

# 2022 World Championships Endurance

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Just weeks before the 2022 World Championships endurance was supposed to take place in Verona, Italy, the FEI decided the venue was not ready in time to host such a championship and relocated the championships to the BIEV venue in Butheeb to be held from 20-26 February 2023. A big change for all the riders who already had their horses ready for competition. Now not only did they had to keep their horses fit for another 4 months, the race would also be in another climate and the terrain would be 'deep' sand instead of the more solid terrain as it would be in Verona. Another

factor was the Custodian of the two Holy Mosques Endurance Cup that was held just one week after the championships, forcing the riders to choose between two major endurance races.

The BIEV venue, which was strongly recommended by the FEI Endurance Committee, is situated approximately one hour from Abu Dhabi's city center. The ride itself was scheduled for Saturday, 25 February with on the 23rd a spectacular opening ceremony on the Royal Palace of Abu Dhabi.

122 horses and riders came to start. The weather was hot





with temperatures being above the 30 degrees Celsius. The 160km was run over six loops and offered great facilities for both the horses and riders with crew points every 5km and multiple water points throughout the ride.

The veterinarian inspections were strict with even vets controlling on the track to pull out tired horses before getting in to metabolic problems. Because of the strict rules and inspection, only 44 combinations manage to complete the course. 78 horses were eliminated.

### **Individual medals**

Right from the start there was a strong group at the head position, containing a few riders from the UAE, Bahrain, Spain and Rebecca Pinder from Great Britain. This last rider, riding the 13 years old gelding Oso Irazu (SDA Silver Legend x OSO Silver Illeana), managed to come in at the 3rd position after the last loop with an average speed of 20.2 km/h. With only one more loop to go, Rebecca Pinder was almost sure for a medal position. Her horse was easily going through the obligatory veterinarian inspections, however, due to the humid situation, the rider herself lost weight, going under the mandatory 75kgs minimum weight, which got her disqualified from the competition.

This gave room for the other riders to ride for the medals. With a mesmerizing speed of 27.4 km/h

average in the last loop and a sprint of more than 40 km/h to the finishline, Saeed Ahmad Alhabri riding Castlebar Cadabra (Castlebar Optic x Yamamah) and Abdulla Ghanim al Marri riding Lockelea Starwood Comet (Elphyn Comet x Sharadh Nerida) for the UAE and HH Sh Nasser bin Hamad al Khalifa riding Darco la Majorie (Baltik des Ors x Quatuba la Majorie) for Bahrain, finished at the first, second and third position. However, due to the fast sprint, both Alhabri and al Marri didn't manage to get the heartrate of their horses down to 64 within the given 20 minutes after arrival, which made them being disqualified. The horse of HH Sh Nasser bin Hamad al Khalifa passed which moved him up to the Gold medal with an average speed of 21 km/h over the 160km race.

At the second position was Salem Malhoof Alkitibi riding the 12 years old mare Haleh (Kevisan park Kentucky Blue x Saracen Sukalata) riding at an average speed of 20.3 km/h. Haleh won the gold medal at the 2021 World championships Endurance in Pisa and was one of the favorites in this competition.

Bronze medal winner was the Spanish rider Jaume Puntigons with his fantastic 17 years old part-bred Arabian Echo Falls (Tango d'Ayres x Song of Wind). This horse already finished three major championships including a bronze medal at the 2019 European Championships. With an average speed of 20.2 km/h, Jaume rode a very consistent and tactic race, earning him this well-deserved bronze medal.

At the 6th position was Omar Blanco Rodrigo, riding the the 11 years old Soraya Peu (Avpy x Kasserine el Chems). The mare did a great race and passed all

veterinary inspections. Unfortunately she was getting worse after the race and was transferred to the Dubai Equine Hospital but died en route. A big loss for the endurance horse world and the Spanish team.

Another loss was seen with the Jordan team. Ali Subhi abu Rabie was riding the 10 years old Sahwat al Wahhab AH. The bay mare did a great race with steady recovery times and passing all veterinary inspections and finished at the 32nd position with an average speed of 14.3 km/h. After the race, the bay mare got worse after the race and was rushed to the Dubai Equine Hospital. Despite all efforts, the mare was euthanized three days later.

### Team medals

Besides individual medals, there was also a team medal. The Gold initially went to the team of Bahrain. However, one of their horses, Hera Durances, ridden by Abdulrahman Mohammed Alzayed tested positive for the banned anabolic steroid stanozolol and its metabolite 16-beta-hydroxystanozolol, which made him disqualified.

Loosing this rider, made Bahrain loose their Gold medal which then went to France, who had three riders at the finish. Virginie Atger riding Raya de Jalima (Baltik des Ors x Pieszczocho), Vincent Gaudriot riding Bum Baya D'Aqui (Sadepers x Pittocha d'Aqui) and Clementine Chaud riding Winaruz el Djin (Djin Lotois x Ain al Kom) were riding a very nice controlled race with an average speed of 16.6 km/h, finishing at the positions 11,12 and 13 after riding the whole race as a group. An example for many! What a team effort and a well-deserved gold medal!







The silver team medal went to Portugal who also had three riders at the finish. Leonor Moreira, riding Spirit de Crouz (Shogun x Kalypso de Crouz) was 7th with an average speed of 17.2 km/h. Finishing at the 25th and 26th position were Ana Margarida Candido Costo riding Vulcane de Crouz (Laios de Crouz x Quivala de Crouz) and Ana Barbas riding Dormane de la Gesse (Dormane). The bronze team medal went to Italy, who had also three riders at the finish. Camilla Coppini riding Ernest (Ghazallah x Ensena) and Letizia Milani riding FB Karonte (Kaerele de Ghazal x Twom Narooma) finished at the 20th and 21st position with an average speed of 15.9 km/h and Carolina Tavassoli riding Carma du Barthas (Khadar x Asma Lotoise) finishing at the 43th position with an average speed of 13.6 km/h.



## Profile of a Competitor

The American based Alisija Zabavska, who was riding for Lithuania also competed at the 2022 world championships in Butheeb with her 16 years old gelding MSA Silver Gazal (Gazal al Shaqab x G Silver Rain by Menes).

### Meeting Gazal al Shaqab & Silver Gazal

“While I lived in UAE, I visited Al Shaqab Stud in Qatar in a year of 2000. I got to meet Gazal when he was only 5yo and already back then he was taking on the world by a storm. I was told that i was standing next to a future legend and it turned out to be the case :) “Alisija tells us about her meeting with Gazal al Shaqab. “When I moved to Texas, i found out that Gazal Al Shaqab was my “neighbor” again, he lived only an hour away, with Michael Byatt, so I visited him again. It was around the time when MSA Siver Gazal (aka Ghazi) was actually born but I didn’t know about his existence just yet.”

It was in 2015 when Alisija received a phone call from a show horse trainer she used to work with, asking her to take a look at a seven years old gelding that could be a great endurance prospect. The moment Alisija saw Silver Gazal, who she calls Ghazi, she knew he would be incredible and immediately bought him, even without trying him under saddle.

### The journey towards the World Championships

Alisija started to work with Ghazi and all went smooth until he finished his first 120km race in 2017. “After the

race, he suffered a very bad colic (due to a human error), which required a risky and complicated surgery.” Alisija tells. “By then I knew how much potential he had in this sport and decided to go ahead and do everything I could to save his life. The surgery was successful but since then Ghazi lost his natural sweating ability and had to be kept on a special sweat promoting supplement for the rest of his life.”

Living and training in hot and humid climate in a south of Texas was not ideal for him but that as Alisija could not change that, she worked hard on changing the management of Ghazi. After careful rehab and conditioning, in 2019, we won the National Champion title in the 160km race on a very challenging course with a brutal weather in California, training for it purely on a very flat terrain at home in Texas. Just around that time frame they also qualified to represent Lithuania at the World Endurance Championship in Pisa, Italy.

“I still remember that qualifying race,” Alisija recalls. “Ghazi unexpectedly decided to jump over a narrow creek, as if it was a 5 foot obstacle, which got me of balance upon landing on the other side. Then he managed to dump me and take off with the front runners. An hour later, after a successful reunion, miraculously locating him at a local farm 7 miles down the road, we had to return to a place of separation and resume our competition, in which we still managed to place 2nd, gaining more and more time on each loop.”

In 2021, upon their arrival to Italy for the world championships, after a 10 hour flight and a 29 hour haul in a trailer, he had 3 weeks of rest and conditioning and they felt like they were going to get, minimum, in a top



Alisija Zabavska with Gazal al Shaqab in 2000



© Becky Pearman



10 place, with the way he looked and felt. Sadly, on a third loop of a competition, Ghazi slipped and fell on the asphalt and suffered near to a catastrophic injury, scalping his knee to a capsule, after getting spooked of a sandy trail by a noise of a crashed plastic water bottle from a passing by crew member of the other team. Completely crashed and heartbroken, feeling like 7 years of a hard work and investment was gone down the drain, Alisja was praying that his joint would not get infected and he could recover from this freak accident. A week later, due to his horrible wound, he was denied to fly back home to USA and Alisja was advised to keep him in Europe until he was somewhat healed. Alisja chose to stay with him because she felt that it was the only way to assure he had maximum care possible. "Asking someone to walk him every 2-3 hours, so there would not be a scar tissue build up, that could potentially prevent him from successfully competing in the future, would be a lot to ask." Alisja explains. "Another problem we were facing was, by the time the wound would be healed, the flights home would be on hold for a couple of months due to lack of demand during a summer time." Alisja and Ghazi were facing additional 4 months in Europe and in order to make the best of this situation a decision was made to stay, rehab and condition him for the European Championship in Ermelo, Netherlands.

With just a couple of long training rides, shortly before the race, Ghazi successfully completed 160km course in the 18th place. That automatically qualified them for the next World Championship, which got relocated to Boutheeb in UAE from originally scheduled Verona, Italy. After a successful arrival home in the USA they started conditioning intensely for the next big race but remained as careful as possible. "It's better to have undertrained horse than an injured one," Alisja tells. "Ghazi is already a very difficult horse to own. Being a very dominant and a high strung - he periodically gets hung up on the fences, while fighting other horses at the distance or decides to break posts and gates, because it keeps him away from getting where he wants to be. It is very challenging to keep him safe year around."

### **The 2022 World Championships Boutheeb**

With just 6 days prior to the competition, Alisja and Ghazi successfully arrived to the venue in Boutheeb from Houston, Texas after being locked up for 30 straight hours (in trailers, then stalls, then trailers, then containers, then trailers again). Then they endured 48 hours of additional lock down at our quarantine facility. "He was thrilled with joy by the time we got to ride out into a desert and explore the terrain," Alisja tells. "At this point we were only focusing on stretching out his muscles and getting used to camels."



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Alisja Zabavska during the 2022 world championships

### **The race**

On the day of a race, starting at 05:45 in the morning in a dark, Alisja was holding Ghazi back on the first loop trying to wait for daylight so they could move out a bit. "He wasn't very happy about that," Alisja recalls "but he complied. However, on a second loop, I hardly had any breaks as he told me to "buckle up and enjoy the ride". We passed a lot of riders then." On the 3rd and 4th loop Alisja and Ghazi could feel the heat and Alisja tried to take it as easy as possible. They kept moving up with each loop and by the end of the 5th round it was known that they were in 11th place!

"I told my crew that I can "taste" a top 10," Alisja says "but they asked me not to take any chances that could potentially mess up our successful finish." That turned out to be a good decision. At the time of departure to the final stage they discovered that 2 horses ahead of them got pulled out due to metabolic problems and they left on the last loop at 9th place. "Ghazi felt strong as the air was cooling off a lot and I decided to keep moving till the dusk and then take it easy closer to the finish in a dark." Alisja tells. And it paid off! They crossed the finish line in an 8th position at an average speed of 16.9 km/h! 8th in the World! What a fantastic achievement!

### **Future plans**

When we ask Alisja what her future plans are with MSA Silver Gazal she replies: "Next plan is the world championship in Monpazier next year. We will aim for the podium:)" □