



Al Rayyan Farm

B ehind the Screen of a Successful B reeding Program

Portraying Bart Van Buggenhout, Al Rayyan Farm, Doha, Qatar

by Monika Savier ■ photos by Gigi Grasso, Monika Savier, Rik van Lent Jr.

Al Rayyan Stud in August, 2008: it's 45 degrees centigrade in the shade, the hot air shimmers, dust makes it appear yellowish. The horses rest in their boxes or shaded paddocks. Energy savers by instinct, they just wait for the night hours to give in to their passion for running. You get an inkling of what the ancestors of these noble horses had to go through in their desert days. Why there was something like natural selection with only the strongest animals surviving and thus shaping the appearance of this breed.

Due to the climate, the coordination of nutrition and exercise of the horses, so necessary for survival, cannot but pose a problem.

"I've worked on that and found a solution" Bart said, not entirely without pride. He opened the door into a greenhouse, and right in the middle of the hot and dusty city of Doha, there was a small green oasis presented to me, concentrated into just thirty-two square metres.

"What is it you are doing here?" "I sow barley that will germinate and grow into a green carpet within 7 days. All of the horses get a strip of that twice every day, about 6 kg in total. Since I've been doing that we have had almost none of those notorious constipation colic's, nor sand colic's. It's inevitable that you risk getting them if you turn the horses out



photo: Gigi Grasso



photo: Gigi Grasso



photo: Gigi Grasso

in this climate and in sand paddocks. The conditions for the horses have changed partially for the better but we can't change the climate. This "barley grass" is not only fresh and rich in vitamins, but also contains oils which distinctly help their digestion."

Bart tells me a lot of interesting details on horse nutrition based on scientific background; I can see clearly that he is not only a stud manager working in his job! Bart Van Buggenhout lives Al Rayyan Farm; he identifies with it and has taken up the challenges under the crescent moon. With creativity and a sound scientific background, he turns his ideas of innovative stud management into reality. He is a modern-day type, somebody who is not afraid of technological challenges.

The kind of responsibility he shows for the horses in Al Rayyan Farm is coupled with his loyalty for his „boss“: Sheikh Abdul Aziz Bin Khaled Al Thani. Over the years many of you who know Bart will confirm it, Al Rayyan

Farm is Bart's family, his social context, the place where he tries to make the connection between his life and job experiences of the West and the realities and challenges of the Arabian East.

The horses and their offspring are of an international unique gene pool, the management has been in his hands for ten years now. In those ten years Bart was able to make a crucial contribution – certainly due to the trust and free hand he has been given by Sheikh Abdul Aziz. The challenges for Bart are to maintain and secure the quality of the horses in direct connection with those sensitive areas: reproduction and nutrition.

The greenhouse, a modern breeding facility (incl. an embryo transfer set up), vaccinations, worming, feeding and supplementing in accordance with the extreme climate, all combined with the right exercise programme – that's what makes the horses at Al Rayyan Farm peak at their best. The intricate breeding strategies developed by Sheikh

photo: Monika Savič



Doha

photo: Monika Savič



Museum of Islamic Art

photo: Monika Savič



Doha, Downtown

photo: Monika Savič



Le Corniche



Al Rayyan Farm



photo: Rik van Lent



photo: Rik van Lent



photo: Gijl Grasso

Abdul Aziz are carefully implemented by Bart. „Learning by doing” is his motto but he does not want to loose time with trial and error. He looks for answers to complex problems and is not above hiring professional advisers and coaches in order to reach his goal, as he feels that the success in the farm or the lack of it are his responsibility only!

However, Bart also knows that he cannot make it all alone. The pressure is enormous as Al Rayyan Farm is a role model for many breeders and horse owners in the Gulf and beyond. There are always critics on the search for mistakes!

Bart’s greatest supporter is, unquestionably, his „boss” Sheikh Abdul Aziz. Then there are the people who work for Bart and are not to be forgotten. Bart has an antenna for how to interact with his staff of 20: one person for every six horses besides assistants in the lab and training barn, and in addition two night watch men and a series of cleaners and drivers, last but not least a great secretary named Mohammed. Most of them are from India, they are migrants who could not but leave their homes for a better life to be made abroad. But today at Al Rayyan they are no longer anonymous; their faces have names on the noble web-

site of Al Rayyan Stud just like those of the “boss” and their manager.

“Bart, how is living in Qatar for a European? Is there something like a network of friendships between the Europeans, Asians and other races, or do you feel integrated into the Qatari society?”

I asked him while we were having a croissant fresh from the oven and a coffee in a small Belgian bakery he had invited me into.

“There are a lot of adventurers coming here trying to make their fortune, most of them don’t leave tracks! But there are some like me that are here to try and build something up. With some of those I have friendships, partly they are the Westerners working in other studs and another group has been here for years as expatriates in all kinds of businesses and jobs. Sometimes I meet with them for a barbecue or dinner party, we give each other advice and support or a helping hand when needed.

There is however a second more mixed network of social contacts. That one consists of some hand-picked Westerners, Qataris and other Gulf Nationals.

In this context, I am the representative of Al Rayyan Stud and of Sheikh Abdul Aziz. It's mostly about image and public impression. In this circle, the friendship is entirely based on trust. It takes a long time to feel really accepted, you need to earn your place and be careful how you deal with it. I was not born into this kind of circle and had to learn my lessons."

"How would you describe your job, in conclusion?" "I have been here for many years to support my boss in letting his dream become reality. Originally, I had been employed as a show trainer. Over time I grew into other functions needed at the farm more than training and showing horses. But I also looked for new challenges for myself. Usually, it took two to three years for an innovation to be well established and to work out really well. That's how it was with producing the grass, next came artificial insemination, and finally embryo transfer. But some other things are all ready on schedule!"

"I am surprised Sheikh Abdul Aziz gave his consent for embryo transfer." -

"You are right, it took me a long time to convince him and we still do not use the method generally. However, with the old mares such as Ansata Sharifa and Ansata Majesta, it makes sense to spare them from the stress of pregnancies they do not keep."

*We climb aboard his small sports car and slowly travel along **The Corniche**, the bay of Doha that stretches for 8 km, passing the old harbour and stopping in front of the new **Museum of Islamic Art**. A fascinating construction, modern, functional and still connected to the ancient traditions of Bedouin building. Erected on an artificial peninsula, the museum is a product of innovative technologies proudly announcing: Nothing is impossible here in Qatar.*

When we pass the old Souq with its array of shops and

stalls, I ask Bart, "do the Qataris still buy horses in Europe?"

"If somebody owns a beautiful horse with the right kind of pedigree, it will have a market here at once. But there are not so many of them and the good straight Egyptian horses in Europe and beyond are few and far between and those left are not always for sale and rightfully so! But a question for you to answer: You have seen many horses in Qatar by now, do you feel this country is still in great need of rising their quality? Admit that our horses have reached a high standard and that's only talking about Qatar, there are other Gulf countries like Kuwait that have a superb Straight Egyptian horse programme as well. Further I feel that if the owners of the farms here in Qatar or Kuwait (other GCC countries will soon follow as well) stay focussed and their managers stay on the job: we are only at first level, lots more to be done and possibilities to be reached. The good thing here is that once a horse is owned by somebody he will really give it time and will try it out all the way, in this way several new families came to exist."

The small white sports car draws away from the coastline, slowly cruising through the downtown of Doha, a gigantic construction site of superlatives. Most of the skyscrapers are still in the steel skeleton stage. Just like so many ants, construction workers from all over the world climb around at dazzling heights, welding and tightening screws day and night.

"Let's just assume you are right and by now it's the gulf area, with Qatar playing an important role that has some of the best straight Egyptian horses. I would like to know: how did that happen? Just apart from the fact that when you bought all those horses in Europe and in the US or Egypt 10 to 15 years ago, money was usually not an issue? And another thing: what are your criteria for quality?"



Bart in the Greenhouse



The Mares Stables



Al Rayyan Farm Stuff



Al Rayyan Farm



photo: Monika Szyver



photo: Monika Szyver

"I can only speak for Al Rayyan Farm. At first indeed maybe money was not the important issue although Sh. Abdul Aziz had one major advantage when he first started to buy his horses: America was in a crisis, many major stud farms went bankrupt or had to sell out, Europe was suffering from that crisis as much as Egypt did, so it was a great time to start. In total Sh. Abdul Aziz bought and imported almost 150 horses over the years. He already had a good number of horses before he started to realise the route in breeding he wanted to take, meaning he changed again many of whom he had bought first. Finally his eye fell at Dr. Nagel's stud at the Ansata Halim Shah daughters. The consistency they had and the type they showed were exactly what he was dreaming of. He bought some at Dr. Nagel's: Aisha and Amar and also one by Jamil – Ameena. All of these mares were from the Obeyyan line tailing back to Hanan. Then he travelled to the US and visited Ansata Halim Shah for real and he was all he had hoped to see and even more. He fell in love and bought mares at Ansata as well, Ansata Sharifa, Ansata Majesta, Ansata Selket . . . Over the years the farm grew with more imports mostly by Ansata and from Dr. Nagel. He found a way to make his own nick between the Obeyyan from Dr. Nagel and the do-

minant Dahman strain through Bukra and Farida from Ansata. The first real success was placing Safir (Sala El dine x Aisha) on the Ansata mares, Ashhal Al Rayyan being the most important product of this combination and now chief sire at Al Rayyan."

"How is the cooperation with other studs here in Qatar?"

"In Qatar most of the farms are run by professionals specialised in one of the three fields Arabian horses are being used for nowadays. So we have Racing, Endurance and Show farms. In Qatar there are some of the world's finest short distance breeding programmes, there is no way a show horse would beat them but from the other side there is no way they would beat a show horse in the show ring. Maybe it's a shame that we lost this versatile ability of the Arabian horse but such is professionalism and the draw to be the best in something, it can't be stopped, it's totally the human competitiveness. But yes we all have a good relationship with each other, exchanging medication, materials, or experience with each other when needed. We joke and I make compliments for the good legs they have, while when they visit us, they praise the heads and the necks..." (laughs).

Arrived back at the stud, we walk through the barns. All of the mares have spacious stalls with the separations only halfway up to enable direct communication between each other. Bart stops by RN Farida, greeting her gently. When he walks on, she looks after him for quite some time.

“How did you allot jobs within this project?”

“Sheikh Abdul Aziz has the instinct for breeding. There is hardly anybody else who convinces me, as a breeder, as much as he does. He plans his production down to the smallest details. He tries to find his horses’ big points and get rid of the weak spots right across the generations. I’m not trying to say that he never made mistakes, he did but he also did learn from them! So did I. There were times when I urged him to sell a horse in order to make room and later on we missed that one sorely in the breeding programme. That brings me to the role I play, I am his facilitator, the one who deals with everything: the veterinary stuff, stud management, human resources management, public relations, and sales.”

Outside, the sun is slowly going down. The noise from the street filters through the outside border and tree line right across the riding arena where the horses are soon to be presented. Al Rayyan, once built on the edges of the desert in the suburb of Al Rayyan, has meanwhile been swallowed up by the houses and streets of the metropolis of Doha. However, Sheikh Abdul Aziz loves his place. His family lives just a stone’s throw away and that enables him, being a family person as Bart assures me, to easily walk across his life’s work spanning the horses, the mosque and the family.

In comfortable armchairs, slightly raised to keep the arena walls from hindering the view, we sit with cool beverages at hand and have the most beautiful ones of the beautiful ones skilfully presented to us.

“Do you attend shows with the horses?”

“No, that’s something we haven’t done any more the last few years. We tend to arrange our own shows and events here. That way, we can by-pass rules and judging systems. There is a lot of “politics” in the air. The pressure on the horses during shows has gotten quite extreme. It’s better for the horses and us to stay at home, we still have our fun with them and organise events for Sheikh Abdul Aziz’s friends and visitors. Besides, I simply do not feel it’s the time for doing it, and as for advertisement, there is no advantage as well, because as a breeder you build a name and reputation and your sales depend on that, not on a show win. When people come here to buy a horse they know exactly what they want and none of them is going to a show! Frankly if we feel we have a client who is more inclined to shows than to breeding and preserving, then we will not sell him anything and advise him to go elsewhere were he finds a more suitable horse and advice.”

While Bart was saying that, there was Ashhal Al Rayyan in the ring enchanting us. He jumped high with all four hooves in the air; taking up the swinging rhythm of his trot immediately afterwards. It was easy to see he wanted to play with his handler. I was fascinated with his type and elegance. I had seen him seven years before, at Dr Nagel’s Katharinenhof, who had him on lease at that time. Meanwhile, the stallion has matured and has an even more refined face. His beautiful eyes were impressive.

The next morning, we had agreed to meet at Bart’s home. His flat with a friendly, slightly fattish dog (a Scottie), had a comfortable flair about it. Photographs on the wall of friends, horses and his family testify to the fact that Bart is a “family person” too, having that in common with Sheikh Abdul Aziz.

photo: Monika Savier



Sheikh Abdul Aziz

photo: Monika Savier



Private Night Show with Sheikh Mishal

photo: Monika Savier



Sheikh Abdul Aziz with Ahhal Al Rayyan



Al Rayyan Farm



photo: Rik van Lier



photo: Gigi Grasso



photo: Gigi Grasso

“The time here has changed you a lot, I remember when you were a successful handler showing horses in Aachen and Paris. How did you get involved with Arabian horses in the first place?”

“When I was a child in Belgium, I went pony riding and later got some riding instruction for dressage. When I was fourteen, I came to know Christine Jamar and her Arabian horses, my life changed that day instantly. I turned into a road that has sailed its way through the Arabian horse industry. I left school and started my own training centre; later on with a partner (Mr. Oostervink), we called it Arminta Farm. I started travelling and showed horses all around the globe. It was exciting but also tiring and stressful. Dealing with the horses was one thing, but all the different customers were too much. I'm quite a perfectionist and I like to make people happy but you can't serve an endless row of kings! Besides, I was too young and lacked experience with financial management. It was a good thing I stopped Arminta. I don't have any regrets and am very happy with the experiences learned. I remember showing all these great horses like Ansata Sinan, Victoria, Abbas Pasha I-12, Orayan, G. Tamim... it's great, I kept a won-

derful album. In the end one more thing occurred to me and made it not satisfactory anymore for me to keep showing. You know what I thought the day after I won Aachen, European, World Champion, or any other title? My only thought was of which horse I would try to win with next year! Now I did not want that question to be the most important question in my life, as a trainer you depend on it because it's with that question you make your living and keep up your image. I can understand the people who do, it's a kick, a short one but mostly a good one to win, but it's not my kind of kick! I think I found myself as a stable manager, although I still have other ambitions too!

Meanwhile I fell seriously in love with the Straight Egyptian horse, and here on the Gulf there are still lots that can be done for it, with breeding, with management, with promotion, ...

I'm working as we speak on the first GCC reference book for the SE Arabian here in the Gulf. So far I have had great participation from Qatar, Kuwait, Bahrain, Saudi Arabia and the UAE. Only a few breeders are missing, I hope to add them soon.



photo: Gigi Gnasco



photo: Gigi Gnasco



photo: Gigi Gnasco

Besides that I started, in my private time, a company named ASEEL. The company is set up in two ways: one is consultancy, the other is projects. I'm not doing it alone, I just play a role in it. We are a group of professionals (some equine experts, some engineers, some technicians) advising on projects related to horse facilities. With Aseel concepts we started the production of stables – box stalls in one the world's finest steel factories owned by the SBL group.

Then on the other hand I have advised, over the last few years, several breeders and horse owners within the Arabian Peninsula on which horses to buy, how to put a group together that can make a nice breeding programme, and how to go on with breeding. I follow up this work with making the purchase, organising transport and advising in the care of the horse back at home. I also assist in finding the right staff for those new stables and programmes.”

“Within Qatar I feel that you have a positive influence towards your colleagues and the other farms, what are your visions on that?”

“The strongest point the Qataris have, and even the Kuwaitis do it that way, is that even if they are competitors at a show, they are glad for each others' success. We help each other, and we share out stallions, at no cost or breeding fee. This gives each owner the chance to use whatever stallion he feels fits his mare best. This is not just good for the owner but in the end it helps the breed! Al Rayyans stallions are open and free to use for anybody who has his mare in Qatar”.

In addition, besides Al Rayyan Farm, I do most of the breeding and insemination and follow up work for Al Waab Stud (owned by Sh. Abdul Aziz's brother, Sh. Abdullah), Aseyl Al Aliah (owned by Sh. Meshaal Bin Eissa Al Thani) and some other smaller breeders. In total,

I think we finish around 50 mares each year without calculating the Embryo Transfer and outside breeding to the other farms, which amounted to another well over 50 in the past season. Doing all that, yes of course it's a positive influence!”

“Where is Al Rayyan Stud heading? “

“I think my boss would like to reduce the number of horses in order to reduce the work load and expenses! Besides, he is not the man who wants to be in the spotlight. He has never accepted a trophy in person in recent years; he simply does not care much for that, neither for winning. I on the other hand would still like to increase the production in order to get our own “Rayyan Look”. Let Sh. Abdul Aziz make the breeding decisions and in turn I'll do my best to turn them into reality. At the same time I can get the farm better developed, some changes and improvements will be made again this year and plans for a new mare and stallion barn with a semen freezing set up attached to it are being developed. For the not-so-immediate future I do not think we can keep all our horses here, I feel we will need to be thinking of a support farm set up outside of Doha with more space and possibilities. Step by step, as he has let me do in the past ten years, he will let me work and develop this as long as he feels I have him, and more importantly: his horses at heart.” □



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