

JAY CONSTANTI

Interview

by Simone Leo ■ photos by TuttoArabi archive

You are an American and your love for Arabian horses started in the States. How many horses did you buy in the States in the beginning?

Jay Constanti: I have been enchanted with horses for most of my life. As a young boy growing up in the suburbs of San Francisco, my earliest experiences with horses was when I attended the Grand Nationals, a large horse show, rodeo and livestock event in San Francisco with my grandfather. I was captivated with horses of all breeds during my early years. I bought my first horse, a Quarter Horse mare, when I was 16. Two years later I bought a Quarter Horse colt. At that time I romanticized the life of the cowboy and thought that I wanted to learn how to work cattle on horseback and ride in rodeos.

Then it all changed in my late teens. I met a young lady who invited me to go on a "trail ride" with her. My idea of a trail ride at that time was a relaxing walk for an hour

maximum on the trail. She had a snow white Arabian gelding. Very early one morning we trailered our two horses a long distance away to the Pacific coast. We met up with

her other friends at a trail head. Her friends also had Arabian horses. Some half-dozen Arabian horses and my Quarter Horse mare started what would be about a 25 mile trail ride back home. At first my heavily muscled mare tried to keep up with the nimble and fast-moving Arabians, but we later settled into a jog and walk for most of the day. The Arabian horses were long gone. I was amazed at their energy, stamina and athleticism. They were nimble like a cat. I heard later that the Arabian horses arrived back home in the late afternoon. I arrived home hours later in the dark on a very tired mare. I'm sure she

was not at all pleased spending the long day on the trail. I loved it! Instead of riding in an arena, we rode in forests, climbed a mountain range and crossed streams. I thought



Jay with Sanadik El Shaklan

this was a magical way to enjoy horses, horseback riding and nature at the same time. The next time I was invited on a trail ride I rode the snow white Arabian gelding. My life with horses would be changed forever.

TA: Did your love for horses come from a family tradition?

J.C.: My love for horses did not come from a family tradition. But somehow horses have intrigued me since childhood. In summers during my childhood my family always took a trip to a resort that had a livery stable and offered horseback riding. My family was interested in hiking and swimming. I was the only one captivated by the horses. I used to get up extra early so I could watch the horses eat their morning hay. If I was lucky, later in the day I was allowed to brush them and even ride. The closest to a family tradition was my annual day with my grandfather when we went to see the Grand National Rodeo and Livestock Event in San Francisco.

Fortunately I come from an open minded family where we were encouraged to pursue our passions. On my father's side of the family was engineering and creating something with your hands; my mother's side was journalism and writing and creating something with your words. Looking back over my many years with horses, I believe that I needed some influence from both sides of my family: a blend of science and art.

TA: You started your career with horse riding, also with purebred (Arabian) horses. So for sure you can tell us if the modern show horses are capable of performing in sports.

J.C.: I believe that the answer to this question is not a simple or easy one. To me, the Arabian horse has evolved in different countries in different ways. During the last century they were imported to countries such as Poland, England, Spain and the USA. Each country has a different vision and purpose for the Arabian horse, and focused on enhancing different characteristics. Each country produced beautiful individuals with different athletic abilities. In this country breeders also focused on breeding for specific characteristics. Some were interested in high stepping movements found in the American Saddlebred. Others wanted to breed for a more muscled form like the Quarter Horse that would lend itself to ranch work. So my short answer is "yes", the modern Arabian show horses are outstanding performers in a wide variety of sporting events and disciplines.

To me, the Arabian horse is the most versatile of breeds.

They can do everything well. But there are other breeds that specialize in specific ridden disciplines. The American Saddlebred is renowned for their upright frame that helps to produce their high knee action. The Lipizzaner is world famous for their conformation, temperament and ability to excel in Dressage. To me, the one discipline that the Arabian horse does better than any other is: Endurance.

TA: What is your opinion of the "ideal" Arabian?

J.C.: For me the ideal Arabian is one that exudes Arabian "type" and has the athletic ability and temperament to do anything well, from the show arena to ranch work to long distance trail competitions. By "exuding" Arabian type, I mean with a compliment of characteristics that I can readily see from a distance: the shape of head, neck, topline, balance, carriage and movement. My "ideal" Arabian is a family horse, a show horse, a ranch horse and an endurance horse – all in one.

TA: If you could name one Arabian that would come the closest to your ideal, which one would that be?

J.C.: My ideal Arabian has a typey face: fine boned with a moderate dish, large, intelligent black eyes low down on the face and set well apart, a relatively fine muzzle, and smallish tipped ears. I prefer a medium length of neck proportioned to the body, with a natural arch in shape, and tapers into a clean throatlatch. I like to see some withers to hold a saddle, and a strong back, good depth and spring through the barrel, a smooth topline that carries along a smooth line to the dock. I appreciate a long hip and a strong gaskin. My early history with Arabian horses was through distance competitions, so leg and feet structure is important to me. Good leg and hoof structure is critical for the long-term soundness of the horse. My ideal Arabian horse should move elegantly, elastically, and athletically with an airy and purposeful carriage.

My "ideal" Arabian can be a show horse, ranch horse, family horses or an endurance horse – all in one. The horse that came the closest to my ideal was Sanadik El Shaklan. He was a pleasure to do all things with. He was our principal breeding stallion and sired champions around the world. He was my favorite riding horse. I rode him regularly in the mountains nearby the ranch. He won many awards as a show horse throughout his life. He served as inspiration for many breeders and artists of Arabian horses around the world.





Jay at Ajman show



Jay at World Championships Paris



Jay at UAE show



Sanadik El Shaklan



Jay at Abu Dhabi show



TA: Do you enjoy sharing your knowledge about horses?

J.C.: Yes I enjoy sharing my knowledge about horses with others, especially those who show serious interest and passion. The famous American cowboy poet Will Rogers once said, "There is something about the outside of a horse that is good for the inside of a man." Horses are remarkable companions. They are willing to give endlessly and ask for nothing in return. To me they represent grace and beauty in motion. They are supreme athletes that require good nutrition and excellent care and management. For these reasons I believe that horse ownership should never be taken lightly. If you want to become good at breeding horses and good at riding horses, there will be no end to learning. The more you learn about horses, the more time you spend with them, the easier it becomes to understand and to train and to "listen" to them. For almost twenty-five years I trained and coached apprentices that came from all over the world to our full service farm to get hands-on experience with horses. They learned about breeding and foaling, training and conditioning, and farm management. With skills learned through doing the work themselves, many returned home to develop their own breeding, training and showing businesses. I take great pride in the successes of others who have learned from me.

TA: Could you give us a small introduction on yourself, your current lifestyle and your family?

J.C.: I am blending two of my life's biggest passions together at this point in my life. I have always enjoyed the physicality of outdoor activities, which by definition is life on a horse farm. Horses were my primary passion. But besides the ranch work, I tried to make time for other sports, such as jogging, water skiing and going to the gym. As the decades clicked by in my life I have realized it becomes increasingly important to maintain a healthy lifestyle. To keep doing the things I like to do, good health and fitness have taken a central role in my life. Interestingly, health and fitness and performance for horses and people are very similar. In my career with horses I started with hands-on experience coupled with a formal university education. I studied Animal Science. I wanted to know all about a horse's anatomy and physiology and equine nutrition and how they relate to performance. At the same time I spent hours each day working with horses. I am using the same approach for health and fitness with people. After a formal education I received my certification as a Personal Trainer a couple of years ago. My goal is

to help myself and others find ways in their busy lives to make healthy choices for their health and fitness. I am now working towards another certification in nutrition.

It amazes me how similar training and conditioning horses is with training and conditioning people. An understanding of conformation is vital information to better understand capabilities and limitations. An understanding of performance goals is essential to build a program to develop physical and athletic capabilities. And to get it done, proper nutrition is a critical component for both people and horses towards achieving health and fitness goals.

Most of my days now include working with horses and people. I also created an equine consulting business to advise new and experienced Arabian horse owners and breeders on all aspects of horse and ranch management. For the future I want to develop a series of classes and exercises designed to enhance the specific needs and performance of riders and horsemen.

About my current lifestyle: I am trying to maintain a balance in my life that includes work and family and free time. I was involved and passionate about horses and they were an enormous part of my life for almost 50 years. For much of all those years I was rewarded immeasurably. But as the years flew by I recognized that I was paying a price. I could not find extra time to spend with my children, my family and old friends. Birthdays, holidays, weddings, and even funerals came and went while I was busy with horses. I am happily married and am striving to maintain a better balance of life that includes time for family, health and fitness, and of course . . . horses.

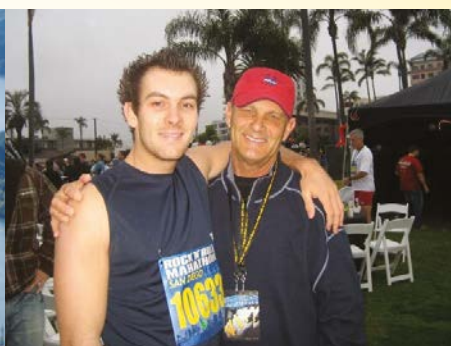
TA: What made you prefer the Arabian breed over the other breeds?

J.C.: In my early years with horses I worked with several other breeds and a variety of disciplines. It was thrilling to sit deep in the saddle as a Quarter Horse worked a cow. I spent some time with Thoroughbreds as a young rider trying to make a Jumper out of a retired race horse just off the race track. (I got bucked off regularly.) I spent time with Warmbloods in Dressage and learned to appreciate the fine art of cueing through the body, legs and hands and the tremendous talents of Dressage horses. And then I explored the great outdoors on the back of an Arabian. I crossed streams, swam in rivers, climbed mountains, descended steep ravines, rode in snow and rain and blistering sun and on narrow trails through the inky blackness of moonless nights.





Jay in Colombia, South America



Marathon with his son Eric, 2005



Skiing



Jay and Francia Constanti in Los Angeles



Boating



I learned to understand that the mindset of an Arabian is quite different than other breeds. Their energy, agility and stamina, to me, are unequalled. Their capabilities are endless. I learned to trust their instincts and abilities with my life. Plus I cannot fail to mention that to me the Arabian is the most beautiful of all breeds.

TA: You are involved in the Arabian Breeders World Cup organization. What is your involvement?

J.C.: About 12 years ago a group of breeders got together at a major horse show to discuss aspects of the shows in the USA that no longer seemed to be attracting interest in participation by many breeders and horse owners. Our breed numbers were declining. The number of entries at shows were dwindling rapidly. We all felt that one of the reasons for this decline was the perception of "politics" and favoritism by judges at our shows. Many of us had attended other shows around the world where we experienced excitement and enthusiasm, as well as a different method of judging. The "Point System" was being used for judging the classes instead of the "comparative system", thus making the judges' scoring of horses completely transparent. Some of the shows were held in exciting cities, such as Paris, where people could enjoy the city with their friends as part of the horse show experience. Some of the shows featured only breeding classes and no performance classes, which resulted in a shorter day at the show, and more time to include other activities.

Within a short time this small group formed the Arabian Horse Breeders Alliance (AHBA). Our membership grew rapidly with the enthusiasm that we were doing something new and exciting for the breed. We planned our first event, a horse show, to be held in Las Vegas, and we would use the "Point System". Many said we couldn't do it. Our first show was a huge success and has proved to be a pivotal point in Arabian horse showing around the world. April will mark the 10th Anniversary of our show. I am very proud to have played a part in this show from the beginning, as a Founding AHBA Member and Founding and Current AHBA Board Director.

TA: And in the Tevis Cup for endurance? Your daughter is a famous endurance rider.

J.C.: The formal name for the "Tevis Cup" is "The Western States 100 Mile Endurance Ride". It is a competition on 100 miles of the most majestic and picturesque – and grueling – trails anywhere in the world. The steep mountain trails,

sheer cliffs and rocks, are technically challenging for any horse. The heat can exhaust the best of riders and horses. The distance is physical punishment for all who attempt to ride those famous and challenging 100 miles within 24 hours. It was in the heat and sweat and cliffs and rivers of those trails that my lifetime bond with the Arabian horse was forged.

My daughter, Shannon, loves those trails too. So does her mother, Terry. When Shannon was 5 Terry and I thought she was a skilled enough rider to enter her in a 55 mile endurance ride that used part of the Tevis trail. Shannon rode with her mother and they both completed. Looking back I recognize that it was irresponsible to put a 5 year old on such a long, difficult and dangerous trail competition. (Now rules are in place to prevent such young riders from competing.) Shannon also forged a love for riding and for Arabian horses on those challenging mountain trails. She competes on several 50 and 100 mile races each year and often finishes at the front. A couple of years ago she and her friend finished Tevis 1st and 2nd, coming in together almost 2 ½ hours ahead of the 3rd place horse. Terry is one the Board of Governors for the Western States Trail Foundation, the organization that puts on the "Tevis Cup" ride. Shannon and Terry have clients around the world interested in completing the "Tevis Cup" and endurance competitions in general. Shannon and Terry put on an "Educational Ride" each spring to teach both new and experienced trail riders the art and science of competing on and finishing long distance rides, such as the Tevis Cup. I try to go up each year to "crew" for Shannon on the Tevis and always take a trip back in my memory to my first long rides on an Arabian horse.

TA: Which is the place you would like to judge and you've never been invited to?

J.C.: I have had the great fortune to have judged shows and amazing horses all around the world. My wish list for the future is not long, but there are a few shows and places I would like to judge. One is the All-Nation's Cup in Aachen, Germany. A country I have not judged in but would like to is Israel. Among my favorite shows to judge have been in the UAE. The quality of the horses and the organization of the events there are first class.

TA: Do you think there is a difference in showing between how it is today and how it was 10 years ago?

J.C.: Yes there clearly is a big difference between now and





Jay and his arabian gelding at Cougar Rock in 1978 taking a junior rider on lead



Distance competition, 1974



Shannon competing at 5yo on an Arabian gelding



Jay with his daughter Shannon



Shannon Endurance Ride in Sierra Nevada



Shannon



Shannon on Dreamcatcher



Shannon



showing 10 years ago. In the USA we used the "Comparative System" and put our focus on a very intense pose or "stand-up", while paying less attention to the movement of the horse, or the structure of their legs and feet. In Europe and elsewhere in the world the horse's general presence, attitude and "exotic" look contributed to high point scores in "Type", plus judging the other categories of Head & Neck, Body,

Legs & Feet, and Movement required that a horse could only win with high points in all categories. In order to have high scores that included Type and Movement, the horse needed to be confident, expressive and free-moving.

With the advent of shows in the USA that incorporated the "Point System" our trainers are now putting less pressure on horses in training to promote a more confident attitude and freer movement.

Conversely, as the overall level of quality of the horses at the shows in Europe and elsewhere are becoming extraordinarily high, the "stand-up" is becoming more important in order to achieve higher point scores in all categories.

I believe that today there is little difference between how a champion is shown in the USA or elsewhere in the world.

TA: What will the show scene look like five years from now?

J.C.: I believe the show scene (to include performance classes and events here in the USA) will continue along its present path towards an exaggeration of the diversified talents and attributes of the Arabian horse. To me this means that breeders will continue to breed for extremes. The breeder who wants to show in the breeding classes will breed for more and more exotic faces, necks, top lines and movement. With that goal we will see more horses with "extreme" heads, necks and bodies, but the conformation of the legs, and "ride-ability" of the horse will likely decline. Other breeders will push their focus on ridden disciplines. With the emphasis on



Jay with his second Quarter horse, 1968

performance Period I believe that those horses will have less and less of the characteristics associated with my "ideal" of the Arabian horse. I believe with each generation of foals breeders are moving further and further away from the Arabian horse that could do everything well.

TA: Is there anything specific

you want to add to this interview to tell our readers?

J.C.: Looking back over my past 50 years with horses I have learned and experienced many things. First of all, I would encourage any person who has a passion for horses to pursue that dream, no matter what your background or age. Next I would urge anyone interested in horse ownership and riding and/or breeding, to expose yourself to as much education about horses as possible. Get involved in horse clubs. Make friends with breeders and trainers. Find a mentor or an advisor. Take lessons. Read profusely. Subscribe to a top horse magazine like TuttoArabi. Go to competitions to watch and learn. Spend as much time as possible with horses. Watch them. Learn how they move and react. Try to figure out their likes and dislikes. Over time you will learn to "think" like a horse. If you want to become a breeder, create over time in your mind what your ideal Arabian horse looks like. Become a student of equine conformation. Then select individuals for your program that come closest to your ideal. Stay true to your dream and your goals and understand that the more you learn about horses the more you know there is still more to learn. Someone once told me,

"An Arabian horse will be your friend, but not your servant."

The better you get to know the Arabian horse, the more you will understand the wisdom of that phrase. □

