

A TEST OF ENDURANCE

Competition is fierce in the world of endurance racing. Stamina, perseverance and concentration from both horse and rider are proving key to the UAE's dominance of "the race to end all races"





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THE HORSES WHINNY EXCITEDLY AS THEY MILL AROUND the starting point at The Emirates International Endurance Village in Al Wathba, Abu Dhabi. On their backs, their riders are waiting for the trail to be announced open. Thirty seconds later the race starts and the frontrunners head out at a controlled trot. With hours of riding ahead, getting a jump on the pack is not an advantage: this is not a race of speed and dexterity. The horse and rider teams have 160 kilometres to cover so strategy is of the utmost importance, and knowing the horse's limits is imperative.

Worldwide, interest in endurance racing is at an all time high, although there are few countries that threaten the UAE's dominance of the sport. "Endurance racing is a growing sport in the UAE," begins Taleb Daher Al Muhairi, secretary general of the Emirates Equestrian Federation. "Endurance is the most exciting kind of racing because as a rider, trainer or owner you can spend more time with the horse. The relationship with the horse is much stronger and the race lasts a lot longer."

The UAE's love of horses dates back to Bedouin times when horses played a vital role in society, particularly in combat, where their speed, agility and stamina could be the deciding factor. Horses were highly prized as symbols of wealth and status, and remain so today. The camel was even more integral. Camel racing has its fair share of advocates, but in a race-off the results are clear.

In 1993, a modern race was held in the UAE, pitting camel against horse. The 40km event held on a trail winding deep into the desert saw the first fifteen places taken by horses. Given this result, endurance racing has been forsaken by camels, with horses claiming the discipline as their own.

Endurance racing in the UAE is supervised by the Emirates Equestrian Federation. Amongst other responsibilities, the Federation organises endurance rides with the aim of promoting pure-bred Arabian horses.



ABOVE: HRH Princess Haya Bint Al Hussein competing in the FEI Endurance World Championship in the UAE.

"Arabian horses and Anglo-Arab horses, which are half Arabian and half thoroughbred, are the most popular horses for endurance racing," claims Al Muhairi. These breeds dominate the endurance riding scene as they tend to be good-natured, quick to learn and willing to please, as well as being hardy animals, well used to the rigours of desert riding.

The Arabian was selectively bred in this harsh environment to continually improve its stamina and soundness. It is not surprising that it has proved to be the preferred breed for endurance racing. "The main difference between Arabian horses and thoroughbred horses is that Arabians are better suited for long distances," says Al Muhairi, explaining that most of the Arabian horses in the UAE racing scene are bred overseas.

The imported horses start taking part in the qualifying races from five-years-old. For a high level competition they have to be more seasoned, with a minimum age of seven. Al Muhairi says prices for a ready-to-race horse start from as little as US\$2,000. "Then again it might be \$100,000 plus," he says. I ask whether the more expensive horse would be more likely to win. "Any horse can be a winner," he laughs.

Endurance races are held across the world, but few are as big business as in the UAE. "It has become a big industry," confirms Al Muhairi. "Including the owners, the trainers, and the riders, a large number of people work with the horses. It's very broad reaching because the sport helps all of the families of the people that work in the industry."

This goes some way towards explaining how Abu Dhabi maintains three major dedicated endurance riding venues, all of which have

A SEVENTEEN-YEAR-OLD EMIRATI SCHOOLGIRL CREATED HISTORY BY BECOMING THE FIRST FEMALE RIDER TO WIN THE 120KM UAE NATIONAL DAY CUP

been purpose-built: The Emirates International Endurance Village in Al Wathba; Bou Theib Endurance Village in Al Khatem; and Al Asayel Endurance Village in Sweihan.

The Emirates International Endurance Village is vast, built on 40,000sqm of land. It encompasses stables, seven fort-like towers for VIPs, a high-tech veterinary clinic, six fully furnished rest houses for the Sheikhs and guests, as well as a host of ancillary services such as restaurants.

Despite the encroaching desert, the top-of-the-line instruments, equipment and facilities allude to advanced precision and efficiency. Looking out across the sand to the weather-predicting (hot and sunny) digital electronic timepieces on each of the seven entrance gates, I can feel the equestrian heritage of the past meeting the technology of tomorrow.

A large circular tent is fitted to host the riders and officials while they rest between stages. Unlike endurance races in many other locations where the teams head out across natural countryside, the tracks here are maintained, which allows crewing vehicles to be beside the competitors at all times, adding a safety net to the sport. "The difference here is that the race is on flat ground, so it's a higher speed race," says Al Muhairi. "The lack of natural obstacles like fences and trees increases the speed."

Each of the Abu Dhabi venues hosts a number of endurance rides throughout the season, which extends from November to March during the cooler weather. Throughout the term, Al Muhairi is anticipating more than 8,000 horses and riders to participate in official races. 2,802 participants had entered the five races that were held up to early December, which was only the beginning of the season. "Especially in the last three to four years, the numbers have been increasing," confirms Al Muhairi. "In the race just yesterday 235 horses started."

The race Al Muhairi was referring to was an 80km qualifier. Endurance racing encompasses qualifier rides of 40km and 80km, open rides of 100km and 120km, and a championship ride of 160km. Just in case that is not long enough, there is also one 240km three-day event, which is part of the broader HH Sheikh Sultan Bin Zayed Al

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Nahyan International Equestrian Festival. Not every horse is capable of competing in every race – it takes a special horse to manage the 160km course. The same can be said of the rider.

Al Muhairi is an ex-rider. I ask him how it feels to be on a horse for up to twelve hours. "When you ride for something like nine hours, you don't think about anything else but how you are going to finish the race," he replies. "This is a relaxing moment. You just switch off and everything else goes away except for your riding."

The day before the race there is a pre-ride, where the horses are vet-checked and both horse and rider are weighed in. Unlike in a stakes race, where the average weight of a jockey is 52kg, in a CEI4* endurance race the minimum weight of the rider is 75kg with saddle. Underweight riders have to carry weights.

During strict veterinary checks held throughout the race, horses with a hint of a health or soundness issue will be removed from the competition. No such tests exist for the riders, who have to judge their own ability to continue. During the inspections the horses are assessed on three criteria: pulse recovery, metabolic stability and gait. If they fail, and many do, they are pulled. This results in the maxim that "for some riders, just to finish is to win".

While endurance riding is a hard slog for both horse and rider, it is by no means a male-only sport. Abu Dhabi hosts a number of women-only events including the 100km Sheikha Fatima Bint Mansour Bin Zayed Al Nahyan Endurance Cup for Ladies. This is the richest endurance race in the world for women, in 2012 offering a total of prize purse of AED 800,000.

"It is restricted to Arab women to encourage and provide more winning opportunities for them," explains Lara Sawaya, director of Sheikh Mansour Bin Zayed Global Arabian Flat Racing Festival. Increasingly, women riders are also competing against their male counterparts in the standard endurance races – and winning. In 2011 Fatma Al Marri, a seventeen-year-old Emirati schoolgirl, created history by becoming the first female rider to win the 120km National Day Cup in the UAE out of a field of 170 entries.

While many of the UAE's royalty participate in endurance racing, it has been deliberately kept open to ordinary riders and owners. Spectators, family and friends mingle with competitors and see every step of the race. "All kinds of people get involved," asserts Al Muhairi. "As part of the registration body, we see everyone join. The Sheikhs own and ride horses, many high level businessmen join... but also normal, everyday people who have only one or two horses."

As we part I ask Al Muhairi if he can offer any training tips. "Each trainer has their own method for training," he expounds, "and each trainer has their own secrets."

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