

ZAMAN: PART ONE

# A LOOK BACK AT MY LIFE WITH HORSES

By Omar Mamdouh Ismail

OMAR MAMDOUH ISMAIL IS WELL-KNOWN TO HORSE TIMES AND TO THE EQUESTRIAN COMMUNITY IN EGYPT. HE HAS ALWAYS BEEN A VERY DISCIPLINED ATHLETE, THE FIRST OF HIS GENERATION TO STEP UP INTO THE BIG CLASS AND COMPETE AGAINST THE SENIORS AND WIN. HIS DISCIPLINE SHOWED IN HIS COMMITMENT TO HIS RIDING AND HIS HORSES AND SURELY IN HIS GENERAL MANNER OF CONDUCT WITH HIS FELLOW RIDERS AND FRIENDS. HE WAS A ROLE MODEL THAT LED THE WAY FOR A WHOLE GENERATION TO FOLLOW. WE SPOKE TO OMAR ABOUT HIS LIFE WITH HORSES IN EGYPT.

Ever since I was a child my parents used to take me to show jumping competitions. Back then I watched legendary riders like Selim Zaki, Gamal Harris, Abd El Kerim Sadek, Omar Mansour, Omar El Hadary and Elwi Ghazi, and the horse shows in the late sixties were similar to the ones in Europe at that time.

Those star riders I mentioned were so lucky to be well trained by La Farge, Brinkman, and Conforti, world known trainers. The military competitors from the Army and Police were the majority; civilians were less than a handful and less talented. In the early seventies after the October War things changed and civilian riders started to out-number the military, and some represented the military but were civilians like myself.

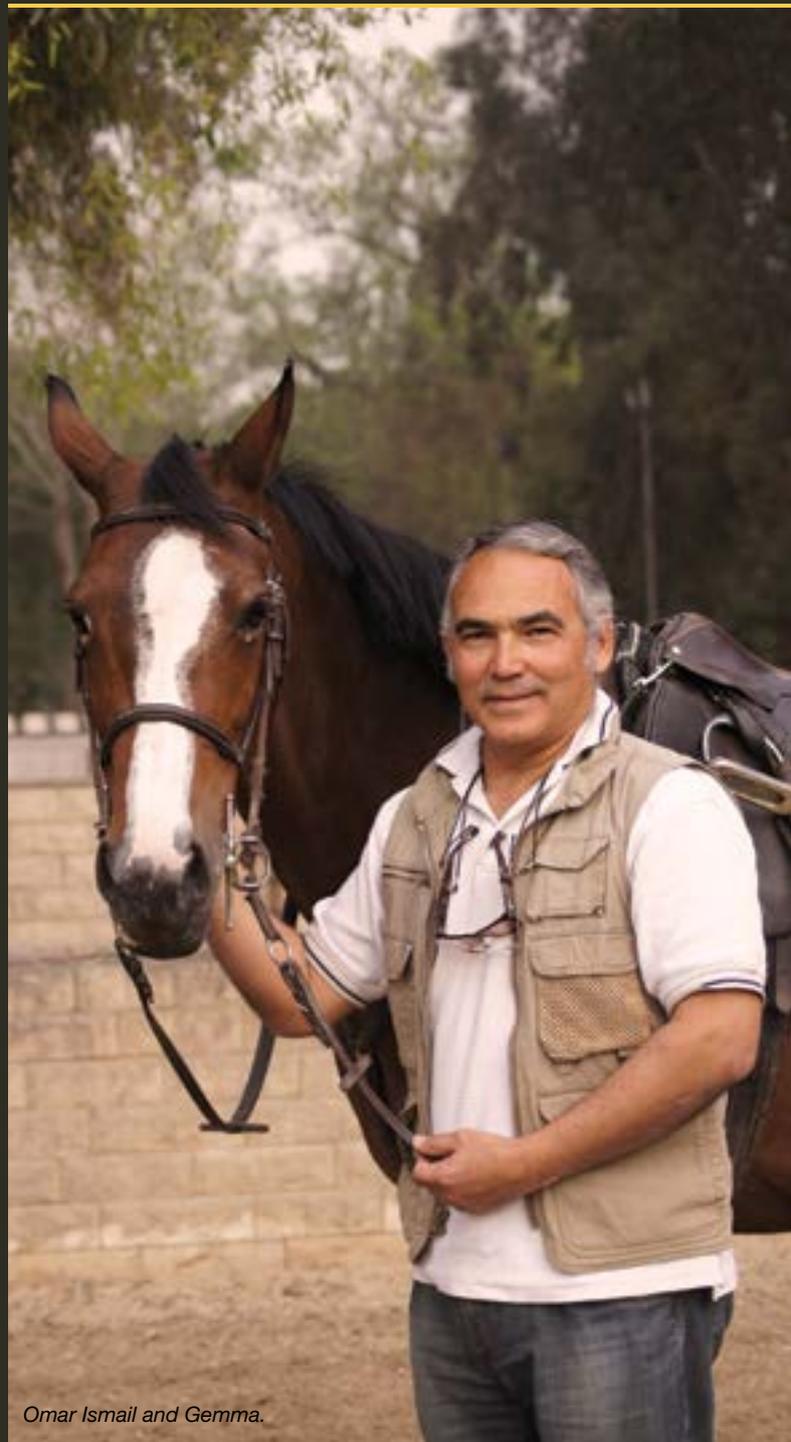
Riding for the military was not easy as the hierarchy in the military was set in stone, the higher the rank the better the horses, grooms, and equipment. In those days a general would get better horses than a major just for rank, not for skill. Sadly a general might have a very limited idea about horses and jumping and the result might be abusing the horse physically and mentally. For civilians in this system it was obviously tough at that time. The great riders I mentioned left the military with a vacuum; no one was like those stars.

Also, back then, the competitions were 120 cm in height maximum with very few horses and mediocre results, and the ban for equine influenza on Egyptian horses traveling abroad kept the sport stagnant. This ban started in 1964 and ended in 1987, so for nearly a quarter of a century I never saw or heard of a horse infected with influenza in Egypt. It sounded like the great riders we had in the past wanted to say that no one can be better than them.

My colleagues and I all put great pressure on the Egyptian Equestrian Federation to help remove this ban and allow our horses to travel abroad, the ban wasn't lifted until 1987.

In 1975 due to the increasing number of Officers' sons riding in the Cavalry and becoming the backbone of the military team, the Commander of the Armed Forces issued a decree allowing them to represent the Army. Unfortunately, the hierarchy remained the same; the three or four officers who rode had very limited capability to ride and jump. This created jealousy in politics and energy wasted not for the well-being of the sport but in relation to who is who and who is well connected.

As for me, it was very hard but a strong spirit and an immense struggle to learn and improve was my main focus; I stayed away from politics and gossip. All the knowledge I needed I couldn't find in the younger military generation that followed the great riders we had in the past. I got it from my great mother and father. My mother an ex-champion swimmer and my father was a revolutionary warrior and founder of the elite Ranger Corps and the Armor Forces of the Presidential Guard. Their knowledge of sports and training helped me improve.



Omar Ismail and Gemma.

The philosophy my coach had was to recruit young men in the Army mostly illiterate, undernourished, and physically unfit, and in a short time mold them into masters in using sophisticated arms, very fit to accomplish any assignment required, able to defeat the enemy and bring victory to Egypt. Applying this philosophy to horses was successful. Famous horses of that time like Hazak, Saroukh, Salama, Basel2, Monz, Zay El Asal, Chiquita, Mustang, and many others were much respected by other competitors. I learned the technical part of equestrianism through reading in the horse library my parents provided, traveling abroad, and learning from world class riders in Europe and the United States. 🏆

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