

MICHEL ISMALUN

# UN EXPERT FRANCAIS EN CONCEPTION DE COURS EN EGYPTE

By Aya Amr

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FRENCHMAN MICHEL ISMALUN STARTED WORKING WITH THE EGYPTIAN EQUESTRIAN FEDERATION (EEF) IN 2010 DESIGNING COURSES IN NATIONAL SHOWS. BUT THAT WAS NOT ENOUGH: HIS VISION STRETCHED BEYOND THAT. HE WANTED TO DEVELOP COURSES GRADUALLY TO RAISE THE STANDARD OF HORSES AND RIDERS IN EGYPT AT DIFFERENT LEVELS TO MATCH THE EUROPEAN STANDARDS.

The first time Michel was contacted by the EEF was in 2010; one of the Federation members asked him to cancel everything on his schedule and travel to Egypt to build a course for a national competition. As Michel was born in Alexandria here in Egypt, coming back was kind of like going back to his roots; he did not hesitate and travelled to Cairo.

His first job was as a rider and a trainer at the French military riding academy École Nationale d'Équitation in the Cadre Noir, the corps of ecuyers, or instructors, at Saumur in western France. Michel told HT that he started to build courses because he was sure that there is the same pedagogic approach to being a course designer or a trainer, that it is all about teaching horses and riders, and trying to make them improve.

Michel always focuses on the balance between the skills and feeling of the riders, he notices that all the Egyptian riders had a sharp sense of riding but were often missing technique and method. At the end of the first show, he had a meeting with the EEF board members concerning the future. He explained, "My opinion about building courses was first to get the horses and riders in confidence and trust; it means building teaching courses where the riders will learn how to understand their horses better." He added, "Almost every rider asked me after walking the course about where the traps are! My answer was: setting traps will help the bad riders but won't help the good ones, so no traps."

This is Michel's ideal teaching course. A teaching course does not mean a lower level or an easy one but it attempts to make the best rider win instead of the best horse; it has normal distances, normal combinations, fitting an even canter all along the course, so the rider will never ride against his horse but will be able to ride fluidly and smoothly. All the distances have to fit the natural canter of the average horse with no traps and it has to fit all kinds of horses, the long and short strided ones, the hot and the cold ones, any kind of horse should be able to find a solution in order to be clear if well ridden. A nice approach to a combination should always let the horse get out clear; they shouldn't have any penalty faults in the combinations but on single jumps, because a combination is the place where a horse can lose his heart and willingness if he feels trapped. We all

know that it takes years to create confidence between a horse and a rider, but it only takes a second to lose it, and this happens basically in combinations. A teaching course should also have all kinds of different scenarios, lines, broken lines, wide turns, any detail that will help the riders stay smooth in their riding.

*"My goal was to see the horses jumping better the second and the last day than the first day of the competitions, and better each upcoming horse show," Michel said.*

The President of the Federation, Hesham Hatab, and his crew agreed with Michel, and very soon in the season the riders started to improve tremendously! They all started to find the rhythm and pace that best suit the horse in order to be clear; the first show, in the A2 and A1 classes, just 3 or 4 riders were clear.

After the fourth show, from among around 25 riders in the A1, 8 or 9 riders were clear and many light 4 faults were happening here and there. Michel said, "I was astonished to see how fast these riders adapted their riding to my courses and very often, they upgraded their levels from C to B, and B to A2-A1 without being scared of the heights or the widths." He continued, "It was also a blast to watch the jump-offs and classes against the clock, because I think Egyptian riders are very competitive and they don't like to lose!"

Michel was asked by Mr. Hesham Hatab to train some riders for an indoor event in Damascus, so he built compact courses in order to give the riders the "indoor feel". It worked and the Egyptian team won many classes there which was a great reward for both Michel and the riders.

Then, unfortunately for the sport, the revolution came and of course created a huge disruption in the group improvement. "When the season re-started after that break, the level of the horses and riders had declined. We started all over again, even though many horses and riders left the country in order to keep competing. Very quickly the passion again took the lead and the riders got back to serious competing."

Nowadays, the upper level of competitive riders has progressed even more than in the times before the revolution. Many more young riders have started joining the sport, which proves that show jumping is more popular than ever and the goals of the Federation are being achieved so far.

"It is a real honour for me to build courses in Egypt; as the riders, trainers and actually everybody are very kind and grateful for my job. Crowds of very young riders join the competitions every week and this has nothing to do with luck, the EEF has done and is still doing a great job, organising many competitions and welcoming anyone who shares the same passion. I am sure that it will keep growing and growing. The next step Insha'Allah will be having the animal health customs restrictions opened so that foreign countries will come and compete, and Egyptian riders will be able to compete outside their country." As HT concludes the interview, Michel says, "I will never be able to thank all the people enough, for their warm and kind welcome; very quickly Egypt felt like home." 🏠