

Gen. MOHAMED SELIM ZAKI

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Thinking about who to interview on 'funding and elevating the equestrian sport in Egypt', we started putting some guidelines that could help us choose the interviewee. We wanted someone who is conversant from the business perspective, has remarkable contributions to the equestrian sports in Egypt, and has an outstanding history in horse back riding field. General Mohamed Selim Zaki was the first person that came up to our minds.

Fate had a great role in what General Selim Zaki achieved in the equestrian sport. As a child, his great passion was for flying as well as tennis and squash. However, his father, a keen rider, pushed him to ride when he was a teenager. At the age of 18, Gen. Selim Zaki decided to join the Military University; but fate played its role again and the cavalry forces soon notified him that he would be transferred to the mounted cavalry force. In spite of the years he passed in riding before joining the military academy and after the training he had and the courses he passed in the cavalry regime, the arrival of Colonel Pierre La Farg, French trainer, was the turning point in Gen. Selim Zaki's riding career, as it made him start understanding, feeling and enjoying riding more. One of the greatest achievements in his riding career was winning first place in the Irish challenge cup competition in 1954 and 1956; he also participated in a lot of competitions in Rome, Italy, and Lucern Switzerland. Today Gen. Selim Zaki still enjoys riding everyday and is an inspiration to all of the riders in the field.

Our editor in chief, Khaled Assem, went to interview Gen. Selim Zaki and instead of coming back to us with an interview, he came back with a very stirring debate that brought up a lot of suggestions and ideas on how to improve the equestrian sports in Egypt. Since they both have the same passion for the sport, they were both very enthusiastic to the extent that they made us doubt by the middle of the interview who is the interviewer and who is the interviewee! The discussion went as follows:

HORSE Times (HT): Can we first start by dividing the issue into two parts, firstly the investment in the horse, secondly the investment in the rider? And please allow me to start this interview by talking about the role of producing and refining the rider.

Gen. Mohamed Selim Zaki (MSZ): To talk about a sport like horse back riding, it is a special case. First as a sport it does not depend only on the rider, it also depends on a very sensitive animal, so it needs a special kind of human being... not everyone could do it. This human being should be raised in an enlightened society so as to be able to deal with animals, with love that comes right from the heart so as to reach anywhere in this sport.

Talking about Show Jumping, both the rider and the horse should have intensive training together, to make them both act as one. If we looked at the history of the equestrian sports all over the world; for example in Russia they have some very good dressage riders and horse breeds but they don't have a history in show jumping. This sport needs a certain quality of riders with physical fitness and capability of taking decisions in a fraction of a second.

HT: In our last issue we had an interview with Dr. Ahmed Shawki, in which he had an opinion stating that to further develop the equestrian sports, the Egyptian Equestrian Federation should increase the number of riders as this would eventually increase funding for the sport, but in your opinion we should choose the rider's caliber to be the best?

MSZ: I agree with the opinion stated by Dr. Ahmed where out of these larger number of riders, who would definitely add to the funding of the sport, we select the category of enlightened, sensitive riders that we are looking for and then we invest further in those selected ones, in terms of technical training and positive mental attitude.

HT: Still, if we considered today Mr. Mohamed Selim Zaki the Egyptian equestrian representative and we ask you to improve the Equestrian sports in Egypt within the conditions that we have now with all its problems and drawbacks; what would you do first?

MSZ: As we agreed, we have to improve the standard of both riders and horses I would start by choosing the riders who are actually talented in horse back riding; we have to improve their standard. As a matter of fact, there is a huge amount of money spent now on horses without a well guaranteed return; I believe this money should be spent on riding schools with good trainers in order to build the basics and find the people who have the resources and the ability to finance such a sport.

HT: Reflecting on what we have just said sir; There is an opinion that without the military and the Police financing horse back riding in Egypt, it would have faced a serious problem, explicitly it would not have had an existence as it does today.

MSZ: There should be some cooperation between the private sector, the police and the military so as to raise funds for those talented riders as well as providing a constant source of funding for Horse back riding sports in general, and here the role of the federation is more emphasized as a coordinator between all those entities.

HT: Where is the role of the private sector in funding?

MSZ: In the private sector every penny counts. If every penny I pay will not give me the return that covers my cost and even more profit, they would never participate. This sector cares a lot to know where his money goes and his allocated profits.

HT: But a very good example could be when Dr. Ibrahim Kamel sponsored Ahmed Barrada when he proved to be a talented player and helped him become a world champion.

MSZ: Yes, but how many examples did we have like Dr. Ibrahim Kamel and Barrada. Another very successful case would be, Winkler. Winkler was chosen by a private company "Bayer" to sponsor him. Now look at what they made out of him and his talent, he became an international champion and won several gold medals. He kept competing until he was 64 or 65. A news paper once named him "the man who gave headache to all", which definitely gave a boost to Bayer's sales as they were promoting their new product "Aspirin" at that time. How many riders in the equestrian history did what Winkler did? Or how many could give the sponsors the profits Winkler gave to his? There are some individuals abroad who have the resources and are always on the look out for talents, they sponsor them and give them what they need to improve. That is abroad but in Egypt we do not have the same atmosphere that can push the private sector to do so, we have to 'create' this atmosphere. Yet before looking for similar chances

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here in Egypt, I believe that talented riders encourage private sponsoring, and in our case we do not have enough talented riders to encourage enough sponsorship on a larger scale.

HT: I have a personal suggestion- do you believe that we could develop private companies or firms that would act as a mediator between the Egyptian Equestrian Federation and the private sector? For example it could have five to six of the big companies as their major clients from which it collects funds and then it uses those funds for sponsoring the talented riders via the federation and do all the publicity needed to bring profits?

MSZ: I don't think this could happen in Egypt, we can not compare European countries with us. They have a very old history with horses as a business that generates profit; this should take some time to convince companies to do this as a part of their advertising campaigns.

HT: Do you think that the special sports horses that participate only in highly professional jumping competitions could be bred in Egypt?

MSZ: Breeding horses needs a lot of expertise plus it's a very tough job to do. These kinds of projects do take a long time and need a lot of funding but it is worth it. It's a huge investment project that you should do if you have the time and money and you can even involve your friends as partners. So as to serve the local sports horse industry. As I said before it needs a lot of experiments... you don't just get a pure mare and a pure sir, the genetic aspects needs experimenting, time, money, and the appropriate education. Poland is the only country that was able to preserve its horses, even during the time of the socialism regime. Also in Germany and in the whole of Europe they have breeding stud farms specialized in designing complete training courses, similar to the systems used with riders. First all the horses are enrolled in a general training program and then each specializes according to their talent e.g. show jumping, dressage, etc... Again this is done through feasibility study programs with the target of calibrating the investment versus revenues.

HT: Now that we have brought up the idea of breeding sports horses; what is your opinion of what happened in the U.S with the Arabian horse breeders, they were all tax exempted so as to be encouraged? Is this possible in Egypt?

MSZ: Definitely yes it could. It's an investment project and it will add to the welfare of the whole economy. We need to have this feasibility study presented to the ministry of agriculture.

HT: What's your opinion of the idea of having a special protocol between Egypt and a foreign country as France for example where Egypt would receive technical help in projects as the ones regarding breeding?

MSZ: There are several good ideas if one has the technology and money. Take Israel as an example; they have a very good Arabian horses (with Egyptian origin) breeding industry. They copied what the Americans are doing and they admit it. They are selling their Arab breed in Europe using 'Egyptian Origin' and they are doing very well.

HT: In our last issue we had an interview with Dermott Lennon, the Irish rider who won the world championship, he personally believes that being professional comes in the very late levels of the sport namely when the rider starts competing internationally. But the starting level of riding should be a sport in its ethical level and never change until you get to the upper levels where you should get more help as in sponsorship.

MSZ: Certainly traveling and partici-

pating in International competitions helps a lot but also costs a lot and it has to be financed either through an entity like the military forces or the police or through private sponsorship like the example you mentioned about Barrada.

HT: A mobile phone Company hosted a championship in Ferousia club that cost them at that time a substantial amount of money! Yet they didn't repeat the experience!

MSZ: Because it needed a very strong advertising campaign. However, I have a preservation; I believe private sponsorship could turn the sport into something commercial and it wouldn't be a mere sport!!

HT: The federation is now organizing a lot of competitions outside Cairo, like in Sharm El-Sheikh and Ras-Sudr. And that's great; new grounds and horses as well. But on the other hand, we need for any equestrian competition more audience and sponsors who come to see the show so as to be encouraged. Companies won't agree to sponsor unless they get an impressive number of audience which is not available outside Cairo.

MSZ: We should all start inviting people to watch the equestrian sports; we need more publicity to try to bring it back to its golden age as it was during the 60s.

HT: To sum up the whole discussion; we need a complete vision from the equestrian federation, we need the Minister of Information to create more awareness and publicity for the sport and the minister of Education to give bonus points for the successful riders in the equestrian sports to encourage them. And finally we need to increase the liaison between the sponsoring companies and the equestrian entities.

MSZ: The ministry of education used to give bonus points to successful students in all sports. Concerning the publicity part, look at the sports in general how many kinds of games do we have that could have been more developed. I can see efforts in some sports now but I think that there is more that can be done and for sure, we have all the means and possibilities ■

General Mohamed Selim Zaki

