



THE LIFE AND LEGACY OF
Ruminaja Ali

■ *by Cynthia Culbertson*





*Ruminaja Ali
at Gardner
Bloodstock
in 1983.*

If Ruminaja Ali had been a person, his life surely would have ended up on the silver screen. Some enterprising young writer would have pitched his story to an up-and-coming Hollywood producer, who in turn would have found a handsome leading man to play the part, and the rest would be history – a Hollywood blockbuster of a movie, seen around the world.

The requisite elements are all there – a youngster from a second generation immigrant family to America, sent to

a new home, but rejected, and sent back. Then finding another home, and going off to a national competition, still a youngster, where, as the “underdog,” he was not expected to emerge a winner. Next, the sweet taste of victory, and a national championship which brings him to the attention of a charismatic and innovative manager who takes him to even greater glory. Another day in the Nationals spotlight, this time competing against the “grownups.” A multi-million dollar syndication. Celebrity-filled record-breaking auction sales. Sons,

daughters, and grandchildren achieving worldwide fame. And finally, returning home to spend his last peaceful years with the family that had been his ever-faithful supporters since age one.

But movies come and go, often quickly forgotten when the next one arrives at the theatre. Perhaps we should be thankful that Ruminaja Ali was a horse. Not just any horse, but an Arabian stallion of supreme type and quality who founded a dynasty during his own lifetime. A stallion whose influence marches

through time; whose get and grandget have in turn founded their own dynasties, conquering the world with the strength and beauty of their blood.

Ruminaja Ali, bred by Russell and Mildred Jameson of Ranch Ruminaja, was foaled on May 11, 1976. His pedigree, a judicious blending of the "new" Egyptian imports to the United States, was a reflection of that old horseman's adage: "Let the sire of the sire be the grandsire of the dam." In his case, that meant *Morafic, the legendary son of the Egyptian



Ruminaja Ali

Agricultural Society's supersire Nazeer, whose sons and daughters exerted a global influence on the Arabian breed. All four of Ruminaja Ali's grandparents, including *Morafic, were imported from Egypt by Doug and Margaret Marshall of Gleannloch Farms whose imports in the 1960's helped create a renaissance of Egyptian Arabian horse breeding in the United States.

The world was captivated by the fairytale beauty of *Morafic, and the lovely bay Nazeer daughter, *Bint Maisa el Saghira, also garnered enthusiasm for



Egyptian bloodlines as she conquered the American show ring with her leggy elegance and striking movement. Their son Shaikh al Badi, born in 1969, became one of *Morafic's most prolific sons, siring nearly 700 foals, including Ruminaja Ali. Bint Magidaa, Ruminaja Ali's dam, was a half-sister to the well-known stallion Nabil and produced seventeen foals in her lifetime, many of them champions. *Khofo, the sire of Bint Magidaa, was the second source of *Morafic blood in Ali's pedigree. His dam, the lovely

Anter daughter *Nabilahh, was a half-sister to *Farazdac, a stallion of ethereal beauty. Linebred to Nazeer, with the additional sire lines of Anter, Shahloul, and Sid Abouhom, the pedigree of Ruminaja Ali also featured superb mare lines from the finest families of Egypt, including Moniet el Nefous, Zareefa, Yosreia, and Kateefa. Ruminaja Ali was Abayyan Om Jurays in strain, tracing in tail female to a mare given as a gift to Egypt from King Abdul Aziz of Saudi Arabia in the early 1930's.

As might be expected, Ruminaja Ali was a captivating foal and grew into a fine young colt. He was entered by his breeders, the Jamesons, in their local futurity, where he was shown to victory three years in a row. It was at his first appearance in the West Michigan Breeders Futurity class that fate engineered a collision course between the Bergren family and Ruminaja Ali. The impact was instantaneous, as Tom Bergren and his mother simply could not take their eyes off the tall, elegant, and boisterous colt that Gene



Ruminaja Ali in a tender moment with Matt Bergren after his return to the family farm in Michigan

Reichardt showed to victory that day. Tom immediately called his brother Jim and asked him to go take a look at the colt at his earliest opportunity.

"I had a really hard time getting to see Ali," explains Jim. "First, by the time I got some time off to go to the other side of the state to see him, we were disappointed to learn that we were too late, and he had been sold." Time passed, and when the Bergrens went to pick up some mares they had sent to the Jamesons to breed to Ali's sire, Shaikh al Badi, they had a chance conversation with one of the girls who worked at the farm. "We heard from her that Ali had been returned by the original buyer and was back at Gene Reichardt's," continues Jim. "We talked about it all the way home from Ranch Ruminaja, and decided that I should take an airplane over to Milwaukee, Wisconsin to see him, since it was just a 90 mile flight across the lake." It sounded easy enough, but when the fateful day came, once again, Jim was prevented from meeting Ali. "After the passengers from the incoming flight were finally off and we were just about ready to get on the plane, the guy driving the luggage cart went too close to the aircraft and smashed into the wing. They decided the plane was unsafe to fly, so I had to call Gene and cancel the visit."

Jim finally made it to Milwaukee, and life in the Bergren family has never been the same. "I was shooting video of Ali, so my first sight of him was through the viewfinder," Jim says. "He was kind of on a hill, and looked so tall I thought maybe it was the ground he was standing on. Then when I did get on level ground beside him, he kept looming up in front of me, and I realized he really was a big colt."

A recurrent theme in the recollections of all who knew and loved Ali is that of his unique character. Jim Bergren recalls that he was instantly aware that this colt was different. "As I was looking him over, I noticed that he was looking ME over," he says laughingly. "I said to myself, he's making up his mind about me while I'm making up my mind about him! First I noticed his balance, then his size, then all of his wonderful qualities put together, but finally, what impressed me the most was just his attitude."



Ruminaja Ali, victorious at the West Michigan Fall Classic Show with Ted Gibson as a two-year old colt

Jim admits he had just \$100 cash in his pocket that day. He used that money to "seal the deal" with the Jamesons and keep Ali off the market until he returned home to complete the purchase. For his time, Ali was quite an expensive colt. But the

Bergrens didn't bargain – they paid the asking price – which was, of course, a bargain in the end.

What made the Bergrens decide that Ali was right for them? At the time they had a nice collection of mares of fine American breeding, including Fadi and El Magato daughters, as well as some mares featuring Egyptian blood. "We were tired of hauling our mares to other stallions," Jim says, "and we probably used up eight of our nine cat lives hauling those mares and their

babies from Michigan through Chicago to breed to Egyptian stallions like *Tuhotmos, *Farazdac, and *Moatasim." But the family was determined to continue with their decision to use the new Egyptian imports. Not only were these stallions visually exci-



*Ruminaja Ali in Canada
as a four-year old,
where he achieved
Top Ten honors.*

ting to the Bergrens, but they believed the bloodlines would add exactly what they were seeking in their herd. "After we learned that Egyptians were having the best influence on our mares, when I saw Ali, I thought 'Here we go!' He's a young horse, but he's gonna be a great show horse, and yes, I believe he's gonna be a wonderful breeding horse, too." The future would prove Jim correct on all accounts.

The Ali star began to rise and twinkle when he won unprecedented back-to-back victories in all three years of the West Michigan futurity, but it truly began shining brightly in October of 1979 when he headed west to the U.S. Arabian National Championships in Albuquerque, New Mexico. The Bergrens had never taken a horse to the Nationals before, and this was only the second National Championship they had ever attended. Ted Gibson was the man at the end of Ali's lead.

well, he was just Ali!" It is important to remember that 1979 was a great year for three year old colts. The Top Ten Futurity Colts included the straight Egyptians Ansata Halim Bey, Ansata Imperial, and Ibn Zaghoul, as well as the *Bask sons The Chief Justice, and Grande Bask. Ali came from nowhere to defeat the eventual Reserve Champion, Huckleberry Bey. The enduring reputations of his competition made the victory even sweeter, as several of those colts went on to stellar careers as show and breeding horses. Jim Bergren recalls, "We didn't know anybody at the Nationals and we didn't know what was going to happen. The preliminaries began on Saturday the week before the finals, and we made the first cut, and then the second cut, and we began to see all these really nice horses going into the ring and then heading home, and we were still in the running with Ali. Then, when Ali was named National Champion, we were

Matt Bergren, although too young to remember the actual event, loves to watch the footage of Ali at that fateful show and listen to his uncles as they recall those unforgettable moments. "Ted was a heck of a trainer," says Matt, "and Ali,

just totally and completely overwhelmed!"

Several other lives were influenced that day in October when Ali emerged victorious. David Gardner was in the crowd, and has often been quoted as saying this was the moment his love affair with Ruminaja Ali began. "Ali was very, very different from anything in that class," remembers David, and after taking a close look at the colt's illustrious pedigree, he immediately contacted the Bergrens and began his pursuit of Ali.

Loy and Linda Davidson of Focus Farm were also present during Ali's win. Known as astute breeders with an unerring eye towards selecting the best stallions to compliment their mares, they immediately booked several mares to Ali. "The Davidson's faith in Ali literally kept our doors open those first couple of years," says Jim Bergren. The long list of Focus-bred champions and champion-producing sons and daughters of Ali proved their decision to breed to this untried stallion to be a prudent one indeed.

Ted Gibson, like so many who were close to this great stallion, was strongly influenced by his character. "Ali was just unbelievable," Ted recalls, "and I don't get emotional about a lot of horses, but this one had more personality than any other horse I ever worked with." Ted recalls that Ali was trained both to ride and drive, and although he

was never shown in performance, he was very impressive under saddle. "You could push Ali only so far when he needed discipline," Ted explains, "and then you'd reach a point where Ali would say, 'Okay, you got the message across. That's enough!' – he could shoot you down with just a look"

When Ted had Ali for training he was still a young stallion, always on the move, always wanting to be center stage, and always full of nervous energy. He never went anywhere at a quiet walk, but instead did a liting dance that became known as "the Ali shuffle." One of the few people who consistently had a calming effect on Ali was a young lady named Rhonda Vandermeullen. "She would take him for long walks in the afternoons, just letting him nibble on grass, listen to the birds and relax, and they got to know each other very well," says Ted. Rhonda, as one of the top show grooms in the country at that time, accompanied Ali to the 1980 U.S. Nationals where he was competing for National Champion Stallion.

Ted Gibson remembers that class like it was yesterday. "Whenever Ali got into trouble at home," he explains, "I'd yell at him and say, 'Ali, quit!'" When the Bergrens got to the Nationals that year

they began giving out buttons with "Ali" printed on them, and during his class the audience began chanting "Ali, Ali" over and over. "Of course, Ali immediately thought he was in trouble," says Ted, "and he started doing that little shuffle and I'm trying to get through to his head and into his brain that everything was really fine, and that he was okay, and not in trouble, and just to relax." Even though he was a bit unnerved, Ali still performed like the champion he was and gave Ted everything he had that day. "My biggest regret as a trainer was that I sometimes

don't believe I was good enough to take Ali where he really could have gone," laments Ted, "He was so regal, and if you earned his respect he would do anything for you. I just wanted to be good enough for him – he was that kind of a horse."

In 1980 the competition was very deep, and Jim Bergren refers to the horses shown during Ali's years in the ring as a "gathering of eagles." The names are still familiar more than twenty years later. "Muscat was named National Champion that year, Bey



Photo by Polly Kratz

Ali as a three-year old taken two weeks before his victory in at the 1979 U.S. Nationals, where he was U.S. National Champion Intucity Colt

Shah was Reserve, and Ruminaja Ali was third. When Ted gave Ali to Rhonda after they left the arena, the stallion dropped his head into Rhonda's chest and heaved a deep sigh. "It was as if he saying, 'I gave you everything I had,'" Ted recalls of the emotional moment between the two. It was the only time he ever saw Ali walk flat-footed, and his head remained down at Rhonda's side during the long walk back to the barns.

The "Gardner Bloodstock" years were next in Ali's long and distinguished career, and China Spring, Texas became his new home. David Gardner, still watching intently as Ali added U.S. and Canadian Top Ten laurels to his show career, remained convinced that Ali possessed innate greatness both as a show horse and sire. Again, he pursued a purchase, and finally persevered, engineering an innovative multi-million dollar syndication, of which the Bergrens remained members. There can be no doubt that David Gardner pioneered a level of promotion and marketing for Ali that was totally unprecedented for an Arabian stallion at that time, and remains a benchmark even today. He steadfastly marched Ali forward, with class and style, to an unparalleled level of accomplishments, and the legend of Ruminaja Ali would not exist without David Gardner and his extraordinary vision for this stallion.

The final time Ruminaja Ali went to the U.S. National Championships he had David Gardner on the lead, several new owners, and legions of loyal fans to cheer him on. Ali seemed to get better and better with each showing that year and the



The last photograph ever taken of Ruminaja Ali, two weeks before his death in 1997

number of his followers increased as a result. By the night of the finals, it seemed the entire crowd had but one

Ruminaja Ali with David Gardner at the 1983 U.S. Nationals where he was U.S. Reserve National Champion Stallion



name on their lips – "Ali." When the beautiful stallion, now lightly dappled and nearly white, was named U.S. Reserve National Champion Stallion, the noise in the arena was deafening.

A stallion may earn fleeting moments of fame through his individual excellence and show ring successes, but only in the breeding shed can he achieve true immortality. There can be no doubt that Ruminaja Ali, only a few short years after his death, has founded a dominant sire line that is influencing the Arabian breed around the world. Ali sired many champions and of his 449 offspring, both straight Egyptian and others, many of these have gone on to produce their own champions. But if Ali had sired only one foal he still would have gone down in the history books, and that foal was the result of an interesting twist of fate.

Before they acquired Ruminaja Ali, the Bergrens bred several mares to his sire, Shaikh al Badi. One of these was a lovely daughter of El Magato named Heritage Memory. For some unknown reason, she did not get in foal that year, a first for her. So when they secured the purchase of Ruminaja Ali, the Bergrens decided to bring her home and breed her to the new colt. She immediately got in foal, and the next year an exquisite bay colt was born. They named him Ali Jamaal, and like his sire, he went on to win the U.S. National Champion Futurity, and in 1990 was named U.S. National Champion stallion. But perhaps even more astonishing, he also sired a U.S. National Champion Futurity colt, BST Dajamaal, and a U.S. Reserve National Champion Stallion, Dakar al

Jamaal, just like his father before him. Today, the sons of Ali Jamaal are busy founding dynasties of their own.

What made Ali special as a breeding stallion? "He sired consistent traits," says Jim Bergren. "He would put type on a horse, and a look that said, 'this is an Ali horse.' He would also technically improve the horse – whether the mare needed hip or a shorter back, or neck, or type, he could make these improvements on a regular basis." It is nearly impossible to name his most influential sons and daughters, as there are so many who have had successful careers as both show and breeding horses. A quick look at just a few of his sons of international significance is impressive, but far from comprehensive. In Qatar there is Kaamil Batal, a National Champion in that country. Brazil, of course, is home to Ali Jamaal. In Australia, Anaza El Nizr has exerted a strong influence, while both in Argentina and in the U.S. Anaza El Farid achieved great fame as a show horse and sire. Coaltown was a Reserve National Champion in Italy, and Ali Valentino and MA Alishah have had tremendous show success in Germany. In the United States, The Minstril has founded his own dynasty, particularly through his son Thee Desperado, yet another U.S. Reserve National Champion of the Ali sire line. The Focus-bred get have also been very influential, including Focus Fanali, Focus Khemali, and Focus Alianna, to name but a few. Straight Egyptian daughters such as Bint Nourah, Lone, Bint Atallah, BKA Alisabbah, Bint Bint Sonbolah, and Bint Zaarina have been outstanding producers. A quick look at a complete progeny list shows that this is but a small sample of his many superb sons and daughters.

Ruminaja Ali was laid to rest on August 29, on the Bergren farm in Michigan. Somehow, it seems that the lives of all who knew this great stallion were changed in some way from having known him. Ali's full brother, Ruminaja Fayez, came to live with the Bergrens recently, and along with Ali El Din, Ali Jamaal's full brother, they feel especially blessed to have so much of the Ali influence on their farm.



Matt noticed when Fayez arrived that his personality was remarkably similar to Ali, as it was somewhat difficult to get close to either stallion. One day, however, when Ruminaja Fayez was turned loose in the arena, he seemed to finally seek out Matt, and want to be near him. Matt decided to "seize the moment" and enjoy some special time with Ali's treasured brother. He led him out on the farm to take a leisurely stroll together and Fayez walked quietly beside Matt until he suddenly stopped and put his head down to graze. Fayez had unerringly chosen to halt at the exact site of the grave of

his brother, Ruminaja Ali. A stallion that, while on this earth, was perhaps never of this earth.

"I think Ali had an enduring quality," states Jim Bergren. "If you look at many champions of years past, they would not even go Top Ten in today's show ring. But I think Ali would have been a champion in any decade, in any country – from the 70's right up until

Ruminaja Ali just after he was purchased from the Jamesons by the Bergrens as a two-year old

today. He was the prototype of the big, pretty, refined and charismatic stallion. Ali was truly ahead of his time."

The Arabs say, "A gold jewel cannot be made except from gold." Ruminaja Ali was surely the gold standard.