Arab, at the top of the Olympic Equestrian games. In my view, he demonstrated perfection and stability on all three days of the events. He sent a strong and clear message to the world: "Yes, the champion can be an Arab." Khaled Eid is a good example of proper management and all the winning elements I had mentioned previously. He has a superb trainer, Nelson Pessoa and an excellent horse. He and his teammates had the full support of their country. I am sure they have gained much experience from this.

Her Royal Highness Princess Haya Bint Al-Hussein of Jordan

I very much appreciate what Her Royal Highness has done for the sport in the Arab media. She has set a precedent for Arab sports-women. Becoming an Olympic rider is surely another tiara on her head.

Finally, I must say that my opinions and judgements are purely my own and emanate from my strong feelings for my beloved sport. I wish my fellow equestrians all the best. I must pose a last question as a disappointed Egyptian. How can we, as Egyptians, form an Olympic equestrian team if the press never mentioned the sport once during their coverage of the Olympics even though André Sakkakini, a native, was competing? They even went as far as broadcasting that Egypt had no more athletes competing two days before André was to ride. Perhaps with a lot of faith, the support of our country and the love of the sport we can make a difference.

Sincerely yours,

Mohamed Nafei, Friend of Horse Times