



Riding three time World Champion – Marwan Al Shaqab

Living in the moment ...

- with Michael Byatt not (only) about horses

background: Menton 2010 © M.Byatt



Birthday wishes to the World Champion and sire of merit – Gazal Al Shaqab

Interview by Urszula Łęczycka (arabhorsepromotion.com)
Photos: Michael Byatt and Michael Byatt's archives

Surrounded by some of the finest and most titled Arabian horses in the world residing at his peaceful XIXth century farm at New Ulm, Texas, Michael Byatt is one of the most recognized horsemen in our community, a person – breeder, rider and trainer, whose name became the authority for many, and the unapproachable example for the others. Visiting Michael Byatt's is visiting one of those rare places where you can meet several multiple World, US National and Scottsdale Champion horses one by another with great Gazal Al Shaqab, Marwan Al Shaqab, Parys El Jamaal, or Besson Carol – just to name the few, as well as the finest El Shaklan, Ali Jamaal or Bey Shah daughters in the breeding barn. Michael Byatt is most known for his show ring successes which began over 40 years ago in Albuquerque, New Mexico. However, Michael says, "My favorite moments by far are not the public moments". Celebrating his 40 year career with Arabian horses we have the unique opportunity to look closer into Michael

Byatt's non-horse passions presenting some of his great photograph and glimpse of private life in a talk that, of course, couldn't miss the important horse-related up to date problems...

Tutto Arabi: What is your favorite photo you ever took?

Michael Byatt: I cannot really claim a favorite photograph. I take photographs, but to be a photographer requires a more developed sophistication than I have. To own a camera is not equal to being a photographer. My goal is to continue developing my skills. One day I may re-visit my "title", but for now we will leave it that I enjoy photography as a hobby. With all of that being said, I love to take photographs for my own personal journey. I take my camera nearly everywhere I go as I never know when the right light will interest me, or a shadow, a composition that I cannot resist, a bird, a building, a horse, a person, there are so many possibilities. I appreciate many things that just happen as a result of having my eyes open and being tuned in to what is happening around me. Having a



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camera allows me to enjoy the experience much longer than just having it in my memory. Photography is also fun to share!

TA: Besides the great Arabian horse passion that we all know about you, photography and painting also interest you. What do these non horse passions bring into your life? Do they influence your horse world and how?

MB: I have many passions in addition to photography and painting. Those two you mention are important to my life's experience. Both pursuits allow me to memorialize moments, either in my imagination or in real life that I find important. I also like the creative process, although it might add to one's insanity a bit. I am not convinced someone like me is ever satisfied with what I am able to create. Photography, the arts, horses, just like my family, my other animals — all of these influence each other and reward me in enormous ways.

TA: One may have an impression that the modern

show horse breeding is mostly about the shape of head and expressive movements as the most important also the importance of these features in show judgment in consequence pushes a lot of breeders to run for the pretty heads only. Do you think this is true and so how the show horse breeding will be developing in the future or how it should be?

MB: Yes, I think it is true. And if someone wants to own and breed a horse like that then I think they should go for it. However, if those horses are winning major championships and there are comparable horses to choose from, with pretty heads and nice motion (just not extreme) then there is a problem with judging and those judges should be called into question. We do not want to get to the point where we are breeding a useless horse that looks like a Pomeranian.

TA: Being an artist you look on a horse as a piece of art - but the horse you are going to judge must



also fit the standard of the breed when it comes to the particular conformation, correctness... How do you combine those things to find the balance between the general, artistic look and the details of conformation?

MB: I do not really say that I look at a horse "as a piece of art" – that must not be attributed to me. What I do say is that I want to be affected by the artistry within a horse – very different. Art moves me. And in looking at a horse, I want to be moved by something within that horse. It could be spirit, or carriage, color, or many things. A horse with no artistic value is boring. But a horse must be a good, sound, usable animal with solid structure; add to that a horse with "artistic elements" and then we really have something.

TA: Do you paint from nature or from your imagination? Do your imaginary horses resemble the real ones?

MB: I paint horses more from imagination because I want to take full artistic license in what I put down. I do not care so much to be an illustrator or to document everything exactly as it might be. There are other methods to capture that result. I want to be free of constraint when I draw or paint.

TA: So did you ever bred or saw the horse of your dreams?

MB: Horses are my dream ...

TA: You are one of those rare people closely connected with some of world's most famous horses in the world like the great stallions of merit – Gazal Al Shaqab, Marwan Al Shaqab, Parys El Jamaal, Besson... Which of the famous horses influenced your look on Arabian horse nowadays the most?

MB: I have had a long career in horses. Before the career in



JA Ultima © M. Byatt



Bint Starbright

horses, I had horses. To single out one would be impossible. For various reasons, one horse or another has had a life changing effect on me. These horses, just as they were able to change my life, were able to change the breed. So much has been written about the horses I have been involved with, I like to say that the horse itself – all of them changed and influenced my life dramatically. With them, I have not only been able to be part of the history of the Arabian horse, I have been able to make history. That is very humbling.

TA: *If you could point three most important features describing a good horse breeder it would be...*

MB: *Good taste, Education, Patience.*

TA: *Nowadays the horse industry seem to be more like a strict business with all its cruel rules more than romantic vision of horse and human relationship. Love for someone or something needs*

time, patience, care and compromises – while the business is more about reaching goals and earning money in the short time sometimes in a cruel way. How do you find the balance between these worlds that Arabian horses face nowadays – being a sensitive and animal loving person?

MB: *It is very difficult to reconcile the treatment of animals as a means to an end (winning) that we now see in so many show arenas around the world. It is degrading to the animals. I have tried to forward the conversation in a public way and to bring attention to the need for change. I have helped. Together with many in my peer group, we have changed the use of ginger in the American show ring. We still have a ways to go but we have helped. In the end the only person I can absolutely control is me. I care about and love horses, I also have truck loads of trophies that prove you can have it both ways, compassion and success. It does not have to be one or the other. All of the above being said, the public (and the DC) watching a show also need to be educated and understand what they are seeing so the*



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conclusions they reach are well informed and just. I have seen and heard a lot of opinions that are absolutely false as to what is considered abusive. There are far reaching negative consequences when uneducated opinions are taken as fact. This is not meant to diminish the reality that abuse does exist. I seek to educate, because through education, both abuser and accuser learn.

TA: Most of us have a problem even to find five minutes to read a book... You are in the journey for 200 days per year and you still have a time to enjoy sightseeing, tennis, painting, writing... What is your receipt for avoiding the everyday stress and find a time for your non-horse passions?

MB: The fact is that now, at my age, if I do not seize on time as one of the most valuable commodities, I never will. I have to make time for all of these things. Working as I have done for decades, allows me this luxury and I am very appreciative of the gift.

TA: What is your favorite place in the world you visited so far?

MB: Difficult to say! Machu Picchu is incredible. Paris is very important to me - I have been going to Paris since 1971 and it is always inspiring... Northern New Mexico, Thailand... - too many... And this is really a privilege to be able to say that there have been TOO MANY to list.

TA: And the one you have never been so far and you would like to visit?

MB: India, China, Patagonia...to name a few.

TA: When you arrive to the new place that you want to discover - where you make your first steps to?

MB: I think it is so important to just walk out the door with an open mind.



Photos taken by Michael during the 2010 trip to Brasil and with Urszula Leczycka while judging 2010 Araxa show

TA: And after the journeys you used to write the trip diaries... Do you think we could ever have the book written and illustrated by Michael Byatt to be printed?

MB: If my body of work ever was complete enough to tell an interesting story and I could also be proficient enough to illustrate it, I think that would be a fun project. Let's get back to this at a later date. Maybe Tutto Arabi will publish it ... ?

TA: Where and when did you get your most important life experience to be horsemen? Was there any particular person that influenced your look on the horse?

MB: The most valuable lessons in horsemanship I received were the earliest. My early childhood was spent with horses, not showing horses, but WITH horses. Together with my childhood friends we learned everything about them through 4-H programs and just riding. We had to do everything

ourselves, we wanted to do everything ourselves. We did not have grooms; we did not have horses for ribbons or money. Our horses' lives were directly related to the care we gave them so we were very attentive to their well being. This in itself taught us so much. The way we were educated about all things equestrian was by doing. Our instructors would take apart a bridle and toss all the pieces in a heap and make us learn about the bridle and how to put it together. We could not saddle up unless all the feet had been picked and looked at. Nor could we saddle until our horses were completely groomed. And at the end of the day we never left until our horses had been put up properly and eaten their meals. And one last thing that my great teacher Ethel Ortenburger taught us was to give a carrot in the evening to your horse. If a horse (that was used to eating them) did not eat their carrot, they might not be well. We learned a lot about our horses by them eating, and of course, by cleaning their stalls. By the time I did start showing horses, I knew a lot about horses and could pay attention to developing my skills as a showman. This was very valuable.



South Africa scenery © M.Byatt

TA: Which point of your horsemen career was for you so far the most important and which one the most satisfying?

MB: Today is the most important. The horses I have bred, managed, shown and lived with have made an impact; they have changed the landscape of the breed forever. I am able to witness firsthand what my efforts have done. The fact that I am still relevant and part of the conversation is wonderful. Who knew? I entered all of this innocently, without expectations, and the ride has lasted over 40 years.

TA: If Michael Byatt would not be a horse trainer and breeder who he would be – professionally?

MB: I was going to be a horse breeder / trainer...there was no other possibility. I tell my kids: "follow your passions", "wake

up every day excited about what you do". I listened to my heart when others were telling me to follow a different path like my father who is a Dr. of Physics. I listened to myself and this has been a wonderful journey. I hope my kids will listen to their heart.

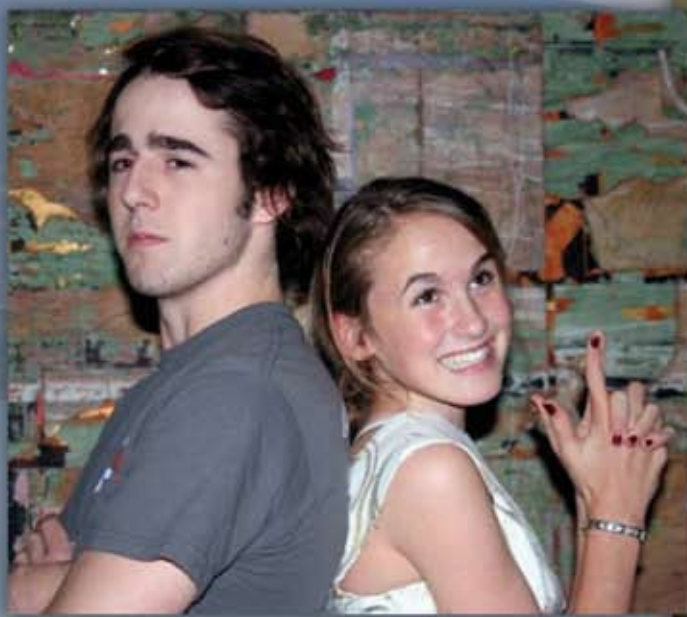
TA: Do you imagine your own life in the future - where it would be and what you would like to do?

MB: I am really trying to live in the moment ...



Murillo Kamer Farm © M.Byatt

Like father like children – Griffin and Hannah





Michael's youngest daughter – Hallie



Italian group visiting Murillo Kamer Farm © M. Byatt

