

# PHILIPPE PARASKEVAS'S PROPOSALS FOR SHOWRING REFORMS — *a Conversation.*

PHILIPPE PARASKEVAS PUBLISHED *The Egyptian Alternative* PRIMARILY TO ADVOCATE FOR CERTAIN BREEDING IDEAS. THE BOOK WAS ALSO QUITE CRITICAL OF SHOWRING PRACTICES, THE ACKNOWLEDGED VENUE FOR BREEDERS TO HAVE THEIR EFFORTS EVALUATED. WE SAT DOWN TO DISCUSS HIS VISION FOR CHANGING THE SHOWRING.



**AHW:** YOU HAVE BEEN BREEDING FOR NEARLY 30 YEARS NOW. WHY DID YOU DECIDE TO BECOME A WRITER AND AN ADVOCATE FOR CHANGE?

PARASKEVAS: I believe in the power and lasting influence of ideas. I also believe in the goodwill and benevolent intent of the huge majority of breeders. As a beginner, I did not find proper guidance in the most popular books available. In the spirit of giving back to the breed, I decided to offer beginners an alternative to the status quo.

**AHW:** YOUR FIRST BOOK, *THE EGYPTIAN ALTERNATIVE*, WAS VERY CRITICAL OF THE SHOWRING. MANY OF YOUR READERS, INCLUDING THOSE FROM THE BROADER BREEDING COMMUNITY, ARE SIMILARLY CRITICAL OF THE SHOWRING. YOUR BOOK'S FACEBOOK PAGE HAS GROWN TO BECOME ONE OF THE MOST FOLLOWED IN ARABIAN HORSE CIRCLES, WITH 75,000 CONNECTED. SHARE WITH OUR READERS YOUR VISION FOR A BETTER WAY TO SHOWCASE THE BREED.

PARASKEVAS: We need a true alternative — a new paradigm. We need to showcase the Arabian horse both for its beauty and utility, not leave them stranded worlds apart. To that end, the showring needs to be reformed with one overriding objective in mind: make it more relevant to the essence of the Arabian horse. By so doing, the industry can hope to win back the attendance

that has deserted the current show scene in the past decades and, by the same token, solve many problems that plague the breed but that originate with the shows and their influence.

**AHW:** WHERE WOULD YOU START?

PARASKEVAS: With the standard and process for judging. I cannot say enough how much I admire the top professional judges. Their knowledge is crucial to the future of the breed, and we need to learn from them every day of our breeding life. Having said that, even the best of the best judges can only apply the current systems, and the current systems do not do justice to what the Arabian should be. They reward appearance over utility and neglect some essentials.

**AHW:** WHAT WOULD YOU CHANGE?

PARASKEVAS: Start all judging at halter with legs. That's right, legs first. Without proper legs, from the hooves up, the rest is irrelevant. Put the bar to a minimum of 17 (in the commonly used 20-point scale) for horses to *remain* in the top-end competitions. Eliminate the rest from championship or "top ten" eligibility. That reform alone will help straighten out the breed in a decade. Some horses with crooked legs could still get "most classic head" in a specialty class, but elimination from overall championship contention would serve notice to breeders







around the world to restore what should be the foremost criteria for the Arabian, a horse capable of utility. While legs are a prerequisite, they are surely not the only factor; nobody is advocating that. Once the first elimination has taken place, judging should go on to the next stage with the focus on general skeletal conformation, as it applies to the Arabian (and not, for instance, the saddlebred; conformational assessment is true *type*).

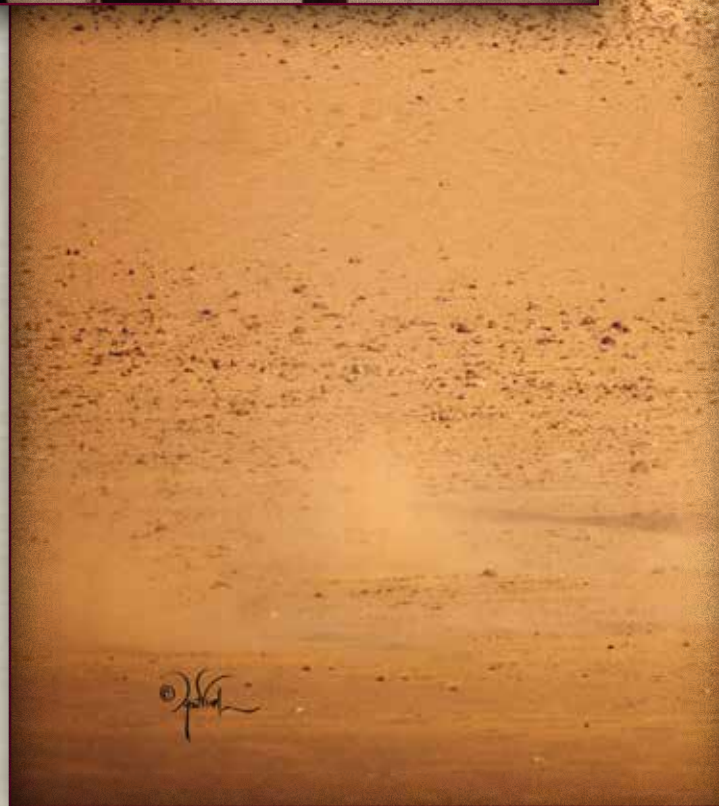
In assessing conformation, horses should not be forced (by the threat of the whip) to stand like statues stretched in front of the judges. *Everybody knows that.* Judges, breeders, owners, handlers, and even the most casual observers know this pose is a disguise for faulty skeletal formation. If we are serious about the future of the breed, it should be banned. Assessment should of course include judging the head and its type. Yes, reward a beautiful head, reward it with a 20 if it is deserved, but do not elevate that single factor to the de facto deciding factor.

**AHW: SPEAKING OF “TYPE,” DO YOU SUBSCRIBE TO THERE BEING A SINGLE, IDEAL CONFORMATIONAL STANDARD?**

PARASKEVAS: Whole chapters of fascinating books have been written on this one issue. I am an advocate for diversity. If these legends were still with us, nobody in his right mind would advocate putting Nazeer before Sid Abouhom, or \*Bask before Khemosabi — or vice versa; all are necessary ingredients for the serious breeders of our horse. Preservation of diversity necessitates that breeders and judges be apprised of the different characteristics of the strains and sire lines. Horses should no longer be observed through the prism of the “Ideal” but rather in relation to their faithful representation of their roots.

**AHW: WHAT ABOUT MOVEMENT?**

PARASKEVAS: Movement is all important, but it is not confined to the trot. Movement should not be judged on the ability of the handler. Enough of their trying to keep up with a horse in an extended trot. This is so artificial, and so alien to the nature of the Arabian! Malpractice on this factor alone has damaged the breed. In the showring, movement can only be judged at liberty. Liberty will also give the judges further insight into every horse’s type, conformation, heart, and disposition.





**AHW: WOULDN'T THAT BE IMPRACTICAL BECAUSE OF THE TIME INVOLVED?**

PARASKEVAS: Not if you eliminate all the horses with offset knees and cannons, horses that stand profoundly beneath or behind, horses that track so badly they could never be ridden, etc. As I see it, movement (liberty) should be the crowning event of any championship, to be held only to determine the top ten positioning (and crowning the champion) after the top ten have been decided. Please note that many elements of classic beauty are best noticed at liberty. A true desert horse, with what may appear to be "very little dish" can look very different in full action when his capacity to breathe will reveal nostrils of a different caliber, showing us all that it is in action that the Arabian must be judged, even on points of beauty. In such a setting, a good eye will appear huge, without makeup or shaving, because the horse will be expressing itself (as opposed to obeying a feared handler). In this setting, beauty correlates with utility. Furthermore, liberty will allow judges to get acquainted

with each horse's canter, thus restoring the native desert gait to its central role, alongside the crowd-pleasing trot. Liberty is a crowd favorite and will certainly bring back the enthusiasm to the showing. The rules may need to be tweaked to make the venue more appealing to breeders, but that should not be too difficult. Some owners would object. Why? Surely, a "champion" should be able to stand up to his peers when set free, or else we should ask ourselves: what kind of "championship" is that?

**AHW: THIS WOULD ALMOST ELIMINATE THE "STAND UP."**

PARASKEVAS: It would also, hopefully, eliminate the abusive whipping, instilling fear in the heart of the horse (to guarantee obedience) that occurs in the current system. I also recommend installing cameras in the warm-up areas and in the barns at every major event to detect improper treatment of horses. If a special fund is established to that end, it will garner many donations.





Any handler, trainer, or owner who is caught abusing a horse should be banned for life. We have heard of professionals who were allowed to come back to work after being convicted of the most heinous behavior. Only the certainty of lifetime expulsion will deter them in the future.

**AHW: YOU ARE QUITE VOCAL ABOUT REQUIRING HORSES TO BE RIDDEN. WOULD YOU INCORPORATE RIDING IN YOUR SYSTEM? OR DO YOU ACCEPT THE APPARENT DIVERGENCE IN THE BREED BETWEEN THE HALTER HORSE AND RIDDEN HORSES?**

PARASKEVAS: Ah, the “two sorts of Arabians” that Rosemary Archer and others have written about. On the one hand, I am persuaded of the versatility of our horse. On the other hand, I strongly take exception to the notion that the requirements are mutually exclusive. It all comes down to proper breeding. People who cannot breed both beauty and utility all too often settle for just one set of criteria, at the expense of the others. One of the most neglected issues of our time is that of riding ability of the Arabian or, more often than not, the lack of it. While it is true that many fine people who own a horse for their own pleasure take pride in riding their horses, the same cannot be said of many who breed mainly for looks. The showing is still seen as the most important venue amongst these breeders, and it is impossible to over emphasize the harm being done to the breed by the divergence of judgment criteria between the functional Arabian and the beauty-contest Arabian. I have long advocated in favor of elevating riding to equal status to halter, only to hear from the industry how “impractical” and “expensive” it would be. Even as we may accept this argument, it cannot be the last word.

**AHW: SO WHAT WOULD YOU DO?**

PARASKEVAS: If we concede that it may be impractical and expensive to prove riding capability in a competitive environment at *every* show, it is not too much to ask that mature show horses that aspire to reach “top ten” status internationally be able to prove that they are fit to be seriously ridden. For the sake of their own future, breed organizations have to move from “hoping” that breeders qualify their horses under saddle to insisting on it. I am calling here for a qualification necessary to compete at halter for mature horses. I suggest that completing a 50-mile ride would be sufficient. Flat racing might also suffice. After all, the Polish studs still put most of their young horses on the track. Disciplines that require rigorous training and performance, such as dressage and eventing, might also serve as qualifiers. If I ever show one of my horses in a reformed

showring, it will have to finish the Tevis first.

Horses that can prove their ability under saddle should enter the showing with bonus points compared to those that simply grace our gardens or live in their stalls. Beautiful horses that can prove they can do what an Arabian is supposed to do would be all the more valuable, I believe, than some of the less apt that we sometimes see crowned at halter. Think of it this way: chests would have to be wider, cannon bones shorter, backs shorter and stronger, hind quarters considerably more correct and powerful.

**AHW: WHAT YOU ARE SUGGESTING IS REVOLUTIONARY AND WOULD REQUIRE THE CONCURRENCE OF MANY PARTS OF THE BREED. DO YOU REALISTICALLY BELIEVE PEOPLE WOULD COME TOGETHER TO SUPPORT THIS, OR ANY OTHER, MAJOR CHANGE?**

PARASKEVAS: I believe that a wide consensus exists on the necessity of reform. Grassroots movements of horse breeders large and small are busy organizing parallel structures. More and more shows and equestrian events are being held outside the purview of the organizations theoretically in charge of organizing them, a clear sign of alienation from the very public that these shows are supposed to attract. Many good people have simply quit the breed in frustration. Concurrently, there has been a downward spiral that ails the market. Ironically, the paucity of money to be made in Arabian horses today may be a blessing in disguise. For the first time in a long time, many who might otherwise defend the status quo now lack the motivation to stand in the way of reform. Many of the most powerful figures of the industry are now just as eager for reform as the “grassroots” breeders. Let us all seize the moment together, then: the time for action is now.

**AHW: EACH MAJOR SHOW ORGANIZATION, FROM AHA IN THE U.S. TO ECAHO, HAS DIFFICULTY CHANGING EVEN SOME STRAIGHTFORWARD RULES. HOW WOULD YOU GET PEOPLE TOGETHER TO MAKE THE MASSIVE CHANGES YOU ARE SUGGESTING?**

PARASKEVAS: Only a broad-based reform will stand a chance of success, and achieving the acceptance of every sector of the Arabian horse community and every stakeholder is crucial. Acceptance will only come if all the entities you mention realize that change is *in their interest*.

Imagine, if you will, a worldwide symposium of representatives of all the stakeholders in the breed who would plan to move decisively from “discussing” to “designing” a package of reforms, one of real practical relevance, and then



publish a “list of recommendations.” Participants should include widely respected senior representatives from concerned breed organizations, senior judges, respected breeders large and small, academics, researchers, and thinkers. These representatives should come from as many geographic areas as possible. All must find the package of reforms to be beneficial when taken in its entirety, even if only in the long term.

**AHW: THIS IS VERY AMBITIOUS. WHO SETS THE AGENDA FOR SUCH A SYMPOSIUM?**

PARASKEVAS: It must be agreed upon in advance, not improvised at the meeting. This symposium cannot be a place to give speeches or to vent frustrations. It is now time to act. I have given my ideas, but many more are out there. The symposium must crystallize the ideas of the wise men and women who are truly dedicated to the breed. The symposium must have a sponsor and a number of personalities who will encourage its success. Together, these will set the agenda.

**AHW: IN THE CONTEXT OF SUCH A SYMPOSIUM, ASSUMING THAT DELEGATES COULD AGREE ON RECOMMENDATIONS FOR CHANGE, WHAT DO YOU EXPECT WOULD REALLY HAPPEN? SUCH RECOMMENDATIONS CAN'T BIND ANY ORGANIZATION.**

PARASKEVAS: Of course, breed organizations have large boards that will need to vote on any package for change, and it is easy to imagine that any blueprint for change may get held up in the bureaucratic grinder. Does this mean that the exercise may be superfluous? Not if you consider the moral force that such a list of recommendations will have. Never before have we had a large body of experts agree on such

a full package of reform. Imagine, for example, the impact that the publication of a document specifying innovative measures to effectively alter undesirable practices could have, if signed by respected members of the training fraternity, in addition to all the blue-ribbon panelists. I believe that this would soon become the “gold standard” of correct training and handling, under the pressure of public opinion. Given vision, given courage, given the readiness to negotiate in good faith for the sake of the future of the breed, everything is possible.





# THE PARASKEVAS ARABIANS OF EGYPT

Dahshur · Giza · Egypt

Email: [author@philippeparaskevas.com](mailto:author@philippeparaskevas.com)

[www.PhilippeParaskevas.com](http://www.PhilippeParaskevas.com)



YOUNG MARES OF PARASKEVAS ARABIANS BEING RIDDEN IN THE DESERT.

ORIGINALLY PUBLISHED BY ARABIAN HORSE WORLD · MAY 2013