



The Classic Arabian

Head & Neck

By Khaled Assem
Photos by Dr. Nasr Marei

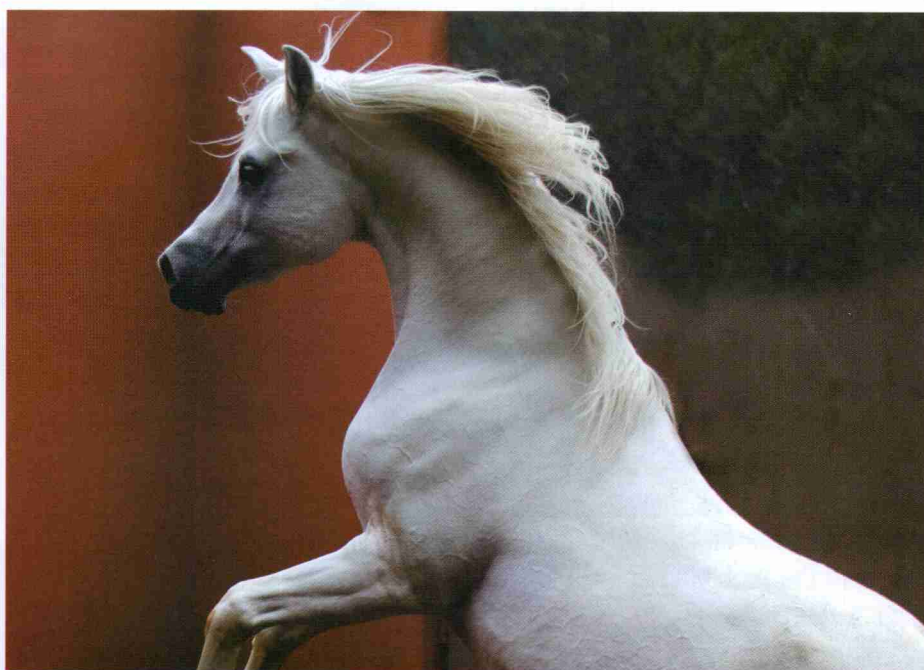
One more time, the briskly charismatic Arabian horse breeder and accredited international judge Dr. Nasr Marei clumps the vibrant, sumptuous beauty and stamina of the Arabian horse. He not only gauges the authoritative guide to a perfect Arabian horse, but also highlights the importance of the breeders' vision. With Type, Movement, and Legs discussed in our two previous series of The Classic Arabian, Dr. Marei focuses on Head & Neck, a peak of the Body, and a tad of selective history.

To my little knowledge I feel that people are so keen to breed a pretty Arabian horse with its dish forehead and think that this is the most beautiful thing about an Arabian. Am I right?

You're right in assuming so and this actually happens quite often, especially with the younger breeders whether in Egypt or abroad. A beautiful head as defined by most Arabian horse experts and breeders has big eyes, small ears, crescent-like jaws, a wide forehead, a dish, a small head, and large nostrils especially if the horse is excited, with a jaw bone that is pronounced and pretty with a very fine throat lash. The definition of the parameters of judging a pretty head is almost universal. The problem in my opinion is that some people put too much emphasis on the head and the neck. The method of judging an Arabian which is popular and mostly used is the 20 point system, and you may see that the head and neck score is given 20% which is a justified one-fifth figure of the total score. Once people who are really keen on heads only see beautiful eyes and heads, they forget about the rest of the horse...which is terrible. It's quite tricky actually because you would see them go nuts over such a horse, forgetting that it lacks proportion, movement, grace and coordination; and I have seen people who buy Arabians just because they have pretty heads. Focusing on just the head is a poor choice because forgetting the rest of the body plus the movement, the owner will end up breeding no horses.

There is another issue involved here as far as head is concerned. If you look at today's head or what has been agreed as the perfect head, and compare it to two generations before, you shall see a huge difference. In other words, if you get the grandparents of the horses that exist today (which

have pretty heads) and put them in a show ring, they will not even get a 15/20 score. But with selection, the input of the breeder, and the vision of what constitutes a perfect head, the consequences may change. When you use a big term such as classical Arabian, you'll really have to go back in time; if we believe that our horses originated in the Arabian Peninsula, you'll find that there are still individual horses in Saudi Arabia and Bahrain that really represent the Bedouin type horse. Once you look at them, you



wouldn't even consider breeding them because they are totally off-type. They have big heads, no dish, small eyes, and croup sidings. If you judge them today, they will score a zero. In poems, they talk about big heads, small eyes, big nostrils, and strong legs. At a later stage, when you look at drawings by famous French or English artists, you'll notice a difference such as the heads being dishier, eyes bigger, and then we as breeders have taken this as the reference in which we breed according to. We are ending it somehow. I prefer what we have today, I wouldn't go for the desert bred Bedouin type, even if those are more original and unspoilt naturally-selected horses.

In the first series of The Classic Arabian, the TYPE of horse was discussed and it was a little vague; from a judging perspective, is judging a pretty HEAD the easiest task as opposed to judging the TYPE?

Many people would confuse head and neck with type. They would see a beautiful head and neck and would think it's a type-y horse. A beautiful head would add to the type, however please note that type is a very different category and many other factors are involved. In contrast, head and neck

should be the easiest category to be judged. Once again, people sometimes judge the horse by head only, when it's a head and neck category. You can have a head that's given a 20/20 point, but the neck would be thick, with a thick throat lash and is given an 18/20 point and you wonder why? A horse can have a short or thick neck, a very heavy throat lash, and a straight or curved neck. All these factors have to be considered when judging the category. Having said that, there is a new trend in which they are re-categorising the whole judging system wherein head would be judged separately from the neck, and whereas the neck would be integrated

into the SHOULDER. And hence the point system would be divided into HEAD (alone), shoulder and neck, body and top line, movement, type etc. This is going to be implemented for the first time in the upcoming Las Vegas World cup where I'll be judging for the first time. The neck itself is a different entity but its relation with the shoulder is very important. Not only from the point of view of correctness and prettiness, but also from the functional and proportional ability of the horse. We know that the angle of the shoulder is very important where free space is given to the legs as to have them animate, bounce and move. I think this new method of judging will be a PLUS eventually.

Using methods such as neck sweaters to enhance or beautify parts of the horse vs. upgrading through selective breeding; what would you recommend having mentioned that the whole concept of breeding is to upgrade the horse?

Sweating the neck down by either artificial means or by exercising will not solve the problem because in this case it would be a genetical factor. Meaning if you have a horse with a heavy throat lash and neck, most probably the offspring would be the same. Even if his neck is sweated down to a beautiful neck that wins shows, when it comes to breeding, the horse will again produce the same kind of horse that he is. You are entitled to use legal methods to upgrade a horse such as neck-sweaters and then display them in shows, but as a breeder you will have to realise that there is a problem; if you continue on breeding this horse, you will be liable to getting some of his offspring with a second generation heavy neck.

From your experience, how many generations does it take to improve upon and stabilise a "requisite" that you would think a horse needs?

It depends on what character you're dealing with. If you want to improve a head, from my experience, I think that the head is the easiest to fix in one to two generations if it's a stallion, provided that you supply the proper mare and visa-versa. Other problems such as legs, croups, and shoulders, may give you some tricky problems. Again the key word is SELECTION like I mentioned in the past; it is the most important added value to a breeder. The breeder has to have an eye to all problems, if not, he will not be able to solve any of them.

Maybe this question is not focused on the head and neck, but a little bit on the body because the head and neck are the keys to the vision of the proportionality in a horse. Are the sizes of the particularly Egyptian Arabians a bit too small? I have seen different breeders here produce remarkably different sizes, from small, medium to a nice-sized horse. Where does that come from? Is it feeding or breeding?

bred type; they are small, agile, can cope with the weather, and they have very fine bones yet very strong ones, and such refined small bodies which are distinctive qualities in the pure Arabian. Though we are still talking about a range of Arabians; the 14 to 16-hand for instance, you are entitled to use these ranges to produce horses that would be considered to be very tidy and very authentic. If I have a 14-hand horse and am keen on making it bigger, then I have to use a big mare to add to the size. Ultimately, the size is really a matter that is up to the breeder to fixate upon; in breeding, I personally am not focused on a specific size. In the show ring, judges do not judge by size, but they judge harmony, balance, the relationship between the length of the neck and the length of the back, etc.

Knowing that for many years in Egypt we presented our horses differently, where and when did Halter shows start?

They started the way we do have



I think its mostly breeding. However, let me say that Arabian horses are generally smaller in size than any other horse. The Egyptian Arabians which we breeders believe are the more classical type, are the more desert

today in the USA. If I go back with my memory during the 40's here in Egypt, there was an annual agricultural fair where my grandfather used to present horses. Back then, it was not a show, but a small presentation; there was

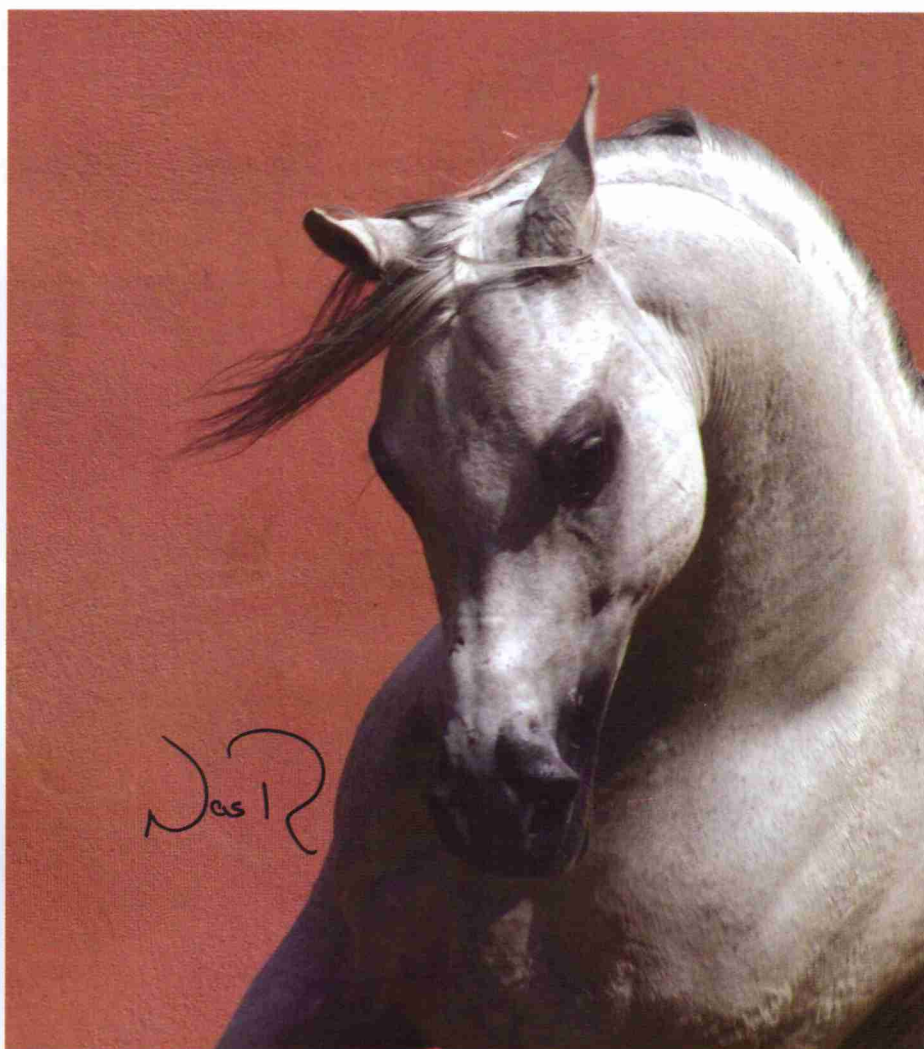
no professional trainer, there was no horse-presenter, the horses were in farm condition and all they did was just stand and trot them for a short period of time. Halter shows go hundreds of years back, but show rings as they stand today were started by the Americans, then the Europeans, and now it's universal.

Some horses respond or may not respond well to the method of presentation in a show ring, does that affect the judging? For example, a horse with so much character but does not respond brilliantly to the presentation, would that represent any inconvenience in judging it?

Horses are like people, some are moody, some are hard to teach, and some have a mind of their own. When it comes to stubborn horses, I don't think they should neither be presented nor even forced to be presented. I have a couple of mares that are knock-outs, but they are simply not interested in being shown...they have no showmanship. These horses are hence pretty and good, but you simply breed them. Not every horse has to be a show horse. A lot of horses may not be very pretty, but are charismatic, have arrogant personalities, have big eyes, and are excited. These are the kind of horses that you put in a show ring, and to fully answer your question, yes of course, this affects the judging. In the category of type in specific, if a horse does not have showmanship, he will score low even if he's pretty.

In regards to what you have mentioned earlier related to the reference of what an Arabian should look like, do you think in the next one hundred years, this reference will change?

Oh definitely. What's happening in the USA and what's happening in Europe and the Middle East? In the 50's, the Americans imported Egyptian Arabians and have taken them miles



ahead of us due to a very intelligent breeding programme. It continued until the late 80's. If you see those horses now, you will see that they are completely different than our type. They have long flat heads and backs because the breeders there selected them for performance riding rather than prettiness and being more classical. Not that ours don't have much functionality, but the American breeders are so affected by American type horses such as the saddle-bred. Meanwhile we stuck to our own type which was originally exported to the USA. We kept it, they changed it.

We also have to consider having our own print in what you turned to as a reference otherwise we won't be needed anymore....

Exactly, you have to keep your identity and your personality. And that's why all the Egyptian breeders here

are dedicated to breeding straight Egyptians. If we start mixing them with Polish Arabians, or any other non-Egyptian, we will lose our identity and will be like anyone else. And in doing so, we will also be one hundred years behind because they have already taken long strides ahead of us, and in order to catch up, it will be quite a difficult task. Egyptian breeders are stuck with what they have whether they like it or not. Out of 250 breeders here, there are maybe two breeders who have bought Polish and Russian Arabians. It is obvious what they are after; winning in the show ring. But like I said, in doing so, they will lose their identity and be like someone else in Europe where they are already way ahead of them. It is an issue but not so serious, nevertheless, we are all against it. **HT**