

A photograph of Princess Haya of Jordan, a woman with blonde hair, wearing a dark grey jacket with the Jordanian flag and the word "JORDAN" on the sleeve. She is looking up at a light-colored horse's head, which is leaning down towards her. The background is dark.

Princess Haya in her
Jordan jacket at the
2000 Olympics

PHOTO COURTESY OF HRH PRINCESS HAYA

A horsewoman since childhood, Her Royal Highness Princess Haya of Jordan, president of the Federation Equestre Internationale, believes Kentucky will provide a 'magical atmosphere' for the Alltech FEI World Equestrian Games in 2010.

By Nancy Jaffer

Making her first major personal appearance before horse sports fans during last summer's FEI World Equestrian Games in Aachen, Germany, Her Royal Highness Princess Haya of Jordan came across as poised, charming—and beautiful.

But the spectators who filled the stands for the compilation of world championships saw only the sophisticated woman who had become president of the Federation Equestre Internationale (the international equestrian federation), just five months previously. They couldn't possibly have realized she is more comfortable in jeans around the barn than in the designer dresses she wears to make speeches and present medals.

"The stables are my space, it is my kingdom," the Princess explains. "I get on a horse and there is no protocol, no one to tell me what to do, and nothing to worry about but my horses. It is home."

From such a vantage point, it's only natural that she has special feelings for Kentucky and its horse park, which will host the Alltech FEI World Equestrian Games in 2010. Describing it as "the biggest horse event, outside racing, ever held on the planet," she notes something of that magnitude requires not only a special organizing team, but also a unique venue.

"The park, with its 1,200 acres, is just that site. It will offer everything that we need to provide a global platform for Kentucky and horse sport. The community around the

CROWNING ACHIEVEMENT

park already is very used to playing host to horse people from across the globe, whether through the sales, the racing or the breeding. In European terms, Aachen had a similar community with a similar outlook and it showed that the starting point for a successful World Equestrian Games is a well-informed home crowd who knows and loves horses. So it is a guaranteed success!”

Heritage of Horses

Princess Haya has studied seven languages, is at the forefront of many charities around the world and serves as the First Lady of Dubai. She’s a remarkable woman of many interests and contrasts, but first and foremost, she’s an equestrian. Horses are part of her heritage; her father, the late King Hussein of Jordan, also loved them.

Her relationship with the most graceful of animals started with one who was wooden: Herman, her hobby horse. Princess Haya’s mother, Queen Alia, died in a plane crash when she was only three. Herman was something she connected with the beloved parent she would never see again.

“I did not really understand much of what was happening at the time, only that she went away and would not be coming back,” the Princess recalls about the loss of her mother. “Where there was laughter in the house before, it seemed to be replaced with lots of whispering in the corridors, and people, I remember, used to look at me and my younger brother, Ali, with concern, and do things like walk away, shaking their heads. I do not remember much about my mother, but I do remember she used to speak to me, and it seemed for a very long time after that the adults used to speak over my head, the way grown-ups do, thinking children never hear them.”

She could talk to her father, however, who understood that something very important was missing in her life. On her sixth birthday, he sat on her bed just after sunrise to tell her about a filly at the Royal Jordanian Stud whose dam had died and needed to be hand-reared.

“I remember seeing her and speaking for the first time to my father about what she must feel, losing her mother. And I think my father had meant it to be that way all along. From that day on, she was my special friend, and I got through my own memories, thinking that I was getting her through hers.”

The filly, Bint Al Reeh (which translates from Arabic as Daughter of the Wind) became the young Princess’s first jumper. Since there were no real show jumps available in Jordan during her childhood, the

Princess would tear off on her mare, clearing logs or anything else she could find, cheered on by her older sister, Princess Alia, who runs the Royal Stud. “I was jumping mad from the moment I started riding,” remembers the Princess, “and the Olympics was always where I wanted to go.”

Competitor of Distinction

The Princess, who insiders believe will be named to the International Olympic Committee and now serves on its athletes’ commission, concedes she has always been “a fanatic about the Games, about the symbolism and anything to do with it.”

At the age of 13, Princess Haya was selected to represent her country internationally in show jumping. For five years, she was the Jordanian National Show Jumping Champion. In 1992, she became the first woman to compete and medal in equestrian in a Pan Arab Games, where she won an individual bronze. She has



LEFT: Herman was Princess Haya’s first “horse.”

BELOW: Princess Haya and her late father, King Hussein of Jordan



PHOTOS COURTESY OF HRH PRINCESS HAYA



ABOVE: Princess Haya and her husband, Sheikh Mohammed bin Rashid Al Maktoum

practically made a career of “firsts” in so many categories, blazing a trail that paves the way for others who aspire to similar achievements in her part of the world.

She rode at her British boarding school and Oxford. After graduating with honors, she told her father she wanted to compete internationally. No one in her family had ever dropped public duty to become an athlete, and not everyone in her homeland was happy about it. King Hussein, however, backed up her dream, creating “Team Harmony,” an international string of show jumpers. Team Harmony continues to this day, but now sponsors five other riders, including Yasmine Abdallat, a California resident of Jordanian heritage.

As she rose through the ranks, Princess Haya trained and competed with several big-name trainers. In 2000, she went to the Olympics, realizing her dream at last. But it was bittersweet.

“The proudest moment for me, in truth, was not at the Games, because my father passed away in February 1999. It was in the hospital with him, when a



ABOVE: Realizing a dream, Princess Haya competed at the 2000 Olympics aboard Lucilla II.

doctor walked in somewhere near the end, and my father said, ‘This is my Olympic daughter.’”

She was saluted by fellow Jordanian athletes when she was selected to carry the nation’s flag during the opening ceremonies in Sydney, another first for a woman and an equestrian. Two years later, she rode in the World Equestrian Games in Jerez. After that, her life took a different path.

“I was really homesick,” she explains. “I also had a very bad back, and it had been giving me trouble for two years. I knew deep down I was never going to be in the sport for life.”

Still, she kept more than one foot in the equestrian world.

“I was not quite brave enough to sell my team of horses, and always thought I would rest my back a little, work at home, and keep my horses in Dubai, as the facilities there were far superior to Jordan for horses, keep on riding in my own time and compete through the summers.”

Then she met and married His Highness Prince Sheikh Mohammed Bin Rashid Al Maktoum, then Crown Prince of Dubai. His highly regarded international racing stable includes such stars as Bernardini, winner of last year’s Preakness.

Life changed after that, however.

New Challenges

“Within a very short space of time, due to the tragic death of his brother, His Highness Sheikh Maktoum in January 2006, and on top of losing a wonderful man who had gone out of his way to look after me personally, I found myself First Lady of Dubai overnight,” she explains.

The situation required quite a transition. “In some ways, when you are born into a royal family, going into another royal institution is very hard, because you know how you should act and you don’t want to make a mistake. When I married and moved to another country, I took that in my stride, but my horses have been my lifeline, and my stable staff is eternally patient with me.

“They can see they are my rock, and they keep telling me, ‘Come day or night, just call, but you must ride your horses!’ When I turn up all dressed up after meetings, they just hand me a broom, like the good old days, or I go mix feeds after I have ridden.”

The Princess has six jumping horses in work at present, but she also enjoys a strong connection with racing, having become interested in it during her days in Ireland.

“Since my marriage, I have come to know in my husband a man who is in love with racing, and who believes in the sport and in its future as strongly as he believes in that of his country. At the races, I feel honored being with him and the team that he has built, and learning from them.”

The Princess also has a bit of experience with another of her husband’s passions, endurance competition. “I ended up trying to qualify three horses for my husband’s stable by finishing 160km rides, and qualified myself for the World Championships. When the opportunity was given to me by him to compete for Jordan, I jumped at it. I loved the experience, and all I learned from the horses I rode, but in my heart and soul, I am a show jumper; there is no way around it!”

In the FEI, of course, she is more than that, having gained familiarity with all its disciplines in order to set the organization on course for a new century.

“Through both my riding and this broader education in the horse world, I came to have a knowledge of horse sport at all levels and a vision for its future,” she says. That was what led her to run for the FEI’s presidency last year. “Part of the philosophy,

which my father instilled in me, was a deep understanding that leadership is about service. So when the moment arose, it seemed a very natural step to put my name forward for election. I take the very greatest pleasure from serving a sport which has given me so much.”

Already, Princess Haya has made changes in the way things are done at the FEI, and in the key personnel, but she’s just starting a long and challenging agenda.

“What I promised was more energy, new ideas and a more agile administration. We have a good team spirit now, and we have a great team. My job is to look at the FEI and the sport with cold, unbiased eyes. I have not made a lasting difference yet; I have a very long way to go, but we will get there.”

Kentucky: ‘A Magical Atmosphere’

One of the vehicles that will help get the FEI to the destination she envisions is the Alltech FEI World Equestrian Games. “In terms of the growth of horse sport, I feel that the Games needed to move outside Europe if horse sport wasn’t to become an insular, European-focused and European-led sport.

“I am certain that by hosting the FEI World Equestrian Games in the United States, we will be able to bring not only Americans, but also people across the world, to a deeper understanding of horse sport.

Princess Haya views the Games at the horse park as opening many doors, both internationally and nationally. “But what marks an event as being extraordinary, and therefore of global interest, is not just the efficiency of its team or the quality of its facilities. An event of this size only becomes extraordinary through the atmosphere in which the event is held and I know that Kentucky will provide a magical atmosphere which, combined with the other ingredients, will spark a huge surge in support for horse sport that will drive us through into the next stage of our development.”