





# ALICE DEBANY CLERO

# IN WONDERLAND

By Khaled Assem

ALICE DEBANY CLERO FIRST VISITED EGYPT IN 1995 WHERE SHE RODE AT THE INTERNATIONAL STUDENT CHAMPIONSHIP IN ALEXANDRIA. A YEAR LATER SHE WAS INVITED TO THE MOVENPICK INTERNATIONAL EVENT TO RIDE A HORSE NAMED BILLY, OWNED BY MR. KHALED TAWFIK WHERE SHE WAS THE ONLY RIDER TO JUMP WITHOUT A SINGLE FAULT FOR THREE DAYS OF SHOWING. SHE CURRENTLY TRAINS THE DUBAI SHOW JUMPING TEAM, AND IN THIS FASCINATING INTERVIEW, WE'LL LEARN MORE ABOUT HER, HER FAMILY, HORSES, AND RIDING CAREER.

**When did you start riding professionally?**

I started to ride professionally at age 17. However, since the age of nine, I was a professional “pony jock”, where I fixed or developed ponies for many people. I was paid with free lessons or a piece of new equipment sometimes, and I gained a great deal of experience.

At the same age, I was offered a job with Barney Ward (McLain Ward’s father). He was the largest dealer in the USA at the time and McLain was still riding ponies.

I cleaned out 10 to 15 stalls and jumped 8 to 10 horses a day. I rarely even just flatted a horse at the Ward’s stable; he would have a groom do that. Barney had an extremely high horse turnover rate. He would test every horse very hard for three or four days to assess

its scope, carefulness, speed and honesty, then the horses would be usually sold within a week.

The education to me as a rider and a competitor was extraordinary. By jumping this many jumps a day, most often at 1m50 or 1m60, you become a riding machine. There is no substitute for this kind of training for the rider. Progress comes in leaps and bounds. Only, a “factory” dealer’s stable can offer this kind of mental and physical training for the rider. It is certainly not how I train horses for long term development; I would never jump a horse of mine that I spent four or five years developing like this. Those horses were for quick sale, not long term training.

Before working there, my mother, a former show jumping rider, invested in me as much as she could while raising her ten children by herself (my

father died at age 50). Though we had limited means, she still brought me to weekly lessons with Frank Madden and Bill Cooney, who were the assistant trainers for George Morris, whom I also worked with from time to time. Since I couldn't afford to have more than one lesson a week, I would drill myself at home between lessons so that I would get the most out of every lesson my mother worked so hard for.

I finished my junior career in 1986 as the leading junior jumper rider in the country. I was then approached by a man named Paul Greenwood. Paul shot to fame in the horse world by purchasing 'The Natural' for one million dollars in 1985. This was the first show jumper in history to have this landmark purchase price.

Paul hired me, at 18 years old, to run his livery business, train his young horses, and he insisted that I go to university, and offered to cover the cost of the tuition fees. I was admitted at New York University and went to school at night while running the business at Old Salem farm.

There was a troubled horse that The Natural's rider at the time didn't want, named Tarco. He was nervous and difficult, but I found a way with him and he became my first Grand Prix horse. He wasn't a winner, but he could jump any track in the world safely and I gained tremendous confidence with him. He prepared me for the chance of my life. The Natural's original rider quit her job after The Natural got injured. Paul said, "If he comes back, he's yours." He came back at 14 years old, and I had three great years with him.

I jumped several Nation's Cups with him, qualified for the World Cup final, and won the Queen Elizabeth II cup in Calgary, among other Grand Prix wins. What an honour and thrill it was to sit on one of the truly great horses of our time.

**When did you take up coaching and what does it take to be a good and efficient coach?**

The years preceding getting The



▲ Alice jumping Tin Tin in Fontainebleau Grand Prix

Natural, I was busy running the business for Paul, which included lots and lots of teaching. I quickly found that I really loved it. I spent eight years working for Old Salem Farm and I taught hundreds of lessons with anyone ranging from first time on a horse to Grand Prix riders. I always tried to make an impact on my student in every lesson. I would always put my heart and soul into my lessons, sometimes exhausting myself and losing my voice. I sometimes put so much into it that I had felt I left a piece of myself in the ring. I will often go to great lengths to explain something as ethereal as a feeling. For example, if I have to run around on my hands and feet to demonstrate how a horse

canters, I will, and I have.

Before Remi and I had children, I had the honour and privilege to work with HRH Princess Haya; we met at the 2000 Sunshine Tour in Spain. At the end of it, she asked if she could come to train with me in Paris. We were going to work closely with Katie Prudent. Katie, who I trained with for two years, was and is one of the best trainers in the world and I was thrilled to work with her for Her Highness. Katie lived in a different part of France, so HRH Princess Haya and I trained in Paris. We trained well together and she qualified for the Olympic Games in Sydney by jumping a clear round in the San Patrignano Grand Prix.



started to ride when he was 18, and won a 4\* event at the Arab League in 2008. Just two years before, he was riding C category (1m10) in local shows. I am very proud of all our team riders: Arif Ahmad, Omar Khoory, Mohammed Ketait, and our youngest, Ahmad Falaknaz. Our riders have proven to be winners in National and International shows and I believe they exemplify excellent horsemanship and sportsmanship.

Abdulla became the first rider in the UAE to ride in the World Cup final, and the first and only one to win a European 2\* Grand Prix (Auvers, France) as well as the first to win two other world ranking classes in Europe.

**What are the most important shows you have participated in?**

Before my work in Dubai began, I had the pleasure of riding in the best shows in the world: Aachen, Calgary, La Baule, Rome, San Patrignano, Cannes, Geneva, Paris, Amsterdam, Vienna, Gijon, Palm Beach, and Bremen. These were done generally with horses we bought young and brought along.

**What are you working on now?**

We have four young horses, and I have a partnership with one five year old. I own half with Abdulla Al Marri who will ride her most of the time, and I trust him to ride any of my horses. I also have three six year olds and one seven year old who I hope will start a Grand Prix in 2012.

I take a very long term view when I am bringing along horses. I don't run them when they are young, so I win fewer young horse classes than others may. I think too many riders are running six and seven year olds flat out day in and day out. Many of them are burned out by the time they reach the age of eight, just when their adult education is supposed to begin.

I am quite excited about the five horses we have coming along. One of my six year olds, Amarusa S (Baloubet de Rouet x Le Mexico) won the six year old Grand Prix in Dinard, exhibiting exceptional quality.

**Tell us about your family; do your children ride?**

My husband, Remi, is not a horseperson, but he loves horses and he has now learned to ride

A few years later, after her marriage, HRH Princess Haya asked me to work for Dubai Equestrian Club about two weeks a month with a team of local Dubai riders; what a life changing opportunity she gave me! As an American woman, I feel so lucky to have been able to know and explore the Middle East as I have and explode some of the myths and misconceptions that some Americans may have, while getting to work with five talented and dedicated riders.

With the great support from the Dubai Equestrian Club, we achieved very good results rather quickly, most notably with Abdulla Al Marri who had only



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▲ Alice & the Dubai Team in Le Creno Beach, at the Debany farm

after 16 years of marriage. He has been the CEO/President of luxury and cosmetics companies over the past 14 years. I have girl/ boy twins the age of nine and a son who is twelve. They all ride and are getting more and more interested. I can't say I know they will be doing this professionally or not, for now they have expressed more interest in medicine and science than in horses. Either way, we will support whatever they decide to do.

Remi and I have invested in a beautiful farm in France located very near to La Baule. It is a very unique place with 37 hectares of grass with 1 km of Atlantic Ocean coastline. The beach it is connected with has a vast open area at low tide with perfect sand so we can jump during the low tide in an immense arena with the best footing!

We have just finished building the stables and we are very proud of them. The farm is far from being fully developed, but we have done quite a bit so far.

### **What are your long term plans?**

I really want my Dubai Team to jump in the Olympic Games and the WEG. They don't have the horses for London, but they have invested in very good young horses and I have great hopes for Rio in 2016. For myself as a rider, of course I would love to ride at the Global Champions Tour if I am ever in a position to be able to hold on to my most promising horses, and enjoy the sport at the highest level again. If not, I will be happy that my riders live that experience out there instead of me. 🇪🇺

*Uncredited photos courtesy of Remi Clero*

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▲ Alice & Remi's 3 bundles of joy: Nicolas, Gregory & Madison the twins



▲ Mr. & Mrs. Clero