

# Donors Needed!

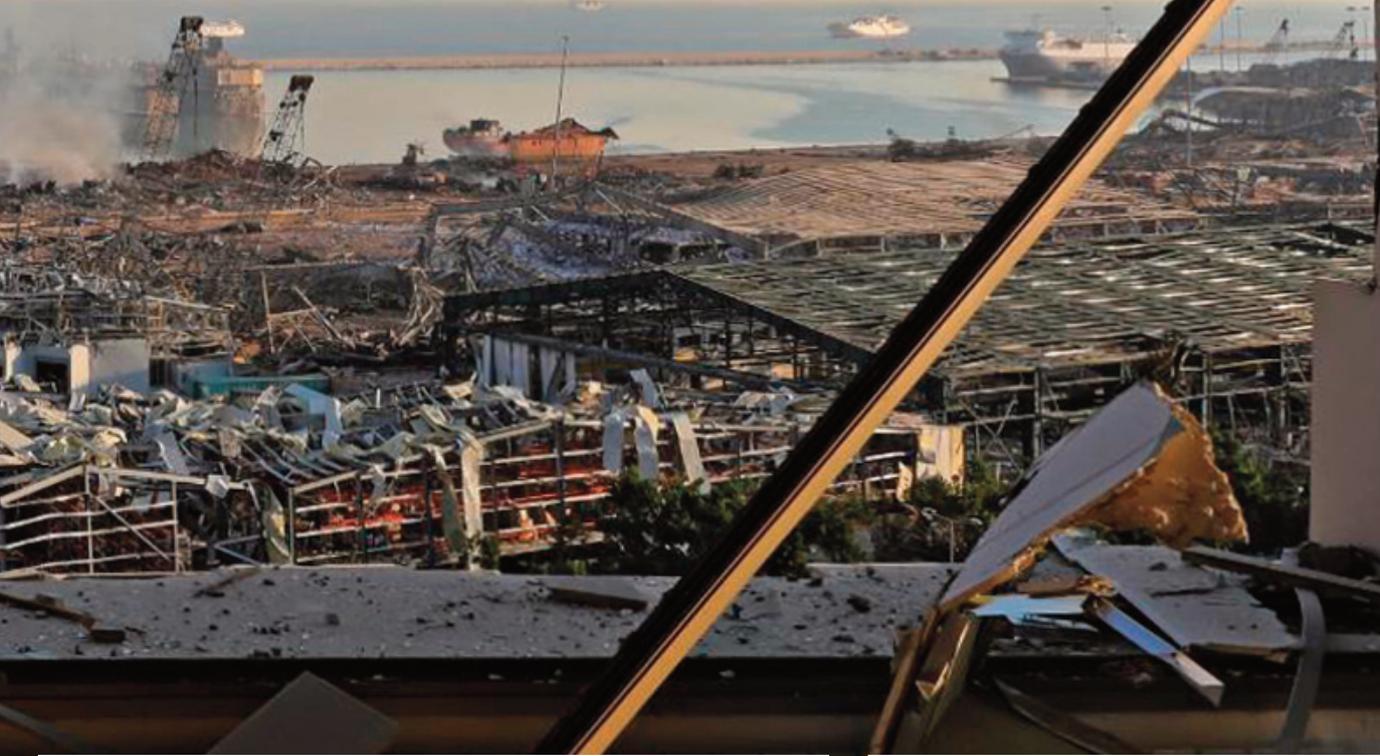
The Situation for the Arabian Horses of Beirut is Near to a Catastrophe.  
Is There still Hope for the Hippodrome?  
How Can the Horses Survive?

by **Monika Savier**

Photographies: Monika Savier, Press Archive Beirut



# CALL FOR SUPPORT FOR THE ARABIAN HORSES IN BEIRUT



**L**ebanon, the beautiful country on the Mediterranean, is experiencing one of the most serious crises in its history. The capital, Beirut, is fighting for survival. The economy has collapsed, with the Corona virus having great influence in that, as it made the situation worse. There is hardly any money, electricity is provided ever less often, and a large part of the population is unemployed and now lives in poverty. The explosion disaster in Beirut is accelerating the city's decline.

Beirut used to be a multicultural promise, but now the city is in the danger of living just a memory of her former beauty and wealth, of her democratic society which was more free and more colorful than anywhere else in the Middle East, and where the racetrack with its horses played an important role for everybody within the frame of the cultural scene of the city. The grandstands have been wrecked since the last war, but the racetrack is a symbol for the fact that in spite of wars and conflicts, things would always go on somehow.

For a long time, when many people in Beirut still had money enough, politics would determine what went on the racetrack, as powerful family, finance, and religion lobby groups all had their say and influence. These times, however, are gone. The city will have to change if it wants to have a future.

Fortunately, there are still Lebanese who, despite all the blows, have not given up hope of a turnaround and are fighting to make the city liveable again for humans and animals. Among them are those responsible for Beirut's hippodrome, who are living for the future of the horses there. Horse Culture must not be subordinated to the economy, but money is needed to survive, and to be able to learn the lessons from that experience of having failed, so things can be done better next time.

Lebanon is profoundly a 'horse country'. Arabian horses have been part of the civil society for hundreds of years. During the times of war, the racetrack and its horses played a unifying role, bringing together people across their many religions and cultures. Now, however, we have arrived at a point when the city is in fear of her future. Today's crisis is the saddest of all the city ever went through, and external help is necessary and essential. The horses are at the center of this crisis and urgently in need of protection.



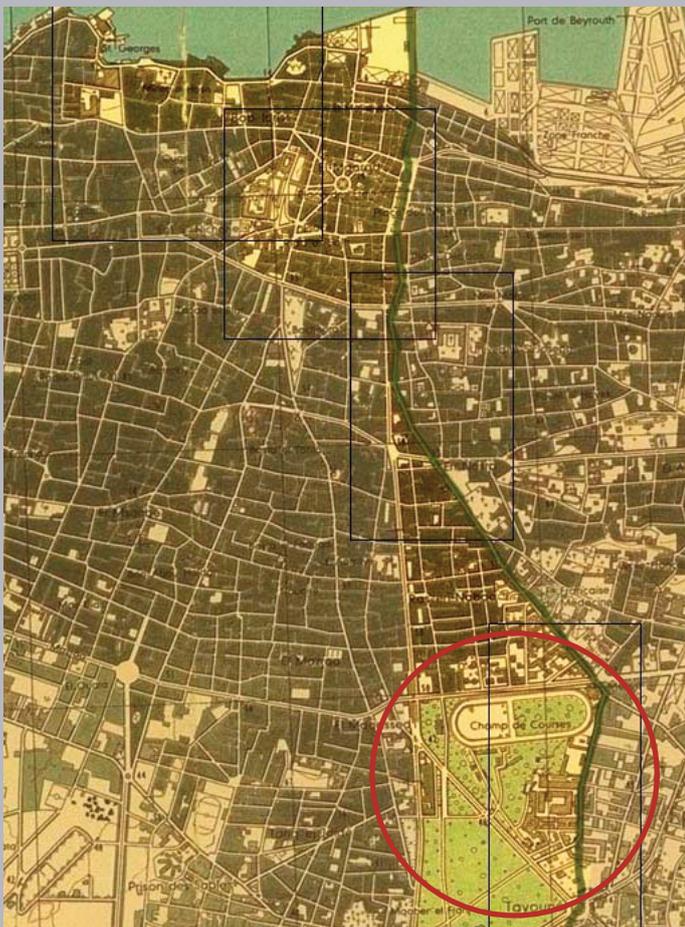
The Romans already recognized the affinity between humans and horses and built the first racecourse in Tyre, Lebanon 2000 years ago. "The citizens need bread and games" was the political concept of Caesar, the Roman emperor. Today the ruling politicians of Lebanon do not even have bread for the whole population. And if the racetrack of Beirut, in the heart of the city, has to close, a cultural center will die that not only cultivated the proud tradition of Arabian horse breeding in the country, but has also been a popular stage where the horses and their jockeys have created a passion shared amongst people of all classes and religions, men, women and children.

You might remember this feeling with the goose bumps that start with a distant gallop noise, the hectic loudspeaker announcement about the course of the race, and then the horses come around the bend and run into the finishing straight. Who will make it to win? The people on the grandstands become louder and louder and accompany with their cheers the horses and jockeys who give their last to the finish line.

Spectators who didn't know each other hug because they bet on the same horse. Others throw away their betting slips and check the program to see what chances they will have in the next race. This shared enthusiasm with people and horses must be preserved.

The Lebanon Arabians, the historical asil breed of horses from the Arabian Peninsula, and the WAHO Arabians, which are imported from all over the world and trained for the gallop races, risk extinction when the curtain comes down and the stage is dismantled there.

We, the Arabian horse community, remain committed to overcoming the dangers the current situation poses to the Arabian horses of Lebanon. And we need the support of the Arabian horse community. Without action being taken now, there is even the possibility that they might not survive. We have to ensure the future of the horses and of the racetrack. The races themselves have to continue. Only by keeping the horses and races alive can we safeguard the racetrack for everybody, and with it, the green heart of Beirut.



Last week I got a phone call from the Director of SPARCA, Nabil Nasrallah. He described the situation in some detail. Of course, with a fund-raising campaign like this, we all want to be sure that any donations arrive at the clearly defined target. Therefore, I asked Nabil very directly about how transparency can be guaranteed to the donors. As is clear in the interview that follows, Nabil gave every assurance. This is the time to use the Arabian horse world social media to draw attention to the scale of the crisis. We need to raise awareness and we also need to raise funds.

We almost have to try, and if we don't succeed and the history of the hippodrome will no longer exist, you knew that all along at least – for this story really needs to be told so the hippodrome and the horses will stick in our memories.



Monika Savier asked Mr. Nabil Nasrallah, the General Manager of SPARCA, about the situation at the racetrack and what steps need to be taken to help save the horses and the racing business there.

**Savier: The horses at the Beirut Hippodrome du Parc are going through a huge crisis. What factors triggered this crisis?**

**Nasrallah:** The country was already going through hard financial times and economic unrest. This has been going on for many years, but with the October Revolution in 2019 it all accelerated, bringing about the financial collapse. And before the targets of that revolution had been met, the Covid 19 pandemic hit us hard with complete lockdowns for many months.

In addition, as if all of the above was not enough, Beirut suffered what is now known as the biggest non-nuclear explosion in recent history, killing hundreds, injuring thousands, and displacing over 300,000 households from their homes in Beirut. All of that has taken place with complete absence and denial from the political authorities. Today the Lebanese pound has lost over 300% of its value in less than 1 year, putting everyone on the verge of bankruptcy.

Our Arabian horses found themselves in the middle of all of this. With no one paying any attention apart from SPARCA with its very limited resources. Perhaps also

some few people with a passion for these horses and a handful of breeders.

**Savier: What has been and still is the cultural role of the racetrack for the people of the city?**

**Nasrallah:** The horses and the racetrack go together. The one cannot exist without the other. The Beirut Hippodrome, the only racetrack in Lebanon, has been the custodian of major historical events of our country. From the declaration of the State of Greater Lebanon in 1920 to the Independence in 1943, to witnessing the different wars and occupations that Lebanon went through, to remaining the green spot in our city, granting the peaceful coexistence of all religions and the beacon of hope for humans and horses alike.

**Savier: Who owns the racetrack in Beirut?**

**Nasrallah:** With a total surface of 210,000 m<sup>2</sup>, making it among the biggest green spaces in the Beirut capital, the racetrack is fully owned by the municipality of Beirut. However, the management of the racetrack and all the related activities were mandated to the NGO SPARCA. The aftermath of the 4th of August explosion, along with the corona virus, it is no longer possible to support the horses or the green environment. SPARCA as an NGO is therefore left with absolutely no resources.



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**Savier: Can the resumption of racing maybe solve the crisis? If so, how?**

**Nasrallah:** The main thing at this moment is to protect and care for the horses. If they can survive and be trained, we can believe in the resumption of races. We also must boost confidence in the continuity of the racetrack for everyone, the horse owners, the passionate admirers of these horses, and the breeders. Continuous weekly racing with adequate prize money and numerous participants are the main requisites for a healthy protection of the Arabian horse industry in Lebanon.

**Savier: So this would be a good opportunity for breeders from all over the world who want to support**

*Potential sponsors will also gain visibility because the aim of our campaign is to reach a large worldwide audience. The results of these actions together with the names and logos of the donors will be published in articles in Tutto Arabi Magazine, Desert Heritage Magazine and Arabian Essence email blast over the coming months.*

**the horses and the racetrack, as they could donate prize money ... Could increased prize money per race improve the survival rate of the studs and the horses?**

**Nasrallah:** With the current financial situation, it is difficult to grant any prize money for participating and non - winning horses. Being able to first increase the prize money (currently 2 million Lebanese pounds equaling less than \$150 today) and distributing participating prizes for all horses is our goal, but for the moment it's only a dream. That would be an awesome approach, the races would be named for the sponsors if they want that, they can donate a trophy and a sum of money for the horses in the race.

**Savier: What would the price money for a race be?**

**Nasrallah:** 1000 Euros and a trophy cup per race, the money to be distributed among the participants, Jockeys, horse owners, trainers and 10% to the race track for organization costs, that would be a great help. A whole race day might total 5000 Euros and the trophy cups on top. But any other even small donation is most welcome.

**Savier: Many horses on the track come from old Lebanese bloodlines but they are not "WAHO Arabians". They are domestically bred Arabian racehorses, who didn't succeed in being in time for WAHO registration or the pedigree was not clear. But they all share the characteristics of a race horse: courage and speed. Would the international interest in the racetrack also help by donating WAHO Arabians for race training to increase the international attractiveness?**

**Nasrallah:** For centuries, the Arabian horse originating from the migratory Bedouin tribes in the desert has been renowned for his courage, speed, endurance, beauty and good temperament. The modern Arabians in Lebanon share these same characteristics, they are still chosen by their owners for both their beauty and



their performance capabilities. And they have to survive as well.

In recent years, also ECAHO shows for only WAHO registered horses have been held at the Hippodrome, but for us, the ideal Arabian horse remains one who can do both, win a race and perform successfully in a show class.

**Savier: Does it make sense if breeders from Europe or the Gulf area send WAHO Arabians to Beirut for race training? They would be paying for the feed and training expenses, which would put money back into the circuit to benefit the employment situation on the racetrack.**

**Nasrallah:** This would be a powerful idea, too. If the horse owners were to invest the cost for two years of stabling and training their horses here, that would be a big support against unemployment on the racetrack. The horses would be broken to the saddle and trained well. In addition, there would be more WAHO horses taking part in races, horses who would also be interesting for Arabian breeding in Lebanon.

**Savier: What would the cost per month be for training a horse on the racetrack?**

**Nasrallah:** The cost for 2 years of maintenance and training would be 150 euros a month.

**Savier: How many families are directly and indirectly dependent on the horses at the racecourse?**

**Nasrallah:** The ecosystem of the racetrack expands to the whole of Lebanon. Beirut itself has more than 600 families financially and socially dependent on the racetrack, the breeders are situated in rural areas between the north, south, and the Bekaa, and the different horse studs are located in various areas, making the total number of families depending fully or partially on the racetrack above 2,500.

*After he finished his engineering studies in Germany, Nabil Nasrallah was appointed, in 1971, at the Beirut Hippodrome du Parc as General Manager of the Society for the Protection and Improvement of the Arabian Horse in Lebanon (SPARCA, a Non-Profit Organization – NGO). Its mission is to protect the Arabian horse, ensuring its sustainability through registration and paternity checking as well as organizing competitions and racing. Mr Nasrallah is also the registrar of the WAHO studbook in Lebanon.*





You can find all important information about supporting the Arabian horses in Beirut here:  
[www.bhr-lb.com](http://www.bhr-lb.com) - [sparca.leb@gmail.com](mailto:sparca.leb@gmail.com)  
 fone number: +961 1664302

**Savier:** What happens if the racetrack has to close?

**Nasrallah:** If SPARCA is no longer able financially to continue with its mandate to manage and maintain the racetrack, the municipality will take back possession of the hippodrome. They will certainly be forced to close the hippodrome once and for all.

The worrying part is that, once done, the park will be commercially evaluated, which is expected to reach a phenomenal value as it is located on 2 main avenues and offers unlimited real estate opportunities. But the priceless loss would be that Lebanon will lose a long tradition of Arabian horse breeding. It will lose the great cultural value of the racetrack and the role of competition, excitement and cultural events for the citizens. The race horses might not survive and Beirut would lose its second biggest green space. Thousands of families would lose their income, with a big number of them being fully dependent on Arabian horse breeding for generations.

**Savier:** In case money is donated to maintain the

horses, the hippodrome and its activities, how is the money distributed? Who decides? Are there democratic structures that guarantee that money is distributed according to an emergency or contingency plan? What transparency can donors expect?

**Nasrallah:** All donors' money will be treated with full transparency, offering full access, at any time, for the donors and public to check and audit every dollar spent. I have to just hope that the hippodrome and the race horses will not die. They have been part of the culture of our capital for a hundred years, however, and we hope that we can learn from that experience of failure and will develop a strategy for survival. We will do so with the help of the worldwide family of the Arabian Horses breeders and horse lovers.

**Savier:** Thank you, dear Nabil Nasrallah. I very much hope that many breeders and lovers of Arabian horses will take these pieces of information to heart and will support and make a financial contribution to save the horses and the hippodrome in Beirut.