

REVELATIONS

UNE MEMOIRE EGYPTIANNE

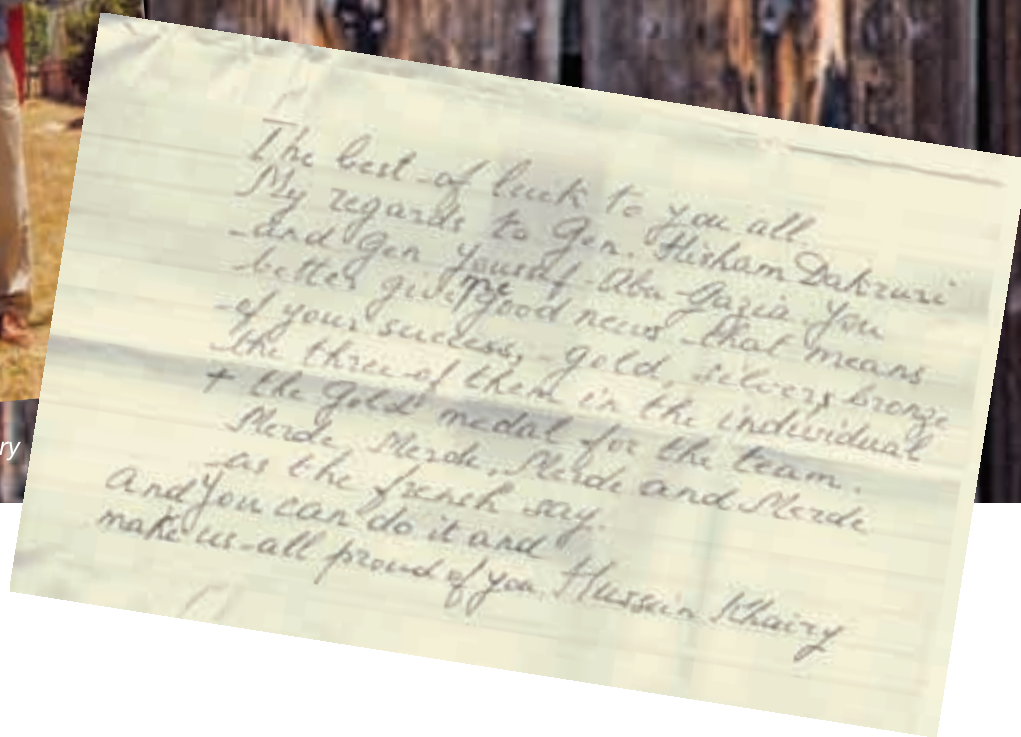
By Nada H. Abdelmoniem







▲ The Late Hussein Khairy & Mamdouh Ismail



It is always a good challenge to try to be creative with articles in Horse Times; it is a unique publication with diverse and controversial editorials. The history article in specific can be a good periodical read and for this spring issue, there were lots of thoughts on how to come up with an intriguing piece.

Some say that "the past is our definition...we may strive, with good reason, to escape it, or to escape what is bad in it, but we will escape it only by adding something better to it." Better like being able to sit down and talk to veteran or rising reminiscent riders about their recollections and triumphs, how their horse should have won, how it is always said if the horse knocks down the first and last obstacle it is not his fault, but it is mostly the riders', and when they start talking about chronicles that went back in time. Must be something about my charming self!

Syria, March 2009, I am in Damascus to cover Al Wafaa International Show Jumping Event. Driving through a very beautiful mountainous road on our way to attend the first day of the show, I was chatting with an aspiring rider who was clearly captivated by the scenes

and beautiful weather that triggered him to actually, be seated on the emotional seat rather than the passengers'! He recollected some good memories of his favourite horse; a lame horse during Al Wafaa. A veteran rider joined in and started recollecting memories about a horse that died a day before some event dating 30 years back! The third rider, the true inspiration to what comes ahead, started recollecting memories on the feat that Egypt accomplished in Syria during the 1987 Mediterranean Games; oh, what nostalgia triggered by a beautifully scented breeze!

And then that was it! We are in Syria covering a Syrian event and alleviated by the weather. There are beautiful floating memories that took place in the same country twenty two years ago! The 2009 Mediterranean Games are coming up in the summer...why not highlight the memories of the Egyptian team winning the team gold medal and the individual bronze medal years ago? Lets bring them all together and hear how history was made...

1987; highly sensitive political relationships between Egypt and Syria and for more than 30 whole years, equestrian teams were banned by the

government to leave the country due to the 'South African horse disease'. The Egyptian equestrian team was being guided by Gen. Hussein Khairy, Secretary General of the Federation and were all thriving to compete on the international level. Newspaper articles kept good track of their activities and updated the public with their national wins. Young and aspiring, they trained very hard, competed and waited for their lucky break which came when they qualified for the 1987 Mediterranean Equestrian Games held in Syria. The Mediterranean Games, organised every four years, stand as the greatest sport event of the Mediterranean region attracting the interest of the maritime countries (nations bordering the Mediterranean Sea), where Europe, Africa and Asia meet. The Games, held under the auspices of the International Olympic Committee, fall within the competence of the Hellenic Olympic Committee in terms of the preparation and composition of the National Delegation, precisely as for the Olympic Games. Off to represent Egypt was Dr. Mohamed Elsherbini, a Paediatrician, Hossam Ragab an Army Cavalier, Omar Mamdouh Ismail, an Anthropologist, Khaled Assem a Mechanical Engineer, and finally Khaled Mohamed Aly, a Political Science graduate.



▲ Mohamed Elsherbini & the late Bassel Al Assad

Omar Mamdouh Ismail,
Remember the basics of your horse were given to him as a hunter. No horse is prepared to come back on his haunches correctly in a fraction of a second and then go forward again correctly in another fraction of a second.
Use your hands lightly with strong legs. Forget the German way of handling the horses between obstacles, and don't sit back too soon, until you are sure that your horse has cleared the fence with his hind legs. Ride to win. And go with God!

OMAR MAMDOUH ISMAIL:

We had a very good team consisting of 5 riders; unfortunately one of the greatest Egyptian riders, Ahdam Hammad, should have participated but for military reasons he could not leave the country. Had he been with us, I am sure we would have had better results because he had two great horses; 'Last Chance' and 'Tariq ibn Ziyad'. I remember that we faced very hard challenges...we were the first Egyptian team to leave the country and participate in an international tournament and so expectations were all over. No horses were allowed to enter Egypt and vice versa. I remember the President of the Egyptian Equestrian Federation back then Gen. Saad Khalifa along with the late Eng. Hussein Fahmy worked extremely hard to lift the ban and they succeeded. The result was me, Khaled Mohamed Aly, Dr. Mohamed Elsherbini, Khaled Assem and Hossam Ragab travelling to Syria to for the games.

For the preparations we jumped high courses of 160cm designed by Gen. Khairy who loved placing exceptionally wide fences...the width of the oxers where crazy I remember! But I guess this was functional for all of us; we went to the games fully prepared as well as had good experience compared to other riders. Gen. Khairy was very close to us as a friend, and he respected my ideas and I was very outspoken about his wide oxers telling him that they were simply too much! He would answer with a no, you can jump it. I respected him like my father due to the age difference, but the oxers were overdone and we all felt they were too hard. When I think of

it now, who knew that these wide fences were our easy step up to whatever came in the future. He was also very involved with us almost like a trainer even though he was not. Each one of us at that time was his own trainer. We did not have a trainer, and Gen. Khairy followed up on us all the time and what makes it special is that he knew us more than we could possibly know ourselves. Before travelling to the tournament, he wrote a short note for each of us and asked me to read it to the others.

One of the challenges we faced was to transport our horses from Egypt to Syria and we were almost not going to go at the last minute. No aircraft wanted to ship our horse due to the rising unstable relations between the two countries, so at the time there was a carrier called 'Zastek' that accepted to ship the horses. Along with our grooms, Hossam Ragab and I boarded the carrier and travelled just to make sure our horses were in good hands even though when we landed, the aircraft was taxied two to three kilometres away from the cargo building; we walked like we never walked before, but it was still fun!

I remember the other teams had fantastic trainers and better horses than ours but we had more talent, more practise and better preparations. We did not have a Dutch trainer to warm up our horses and then we would just saddle up at the arena after a good "correction"! Other riders did so...we also did not have any "rapping" which was considered cheating. So we rode fair, clean and honest.

I remember during the Grand Prix, I had a one knock down that prevented me from winning the silver individual medal because there were military soldiers chasing after my horse inside the course just to scare him off! Fortunately my horse was so well trained; it could have jumped next to camels or next to an army tank! The Egyptian team was so well trained if a bomb blew up unexpectedly we would have still jumped clear.

More than 20 years have passed and still my memories of the gold medal are fresh and beautiful and of course all the members of the team share those memories. As the French say, "esprit de corps"; we were like a union and my fellow riders are special to me. As close friends, Khaled Mohamed Aly and Khaled Assem along with myself travelled a lot together and when we travelled and won together at the games, the victory was of course very unforgettable. We had plenty of fun! The two Khaleds, Mohamed, Hossam, Gen. Hisham El Dakrory, Gen. Yousif Abu Gazia, Gen. Saad Khalifa, those were the administrators of the federation back then. There were neither mobile phones nor emails and from time to time we called Gen. Khairy for some tips. It was such a pleasure to be part of the team; I enjoyed it and can never forget those times.

Laughing: I remember Khaled Mohamed Aly had several Lebanese girlfriends who flew all the way from Alexandria to Syria to cheer us on. They were very pretty and cheered us on like no others!

*Khaled Assem,
Ride Forward, Forget Perfection, Forget
The Public.
Have confidence in yourself, Communicate
this confidence to your horse; your horse
will then take care of himself and of you.
Forward, Forward, and Forward.
Repeat: The last three strides belong to
the horse and not to you.
Ride to Win and go with God!*



► 4th from left: Khaled Assem,
Mohamed Elsherbini &
Hossam Ragab
Bottom: Khaled Mohamed Aly &
Omar Mamdouh

KHALED ASSEM:

I remember one last qualification at the Army Club; the fences were huge and you either go through, go across, or other horses completely collapsed. And on top of it there was a double combination of a triple bar to a vertical that was gigantic. Actually I remember my horse back then, 'King Tut', was such an incredibly brave creature that went through the qualifications without any hesitation or doubt. Gen. Khalry used to always say "I want to see the ceiling of your horses, the maximum 'plafond'. I also remember the travelling procedures; the five of us used to stay at the federation and rotate shifts to make sure that the faxes arrived in Syria, the telex, the details of the flight, and how we had to build a container for our horses to board the plane...we literally built pallets! They were not available back then! So many details we had to be attentive to in order to make sure we will go to Syria well prepared. When we were finally there, I remember that everything was handled discreetly due to the crunchy relationship between the two countries...we would ride our horse and train somewhere up in the mountains.

During the qualifiers, I remember I knocked two fences which was funny because the course designers built a couple of fences just too near to the arena railings and the crowd which was basically Syrian, as soon as any horse ridden by a non Syrian would come to

approach the fence by the railings, would stand up, shout and raaaaam as if they were hooraying...but actually they were scaring the horses and mine, completely freaked out that day. Given that, my fellow riders and I had to make a decision regarding the team that would compete and I felt that my horse was the most of the delegation's horses that was shaken by the crowd. And so for the benefit of the team and for the name of Egypt, my horse and I did not compete as part of the team; it was a difficult decision at the time.

When I remember, I felt that we had all the heart and preparations that would take us across, but we lacked the refinement and trickery of how to be prepared to do well. Other teams had extremely good Dutch trainers who rode their horses and even prepared them to become sharper day in and day out. There were tricks that we definitely did not hear about such as putting some liniment under the bandage where the horse's leg would be a little bit sensitive and accordingly he would not want to touch any fence to avoid pain. We did not train to do these things, we never even heard of these things; we trained to be brave and to jump as big, wide and difficult courses as possible. But then this was another learning lesson at the time.

I remember the fences were huge! It was the first time for me to jump in front

of a crowd of thousands of people; it was all new and terrifying. We had to do well because this was a new presentation to the Egyptian team. Luckily all went well! Mohamed Elsherbini jumped with 'Madison' and won the individual bronze medal....'Madison' was a very good horse bought by the federation. Omar Mamdouh was also a potential candidate for the gold medal jumping with 'Zay Al Assal'; actually, they were a favourite! Khaled Mohamed Aly had a very brave and sturdy horse 'Ayoub' that jumped his own way, but Khaled was a strong and reliable team member. Hossam Ragab had a very good horse that was owned by the Police Club at the time, although when remembering, the horse was a little bit lame but Hossam was careful and made sure that the horse passed the vet check; he ran along with him himself with a heavy heart until the horse passed. Well, it was a marvellous experience and we made lots of good friends. We also realised that at the end of the day it is probably the Egyptian flag that counts.

Laughing: I also remember that we once went out for dinner with the late Bassel Al Assad. Oh my God, the food was indescribably scrumptious that we over ate and over stuffed our stomachs. Khaled Mohamed Aly could not walk home that day and we all had to help him walk!

Khaled Mohamed Aly
 Stop breaking your horse's stride, especially when you get near the obstacle, if you do you will lose the impulsion of the horse and your horse will jump first and will not take off correctly & will not round his back over the obstacle with the result that he will drop his forelegs on his hind legs with the risk of knocking the obstacle. The last three strides belong to the horse. Please do not interfere and break his last strides and follow his back. Ride to win, and go with God!



▲ Khaled Mohamed Aly & his horse Ayoub

KHALED MOHAMED ALY:

I remember that it was all about challenges before going to Syria! We had no trainers, no vets, no course designers and no transportation. We did everything on our own. Of course I remember the good effort from the federation back then because they bought good horses; 'Madison' was one of them. The two horses that Adham Hammad was supposed to ride were also top horses. Furthermore, the federation was able to sponsor us financially but they lacked technical and technological details; currently horses are very expensive and federations do not have plenty of financial resources.

I remember our training was hard-hitting; I also remember the big courses that Gen. Khairy designed...his concept was to simply "jump big". The scenario of confirming our travelling to Syria was very consuming; I remember very well before travelling, Khaled Assem, his mother and I were running in the middle of the streets of Cairo to reach the Ministry to get our uniforms just one hour before the flight! Khaled's mother, who was a Director of a Travel Agency at the time, called the airport and somehow gave us time for the check in! Upon our arrival to Syria, we still did not know if the horses were coming or not! It was a miracle when they showed up. My fellow riders all rode good horses owned by the federation or the Army and Police Club, or the Ferousia Club, but I was the only and youngest member of the team that had a private brave horse gifted to me by my father who did

not have the ability to invest on a big scale like other establishments. Our horses were the first horses to leave the country since the late days of Gen. Gamal Harris and Gen. Selim Zaki, men who were part of the National Egyptian team participating at the 1960 Olympics.

I also remember that my groom wanted to do a marvellous job and make me happy but surely did not! He bandaged my horse's legs so tightly the horse arrived with four swollen legs! I spent the first three days in Syria with a hose; just splashing cold water on his legs to cool the swelling down.

It was the first time for me to attend and participate at a show with many spectators; it was like a football match! The spectators were not too friendly to riders, however, they shouldn't really be blamed because I am sure it was a whole new experience for them as well. I remember the hardest part whilst riding was approaching the fences close to the arena railings; the crowd would just shout and wham all the time. Still, nothing could have come between us and the medal, even a Pepsi can tossed at us from the crowd...we had the determination to win a medal...and we did.

Personally, the most difficult part at the show was during the second round of the competitions. We were leading during the first round but the second one started to get a little bit out of hand; the crowd was a little aggressive, the horses were

getting tired, and the mysterious preparations that the other teams went through were puzzling. If I had knocked more than two fences down, we wouldn't have won the gold medal. I was just 22 years old and under a lot of pressure! Riding 'Ayoub', a horse that was not too careful but one that can jump big, we were approaching the second fence, a double oxer and we knocked down A and B from the double. And so I had faults...and the team was depending on me to clear the other fences. The moment of pressure release came when I cleared that last fence...and that was it, Egypt won the gold medal. Well, we had an amazing time when I think of it. We were rewarded for our team spirit and mostly for our patience even though when we came back to Egypt, equestrian and Judo were the only sports that received medals and I expected a parade at the airport! I was wearing my medal and I thought the Minister would be waiting for us just like they do with football stars! Having said so and having mentioned that the Syrian crowd was unfriendly during the games, when we won they really cheered for us and were very warm; this was also a rewarding feeling.

Laughing: Khaled Assem loved fresh pistachios; Syria is known to produce amazing nuts. Note that he did not eat the cooked ones, but the fresh ones that by far, one can merely have a handful of! I think the first night he consumed a kilo of fresh ones and for the first two days he was sick in bed.



◀ The faithful groom, Madison & Mohamed Elsherbini

Dr. Mohamed EL Sherbini;
Be Fair to your good horse. Give him a good
Forward Canter. Full of impulsion. Do NOT slow
down before the Obstacles, [Any Obstacle] Remember
the pace is 400 meters per minute. Give your
go at least 450 meters per minute. Give your
horse the ~~speed~~ balanced, Speed and impulsion
necessay to let him clear the obstacle
without Unneces effort. Ride to win, And
Go With God!



MOHAMED ELSHERBINI

The Individual Bronze Medallist:

When I recall, 22 years ago my fellow team partners and myself had the most ambitious target in our horse riding career; winning an international medal for Egypt. No horse left Egypt since the 1960 Olympics when the Egyptian team came in 4th place! My dream was to raise the Egyptian flag in a prestigious event such as the Mediterranean Games or even the Olympics. Thanks to the support of the federation, at that time I had 'Madison', not a big horse but one with a big heart. He was 12 years old at that time and too sensitive in the mouth; I remember I had to prepare a special plan to match with him! Firstly, riding him with a rubber bit and asking him to do what I wanted from him without ordering and secondly, I had to improve his jumping technique since he was jumping too high above the fences without using his neck and back...the thing that worried me the most because such horses usually get tired easily while jumping high fences, especially when getting older. I succeeded in doing such modifications and 'Madison' became my perfect match.

After the team selection, the preparations were very hard. Gen. Khalry believed that "big and high courses were the best teacher." I was also worried that old 'Madison' might not survive such courses, but with the wisely relaxed exercises at home, we

managed. As the team captain, I started to think about the others. We were all very talented and brave riders but without a trainer, a vet, a proper blacksmith, or even an up-to-date course designer, and modern fences before travelling. The courses at the time became very technical...fences were closely related to each other and the poles were lighter (11 kg) and rounded, and the cups were flat while the speed was 400 meters per minute; really...all so challenging! And so, aiming at Syria a week before the competitions, I had to take the working schedule from each rider to deliver them to Gen. Khalifa, Gen. Dakroury, and Gen. Abo Ghazia, nicely asking them not to interfere too much with the riders when training as each of us was a self-trainer in his own way. It was impossible to change or to be asked anything at that time!

In Syria, we had to jump five courses in three days, with two rounds in the individual Grand Prix and two in the Nations Cup. A difference of one pole down kept me from winning the gold medal. That pole was down because of the crowd! Nevertheless, I had received the bronze individual medal; what a moment! The late Bassel Al Assad won the gold medal; I remember...he was a very good rider who had a very good horse and a good trainer. During the two individual rounds, my temperature was 39.5 degrees while competing for the title

but my spirits were very elevated and too strong to be affected by anything; and there was the moment...the Egyptian flag was raised for the first time. The second and most exciting time was when we won the gold medal as a team! The second round of the Nations Cup had the atmosphere of a football match; the crowd went crazy as they wanted Syria to win. The pressure was too much and the horses were distracted, but our determination was stronger and we could have grabbed the gold medal out of a lion's mouth! The national anthem with the Egyptian flag raised highly were in action in a moment that will never be forgotten; it was a great feeling with "one for all and all for one". I will never forget my faithful and very old groom at the time, Abdelaziz El Degheidy, who took ultimate care of 'Madison' who won the first official and precious medals in the Egyptian show jumping history.

Laughing: I remember we spent our first night in Syria in a military hotel (had only one floor!) with only officially dressed soldiers around. I remember we had three meals and those meals were only "white": milk, white cheese, labna, and yoghurt! I called Gen. Khalifa and told him that if they do not move us from this hotel, we would all go on a strike! Hmmm...our request was immediately implemented and we were transferred to a five stars hotel!



Hossam Raghab:
 You have a good horse, powerful and nice
 Trained. He doesn't like to knock obstacle
 Be with him when he jumps from far. I
 Not try to judge distances. Do not interfere
 with your hands, your interference is
 Always wrong. If in doubt, close your
 eyes and push forward, your horse has
 the power to clear the fence even if it
 take off is far from the obstacle
 have confidence. And you will
 Ride to win, and go.

HOSSAM RAGAB:

It was our dream to compete at the Mediterranean Games. I remember that we all froze when we heard we would actually travel.

I insisted on travelling along with the horses to make sure that it was all true, and to also see that the horses made it out in good hands. When we won the gold medal finally, everything fell into place and the dream came true.

I remember that we were all a tad disorganised because we had no trainers, but we all tried our best to encourage each other to try for success. We also mustn't forget the great effort exerted by Eng. Hussein Fahmy who I think was the upholder of our dream; he was the one who travelled to France many times back then in order to make sure that Egypt was clear from the 'South African Disease' and also to make sure to get approval that after nearly 30 years, the Egyptian team can be back to compete in international shows. I thank all those who remember us a team and those who helped in our success. **HT**

From left: Khaled Assem, Mohamed Elsherbini, Omar Mamdouh & Khaled Mohamed Aly

