

HARRY HERBERT

Sheikh Joaan bin Hamad Al Thani's Al Shaqab Racing, a rising force in the Thoroughbred industry, enjoyed a banner day in the Middle East Thursday, as its silks were carried to victory by **Dubday (GB)** (Dubawi {Ire}) in the HH The Emir's Trophy, Qatar's richest Thoroughbred race, and by **Mshawish** (Medaglia d'Oro) in the G2 Zabeel Mile at Meydan in Dubai. Late last year, Sheikh Joaan appointed Harry Herbert, Managing Director of Highclere Racing, as his racing advisor, and Michele MacDonald sat down with Herbert following Dubday's victory Thursday.



Harry Herbert
Michele MacDonald

MM: How do you think the Qatar International Racing Festival fared in its first year as a truly international event before visiting racing figures from around the world?

HH: Absolutely fantastic. There's a huge atmosphere here, and there [a lot of] European people out here--English trainers and French trainers and some who don't have horses running here, like John Gosden, Sir Michael Stoute, Richard Hannon Jr. and many others. And there were heads of racing authorities. The last time I was out here was two years ago, and I've really seen it grow. Everyone knows the importance of the Qatari investment in the world Thoroughbred industry--it is massive and hugely important, and it's great that it is being supported by the major folks from across different racing nations who came here to see what Qatar is up to.

MM: How do you perceive the Qatar International Festival growing in the future?

HH: As far as it growing, they're talking about a new racecourse and there are lots of things that they will want to change, including the quarantine facilities. There are various things that are going to need to change before it can grow into a major international event that will, without any doubt, have significant support from trainers who will run their horses here. The time scale I'm not certain of, but I know that Sheikh Joaan and his advisors that I've spoken to are extremely keen that things are progressed rapidly and that this Qatar festival finds its place within the world festivals, with trainers from across the world running their horses here. I'm sure that's only a matter of a couple of years away.

MM: How far along are the plans for the new racecourse and what might the plans include?

HH: There's a lot of discussion going on at the moment. There are two or three sites that are being discussed. Probably the answer is still a ways away. But what I have heard--and remember I am very new in my job as racing advisor to Sheikh Joaan--is that there is an absolute intention to get this done and to get it done as soon as possible and to get it done well. I don't think we are looking to create another Meydan, but we're certainly looking to create a facility that will incorporate the best horses in the world coming to Qatar. That's what they want--it's about getting the best here. And I have no doubt that will happen over the next few years.

MM: One issue you mentioned concerns quarantine rules. What might have to change in Qatar to make it easier for international horses to travel in and out of the country?

HH: I suspect it's going to have to be addressed by government, the equivalent of a ministry of agriculture here and at a different level that I'm not involved with. But if you are building a new racecourse, the first thing you've got to be thinking of is your facilities for international horses. Otherwise, it can't be an international festival. They are very, very aware of it, but as far as the details, I can't answer that question.

MM: People in America will also be interested in what Sheikh Joaan might have planned for racing and/or breeding in the U.S. What are the goals?

HH: He is keen that Al Shaqab can compete in principal Group 1 races around the world. He has always said 'around the world.' It is an international success story that he is looking to create. Therefore, I have no doubt that over next few years there will be more horses in the United States. Some, like in the European program, will be bought privately and others, I suspect, [will come from] a yearling buying program that has to go alongside that, with breeze-up sales and the rest of it. He's expressed a real wish to win the Kentucky Derby. He absolutely believes it and wants it. And I think, as we've seen today [in the HH The Emir's Trophy won by Dubday], that's his passion: 'I want to win this race and go for it.' Whether [winning the Kentucky Derby] can happen this year or next year, I don't know, but the effort will be there to make it happen.

He's just sent his first horse in the U.S. to Todd Pletcher, a filly, from [French trainer] Damien de Watrigant. She has just arrived at Belmont Park and will head down to Florida and we will see how she gets on. Her name is Damsah (Mr. Greeley), and she's four years old. She's sort of a sprinting filly [who has been raced in France], and maybe in the States she might need to go a bit further. She's not a superstar, but it's a start.

Todd met Sheikh Joaan and his advisors at the Breeders' Cup last year. We've been talking with Todd, but we'll need other trainers as well. Other trainers will get some patronage.

MM: Did Sheikh Joaan enjoy the Breeders' Cup and what did he think of this experience in American racing?

HH: Of course it was a very disappointing day [with his runners]. It's always difficult at the end of our [European season], and those horses had a tough time; [multiple Group 1 winner] Olympic Glory (Ire) (Choisir {Aus}) had had a long season [before he ran unplaced in the G1 Breeders' Cup Mile] and he's probably more of a horse that appreciates easier ground. But the Breeders' Cup is a great racing festival and that's the kind of event in which the Sheikh wants to see Al Shaqab compete.

MM: You mentioned after Dubday won the Emir's Trophy that jockey Frankie Dettori was wearing newly designed silks for Al Shaqab Racing. How were the silks conceived?

HH: The Sheikh wanted the gray and the maroon to come into the design since those are [Qatar's] national colors, and he liked the idea of The Queen's silks at home with the gold braid [on the front]. So I went away and got very various shades of gray and we put the gold braid on top, beautifully done. And rather like Highclere Thoroughbred Racing--we use a velvet cap--we tried various shades of maroon. The maroon velvet cap looked beautiful with that shade of gray on the silks. Then it was a question of a tassel [on the cap] or what The Queen has, which is called a fringe, with a slightly heavier gold on the top. So when I presented the new silks to him, his reaction was fantastic--he was so pleased. It seemed to be exactly what he wanted.

Like all of those things, watching Frankie ride out today...the first thing he did was put his hand on the ground into the turf and then just wipes it [on the silks]. It seems like jockeys have that tradition. I know everyone involved with Al Shaqab have great pride in looking at the new silks and having a jockey as great as Frankie ride in them the first time and then winning the biggest Thoroughbred race in Qatar is absolutely the stuff of dreams. It was very special for everyone involved.



Frankie Dettori aboard Dubday in the new Al Shaqab silks
Michele MacDonald

MM: Was Sheikh Joaan here to see Dubday's race?

HH: Sheikh Joaan was here today and very happy. He brought his sons with him, and it was lovely to see his sons going to pick up the trophy. He's got to rush off and catch a plane; he's going to be heading back to London.

MM: What was his reaction to the race and Dubday's victory?

HH: Owners at every level--you go through that moment. It was, 'Frankie, you've got to get out of that pocket,' and then the gap appeared and Frankie asked the horse to quicken and Dubday hit a flat spot just for a moment. Then



Sheikh Joaan's sons after collecting the trophy
Michele MacDonald

suddenly, it all changed in the blink of an eye. Frankie rode a great race, flew down the straight. Of course, [Sheikh Joaan] was super excited and then we had Frankie's flying dismount and all the crowd here went absolutely mad. And so there were so many wonderful ticks in all the right boxes, but it was Frankie, it's new silks, it's the Sheikh, it's [Qatar's] own race. He

was with the emir, so they have sort of a set routine, so he and I will have to catch up later on the phone about the whole thing.

I think it's now about planning for this horse's future and sending him to Dubai for the [\$5 million G1] Sheema Classic, which I think would be the right spot for him at a mile and a half, and then see how he gets on there and see how he fits in the whole international picture before making any set decision about whether he goes to Europe, or possibly, because he loves fast ground, to the States. That's a real possibility.

MM: Although you are the racing advisor to Sheikh Joaan, do you know anything about plans for his breeding program and possible farm acquisitions?

HH: He has a lovely stud in Normandy [Haras de Bouquetot, where he stands Group 1 winners Planteur (Ire) (Danhill Dancer {Ire} and Style Vendome (Fr) (Anabaa)]. They're not rushing into that side of it. They've bought some lovely mares and obviously that will grow as the beautifully-bred fillies that he's been buying retire to the paddocks. But there's no plan right now to say 'We want a new stud farm in America and another one in England and another one in Australia.' That is something about which there will be decisions made in the coming months.

MM: How do you like your new position with Sheikh Joaan and Al Shaqab so far?

HH: It's very exciting. It's very daunting to start with. But for me, the Sheikh has been so welcoming and the team that is around the Sheikh have been so welcoming. With the team that I am putting together in the offices--the same offices we have at Highclere Thoroughbred Racing, but we've expanded them--it's a very exciting process. I am absolutely loving it. I'm only three months in, but days like today, as we all know, do make it very special and they 'refill the tanks' and give one an enormous buzz. The Sheikh has people working hard around him and he appreciates us, and working for someone who has such aspirations is absolutely thrilling. I'm incredibly lucky to have this opportunity. [Click to share this story.](#)