

“We need to think about new Ways of breeding Arabian Horses in Europe”

Monika Savier asks Bart Van Buggenhout about the different Arabian horse breeding realities in East and West



Bart with Maida Bint Bint Mohssen in the desert

Bart Van Buggenhout is a personality in the horse industry, and he has left his mark in several places of top-level horse breeding. Whether as owner and trainer in Arminta Farm in Belgium, or as the successful stud manager of Al Rayyan stud in Qatar or Al Jassmiya in CA, Bart was always looking for innovations, for solutions and experiments. In doing so, the not uncontroversial reproduction technology was as important to him as the good quality of life for the horses entrusted to him.

When I visited Bart for an interview in Qatar in 2008, he explained his various attempts to optimise breeding. These included improved natural nutrition and husbandry of the horses in what has become a climatically critical country for horse breeding. With his sensitivity and knowledge about ecological problems that affect the horses, he was ahead of his time. Today he is an interface between the cultures of horse breeding on the different continents.

In this interview now, Bart told me his assessments and suggestions for the future of Arabian horse breeding, which is flourishing in the Gulf and in crisis in the West.



Sheikh Abdulaziz with Ashhal Al Rayyan

M *Bart, you were stud manager of Al Rayyan Farm in Doha, Qatar for many years, and as you said yourself, a motivated student of Sheikh Abdul Aziz Al Thani. You then became the successful stud manager of Al Jassimya Stud in California, USA for 10 years. Now you are back in Qatar? What is your current position? Where are you standing today?*

B Currently I work as a breeding and farm consultant both for Al Rayyan - Qatar and Danubius Arabians - Romania. It's fun to be back in my old roots and try to re-establish the breeding philosophy as was under Sheikh Abdul Aziz but of course much has changed, also horses and access to stallions. It's a whole new challenge but I love it. Besides all that I started an app that features articles and stories of Arabian horses, mostly focused on the Arabian we keep at home. My home now is really back Belgium and Europe.

M *How do you see the situation of show horse breeding in the USA today?*

B USA breeding is becoming rather small for such huge country! Their registration fell from 20.000 plus to just 2000 plus in less than 20 years. Frankly these numbers are so low some of the performance trainers are complaining they cannot find horses and what they find is not of standard. If

you look at performance classes now the average age of the horses competing has dramatically increased. These are pointers to say ... the situation might not be in a healthy level now.

M *How has horse breeding in Qatar developed in the meantime?*

B Qatar has as the whole Middle East increased their numbers, still not to the level to compensate the old numbers from USA or Europe that are lost. But it's a clear sign that the Arabian horse has found its roots back in its native land and thankfully regains a new appreciation.

M *Is there still the conservation breeding of the Bedouin heritage as Sheikh Abdul Aziz wanted?*

B I think there is now a bigger diversity of breeders and ideas. When Sheikh Abdul Aziz started, he was one of the first and a keen student, he had a good following and it is still there it is still living on and I am very happy to experience it and meet the old friends back ... and some new ones joining in for those goals. But also, there are other ambitions now at play, more competitive and just gold directed. It is not 100% my world and my love or believe but then diversity lives and should live.



Al Rayyan mares photographed in Qatar Desert

M *The invention of frozen semen heralded the end of the diversity of the Arabian race. Because globalised trade routes enabled a boom of champions never before possible. Regional horse breeding is now a thing of the past. The global breeders' world changed greatly as soon as shipping semen became a working option – you simply buy that champion's semen, no matter where in the world it is stored. The price, breeders pay for easier access to the international stallion markets is a severe narrowing of the gene pool. How do you see that point?*

B I think we have to be very careful how we use and how we proceed with all the frozen semen worldwide, because it limits the diversity of the gene pool. It is very much the time that we must start to look for more diversity. The breeders of Arabian horses must go their own way, taking some risks but using stallions which are probably not the top stallions in the show ring but they bring back diversity of the blood and provide us with some new out crosses.

M *Is breeding criteria today based on the use of a few big names, beauty aspects but nobody cares about functionality?*

B Having lived in the States and having sent horses to performance trainers and winning National titles under saddle with horses I intended to breed for the show and even won in the show ring with horses and later under saddle won I have become a strong believer in functionality. In the end each horse should be able to carry a saddle no need for me to finish the marathon but it needs to be able to carry me around if requested and needed.

Conformation, good legs and movement is most certainly something that has been lost over the past 20 years, level of horse man-ship I fear too! But I do no longer believe in staying at home and have horses just for your own at home. No, I do believe now horses as in the past should be exposed, ridden, show, hikes, or extended pasture life. They should use their legs and feed and develop good bone, how don't matter but they should.

M *The famous title shows were almost all imported to the Gulf. Many Shows are held there during the winter months. Is it over with the meetings and open house events between the studs? Is it now primarily about the hunt for champion titles?*

B The farms in the Gulf countries are breeding a lot of horses at the moment, why because same like 30 years ago in Europe or USA there is a good demand. This demand at some point will stop and so the growth will stop these are just fluctuations that happen and we see them everywhere ... the past teaches us that. With it the Gulf Countries have now many shows and they do breed amazing horses. Right now, it's fair to say they breed most of the best horses born currently and competing currently. So that they require high level shows is understandable. And we in the west



Bart and Brazilian breeder Murillo Kammer and Soren Stanescu, Danubius Arabians owner on right side, Dr. Raphael and Ioana – the Danubius Arabians vet and manager on left side



Sheikh Jassim Bin Khalifa Al Thani and team Aljassimya receiving best breeders trophy at World Championships in Paris

should let them but we need to think about new ways of breeding Arabian horses in Europe. We should go and find what we need to do to enhance our own local market again and for that we need to stop pointing fingers at others but only at ourselves because the solutions are with us and not with others. The farms in the Gulf countries are still doing big open houses and absolutely do plenty of presentations for friends, family and other enthusiasts ... there is no shortage that's a shortage that only we in the West have, we have stopped visiting each other and learning from each other's failures or gains.

M *Should we try to breed these qualities back through selection and conservation breeding? Or we should let it go, the horses today have other big points. Over the centuries people have always bred horses to suit their tastes and needs?*

B See, everything has a time to grow and decline and each country or continent needs to do its own thing to fill its own needs. Many people now understand globalization has some good things but many negatives too! We in Europe need to look at ourselves and start again from the bottom because in many ways we are close to that, same as USA, same Australia by the sounds of it. We need to learn

to understand our youth and there needs because they are the future, they are the only ones that can revive it! Unfortunate no one is doing it and they just have focus on business and staying a live with whatever sale they can still make mostly to Middle East. WE need to start breeding back our own horse for our own needs. And I believe it should be versatile because young people are interested in more action and adventure.

M *The virtues of Arabian horses 100 years ago were people-friendliness, stamina, fertility, charisma and nobility, and a few were also beautiful. Much of that has been lost today.*

B You might call it conservation but I think soon we need to speak about preservation because of these falling numbers there might not be enough diversity left in the future to keep the race a live in a healthy genetic pool. So, I rather would love to see some rising numbers. As too diversity I do know many breeders realize that too and to name a few such as Al Nasser Stud leasing divers' stallions for their program, also Danubius is doing it. It's not so people don't know, but to do something about it has to become 5 min before 12, as with everything in this world. So, I stay optimistic ... lots can be done in 5 minutes.



Bart carrying a trophy at the world championships home

M *How can we get back to breed more quality instead of just quantity? In some countries more than 5000 foals are registered each year.*

B Ha this is a good and interesting question. So, let me ask you first one in return to keep in mind? Where is the quantity as worldwide registration numbers have dropped by over 60%?? Don't we need to keep a rich and exuberant blood pool? Well now you get some answers but I don't have them all. Yes, some farms have increased their number where other breeders have disappeared and gone altogether, but is it a bad thing these farms are now picking up the slack? There is not a simple answer to your questions but as history teaches when something gets unappreciated in one place it gets appreciated in another. The Western world suffers right now mainly from youth that isn't willing to take over what their grandparents, few parents are doing ... the natural generational flow isn't up to date ... reasons for that? Two things I believe to be true is the cost of horse keeping and the exuberant use of data ... data that gives us so many more options in life then for example my generation had growing up. Young people today seek adventure, travel is easy, cost for traveling is comparative lower than it used to be and so they go: studying abroad, traveling, working, all kinds of adventures...but that

life style doesn't fit with horses whom need daily care. Numbers are up in the Middle East only, why, simple they have now the money they didn't had 40-50 years ago and have the interest re-shaping there cultural heritage, second their traditional family bonds makes them spend more time at home, therefor ... right ... it's easier to be and bond with horses. OK this all is simply explained, the truth is far more complex but we would need a lot of time for that. Finally, if there was much more quantity decades ago where the numbers over quality % higher truly higher than till now ... I think if you truly study that part, you will find not! I am happy Middle East is boosting the production at this point where we stand today, as this might supply other nations or world parts in the future ... I believe it will always move around. 20 years from now Middle Eastern kids will most likely be backpacking around the world and not feel for being tied up on mocking out stalls. People like to blame situations, most of the time they see other people's situation before their own ...again look at worldwide numbers and figures of Arabian horse breeding, if they keep falling as they are we might need WWF in 50 years to safe this breed. I say it with a joke but you know what I mean.

M *The impact of climate change on the countries of origin of Arabian horse breeding, probably makes it impossible to keep horses as grazing animals during the winter. The Gulf States have had experience with this for a long time.*

B This statement is accurate but meanwhile extended over large parts of Europe - USA and other countries I fear, we see a dramatic change in nature everywhere.

M *What will be done there to protect breeding and how will that look in the future? Can the horses only be kept in stables?*

B People adapt and most animals adapt, horses are exceptional adaptable too that's why I guess they have been such century long friends too us, much like dogs and cats and other pets. Ways will be found and adjustments will be made.

M *Are the Mediterranean countries coming back into play as breeding areas for the Arabs because of climate change? Like they did 1000 years ago?*



Bart with three Aljassimya bred horses winning all three top 10 in the hunter futurity and US Nationals

B No, I think they have just as limited food sources as the Middle East has now, failed crops, grass and hay limitations. I do not see the countries like South Italy - Spain or Greece having much chance at all. If anything, I do think areas like Normandy or Poland are the right places to be for horse breeding now more than ever.

M *How do the young breeders see this problem? Will there be new technologies or rather resignation?*

B Young breeders ... well do we have any in the West or is this a question for the Middle East? I think we in the West again need to go to work, by ourselves to create young breeders. In the Middle East well the younger ones will have difficulties and challenges of their own, good horses are in the hands of few and those few don't need to share if they don't want too. So, they need to figure how too successfully try to start and then continue, they will not have and easy task either.

M *That looks like the Gulf countries and Europe must go their own ways?*

B I strongly believe YES. I do not think it favours European breeders with the issues they face to be under the same umbrella with the Arabian

countries. Both have complete opposite problems and need completely different solutions on how to handle the issues at hand. If the Arab countries want, they can hire help or advice where needed but I find that we asap need a focused organization that deals with what lives in Europe, because if it continues as it goes there is absolutely no need for anything to saved anymore in few years. This is another discussion I do not have all the answers for ... yet and maybe never will as with most situations its ever changing ... but it will ask time and effort, creativity and focus ...

M *Thank you for your time and very interesting reflections about the Arabian breed.*