



The Godolphin stables of Sheikh Mohammed have been created by a horseman, with no expense spared. Basic needs are provided alongside luxuriant extras, but all is achieved in a quiet understated manner. If a horse or staff member needs something, it is there. But there are no novelties or gimmicks, no spending for the sake of it. This is a place for the horse and it is no different to any other working yard. Sheikh Mohammed has a passion for the horse and has filled his stable with those who share that passion, none more so than trainer Saeed bin Suroor.

Anyone who thinks they have a love of horses and racing must make it their goal in life to spend just five minutes with Saeed bin Suroor. Then they will know what that passion truly is. As Saeed acknowledges himself, every moment of his time is precious, so I expected professional curtness and the relaying of facts and no more. I certainly didn't bargain for being elevated to a higher plain during the time that we spoke, a sense of being in the presence of a true icon of racing whose every word epitomises what our devotion to the horse is all about. And when he speaks of the personal sacrifices he willingly makes for the sheer passion of his life (it could never be described as a 'job') it engenders a genuine lump in the throat.

Because he devotes his life to the horses in his care and the people who work with them, Saeed has somehow managed to slip through the media net, a quiet, unhailed hero of the Turf. He most certainly doesn't present this image when we speak. He's bubbly and confident and seems to be enjoying the interview, perhaps a testimony to his people-skills. There is no question he'll shirk away from,

no answer he isn't willing to elaborate on, an enthusiastic speaker who is generous with his time and thought. He is an intensely passionate man and, fortunately for all of us who are racing fans, that passion is focused on the horse.

I have a long list of questions and most are already answered in a single sentence. As soon as you hear him speak of the horses in his care you understand why they are so successful worldwide, why they always stand out so impressively in the parade ring, why so many great Darley stallions were great Godolphin horses. It isn't necessary to ask him for his training tips and secrets, because there are none. His horses are simply healthy and happy and want to win for him. Anyone can learn to feed and exercise correctly. Very few can instinctively know how to keep each individual horse in their care happy. Saeed makes it his mission. The health and happiness of his horses quite literally matter above all else. "I see my horses and my team more than my family," he says quite happily.

His response to my first question explains his unique talent, but it doesn't really get answered because he doesn't understand it. And that's

exactly what makes Saeed one of our all-time great trainers. "When did you first become interested in horses?" I ask. And he is instantly confused and says he needs help, he doesn't understand the question. His eventual answer explains why.

"When I first opened my eyes there were horses. There have always been horses around me. My family for generations have looked after horses and bred them, it is in our blood," he explains. "They are part of our culture, we treat them as though they are part of the family. We had Arabs, and the Thoroughbred is a little bit different, different speed, different size, different mentality, but just as special. They are all special. The passion is strong, it's our lives."

To many of us, Saeed appeared almost overnight from nowhere, a policeman from Dubai, we were told. Still only in his late twenties, he had been appointed private trainer to Sheikh Mohammed in a seemingly crackpot scheme that would see 30 of the Sheikh's best horses removed from their trainers and presented to bin Suroor, to be based in his stable in Dubai. This was in 1995. We had never heard of horses being trained in Dubai and the idea that they could come to Britain and race was prepos-

terous. Until they did.

In that first year, they not only raced, they carried all before them. There was a fear that British racing would never be the same again, that only horses wintering in Dubai could win the major races. Such was the novelty factor, full credit seemed to elude Saeed. What other first-season trainer could arrive at the start of the European season and promptly send out the winners of three of England's five Classics, The Derby, The Oaks and the St Leger, in addition to the French Two Thousand Guineas, the Prix de l'Arc de Triomphe, King George VI & Queen Elizabeth Diamond Stakes, York International, Eclipse Stakes, Yorkshire Oaks, Golden Jubilee Stakes, and Nunthorpe Stakes, without being feted by the press and hailed as a genius? Saeed also sent out Red Bishop to win the San Juan Capistrano Invitational in the USA and Heart Lake to win the Yasuda Kinen in Japan. The following year he won the first of his four British Champion Trainer titles.

Of course, he hadn't come from nowhere and had taken out his first licence as a trainer in 1994, his natural talent and success quickly bringing him to the attention of an astute Sheikh Mohammed. "Before Godolphin I trained for another owner in Dubai," Saeed tells me. "This is my 16th season with Godolphin. We started off with just a very small number of horses, originally we had 30. But we needed more horses and the stable got bigger and bigger. I now have 170 horses myself. You need this number, to compete on the scale that we do. With two-year-olds you need to see something good from them. So many here come as yearlings." Most need time to develop, but there are still races to be won, so having the strength in numbers is important.

"I love the yearlings, I enjoy them very much," Saeed says earnestly, "they are like babies, you have to look after them, treat them really well and give them time. They need lots of time. A two-year-old, he is learning every week. And you learn a lot about them. And you enjoy every time you see them. You have to be very patient with them – he will tell you when he's ready."

I ask if the very good ones stand out from the start, does he recognise those with potential? But it's another alien question to him. All horses have potential, some simply need more help than others. He sees the spark in each yearling and gives them the time and nurturing they require. They are all stars. He would no more pick out one than a mother would single out a favourite among her children.

A racing stable isn't only about the bright new things and the promises to come. There are established stars, too, and for Saeed many of these have come from other stables, often abroad. Some might think it's a new learning curve when an older horse joins the stable from a different trainer, but no horse is a stranger to Saeed.

"There is no difference," he insists. "This is a company, an international company. Multinational. I already know these horses, I follow them before they come here. Sheikh Mohammed asks me to look at them, it's part of my job. This is a market," he explains. "We buy and we sell and we keep horses to become stallions. That is the purpose of the company, to produce stallions. If you look at the Darley stallions, most of them were Godolphin racehorses."

The word team is never far from Saeed's lips. He doesn't speak of staff, he talks instead of the grooms and work riders who help him every day and who he, in turn, does his



utmost to help. The team lives to serve the horses in its care, it's a horseman's paradise and a home every horse would aspire to, if they only knew.

"We have professional work riders, that is their only job, to ride the horses," Saeed says. "In other stables the riders have to do everything – groom, clean the stable, lay a bed for the horse. Our riders have only one job – to ride the horse. We want to help them do their job as best as possible, to make it as easy for them as possible. The work riders are all professional riders. They give me so much information. I help them as much as I can because they help me so much in my work."

"Our grooms are from Pakistan," he continues. "They are horsemen, it is part of their culture, too, they have always had dealings with horses. They are there for the horse, they do no other thing, they are with the horse all the time. At evening stables the groom takes his horse for a pick of grass. They help the owner, the rider, the jockey, the trainer. It is very much teamwork, we all help everyone. You need to make things easier for everyone, we try to help them out."

There is no doubting Saeed's skills in the management of people. He understands implicitly that to keep

his horses healthy and happy he must also do the same for his team. People management, in the end, is all about securing the horse the best possible environment.

"You need to have a quiet stable, the horses need to be in a quiet, calm environment, they can't be upset," he emphasises. "There is no noise in my stable. The main thing is to keep a horse happy. When he's happy, he will give you the results. The way you groom him, the way you treat him, the way you feed him, the way he is ridden, it takes many things to make them healthy and happy.

"Time is very tight, very tight. I go racing every single day. Every day. Everything has to be exactly 100% before I go." This is clearly something very important to him. Not just the perfect well-being of his own horses, but his constant presence at the races, his knowledge of other horses who might one day be in his care. Everything about the Godolphin operation is so meticulously thought out that you wonder why they're based at Newmarket and not in a private training establishment away from racing's centre.

"Newmarket is completely different to Dubai or other countries, where you train on the track," Saeed explains. "Here you have so many gallops, different gallops. Some might sometimes be closed, but you choose where to go with your horse, you choose the gallop that suits your horse best. We also have our own private gallops, we have four, and they are permanently looked after by a team of people, so the ground is always fresh, always good ground, every one of them is perfect. We can use them in the summer, when the ground elsewhere is too hard, or if the public gallops are too wet."

Having won in Britain, France, Ireland, America and Japan in its first year of operation, Godolphin as a



Saeed bin Suroor at Newmarket
Photo - www.godolphin.com

company is certainly multinational, and it expects its horses to be as well. For a man so dedicated to the well-being of his horses, what difficulties does this present?

"Our horses travel all the time, they are used to it, it's not a problem," he says. "We have a very good routine, so it's never any different for them. They have the same groom, we send the same work rider with them. It's not that difficult, it's just routine, well organised. We are looking at the best owner in the world. We compete all over the world and Sheikh Mohammed is a major help internationally."

Some trainers talk of finding the right horse, having to wait for the right type of animal suitable for taking to the top international races. Saeed understands that they all have equal potential and travel is no barrier to them, he can send two or three horses for the world's most prestigious races. But that doesn't make it any easier to win.

"Some races are definitely on our agenda for the future, the Melbourne Cup, the Japan Cup, the Breeders' Cup Classic, the Kentucky Derby, but it is never going to be easy. You need the class horse. He must have stamina, speed, quality, he must be

able to handle the ground. If we're not successful, we try again." It would be hard to describe Godolphin as unsuccessful and they have certainly been willing to try. Saeed has trained the runner-up in the Melbourne Cup in 1999, 2001 and 2009, while Beekeeper finished third in 2002. He has also won the Caulfield Cup with All The Good.

"The Melbourne Cup is very important to us. Very important to Godolphin and very important to the United Arab Emirates. It's the best race in the world," he stresses. "For the Melbourne Cup it is important that the horse can stay. They need to be able to get home over two miles. But still they need to have speed and class. We didn't have luck in the past. The horses we sent got injured before they ran, which made it very difficult, or they didn't even run because of problems before the race. It's a tough game, it's always hard, but you always have to be looking forward." Saeed will have little time to digest the performances of Holberg and Campanologist in Melbourne, as it coincides with the stable's annual move to Dubai.

"At the end of the autumn, we move," he tells me. "1st November, as it gets cold, we move to Dubai.

The horses race in Dubai from January until March. We move back 1st April, as it starts to get warm. It isn't a problem for the horses moving to Dubai from Newmarket and back again. We are only in Dubai for the winter there, so it is cooler. There isn't a huge difference, it's cool weather, not cold. Our horses look different to those who have stayed in cold climates. They have beautiful coats. Their well-being shines. Moving away from the cold helps them a lot."

The winter holiday definitely works and Saeed has trained the winner of every British Classic. His other Group One successes are just too numerous to list and I wonder if he has any ambitions left? "The races I would most like to win are the Melbourne Cup, the Japan Cup, the Breeders' Cup Classic and the Kentucky Derby. I have won the Dubai World Cup five times, but that is a great race, it is always an ambition."

Asking him to name a favourite horse from the many he has trained is always going to be tough, but he admits there are horses he remembers with particular fondness. "Daylami, I liked Daylami very much. And Dubai Millenium and Fantastic Light, they were very special for me. Daylami was the first horse to win the Breeders' Cup for us, in 1999."

You might argue that Saeed has been very lucky in his chosen path, but his success owes more to hard work and dedication than to luck. He is doing something he loves, but he is the first to admit that it isn't easy. What advice can he offer young hopefuls?

"In this job you have to be very patient, from day one. You have to have a vision. A target. You must be able to say with confidence 'this is my future, this is how I see myself.'

It's a very tough game, very hard. Racing is like the stock market, up and down, red and green, win and lose. You have to be patient, be cool. For some people when they lose it's the end of the world. That's no good. You have to always be looking forward.

"Be patient. Be patient with horses, be patient with people. People think you can just learn and be good at what you do, but it takes years to learn. You can't dive in, you can't learn quickly. Always, you learn.

"I work 365 days a year for 16 years. I had no holiday at all, no day off, in the first 13 years. In the last three years I have taken one week or ten days off, only when we are back in Dubai. My day always starts at 4am, every day of the week. There is no weekend. I go racing every day. Sometimes if I am racing abroad I will not get home until midnight. I get four hours sleep, no more. That is not a life for a family. This is my holiday, this is everything for me.

"I see my horses more than my family. I am always away from them. In the summer they come to see me. My wife is very understanding, but it is very hard. When I go back home my littlest kids don't know me, they run away from me and cry. In two or three days they settle down and we are best friends again. But for a father, that is very hard. To go home and have your little kids run away from you... very hard. We speak all the time on the phone, I ring them at home and at school. My wife, my mother, my oldest kids, they understand. But the little kids... Always, for them, I smile. It is the same way with them as with the horses, be patient. Within two or three days we are great friends, but then I have to go away and I know it will be the same again..."

There is a laugh in his voice, as well as the under-current of sadness.

He relates the heart-rending tale with humour, because he has to be brave about it. As with everything, he remains patient, looking forward. Even with a lump in your throat you can't feel sorry for him, because this is the life he loves and the sacrifices he is willing to make. Even with a lump in your throat, you can't help but feel envious.

Would he encourage his own children to follow in his footsteps? "My children, my nieces, my nephews, they all have horses. It's their life. But I'm not going to push them, because it's very, very hard. It's something they must decide."

The uncomplicated selflessness about the man is overwhelming. Saeed is a giver, devoted to his family, though he can't always be with them; his horses; and his team, whom he has praised and thanked ceaselessly throughout. So it comes as an initial surprise, though no surprise at all, that he ends the conversation with a fervent request. "You must add also my team. It is all about teamwork. We are a company. I see my team more than my family and we enjoy every minute together."

He is not a martyr, he is not boastful; he is no more unassuming than he is over-powering. He devotes every waking moment to his horses, but he isn't a workaholic in the perceived sense, because here he is giving freely of his time and happy to talk frankly of his experiences. This is truly a way of life, a readily acknowledged passion that is all consuming, but his very lifeblood itself. He is, I feel, the luckiest man alive. Saeed Bin Suroor is actually living The Dream – and it's one that most of us share.

FOOTNOTE: Congratulations to Lissa Oliver for being awarded a special commendation by the Horserace Writers & Photographers Association, Great Britain.