

KHALID EL-KHOUMSI

MOROCCAN REINER WHO FOLLOWED HIS DREAM

By Nada H. Abdelmoniem

WHILE COVERING THE FINAL SHOW JUMPING COMPETITONS OF THE 2014 MOROCCO ROYAL TOUR TRIAD THIS FALL IN THE CITY OF EL JADIDA, I FINALLY HAD THE CHANCE TO MEET AND INTERVIEW THE INIMITABLE KHALID EL-KHOUMSI, THE MOROCCAN CHAMPION IN THE OFFICIAL FEI SPECIALTY DICIPLINE OF REINING. EL-KHOUMSI IS THE ARAB WORLD'S FIRST EVER REINER AND WAS THE FIRST ONE TO COMPETE AT THE ALLTECH FEI WORLD EQUESTRIAN GAMES 2014 IN NORMANDY (WEG). REINING IS A HORSE SPORT WHICH DERIVES FROM WORKING CATTLE; THE UNIQUE SKILLS WHICH THOSE WORKING HORSES REQUIRE INCLUDE IMPOSSIBLY TIGHT SPINS, EXTREME STOPS AT FULL SPEED, AND COMPLETE UNITY OF HORSE AND RIDER WITH LITTLE OR NO VISIBLE AIDS. ONE'S MIND IMMEDIATELY JUMPS TO THE COWBOYS OF THE OLD AMERICAN WEST, NOT THE SHORES OR DESERTS OF MOROCCO! SO HOW WAS THIS MOROCCAN BUSINESSMAN INTRODUCED TO THIS DIFFICULT AND EXOTIC SPORT, AND HOW DID HE BECOME SUCH A SUCCESS? AS EL-KHOUMSI EXPLAINED, HE FOLLOWED HIS DREAM...





HOW IT ALL BEGAN:

I started loving horses when I was five years old. I grew up in France and I used to come to Morocco on vacation with my family. We stayed at my grandfather's house and he had horses as he was a Tbourida/Fantasia rider. After some time, I told my father that I wanted to start riding but he refused as my grandfather's whole life revolved around horses and he didn't want me to take the same path, but I just loved them anyway. I guess it runs in our blood because my daughter showed an interest in horses at a young age, so we pursued her interest with her firstly practicing classical riding and then jumping. We really had no goals; it was simply a hobby.

While in France, I was introduced to reining riders who trained at the same club where I would take my daughter. I was very impressed and wanted to try the sport. I was 40 years old at that time and the moment I tried it out, I just fell in love with it and wanted to train professionally. No joking around, one month later I bought my quarter horse first horse and started to train.

REINING SPORT:

This discipline originally was formulated for cowboys in the US herding cattle business, but was turned to a sport with horses instead of cows. It's Western dressage; you have to do some moves without actually showing what you do, without any resistance from the horse or any brutality from the rider. Everything is done with the rider's body and with full complicity from the horse. Reining needs a very strong horse with a tough mentality.

THE JOKE THAT BECAME REAL:

I firstly started attending competitions in France as a spectator; after the first competition I told myself that I

have to professionally participate and that's when I bought my second horse and started on the basics of reining with French trainer Kader Ikhlef, a trainer who had more than 80 breeds of horses. Upon completing my first competition, people asked me, "Where have you been hiding all this time and for how long have you been training?!" It was quite surreal as I myself didn't realise I may have the potential talent for the sport.

In 2008 Ikhlef told me that if I wanted to get to higher levels I should look for a more experienced trainer and invest a bit more in horses and training, and so he introduced me to Max Woygnet, a French/American reining trainer. He wondered why I didn't represent Morocco in reining and I thought he was joking, but he really wasn't!

TRAINING TO BE THE SOLE ARAB REINER IN THE WORLD:

Following Ikhlef's advice, I contacted the Moroccan Equestrian Federation. Reining is definitely uncommon in our part of the world and it was a whole new discipline for the Federation, except for one Moroccan International Arabian horse Judge and Breeder, Omar Al-Khateeb, who was very familiar with the sport.

Once I got approval from the Federation to represent the Kingdom, I sold my business in France and completely devoted my time to train and qualify for the WEG in France. I started to prepare for the event, prepared the horses and I had my own trainer. I trained really hard for two years and spent all my time riding. I had three horses along with other horses to learn how to ride correctly, and at the same time I was also professionally competing.

THE HORSES:

I saw a great horse ridden by a

Belgian rider, but was not up for sale. But I had my eye on him and so I visited her ranch in Belgium where she showed me a lot of horses but all I wanted was the one I saw before. I paid what she wanted for the horse and then directly headed to the Open Championships which are the highest competitions for professional reining riders.

For the WEG, I qualified with the two horses and competed with only one, Masterful. He really is as wonderful horse and our connection is quite unique. When we enter the arena I feel that he's the one telling me what to do, and that I have absolutely nothing to worry about. It's quite special.

THE WEG:

To qualify for the WEG, I needed to compete in 3-stars events. I bought a much sturdier horse and Woygnet introduced me to a new Italian/Swiss trainer, Chris Feichter. Feichter is still currently my trainer and owns a ranch near EuroDisney where we train. The woman who prepared my horse Masterful was also the USA's Shawn Florida assistant, Individual gold medallist at the WEG this year. They prepared Masterful for four years, he passed all the age qualifications, and finally, the first international competition we entered was in December 2013 at Salon du Cheval de Paris where we finished in second place.

Prior to the WEG the US Team contacted me and asked if I could assist in finding them a quiet location for training near Caen and this was how I got to know the best reining team in the world. For 20 whole days, I resided with them in the training farm, we trained together, and I learned so much from them. It was simply an exciting and incredible experience at the JayKay Farm near

EuroDisney.

MENTAL CAPABILITES WHEN COMPETING:

One has to stay in mental communication at all times with the horse. If that is lost, then forget about being able to continue the round on the arena. High levels of concentration are required otherwise, in a split of a second, it could all just go away.

RESULTS & UPCOMING PLANS:

In August I participated in a French Championship and was placed in third and fourth places with two horses. I don't concentrate on being placed first; I only want my horses and I to get more experience. December I will be competing at Salon du Cheval de Paris and I was asked to be the National Reining Horse Association (NRHA) representative of the Salon and I accepted. I was also asked to develop reining in Morocco and give some clinics, so that will be including in my two-year plans.

THE FAMILY:

My wife is French of Algerian origin but was born in France and she lived there her whole life. She supports me but she doesn't enjoy the sport because I spend too much time with my horses. I do tell her that I can't survive without horses! When I purchased my first horse I called my father and told him that I have something to show him; he visited the ranch exclaimed "Oh no, you did it!" I have four children; my daughter Ines who's 15, Mohammed Amine who's 12, Younes who's 7, and Safwane who's 4. Ines also happens to be a champion in reining! My son Mohammed Amine also wants to try reining; the others don't want to start yet but I would love it if they did. 🐾



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