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# EGYPT'S GROOMS

## THE FORGOTTEN SOLDIERS (Part 1)

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By Karim Mekawi



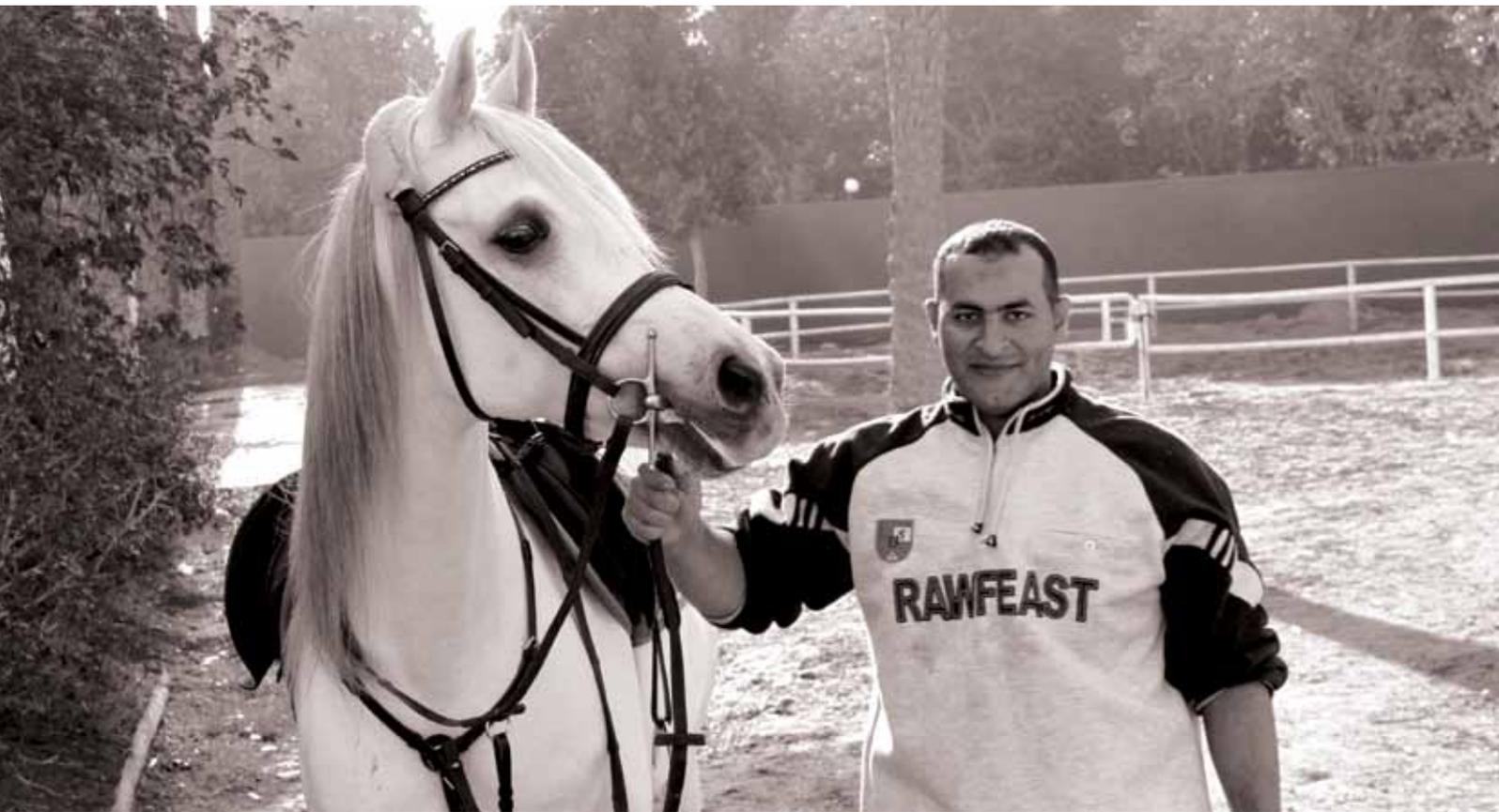


AIMING THE SPOTLIGHT  
ON OUR EQUESTRIAN  
SUPERSTARS  
DURING THEIR PRIZE  
CEREMONY, WE SEE  
ALL THOSE LEGENDARY  
RIDERS ABOARD THEIR  
TRIUMPHANT HORSES  
AWAITING THE GLORY  
OF A GRAND TITLE OR  
AN EXCITING CHEQUE  
OF MONEY BUT THEN  
WE SEE THE LOYAL  
GROOM STANDING  
BY THE ARENA RAILS  
WATCHING, AWAY  
FROM THE LIME LIGHT,  
HARVESTING THE  
FRUIT OF HIS HARD  
WORK AND WEARING A  
PRICELESS SMILE FULL  
OF MEANING, EMOTION  
AND PRIDE.

These hard-working employees are the reason this all happens and are very much behind the scenes making sure the horse is in top form for the next event, giving all that they have in order to prepare their equine partner for what the rider really wants.

A profession such as this in Egypt does not require a college degree or a certification to work with horses. There is much more than that, it entails patience, accuracy, acquired experience and best of all – love and will to provide for those four-legged creatures.

Upon interviewing some of the grooms in Egypt, one can discern loyalty to the horses they work with, as well as a special relationship that one cannot immediately comprehend. It is indeed “more than just a horse” – which is a quote that I heard very often. Although some of them may not have completed their education, or even get paid less than they would wish for, nevertheless they are still determined to continue their job as grooms and serve the



▲ Omer Ebeid & Sary

one creature they say was “A gift from God.”

Grooms in Egypt are indeed a special story that can be very curious for some and interesting for others but which cannot be summed up in a single article, therefore to do them justice a series of chronicles would be necessary. They are indeed the recollection of experiences, memories, destiny, hardship, triumph and loss all in one blend. “It is not a job that I took a diploma for, it is a hobby and a craft that my father and grandfather taught me”, says Shaaban Ebeid at the Sakkara Country Club who has been a groom for 20 years now. “I quit middle school and went to work with horses at Mrs. Wigdan El Barbary’s Stud farm, went to Siwa for a year, came back and then settled here with more horses.” He also gets a bit political and speaks about the situation of grooms in Egypt and how the majority are not given sufficient appreciation regarding fixed working hours, improved stable facilities as well as better pay. “Grooms in Europe, for example, get paid a lot and some riders there can’t even afford to hire one because grooming there is

considered expensive labour.”

Shaaban can be seen daily walking around the stable yard, grooming his horses, feeding them, shifting bales of wood shaving to his horses’ boxes to make them most comfortable. “I have a five year old Arabian mare here, called Basbousa – owned by a German girl. She’s very special with a lot of character...I really spoil her”, says Shaaban about the one mare that takes up plenty of his time and who he treats as his daughter. He also goes on to tell me an interesting story regarding a horse called ‘Voltaire’ who had all the qualities of a decent show jumper, but was terrorised by the trailer and hardly went to shows due to that complex that he had. “I used to lure that monster to go inside and I stayed with him till we arrived to the show grounds, but I realised that he genuinely started to get comfortable when I kept him company in the trailer.” It is an unexplained fact and he doesn’t even know how it happened.

Shaaban and his brothers all work in the horse industry and have been doing so for the last two decades, however one younger

brother who looks after four horses, does it with an unsound hip after a serious accident years ago with one aggressive stallion that resulted in surgery and a work break for six months. “I couldn’t work for months, and I was depressed due to financial issues, as well as the fact that I didn’t see horses on a daily basis”, says Omar about his arduous experience with doctors, unemployment, finance, and most of all the horses he dealt with. On the subject of general appreciation towards grooms, Omar considers that only 20% of grooms in Egypt properly receive sufficient gratitude whether tangible or intangible. Nevertheless, he still does it and gives his horses he works with a great deal of time, effort and dedication even with a hip that does not aid him.

Truly, one can easily say that there is so much surrounding grooms as individuals that one can be touched by, especially the stories of adversity and difficulty that most of us are not aware of.

The connection between a horse and his groom is very unique, and once a groom gets attached to one it becomes very difficult to let go.

Even with the younger generation of grooms who are in their twenties, they find it to be a great challenge when thinking of another living. “I don’t think I can imagine myself working as anything else, I finished university, but horses are in my blood, believe it or not”, says Amin from Ferosia Club who saddles for Ibrahim El Bastawisy.

However, one otherwise unremarkable groom catches my attention due to his intriguing past with riders abroad and with the enthusiasm that keeps him going on a daily basis. “I like working with winners [horses], they keep me motivated” says Ahmed Abdel Halim who served a few years with Egyptian Show jumper Daa Beshir as well as the former Chef d’equipe of the Egyptian National Team – Eng. Samir Abdelfatah, for their horses in Saudi Arabia. “I worked for an average pay, but I still did it because Al Mandoub and Daa kept winning and that kept me going”, explains Ahmed about the horse and rider combination that influenced his life the most. Ahmed also talks to me about his experience in Europe and how the grooms there pushed him to improve his work and perfect it. Not only that, but he realised that grooms abroad have fixed working hours with an incomparable pay to grooms in Egypt, and also have better facilities and equipment to help them.

Ahmed also elaborates on how high the competition is in Europe and how easily one can be replaced, even as a groom. “In Europe, your work has to be perfect, if you do the same mistake twice, your employer will ask you to leave on the spot and invest the 2,000 Euros in someone worthwhile.”

His experience abroad narrates itself as he talks about his journey in Saudi Arabia, and his impressions about Arab riders like Khaled Al Eid, HRH Prince Abdullah bin Miteb, Ramzy Al Duhami and at Saudi business tycoon Dr. Khaled Al Jeraisy’s stables where he saw all those riders going in and out. “I saw a lot that is behind the scenes, I really saw what equipment these grooms are given, what tack they use and most of all the groom accommodation which

I never saw here in Egypt”. Ahmed thinks that not all grooms in Egypt are given full appreciation and that it all goes down to one equation; who you work for, what standard of work you are doing and for how many horses you work in accordance to your pay.

When watching the Arab league show jumping qualifications for the World Cup on television, Ahmed points out several of the riders that he got to meet through the shows he went to, the horses that lodged in the stalls next to his and how the experience of living with European and Arab grooms was very educational for him.

But then again, not only the grooms who travel abroad learn new experiences from people, but grooms also learn from local circumstances. “Surely people that we previously worked for taught us something, whether professionally or personally” says Mahmoud Mohamed who’s been around horses for 23 years now, with no consideration to make another living. Together, his five horses and four children form the number “9” which is very dear to him. Former groom for a lot of people including Abdullah Faisal Al Sabbah,

Osman Abou El Gheit, Mohsen Tantawy and Egyptian International show jumping rider Ibrahim Sami, he set a major goal that he tries everyday to achieve – “Make the horse happy.”

It is an objective that most grooms try to reach, but the question is – are they really happy? Looking at the very feisty and hot tempered 30-something year old mare ‘Alia’ that Mahmoud looks after, she really does give the word “happiness” a different meaning. “She is easily 30 now, and she is still very careful about what you give her, which makes it more difficult to look after her.” But here she is; an ancient and happy four-legged creature, with 30 years on her girth, and a couple of more years of life to give.

In the end, I can easily say that my personal perceptions were raised a notch when sitting with just a handful of the numerous horse grooms in Egypt and taking notes while they recited their personal, side-by-side, stories with horses that altered their careers as well as their views on the appreciation of grooms in Egypt, how they think grooms abroad are being treated and the horses they cannot part with. 🇪🇬

▼ Ahmed Abdelhalim & Easyjet

