

September 24, 2010

**Princess Shakes Up Equestrian World**

**By** [**KATIE THOMAS**](http://topics.nytimes.com/top/reference/timestopics/people/t/katie_thomas/index.html?inline=nyt-per)

BAYAMON, P.R. — As a daughter of King Hussein and the wife of the ruler of Dubai, Princess Haya bint al-Hussein of Jordan has the pedigree that is practically a prerequisite for presiding over the [International Equestrian Federation](http://www.fei.org/), which governs the sport. Members of noble or royal families have led the organization, with few exceptions, since its founding in 1921.

But in her four years as president, Princess Haya has defied prim royal stereotypes by shaking things up. She dissolved the committee that oversees the discipline of dressage, calling its members “uncooperative and self-serving.” She pushed through a measure that would have allowed the use of several controversial drugs for horses. And she has cracked down on cheating in the sport even as she recused herself from an inquiry in 2009 involving horses, belonging to her husband and one of his sons, that had tested positive for performance-enhancing drugs.

Princess Haya’s tenure has been so contentious that two men are opposing her in an election scheduled for November, the first time an incumbent federation president has been challenged. The vote is likely to be a juicy topic of conversation at the World Equestrian Games, which open Saturday in Lexington, Ky. The two-week event, being held outside Europe for the first time in its 20-year history, is on a par with the Olympics in prestige, and it will draw horse enthusiasts from around the world.

While not exactly rejecting her royal identity, Princess Haya has long challenged what it means to be a princess. In Jordan, she is the only woman licensed to drive heavy trucks. In her 20s, she pursued a full-time career as an equestrian athlete, competing in the 2000 Sydney Olympics and driving her horses across Europe in a custom tractor-trailer.

Now 36, she is the worldly junior wife of Sheik [Mohammed bin Rashid al-Maktoum](http://topics.nytimes.com/top/reference/timestopics/people/m/mohammed_bin_rashid_al_maktoum/index.html?inline=nyt-per), 61, making appearances in jeans, her long hair flowing, even as his senior wife leads a more private life.

Those who support her say Princess Haya has taken on some of the federation’s thorniest issues. Her royal predecessors include [Prince Philip](http://topics.nytimes.com/top/reference/timestopics/people/p/duke_of_edinburgh_philip/index.html?inline=nyt-per), Duke of Edinburgh, and the Infanta Doña Pilar de Borbón, the sister of [King Juan Carlos](http://topics.nytimes.com/top/reference/timestopics/people/j/king_of_spain_juan_carlos_i/index.html?inline=nyt-per) of Spain.

“I really was surprised to see that a princess could be so down to reality and work so much, with her own hands,” said Diana M. Ramos, a dressage rider from the Dominican Republic who served until recently on a federation governing committee. Although her country’s federation voted against Princess Haya in 2006, Ramos said she had since won them over. “She’s really a woman of this time.”

But to her critics, Princess Haya is an autocrat who makes rash decisions. One rival is the first vice president, Sven Holmberg of Sweden, who promises a restructuring of the federation to incorporate more grass-roots views.

“It’s been too much a top-down design rather than the other way around,” Holmberg said in a telephone interview.

Princess Haya acknowledged that her style had turned off some people. “I could have done things differently,” she said, “but the results would have been the same.”

There is nothing genteel about this election, in which the winner needs a two-thirds majority from the roughly 130 national federations casting votes at the [General Assembly](http://topics.nytimes.com/top/reference/timestopics/organizations/g/general_assembly/index.html?inline=nyt-org) in Taiwan. Princess Haya’s challengers, [Holmberg](http://www3.ridsport.se/Svensk-Ridsport/SvenHolmberg/) and [Henk Rottinghuis](http://www.henkrottinghuis.org/) of the Netherlands, each have a Web site. And this summer Princess Haya made a swing through the Western Hemisphere, including a stop in Puerto Rico in July to attend the Latin American and Caribbean Games.

During the equestrian competition in Puerto Rico, Princess Haya looked crisp in a blue oxford shirt and black jeans despite the 90-degree heat. She mingled with the sport’s local leaders as reporters documented her every move. Inside the stables, she waved off the photographers, citing concern for the horses. “This is their bedroom,” she said as she walked along the stalls, tickling horses’ muzzles and feeding them carrots.

Her mother, Queen Alia, was killed in a helicopter crash when she was 2. Shortly after the crash, she received from her father a foal, Bint al-Reeh, or Daughter of the Wind, whose mother had also died.

Caring for another living being is “often the easiest way to get over your own pain,” she said. At 13, she competed in her first international event and joined the show-jumping circuit full time upon earning a degree from Oxford in politics, philosophy and economics.

Princess Haya was not a standout rider, finishing 70th at the Sydney Games, but she identified with being an athlete. “I was able to interact with levels of society in Jordan that I would have never probably seen in the palace,” she said.

Even as she has stayed within certain conventions, she has challenged others. Princess Haya speaks with passion about her trucking license, which she earned at age 19.

“I used to watch these American movies with people driving lorries, big artics,” she said, describing articulated trucks, “and talking on the radio to each other. And I just thought it was what I wanted to do.”

Her father, [who died in 1999](http://www.nytimes.com/learning/general/onthisday/bday/1114.html?scp=1&sq=king%20hussein%20and%20obituary&st=cse), used to delight at hearing about the trucker cafes she frequented on the road. “I used to come back home and tell him all these stories and all the latest jokes about the family.”

She is not above playing practical jokes either. Princess Haya recalled the time a few years ago when Sebastian Coe, the chairman of the London Organizing Committee for the Olympics, showed her around Greenwich Park, where the equestrian stadium will be for the 2012 Games. When the need for additional seating came up, Princess Haya pointed toward the Queen’s House, a London treasure.

“Can’t we just knock it down?” she recalled telling Coe.

“You could see him thinking: ‘Arab princess. Is she serious? Are we going to have a problem?’ ” She gave a sly smile, saying, “Very funny.”

Since marrying in 2004, Princess Haya has appeared with her husband at public events in Dubai. His senior wife, Sheika Hind bint Maktoum bin Juma al-Maktoum, is rarely seen. She was married in 1979 and is mother to the 27-year-old crown prince. Princess Haya and the sheik have one child, Sheika al-Jalila, 2.

When asked whether they had discussed her role before their marriage, Princess Haya laughed and said: “There was no discussion. It was the fact that I loved him and how I would move my stuff from home to Dubai. Practical things.”

She added, “I see my role as Sheik Mohammed’s wife.” Princess Haya is also active in humanitarian work. “She doesn’t do it with bravado or lots of publicity,” said [Kofi Annan](http://topics.nytimes.com/top/reference/timestopics/people/a/kofi_annan/index.html?inline=nyt-per), the former [United Nations](http://topics.nytimes.com/top/reference/timestopics/organizations/u/united_nations/index.html?inline=nyt-org) secretary general. He said he was impressed when, on a trip to Kenya, she visited victims of ethnic violence before meeting with the president.

Sorting out these disparate roles — she uses a BlackBerry for equestrian business and an [iPhone](http://topics.nytimes.com/top/reference/timestopics/subjects/i/iphone/index.html?inline=nyt-classifier) for everything else — can be difficult. Once, after a long discussion with a world hunger expert, she took a call to discuss whether men and women in the discipline of vaulting should wear the same type of unitard. “I didn’t know what the word was until about halfway through the conversation,” she said. “It was very bizarre.”

Princess Haya said she was actually more methodical than spontaneous. “Sometimes to the outside world, I can move quite fast, but it’s because I spent so much time thinking about it,” she said.

Of her tenure, she said she was proud of bringing in more qualified staff members, developing a sponsorship plan and helping to put in place an integrity unit to crack down on doping and cheating. She has also contributed in ways few can match, donating about $32 million toward the purchase and renovation of federation headquarters in Lausanne, Switzerland.

Some of her other moves have not been as politic. Last November she was criticized for introducing a list permitting use of anti-inflammatory drugs for horses. Eventually, Princess Haya was forced to withdraw the proposal for the drugs, which can mask serious injuries before competition.

Complicating the issue is that in 2009 Princess Haya’s husband was barred from competition for 6 months and the crown prince 10 months for drug violations. She has said that the sheik’s workers discovered the use of illegal substances and reported them to the federation at his request.

Holmberg acknowledged that he is running because he strongly opposed her position on anti-inflammatory drugs. And Rottinghuis, a former Dutch equestrian official who ran an international trading company, said European equestrian officials asked him to run against her. He has said that the federation’s image has suffered recently and that the sport is not globalizing quickly enough.

“I think someone with my profile could help the F.E.I. in the next four years,” he said.

Like a skilled politician, Princess Haya was upbeat about being the first incumbent to face a contested election, calling it progress. Once, she said, members of royalty assumed the presidency with little opposition.

“When I started, it was a federation that couldn’t look to the future.” Now, she added, “I’d like to think that this is a federation that anybody can lead.”