

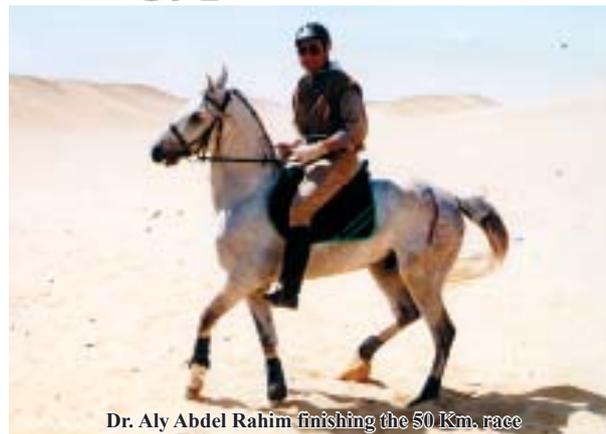
100 K endurance in the Egyptian desert

Riding in the desert has never been a special discipline in Egypt. It has been the sort of low-key activity engaged in by tourists at the pyramids, horse owners, and riders in other disciplines who felt that they needed a break. Desert riding changed this spring with the introduction of a new equestrian sport in Egypt: endurance riding. For years riders have gone out for five to ten kilometres rides, but for many the idea of riding twenty, fifty or one hundred kilometres seemed impossible. However, in North America, Europe and Australia, endurance riders have been competing over distances that begin at 90 kilometres and go as high as 250 kilometres over a 5-day period for almost 50 years.

In February, a telephone call changed desert riding forever here. HH Sheikh Mohamed Maktoum of the UAE, became interested in endurance riding in Egypt. The UAE Equestrian Federation contacted The Egyptian Arabian Breeders Association in February about setting up a series of endurance competitions to culminate in a 100 kilometre ride in May. As Egypt had no endurance Federation, at the time, a somewhat informal coalition was put together to organize these rides. The coalition included The Egyptian Arabian Breeders Association, The jockey Club. Al-Ahram, and input from some independent riders and organizers.

The first ride was held March 12, 2000, gave the committee only two weeks to organize and everyone wondered how many riders would want to participate. Initial guesses stood at about 35, but when the day dawned there were over one hundred riders and horses gathered at Sakkara Country Club for Egypt's first endurance ride, and many more complained that had they learned of it earlier, they would have been there also. This event was designed as a training ride for which the plan was that participants were to cover a 20 kilometre course in a set period of time, somewhat like a car rally. If they came in too early, they would be disqualified, and if they came in too late, they would also be disqualified. As well, horses had to be at least five years old, and they were checked for soundness by veterinarians before and after the ride. If a horse failed this check for any reason, it was also disqualified. This placed a responsibility for the welfare of the horse on the rider. It was certainly not a no-holds-barred dash across the desert for glory. Despite the expected and unexpected glitches, the day was a resounding success for all, with riders, organizers and veterinarians looking forward eagerly to the next stage in April.

The second ride was held April 21, and was for a distance of 50 kilometres again at a set speed. This time the speed was a bit faster (10 to 15 kph rather than 9 to 12 kph), and the horses had to not only pass a vet check before the ride, but had one in the middle with a mandatory, rest period, followed by one at the end. Where in March riders had gone out from Sakkara Country Club



Dr. Aly Abdel Rahim finishing the 50 Km. race

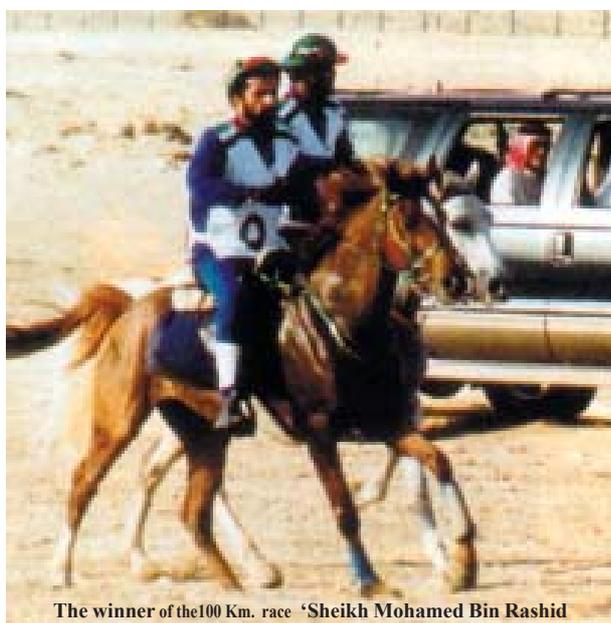
for a 20 km loop, this time they went out for a 20 km loop, came back to the club for a vet check and rest, and then went out for a 30 km loop. Some horses completed the first half and were judged unfit by the vets to complete the other half. Of the roughly 100 horses to start the ride, 69 qualified at the end of it to go on to the third stage, the 100 kilometre ride on May 19.

Horses that were to compete in the 100 km ride had an additional demand laid upon them, that they be at least 6 years old to compete. For rides of longer length, horses must be 7 years old. Where the previous rides had been supervised by the FEI officials from the U.A.E as well as local personnel but were fairly casual and were set speed, the 100 kilometre ride had no maximum speed set. This meant that it was entirely up to the fitness of the horse and rider and the rider's ability to pace his horse to complete this distance, as to whether a rider and his horse could finish this longer course. Another difference, and an important one, was that for this ride, participants came with their horses from other parts of the Middle East to join our local riders. Many of these riders, like the Maktoum family, were riding horses that had been doing this sport for years, rather than the months of our local horses, and both horses and riders had much more experience and training than the Egyptians. However, this didn't daunt our riders who looked on this as more knowledge and experience to be gained, recognising the small likelihood that any of them would actually come in first place.

After all the horses undergoing an even stricter veterinary check the day, before the ride, 75 horses and riders set out at 6 am on May 19 on the first 36 kilometre loop. Of the 75, there were 33 visiting riders and 40 local. At the end of the day, after hours of riding in hot sun and dusty desert, 18 riders finished, of whom six were Egyptian, an excellent percentage for people who had only been preparing for three months for this competition. The winner of the race was Sheikh Mohamed Maktoum, after his son Sheikh Rashid had finished first but had his horse disqualified at the end for lameness. One of the Egyptian riders, Goma Mahmoud Mohamed Awad from Eurostable, finished in 1st place after other riders from Jordan and the UAE, while the other five Egyptian finishers came in later. A 20 kilometre set speed ride held at the same time, drew an additional 65 local riders, most of whom were participating for the training aspect and the fun of joining in the festivities.

This is not the end for endurance in Egypt, although it is the end of the season, with the cooler weather of the autumn, there are more rides planned under the supervision of the Egyptian Equestrian Federation, according to the FEI rules. For following the huge success of these three events and the enthusiasm of the Egyptian riders, a permanent Organizing Committee has been formed to plan for the future endurance races in Egypt. This new committee includes members from both, The Egyptian Equestrian Federation and the Egyptian Arabian Horse Breeders Association, as well as a member representing the Egyptian riders.

Now that the task of organizing the endurance has fallen under the responsibility of those two bodies, Egyptian riders and enthusiasts all over the world will have the unique possibility to ride in the great deserts of Egypt on a regular manner year round.



The winner of the 100 Km. race 'Sheikh Mohamed Bin Rashid