

LEBANON



RACING FOR CHANGE

Very Special Festivals: the 100 Years Anniversary of the Racetrack in the Heart of the City of Beirut and the Arabian Show on May 14+15



Text and Photos
MONIKA SAVIER
Lay-out:
MARIO BRUNETTI



BREEDING FOR THE FUTURE

The Lebanese Arabian Horse Championship 2016

Horses and Lebanon have been together for thousands of years. Horse breeding was probably introduced into Lebanon by the Greeks, who had been masters in the art of riding for centuries even before Christ was born. It was the Romans, however, who 2000 years ago built the first Hippodrome in Tyr, to the South of Beirut. It is the only Hippodrome that has for the greatest part been preserved up to today. The Romans also built a racetrack within the city, in what is today Wadi Abu Jmil, the Jewish quarter. And finally in 1916, during the time of French colonial rule, today's racetrack in Beirut's "Central Park" was built. During the 1950ies, the Beirut Hippodrome was one of the most renowned and most well-used racetracks in the world. International jetset and world-famous stars from the music and entertainment scenes were at home there. In the 1960ies, there were so many horses pushing for admission that races with good prize money to be earned took place two days a week with up to 20 horses per race. However, the civil war from 1975 to 1990 did not only change the Middle East, but also created a grave crisis for the Beirut Hippodrome.

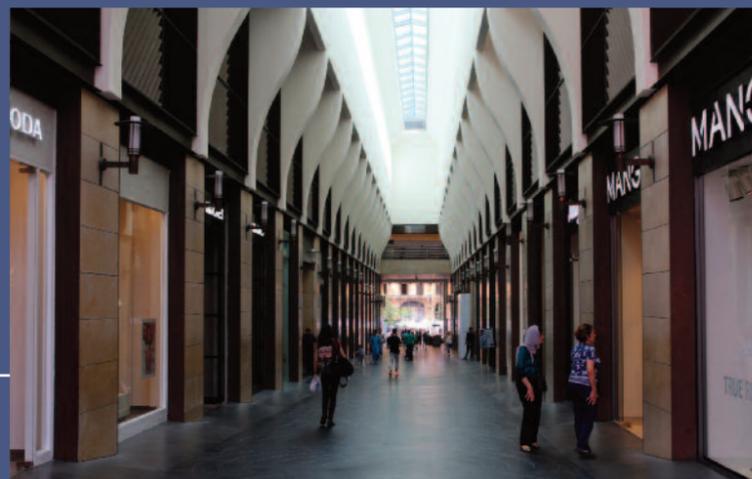


savier

Beirut has long been called the „Paris of the Orient“, a name that is now valid again in a whole number of fields, as it's not only Beirut that is somewhat overshadowed today. Paris bears the cost of her former colonial activities even nowadays – with hardly anybody in Beirut talking about the past, as Beirut citizens are used to defying violence with metropolitan solidarity.

Instead of talking, the people of Beirut will hunt up ever new counter projects against common normality, and they are really good at that. One of these projects was celebrating the 100 year anniversary of the racetrack on the premises, where sports and show Arabians would face spectators together.

After all, it's well known that the inhabitants of Beirut learned, even after the tragedy of a 15-year civil war that reduced great parts of the city to rubble, to celebrate whenever there's an opportunity, and to get creativity and passion out of life no matter what. No wonder, then, that after the war, the city was rebuilt at amazing speed and today there are flourishing scenes for culture, the arts, and music, with their range and importance surpassing that of any other Arabian country. All of these are aspects that make this city so adorable and attractive – particularly as the inhabitants of Beirut somehow succeeded in imbuing the modern, newly built parts of their city with the soul of Lebanon. Beirut is a city that looks like the modern Diversity Management that created the new quarters, making room for a whole number of different churches and mosques, but also for many cafés and restaurants – and for creative start-ups, for a new party culture, for music, and for graffiti.



The graffiti in Beirut have made history, in their way. They are one method for young people to take over some public space, to take part in political debates by way of their art form. The city government welcomes this kind of activity, with an emphasis. However, just an hour by car away in Syria, things are different. When students, animated by the famous graffiti of Beirut, translated their protests against their government into their own form of street art, they were arrested. No culture of toleration there, and when their fellow students demonstrated their disagreement and demanded freedom for them, the Syrian civil war was set into motion.

THE COMMON CAUSE: ARABIAN HORSES

However, there are things that Syria and the Lebanon have in common, and one of them is their re-discovery of Arabian horses. Until 150 years ago, the horse markets of Beirut, Aleppo, and Damascus were the gateways to the authentic Arabian horse breeding of the Bedouins from the greater area of Syria and the Nejd. These markets were the places where many of the purchasing expeditions of the European royal houses started their search for suitable breeding stock for improving their domestic cavalry horses.

Horse racing was a much-coveted way of testing horse performance even then, so it's no wonder that a hundred years later, during the first half of the 20th century, the racetrack located right in the green heart of Beirut was so wildly popular with city people that still remembered their Bedouin and desert background. Later on, during the civil war, it was also highly popular, but with an entirely different group of people. This time, it was soldiers that were united in their admiration for Arabic horses. During the civil war, Beirut was divided into an Eastern and a Western part by the ill-famed *green line* that centered on the 40 hectares of the racetrack and a pine forest, the *Horsh Beirut*. The racetrack still worked with hundreds of horses at that time, tended and trained by people of different religions and cultural origins. This multicultural melting-pot was now wedged in between the Israeli and Palestinian war parties and depended on their goodwill for supplies. Many of the talks and meetings that were held between the combatants took place right in the middle of the city, on the racetrack, that small green world of the horses that were loved by both sides. There came the day when there was no more feed for the horses – and the miracle happened: Arafat ordered a ceasefire for his Palestinian PLO guerilla force, and when he called Israeli prime minister Begin to tell him that the horses were in need, Begin followed suit, ordered Sharon to cease fire, and feed for the horses could be brought in.

Today, about 1.5 million war refugees from Syria live in Lebanon. Some of them brought their Arabian horses with them in order to save them from the war. Additionally, some other breeders out of Damascus, stables that have not yet been threatened by the war, have enrolled their WAHO-registered Arabian horses for the Beirut races for the first time.



THE EVENT AND THE PEOPLE BEHIND IT

So once again, the racetrack united different cultures and peoples. One of the reasons for this success is Nabil Nasrallah, for 40 years now director of the Hippodrome. For long years, he has invested considerable effort by working for international recognition of the racetrack. With this year's race, the first race open to "Lebanon Arabians" that are not WAHO-registered as well as to the international Purebred Arabian scene with their WAHO-registered stock, his dream has become a reality. The WAHO-registered Arabians are back on the Beirut race track! The historic racing day took place on May 14th as part of the 100 year anniversary celebration. When last year, young Beirut Arabian horse breeder Danny Ghosn and the *Lebanese Arabian Horse Organisation* had organized the first and impressive Arabian Horse Show on the premises of the racetrack, one of the VIPs attending the event with great interest was Beirut's mayor, judge Ziad Chbib. The event was totally convincing for him, as it had aptly demonstrated the positive and connective force that radiates from Arabian horses. Breeders flocked to the show with their horses, and there was a wildly enthusiastic audience throughout. The show served to underline the multicultural influence and the new role that the historic park of Beirut plays, and this demonstration was to be topped this year. So this year's highly successful event combined a horse show on the racetrack, the 2nd Lebanese Arabian Horse Championships, with a day of horse races, and it came to be because of the cooperative team play of Nabil Nasrallah and Danny Ghosn, both of whom were supported by the mayor himself. With this background to the event, in addition to the fact that in 2016, Beirut celebrated the 100 year anniversary of the Hippodrome, it is not surprising that the show weekend became a highlight in the Beirut event calendar and a great success with all fans of Arabian horses. The 2nd Lebanese Arabian Horse Championships took place under the umbrella of AHO, the *Arabian Horse Organization*. The great event was a challenge for Lebanon, but at the same time a great opportunity, as the championships attracted the attention of the world-wide Arabian scene. The Lebanese Arabian Horse Organization was proud to present the results of their incessant commitment for Arabian horse breeding and showing in Lebanon. On the occasion of the show and racing weekend, a gala dinner was hosted for the people actively engaged in the workings of the racetrack and the show, as well as for politicians.



PEOPLE



THE LEBANESE ARABIAN HORSE CHAMPIONSHIP 2016

Encouraged by the positive experiences with last year's event, there were ten classes offered for this year's National Championships. 62 horses were enrolled. The organization team headed by Danny Ghosn was supported by the *Arabian Horse Organisation*. Acting judges were Richard Philstrom (France), Adberrazzak Hmidani (Morocco), and Mohamed Zegloul (Egypt). Only WAHO-registered horses were eligible. In the mare and stallion classes, part of the horses had been imported, but the other half were bred in Lebanon as products of high performance breeding. The foals, on the other hand, had mainly been born in Lebanon, even if many of them were descendants of international show champions. So for example, the filly class was won by an EKS Alihandro daughter, and the colt to win the championships in his class was a son of Abha Qatar who was placed in front of a Kahil Al Shaqab descendant. So, importing frozen semen into Lebanon seems to be working well. For both days, the event attracted a large and highly passionate audience. Danny Ghosn explains the reasons for that:

"We have been working for putting up an Arabian Horse show here since 2013. However, there was political tension and war all around us, so people had different priorities in their lives and it was just not the right moment in time for Beirut. Finally, however, it was not even very complicated to organize a show in cooperation with the director of the racetrack and working together with AHO. This experience enabled us to learn about the enthusiasm that our country's Arabian fans put up. We envision a great future for shows and for breeding show horses in addition to the race horses. The breeders now get the opportunity to present their horses to international judges. I wish for Beirut, this city of contrasts and pluralism that can look across the Mediterranean, to become a meeting point, a gateway connecting breeders from Europe and the Middle East."

It is well possible that this is a prospect and perspective for Beirut. As of recently, horses can be imported into and exported from Beirut again, which means the Beirut show might go international. This, in turn, means there might be a market that does not just resort to importing, but makes it possible to present the results of Lebanon's breeders on shows in the Middle East.



THE CHAMPIONS

In the filly championships, the winner was AJ ADINA (EKS Alihandro x AJ Ambers Ajman) owned by Samjad Stud, in front of SERENA (Om El Shahamaan x Splendida) of Ammar Shmele, and AJ EJRESSA (Vervaldee x Ejrene) owned by Adnan Mazloun.

In the colt championships, the winner was QAYSSAR EI SULTAN (Abha Qatar x La Viva Versace) of Abdul Kader Dargham, in front of his stablemate Shab El Sultan (Kahil A Shaqab x Vxsyn Ia). Bronze was awarded to MAJD AL AMIN (Aabis Al Amin x Halifa B) born and bred by Mohamad Al Amin.

In the mare championships, the winner was CELINE (Black Kamir x DP Black Sheeniah) of Maher Hammoud. Silver was awarded to her stablemate RAGHAD (Emfaytikt x TM Cz-tanooga). Bronze went to TM LEGYIA (Lissar x TM Laguna) of Adnan Mazloun.

In the stallion championships, the winner was FF FALCOS PSYG-NATURER (Falcon BHF x Bay Oaks) owned by Mohamad Ouraibi. Silver was awarded to PHANTOM DA (Escape Ibn Navarrone x La Viva Versace) of Abdul Kader Dargham, and Bronze went to TM WALERIAN (Lissar x TM Walijka) of Talal Al Akli.



THE RACES

After the last champion title of the show had been awarded, spectators and organizers all swarmed from the showing arena inside the racetrack to the stands along the outer rims of the track, ready for the races. The grandstand was packed full of spectators. Not only men are enthusiastic racing fans in Beirut – there were women and many young people there as well, all passionately watching, commenting and cheering the horse presentations and, of course, the races. Betting is of great importance here. But even without that, there is nothing that compares to that fascination gripping a whole racetrack when the breathless silence is gradually replaced by that faraway rumbling created by the horses' hooves when they draw ever nearer at their gallop. The ground starts to tremble, and on the stands along the track, people start to go crazy. Men and women alike will yell almost hysterically, an ever-increasing staccato, particularly when the running-in for the home stretch is somewhat crowded and the winner presses through only during the last hundred meters. It's a unique atmosphere. These are the moments when all spectators are equal, all connected emotionally by their common passion for the key players of the track, the horses. Even if that state does not last long, there is still that feeling that on the racetrack, people are connected by some mysterious bond.

On this weekend in May, Saturday evening saw „Lebanon Arabians“ racing for money and honors just like they do every Saturday. These are horses of Syrian-Lebanon breeding in the hinterland, Arabian „oriental“ performance horses that have not been registered with WAHO for the most different reasons. For generations, they have been selected by local breeders and built up for the racetrack.

After that, a race open for WAHO-registered Arabian horses only was held, with the winner receiving prize money and the WAHO trophy. The mayor of Beirut, judge Ziad Chbib, was present together with representatives of the Ministry of Agriculture, to hand the trophy to the winner from Syria. But it was Nabil Nasrallah, director of the racetrack and the registrar of WAHO for Lebanon, who had succeeded in getting a WAHO race organized in the first place. After that race, there was a decision to have Purebred Arabian races in Beirut regularly from now on. Right now there is still a lack of Purebred Arabians coming to the racetrack and taking part in the training activities there, but it is hoped this problem can be solved. The aim is to have the racetrack tie in with and live up to old traditions so it can be a platform where Arabian Purebred horses can be presented to the large audiences they deserve.



From left: Mr. Sami Wardi and his daughter with the WAHO Trophy, Dr. Mohammed Machmoum (AHO) and Mr. Danny Ghosn (Lebanese Arabian Horse Organization).



From left: Mr. Nabil Nasrallah, Director of the Hippodrome of Beirut, the Governor Judge Ziad Chbib, the Arabian horse "Angel" with Jockey and Mr. Sami Wardi, the happy owner from Lebanon.



A BREEDERS' CLINIC

The night before the show, owners, breeders and handlers were entitled to take part in a workshop on showing organized by AHO on the premises of the racetrack. The clinic was intended to convey and discuss some more know-how on handling and presenting show horses as well as on the criteria for judging. As a speaker, veterinary doctor Mohamed Machmoum from Morocco had come in to give a very interesting slide show.

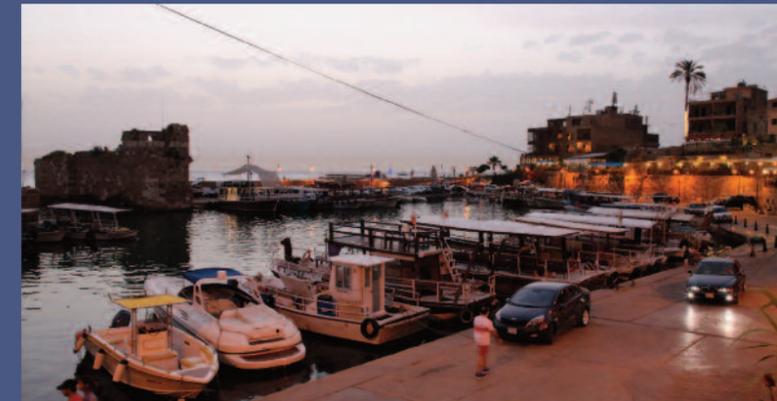
THE STABLES' WORLD ON THE RACETRACK

Nabil Nasrallah took us on a tour of the stable complex on the racetrack. The marks that the war left are still painfully obvious. There are almost 400 horses living there today, cared for with tender loving care by their grooms, owners, and trainers. We saw fresh fruit brought from the market for the horses, a cooling fan in front of a box stall against the heat, old bathtubs with barley soaking in them in every aisle of the stable. And of course, everywhere there was a most friendly welcome for the European guests. Next year, we really ought to be more guests, as Beirut is definitely worth a good long visit!



BYBLOS

Byblos is a small town on the sea coast about 30 km north of Beirut and is a very special place. The town has been in existence for 7,000 years, making it a contender for the world's oldest continuously inhabited town. Phoenicians, Romans, Greeks, crusaders – all of them inhabited Byblos at one time and left their temples, churches, and mosques there in addition to a scenic ancient port. And for the visitors of today, it's where you find the best fish restaurants along the ocean.



**VISITING A LEBANESE BREEDER:
DG ARABIANS**

The day after the show, we had the opportunity to visit DG ARABIANS stud. Small but mighty is a fitting description. Located on a hill a few hundred meters above Beirut and offering a beautiful view of the ocean and the city, DG Arabians stud was terraced into the hillside. Gigantic walls of natural stone protect the premises which are made up of several aisles with box stalls and roomy paddocks. Fruit and palm trees, a guesthouse, and grandfather's organic kitchen garden round out the complex. The owner is Danny Ghosn, a key player for new, modern Arabian horse breeding in Lebanon. He spent many years of his life and his education in the US. His first stallion was the typey grey Ammar Al Mohamdia (Farres x LF Starzafire by Thee Desperado) born in 2010, a Straight Egyptian of the Hadban Enzahi strain. The first Straight Egyptian filly he acquired for the stud was TB Hilal (Nil del Guado x TB Hasna), born in 2013 and now in foal to Ammar Al Mohamadia. She is a mare tailing to the OBEYAN UM JURAYS line which has always been a symbol of elegance and refinement. In addition to these two Straight Egyptians, Danny Ghosn imported two more typey mares and an impressive colt as a foundation for building up his show section. As the co-organizer of the show, Danny Ghosn was fair enough to refrain from having his horses take part in the show. Still, they absolutely need to be taken into account for future show horse breeding in Lebanon, as *blood will tell*.



DG ANTAR (Fadi Al Shaqab x Alisha Bint Bengali)



AMMAR AL MOHAMDIA (Farres x LF Starzafire by Thee Desperado), born in 2010



TB HILAL (Nil del Guado x TB Hasna), straight Egyptian mare, Obayyan Om Juray strain, born in 2013. She is in foal to Ammar Al Mohamadia.



MAHITY JOLLY (WH Justice x Mahity El Jamaal), born in 2103. She represents the type, charisma and bold character of the Arabian horse.



ALISHA BINT BENGALI (FS Bengali x Aida V), born in 2006, in foal to Fadi Al Shaqab. This Arabian mare tails from Russian lines and displays a solid conformation combined with type.



AJ NADER (AJ Mardan x AJ Noor Kwestura), yearling colt