



Sheikh Hamad Bin Ali Al Thani with Munira Al Rayyan (Ansata Sokar x Bint Mesoudah M HP), Al Rayyan Farm 2015



INTERVIEW BY MONIKA LUFT

# The moment I opened my eyes for the first time, I saw horses

## SHEIKH HAMAD BIN ALI AL THANI

since February 2015 the manager of AL RAYYAN FARM,  
one of the oldest and most significant in Qatar.

Together with Sheikh Hamad Al Rayyan begins a new chapter. Sheikh Hamad, one of the creators of the power of Al Shaqab, was for 17 years the main breeder and manager of a stud which brought the world, among others, two of the most famous Arabian sires – Gazal Al Shaqab and his son Marwan Al Shaqab. Today it is difficult to imagine modern breeding without these two champions, which have become living legends. Sheikh Hamad Bin Ali Al Thani spent his entire life among horses: he began with his own small stud in Egypt, until in 1992 he was elected by the then Emir of Qatar, Sheikh Hamad Bin Khalif Al Thani, as the director of Al Shaqab Stud. After a break resulting from an illness he returned to work which is his passion – the breeding of Arabian horses. Al Rayyan, a city that is closely adjacent to the country's capital Doha and which lent its name to Al Rayyan Stud, is a special place for the Qatari people. It is here that the historic, victorious battle against the Turks took place, after which they had to abandon the lands of Qatar. Its name means "the source of irrigation" and as per Islam it also means "a door in heaven" or "one of the Gates of Paradise". It is here that we find the Aspire Dome sport complex with the 300 m Aspire Tower (The Torch Doha), designed by Hadi Simaan, dominating over the vicinity. It is here that we find the seat of the Qatar Foundation, as well as the Racing and Equestrian Club. And it is here that the horses of Al Rayyan Farm have their home, together with the stud's 19 year old senior multi-champion, Ashhal Al Rayyan (Safir – Ansata Majesta/Ansata Halim Shah). Sheikh Hamad Bin Ali Al Thani personally gives us a tour of the stud.

photo: Monika Luft

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• Monika Luft  
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**Monika Luft: Did your love for horses come from a family tradition?**

**Sh. Hamad Bin Ali Al Thani:** It is hard to say when my interest in horses began, because the moment I opened my eyes for the first time, I saw horses.

**It was here, in Doha?**

Yes. Like every child, I loved horses. The horses were in the stables, and we used to play close to them. At that moment for us, the kids, horses were just something big that was always around.

**Did you have your own horse at the time?**

No, but I visited my cousins' horses, I played with them and then I started riding. I was about 7 years old. I rode them Bedouin style, no saddle, just for fun. When I wanted to ride a horse, especially if it was a good and famous horse, I did all the work in the stable and then got the permission from the owner. I loved the horses so much that I went to the Federation to learn to be a professional rider. And I started racing, like everybody else there. It was the time when Arabian horse races started here in Qatar. We had been in contact with the people from the UK as the best riders came from there in that time. They had flat racing, they had a program. I also travelled to Poland and Russia and France. But of course the UK was the most important place, we have been allowed to buy horses there, so a lot of Qatari people knew this country better than others. I was 13, maybe 14 years old when I went there for the first time.

**Did you go to school there?**

No, I went to school here in Qatar, but then I spent some time learning English at Cambridge. After that I bought three Arabian horses from the UK for racing, but they had more beauty than speed. They were very, very pretty, so I don't know why I picked them for racing! Of course I lost. So I understood that I don't have an eye for racing. But still racing is something that we all like a lot, so I started training horses for races. But I did not succeed.

**So eventually you chose the beauty of the horse as your main interest.**

Yes, speed was a wrong choice for me... After that came Egypt. This was already a higher level. Sheikh Abdulaziz Al Thani was my cousin, my friend and the greatest teacher. Also Sheikh Nawaf Nasser Bin Khaled Al Thani was like an older brother, we started riding in Doha together. He brought the best horses to Qatar. We went to Egypt as we were very fond of the Yosreia line, the one of the great Aswan. And it was close to my racing education – big horses, big movers... To me they were just the

best. I had a riding background and even if I did not know at the time why I was so attracted to them, that was the reason. I had never seen horses standing, I knew the horse from his back, from the saddle position. I could describe the shape of the neck or the carriage from the position of the rider, I could see the tail when I was turning my head. I knew where it should be, I knew how the legs should look like, how the neck should look like.

**Do you remember your first horse?**

It was the mare Yosra (by Shaarawi), from the Hamdan Stables, in 1987 or 1988. It was a moment that I started to be interested in pedigrees, not only in riding. I bred her to Shadwan, a stallion from Egypt and I had a very nice chestnut filly that won the class at her first show here in Qatar. I rode her afterwards, everybody was surprised, but I am a rider, for me a horse, even a show horse, should be ridden. And then I had a flea-bitten big mare, of Hadban blood, no dished head, but a beautiful eye. Then the Foundation started here in Qatar and we started buying horses for His Highness Sheikh Hamad Bin Khalifa Al Thani. Why me? He saw that I am young, interested in horses and from his family and he said: why won't he take over? So we went forward and started buying horses from Egypt and later also from Tersk, Russia which was something totally new here, first Russian horses in Qatar ever. There were three fillies, one of them was a chestnut Balaton daughter Malvina, very good producer and race winner. Those horses really stole my heart, as they were charismatic for showing and they also had the speed. You could count on them on both fields. Since then people started bringing Russian horses for racing. And after that we bought French horses. I remember sitting one day at the Club (QREC) and His Highness asked me: what is this horse? Is it an Arabian? And I said: yes, a French Arabian. And he said: No, it must be another breed. From that moment we stopped buying French horses for racing maybe for 6 years. Then people changed their mind again, as they just wanted to win. And HH allowed it because he was always open to people, even if we did not like French horses ourselves. And I still don't like them. In 1991 we went to the U.S. And that made a huge difference! That was a totally different story. We saw a different world in every sense. We went to a small show, to the Egyptian event, but anyway, we were very surprised. We have never seen horses shaved and with oil put on them. We have always seen the horses being presented the natural way. No halter, liberty style. So we were like kids: what is this? What is happening here? Believe me, we could not even touch a horse because of the oil. We were shocked, we had been asking ourselves, what is all this for? And then we knew about ginger and we asked: why ginger? We have never used this.



Sheikh Hamad Bin Ali Al Thani at the 5th Qatar Int. Arabian Horse Show, Straight Egyptians, 2015

### **It is forbidden!**

Yes, but that was the first time that we ever heard about it. And this pose, a horse like a statue, this was a big shock. We knew Egypt, where it was all rather chaotic, everybody fighting, the stallions hardly controlled by people, everybody shouting: be careful, the stallion is coming! And here the stallions were very sweet, everybody could touch them, give them sugar, they were not dangerous at all, they did not kick you, not hurt you, nothing of this. We were really surprised. And then the marketing. We saw how to do that for the first time, how to promote horses, how to do business. This was the moment when we were introduced to Michael Byatt, in 1992. And we started building a professional breeding at Al Shaqab in September of 1992.

### **And a new chapter begun.**

Yes, we went very, very professional. In the beginning it was more fun, and from that moment it was a serious thing.

### **How many horses did you buy in the States in this first moment?**

Nine. Before those three fillies from Russia came, we only had Straight Egyptians. Imperial Phanilah (by Ansata Imperial), a champion mare, and her sister Imperial Impharida, the best producing mare, and the stallion Sabiell (by Nabel), who became Reserve World Champion. First we showed them in the U.S., at the Egyptian Event, where we took the champion title, and

then we brought them to Qatar. In 1993 we went to Paris. With Sabiell we claimed the Reserve Male Championship, in 1994 with Phanilah we took the World Champion Mare title and the highest score of the show. One of the most beautiful mares ever.

### **Amazing start, indeed!**

Phanilah was an incredible horse, you looked at her eyes and you knew: this is not just an animal. Flea-bitten, feminine, you immediately gave her 20s. She was not a mover but when standing, you could see her natural beauty, a real dream of desert.

### **This is what you look for in a horse: desert beauty?**

Yes. I always look for a beautiful head and good conformation. And of course the pedigree. I can tell you if the horse can move, when I see the pedigree. Maybe he doesn't move today. Most of the Egyptians don't move indoors. They need space. If they are loose outside, they will show that they can move. For example when speaking of Polish horses: if they have Aswan in their pedigree, they usually can move.

### **How did you discover Kajora?**

We were really lucky. We bought her from the Gucci Herd after his bankruptcy. We were in the States at the time. Michael Byatt did a great job. He showed me those horses and he said: maybe they will be sold. We came back to Doha and I remember him calling me at 4 o'clock in the morning: this mare will be put on auction today. Are you in? And I said: what is the price? And



he said, I don't know, it's an auction. So I said, go ahead. There were the best horses in the world at that auction – US National Champions Kajjora, Shahteyna (by Bey Shah), PR Padróns Jewel (by Padrón) between them. We bought 13 horses. And then Michael called me: remember Farid? I must say that I had the opportunity to buy Anaza El Farid. And not buying him was one of the biggest mistakes of my life! There were two stallions. First one was 50 thousand and the other was 90 thousand. This was Farid. But I went for the cheaper one... So Michael calls me and says: the mare is in heat, we can breed her to Farid. I said: go on! And from this cross Gazal was born.

#### What is so special about him?

He is different in so many ways! I have to say that before Gazal we bought Ansata Halim Shah (by Ansata Ibn Halima) from Judith Forbis. He came to Doha, but we had very bad luck with him. He stayed with us for 6 months, he tried to jump a fence and he broke his leg. It happens sometimes at every farm... But Gazal is special, first of all because of his pedigree. He got the best from the Polish blood and the Egyptian blood. People say that the golden cross is between Spanish and Egyptian lines but this is wrong. It's between Polish and Egyptian. It is happening everywhere: when you cross the Polish with the Egyptian, you succeed. Because the Polish blood is more light than the Spanish. Spanish is too heavy and even the Egyptian cannot add the refinement needed. It's very hard. Of course they can produce the eye, but not a complete horse. The neck, the bone, is still too heavy. And Gazal is a gift for us. I need to tell you what I believe in. I think horses are like a gift from God for the people. I think the biggest affection for humans is the horse. They can feel about you, they know from your walk who you are, it is a very special relationship. If you don't believe in horses and don't love them, this gift goes to waste.

#### Is that why Al Shaqab stud achieved success so quickly? Because this gift was appreciated?

It is possible. I know many breeders of the world and hundreds of horses that never produced anything. Al Shaqab is different.

We were young, we had no big knowledge. We had trust in our collaborators like Michael Byatt but in fact I don't know why we were so lucky. But we got the best of the best.

#### So luck is also important.

Absolutely. And our strategy at that time was also to help the people in Qatar. The stud was open to every Qatari who wanted to learn something from us. For breeding, for shipping horses, for education, for vets, for any support. We even gave horses to the people every year, maybe 30 or 40 horses were just gifts. And when you give, God gives you.

#### How did you discover Poland and Polish horses?

After the U.S. we went to Poland. And we discovered another different story about the relationship with the horse and how to work with horses. For me Poland is a different style. It is like reading a history book. Everything is in a right place. And we have never seen hundreds of mares in one barn.

#### Did you visit Janów Podlaski or Michałów?

Both. I met Director Andrzej Krzyształowicz and Director Ignacy Jaworowski. I sat with them, we had lunches together, we talked about horses. I started to judge at that time, I was judging in Poland too, so I spent quite a lot of time with them. I was really lucky.

#### What was the most surprising for you?

The bay. We had never thought that the bay can produce, we always had the idea of the white horse. And they were breeding very good horses, also bay ones. For me it was more than Egypt. In Egypt there was a lot of small breeders, everybody with their own ideas. The government there lost the plan, the influence, they sold all the best they had. But in Poland there was planning, they knew how to sell horses and which horse could be sold and which one should stay. Because everybody wanted to buy horses from Poland but who would be producing the foals afterwards? They knew which horses they should keep to continue the breeding.



### **Whose idea was it to lease Gazal Al Shaqab to Poland?**

It came from them, the Polish directors. They asked me and I considered it a very good idea. I was a young breeder, only for 5 years at that time and the opportunity to breed Gazal to a hundred mares was a fabulous idea to me. A small breeder could not do it. And it was also the opportunity for me to be known and respected as a breeder. And it was good for the promotion of my country.

### **Did you expect such marvelous results from that decision?**

Gazal dam was the Polish Kajora, so I knew it would be a good cross with Polish blood. But I did not expect that much! Of course they know what they are doing. I was very pleased and I am still pleased with that decision. I expected more from Gazal than from Marwan. I am still more convinced about Gazal than Marwan. Because my type is more Gazal than Marwan.

### **When you see Gazal daughters, do you immediately know who their sire is?**

I can tell from a hundred meters. Any Gazal get. Even yesterday I saw a horse and I said: I would swear it is Gazal blood and it was!

### **Do you feel fulfilled as a breeder?**

I cannot say I am a breeder yet. A breeder should have bred his own line. I don't have my own stamp yet. OK, I bred the best stallion. But that's it.

### **In that case who, in your opinion, can call himself a breeder?**

It is a person who dedicated his life to create one line. And when what you breed is good. It is like you own a factory and you have one product, your own product. In Al Shaqab we have done different products. And we had the chance to have different blood. We succeeded because we took the chance. I thank God that he gave me this opportunity, God gave me this feeling about the horses. Let's take the dam of Kahil Al Shaqab, OFW Mishaahl. Ask Michael! I just knew she would be a producer. Or Kajora. I knew it. I feel in my heart that this horse can be good. I don't know if it comes from experience

or from something else. The dam of Kahil, nobody liked her, and she is the dam of the best stallion of the world now. She has not even a great pedigree but she produces. Have you seen full sister to Kahil, Sultanat Al Shaqab, the yearling champion filly at this year's Qatar Int. Arabian Horse Show? Her dam had several problems and Michael said: Hamad, what is it about this mare, why do you want her? And I said, I don't know, I just have a feeling.

### **Maybe you see the horse's soul by looking at his eyes?**

I think it is about the relationship, maybe. I can work with any horse. I ride all the difficult horses. Yesterday we got a horse that the grooms could not take out. And I did it with no problem and he walked with me, with full confidence. Maybe it's about the smell.

### **So you are a real horseman.**

I think I am. I am more a horse lover than a breeder. I can sleep with horses, I did it many times. For example when the horse is sick and I love him a lot, like Halim Shah. I slept with him in his barn, I read with him the Koran. And he cried. I just love horses, I don't care if they are good or not. The problem is that people always ask you about the famous horses. And this is far away from human. There are horses that cannot be successful but still they deserve love and care. Like Amira Al Shaqab. I showed her in Dubai 3 or 4 years ago myself. I knew we could not win, but I just loved looking at her. Everybody laughed at me and I said, I don't care. One of my old friends was judging, I told him: why did we not win? And we both laughed. But she is really a lovely mare.

### **Who do you think deserves to be called a breeder?**

Judith Forbis. She has her own stamp. I know her since the 90s. She has knowledge, she knows how to promote the horses. And this is also important because there are a lot of good breeders who don't know how to market their horses. We are lucky at Al Shaqab because we have Michael Byatt. He is good in marketing. He played a huge role in promoting Al Shaqab. And now people look at us in a different way.



Safir Al Rayyan (Ashhal Al Rayyan – RN Farida), Al Rayyan Farm 2015

### Do you still travel to shows?

Yes, I travel, but in the 90s the shows were more fun. People talked to each other. We went to many shows but we never stayed until the championships. We did not care about the champions because we already picked the horse we liked. I remember Sheikh Abdulaziz or Sheikh Nawaf, all the old friends, we talked later in the car about the horses that looked nice and that could fit our breeding and could be maybe fifth in class, not necessary be the winners. OK, we loved the horse who won, but did not care. It was important for the owner but not for us. Now is different. I can't sit with people now, because they say: you know my horse? We had a "19" at a show. And what do I care? First: what is the name of your horse and his pedigree? And why you bought him? What do you want from him? You want to make salad? Pizza? Do you ride him? Do your kids ride him? I think a horse should not stay in a farm without work. He has to have something to do. Like a human, if the horse has nothing to do, he will eat himself. You cannot change the nature. You have to know where the horse is coming from. We believe God made him from a south wind. It means he likes freedom. Don't keep him in the box. Keep him loose, in the paddocks. Let him go around.

### But this is not possible when it comes to today's show horses...

Believe me, that is not the way. Horses like Marwan are living in the paddock all the time, never in the box. Gazal was living in the paddock, with grass. But now it is more politics, it is about sponsors and money and money and money. We always loved Aachen because Aachen is for us a breeders' show. In the beginning

we never had a VIP table, we just sat with people and walked from breeder to breeder and talked. And we saw all those Polish horses move and win, and it was amazing. I remember Mariusz Liśkiewicz, he was showy himself! And if horses had a winter coat, nobody cared. Now I don't like to see the horses all shaved, it is a plague to me. But this is the show world today, you need to do it.

### Do you enjoy sharing your knowledge about horses?

Of course, I can talk about everything openly, but I could not have my own school. I always say: don't follow anybody. Breeding is art. I cannot tell you how to do it. You cannot teach breeding. Breeding is collecting from many sources. When I started breeding, I read the book of Judy Forbis "The Classic Arabian Horse". And I put points on every picture of a horse: this is a "19" in the head, "18" in the neck... I did it by myself, with no advice. I educated my eye this way. The eye is very important. It is also a gift, if you are able to evaluate the horse when you see it. You see where is the fault and where is the good point. And then you can go back to the pedigree and see: ah, ok, this eye is because of the mother, this back is because of the father. And the bad legs are from the grandfather. Would it be a good producer? No, he cannot. But this one, with bad legs, he can be, because it is coming not from his pedigree but from how he grew up, in a bad place, wrong box. When you can judge all this, you can be a breeder. You have to have the knowledge, but you also have to have the eye. And then you have to have the tool, I mean the horses. I was lucky because I had been at Al Shaqab and I had the tool, I had the horses to



Sheikh Hamad Bin Ali Al Thani at Al Rayyan Farm, 2015

breed. Tools, eye and decision. That's it. I believe in the horses that I bred. I know that they have some faults, but I will not talk about it of course – it's my horse!

### **What are your plans at Al Rayyan?**

I started here this year. I have to know my tool, my mares. To know them, to scan them, I have to breed them all to one stallion. I know their pedigrees, I know their faults and good points, but I have to see how they produce. Next time I will know what to expect and what I need for them. For example I will know that Morafic blood with this mare doesn't work. So I have to change. Of course luck is also needed. Marwan's dam was bred to Gazal six times. And there is only one Marwan. God gave you this. You ask more but maybe it is enough. You try, but it will not happen again. This is God. People believe in embryos. I hate it! Do you expect you will have everything? Thank God for what you have already got. From 5 embryos maybe one will be good. And it will come if God wants to give you it, today or tomorrow. So what for? Are you a breeder or what? A breeder who loves horses will not do this. He would never throw a horse out because he is not good enough. If the mare doesn't give you what you want, don't breed her anymore, stop taking more and more embryos! Use her for riding. But five embryos from one mare? This is ridiculous. People who love horses would not do this. This is business and business in breeding doesn't work.

### **The most beautiful moment in your life as a horseman?**

Very hard to tell. Every time when you get a nice horse – when

you buy it or when it is born, is a happy day. I have a big lunch then. I swear, when I win, I am never as happy than when I have a good baby. Yes, you are pleased when you win but it is not for yourself. The win in a show is not for yourself, it's for your country. For the people who respect you. You have to work hard to please your country and the people who put you in this position. But is not for you. For me is when a nice baby is coming, this is my gift, this is my chocolate.

### **What will be your future now?**

My future is enough when I smell the horse's back. Michael asked me: how are you feeling the first day? I said: Michael, the smell of the horse's shit smells like heaven to me. This is my life, this is what I care about.

### **Could you say "I have a dream...?"**

It is about a horse that is coming. I would love to have something between Gazal and Marwan. And grey.

### **Do you already know how to do it?**

No, not yet, but I believe it is coming. Nice neck, not as long as Marwan's – more balanced, big eyes, not very dishy head, but nice. And a stallion! We have nice mares already.

### **Let's see this dream fulfilled.**

Inshallah.



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