

# WAR IN LEBANON

## NEWS FROM THE RACETRACK IN BEIRUT



Keeping the horses and races alive can help safeguard the racetrack for everyone, along with the green heart of Beirut.

Text: Nabil Nasrallah and Monika Savier  
Photos: Monika Savier and Racetrack Archives



The famous racetrack in Beirut in the 1950's



## Lebanon is profoundly a horse country.

Arabian horses have been part of civil society for hundreds of years. During times of war, the racetrack and its horses continued to play a unifying role, bringing people together across their many religions and cultures. However, we have now arrived at a point of doubt or uncertainty. Today's war has created a deep crisis, marking one of the saddest times the city has ever experienced. External help is necessary and essential. Horses are also in a critical situation and are urgently in need of protection and support.

The current conflict not only brings destruction but also revives traumatic memories of the last war in 2006 for many Lebanese. Nevertheless, following the Interruption of racing on October 2024, the racecourse management decided to resume racing on the 17/11/2024, starting with two race meetings without an audience, for a quick assessment of public reaction, followed by regular weekly races. In such a situation, it is a priority to assist horse racing enthusiasts with live images of the races and to purchase adequate closed-circuit television systems that would boost interest in horse racing.

In addition, sponsorships for horses could be taken on, so that they can be brought from the still threatened south of the country, to the safer stables and cared for there.

This is no longer possible for the breeders themselves, after many properties in the south of the country were destroyed or mined.

During all previous wars, the city and its racecourse were a symbol of an open world of all cultures and religions. The country has always been proud to offer refuge to minorities. Since the war in Syria, 1.5 million Syrians fled to Lebanon. This was a great challenge for this small country.

Until the 1960s, Beirut Hippodrome was still characterised by a fascinating mix of Ottoman architecture and turn-of-the-century styles, even some art-déco. The last two wars have damaged many of the historical buildings. The diversity of Beirut's neighbourhoods reflects the diversity of its population. After the end of the 2006 war, many Lebanese saw the construction boom as a symbol of a new era, no longer marked by unrest and attacks, but by stability and prosperity, and thus peace. Diversity was a reality. Whether



The races must go on



hijab and abaya or baseball caps and shorts, anything was possible, as was the diversity.

Beirut's inhabitants are known for being able to adapt their lives to whatever the current situation, even after the tragedy of a 15-year civil war (from 1975 to 1990), which reduced large parts of the city to ashes, and the 2006 war. There was not much talk about politics, religion or inflation. Instead, the cultural, artistic and music scenes in Beirut flourished like in no other Arab country. The rediscovery of the Arabian horse as a lifestyle symbol of young elites from all regions and religions of the country was undoubtedly one of them.

The Shiite Hezbollah was founded in Baalbek in 1982, during the Israeli occupation of Lebanon. The group's power largely paralyzed the political processes in the country, blocked the judiciary and infiltrated the state administration. But in the disadvantaged neighborhoods of the city and in the south of the country, it supported ordinary people, workers and farmers through welfare measures. To this day, Hezbollah has made itself attractive to parts of the population. Many of them have paid for it with their lives in recent months and

some were farmers and horse breeders. They would have sent their two and three-year-old young horses to Beirut for training on the racecourse. Meanwhile, the broodmares were in the farm pastures and olive groves of the south. Many died there in the hail of bombs. Now there is UN Resolution 1701, which stipulates that the Israelis withdraw behind the demarcation line and that Hezbollah withdraw behind the Litani River. It also states that Hezbollah must hand over its weapons arsenal to the Lebanese army. Hopefully peace will soon become a reality.

### **The racecourse in Beirut – a symbol of peace and cultural co-operation, in the middle of the city's green heart. What does its future hold?**

During the civil war, the Beirut racecourse acquired a special significance, as engineer Nabil Nasrallah, who is still the general director of the hippodrome today, reported. The city of Beirut was divided into a western and an eastern half by the famous Green Line, a division that also ran through the city's different religions and paramilitary groups. Crossing the Green Line was perilous.



Destroyed stud farms of Arabian horses in the south of Lebanon





However, the 20-hectare racecourse and the Horsh Beirut pine grove, a green oasis in the middle of the city where thousands of horses were trained, were located exactly on this line. They belonged to people of all religious affiliations, as did the trainers, jockeys and grooms, a multicultural melting pot that could not be divided by the war.

Beirut used to be a multicultural promise, but now the city is in danger of having just a memory of her former beauty and wealth. Her democratic society was more free and more colorful than anywhere else in the Middle East, and the racetrack with its horses played an important role for everybody within the frame of the cultural scene of the city. The grandstands have been destroyed since the last war (1982), but the racetrack is a symbol for the fact that

in spite of wars and conflicts, things would always go on somehow. The city will have to change if it wants to have a future. Fortunately, there are still Lebanese who, despite all the blows, have not given up hope of a turnaround and are fighting to make the city livable again for humans and animals. Among them are those responsible for Beirut's hippodrome, who are living for the future of the horses there. Horse culture must not be subordinated to the economy, but money is needed to survive.

We asked **Mr. Nabil Nasrallah**, Director of the racetrack, to tell us about the situation on the racetrack.





## Racing Against the Odds The Resilience of the Beirut Horse Racing Club

In the heart of Lebanon, where history and culture intertwine, the NGO SPARCA, Lebanese Horse Racing Authority, stands as a beacon of the nation's passion for equestrian sport. Despite facing significant challenges, including the threat of drone attacks, the decision to continue hosting races reflects an unwavering commitment to preserving a vital aspect of Lebanese culture and community.

The horse racing scene in Beirut is not just about the thrill of the race; it's an integral part of our social fabric. It brings people together,

reflecting a unifying symbol of peace, joy, and resilience. Each race celebrates skill, strength, and the rich history of horse breeding in Lebanon.

Even in turbulent times, our community's resilience shines through. The brave decision to continue with races symbolizes hope and defiance against adversity. It showcases our commitment to normalcy and celebration in the face of challenges.

Moreover, the club is more than just a venue for racing. It plays a crucial role in promoting tourism and the economy built around the horse.

In conclusion, the Beirut Horse Racing Club is a symbol of resilience and a testament to our enduring spirit with the objective to secure the perennity of the Arabian horse industry. Also to protect the last green public area in Beirut against concrete promoters. So, let us face the challenges ahead.



## INTERVIEW

*Savier: Despite drone attacks and grenade fire, races continue to take place, even if you decide not to allow a public for security reasons. That's brave, but risky. What do you want to achieve by doing that?*

**Nasrallah:** Our main objective at this moment is to protect and care for the horses. We also must boost confidence in the continuity of the racetrack for everyone, the horse owners, the passionate admirers of these horses, and the breeders. Continuous weekly racing with adequate prize money and numerous participants are the main requisites for a healthy protection of the Arabian horse industry. However, there is also a lack of economic resources to replace the obsolete technical and digital equipment.

*Savier: So, this would be a good opportunity for breeders from all over the world who want to support the horses and the racetrack, to donate prize money ... Would increased prize money per race improve the survival rate of the studs and the horses?*

**Nasrallah:** Being able to increase the prize money - currently 30 million Lebanese pounds equalling equaling today less than \$300 - and distributing prizes for all participating horses is our goal, but for

the moment it's only a wishful thinking. That would be an awesome approach, the races would be named for the sponsors if they want that, they can donate a trophy and a sum of money for all the horses in the race.

*Savier: What would the prize money for a race be?*

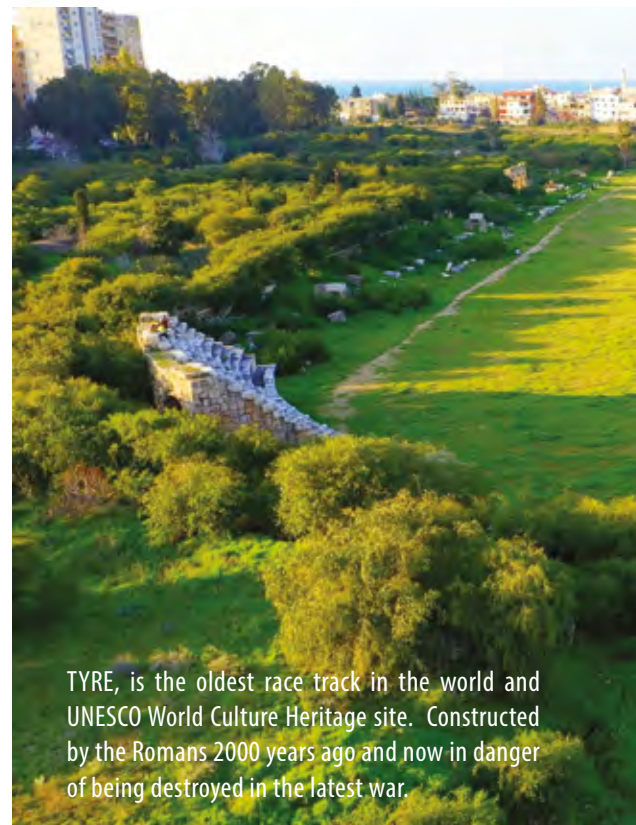
**Nasrallah:** 1000 Euros and a trophy cup per race, the money to be distributed among the participants, Jockeys, horse owners, trainers and 20% to the race track for organization costs, that would be a great help. A whole race day might total 5000 Euros and the trophy cups on top. But any other even small donation is most welcome.

*Savier: Many horses on the track come from old Lebanese bloodlines but they are not "WAHO Arabians". They are domestically bred Arabian racehorses, who didn't succeed in being in time for WAHO registration or the pedigree was not clear. But they all share the characteristics of a true Arabian horse: courage and speed.*

**Nasrallah:** For centuries, the Arabian horse originating from the migratory Bedouin tribes in the desert has been renowned for his courage, speed, endurance, beauty and good temperament. The modern Arabians in Lebanon share these same characteristics,



After he finished his engineering studies in Germany, **Nabil Nasrallah** was appointed, in 1971, at the Beirut Hippodrome du Parc as General Manager of the **Society for the Protection and Improvement of the Arabian Horse in Lebanon** (SPARCA, a Non-Profit Organization – NGO). Its mission is to protect the Arabian horse, ensuring its sustainability through registration and paternity checking as well as organizing competitions and racing. Mr Nasrallah is also, the registrar of the WAHO studbook in Lebanon.



TYRE, is the oldest race track in the world and UNESCO World Culture Heritage site. Constructed by the Romans 2000 years ago and now in danger of being destroyed in the latest war.

they are still chosen by their owners for both their beauty and their performance capabilities. And they must survive as well.

In recent years, also ECAHO shows for only WAHO registered horses have been held at the Hippodrome, but for us, the ideal Arabian horse remains one who can do both, win a race and perform successfully in a show class.

**Savier:** *Apart from the war between Israel and Hezbollah in Lebanon, what other factors triggered this crisis?*

**Nasrallah:** The country was already going through hard financial times and economic unrest. This has been going on for many years, but with the October Revolution in 2019 it all accelerated, bringing about the financial collapse. Before the targets of that revolution had been met, the Covid 19 pandemic hit us hard, with complete lockdowns for many months. In addition, as if all the above was not enough, Beirut suffered what is now known as the biggest non-nuclear explosion in recent history, killing hundreds, injuring thousands, and displacing over 300,000 households from their homes in Beirut. All of that has taken place with complete absence and denial from the political Authorities. Today the Lebanese pound has lost over 300% of its value in less than 1 year, putting everyone

on the verge of bankruptcy. Our Arabian horses found themselves in the middle of all of this. With no one paying any attention apart from SPARCA with its very limited resources. However, there are still a few people with a passion for these horses and a handful of breeders.

**Savier:** *What has been and still is the cultural role of the racetrack for the people of the city?*

**Nasrallah:** The horses and the racetrack go together. The one cannot exist without the other. The Beirut Hippodrome, the only functioning racetrack in Lebanon, has been the custodian of major historical events of our country. From the declaration of the State of Greater Lebanon in 1920 to the Independence in 1943, to witnessing the different wars and occupations that Lebanon went through, it remains the green spot in our city. This iconic park, up to now, grants the peaceful co-existence of all religions and the beacon of hope for humans and horses alike.

**Savier:** *Who owns the racetrack in Beirut?*

**Nasrallah:** With a total surface of 210,000 m<sup>2</sup>, it is one of the biggest green spaces in the Beirut capital.

The racetrack is fully owned by the municipality of Beirut. However,





the management of the racetrack and all the related activities were mandated to the NGO SPARCA. Due to the current war, SPARCA is no longer able to support the horses alone. It is therefore left with absolutely no resources.

**Savier: How many families are directly and indirectly dependent on the horses at the racecourse?**

**Nasrallah:** The ecosystem of the racetrack expands to the whole of Lebanon. Beirut itself has more than 600 families financially and socially dependent on the racetrack, the breeders are situated

in rural areas between the north, south, and the Bekaa, and the different horse studs are in various areas, making the total number of families depending fully or partially on the racetrack above 2,500.

**Savier: What happens if the racetrack must close?**

**Nasrallah:** If SPARCA is no longer able financially to continue with its mandate to manage and maintain the racetrack, the municipality will take back possession of the hippodrome. They will certainly be forced to close the hippodrome once and for all. The worrying

**Evaluation des Performances des Chevaux à l'Hippodrome**  
En date du 24/11/2024

Time Course No. 1427 Départ : 12:00 Prix : ZHARIFA  
FOUR CHEVAUX A 4 ANS ET 5 ANS  
Poids Course 54 Kg. Avec Demerage Aux Jockeys Et Chevaux Poids  
Prix : 30 000 000 L

Propriétaire	No Cheval	Spéc	Pg	Jockey	Entraineur	St	Performance
Amrallah El Wan	102	54 S	1	M. Ali	02 041 1307	M	02 041 1307
Mohamad Fouadfar	103	54 S	2	F. Adam	02 041 1303	M	02 041 1303
Ali H. Sarrafine	104	54 S	3	A. Hussein	02 041 1122	M	02 041 1122
Michel Prasson	105	54 S	4	M. Ali	02 041 1234 567	M	02 041 1234 567
Elas Zaima	106	54 S	5	A. Hussein	02 041 1122	M	02 041 1122

Time Course No. 1428 Départ : 13:00 Prix : ENGIN  
FOUR CHEVAUX A 4 ANS ET 5 ANS  
Poids Course 52 Kg. Avec Demerage Aux Jockeys Et Chevaux Poids  
Prix : 30 000 000 L

Propriétaire	No Cheval	Spéc	Pg	Jockey	Entraineur	St	Performance
Joseph Sarrafine	201	52 S	1	M. Ali	02 041 1307	M	02 041 1307
Mohamad Fouadfar	202	52 S	2	M. Dabbou	02 041 1451 1155 1123 1161	M	02 041 1451 1155 1123 1161
Ali H. Sarrafine	203	52 S	3	A. Hussein	02 041 1307 1234 1155 1161	M	02 041 1307 1234 1155 1161
Wafiq El Agha	204	52 S	4	F. Adam	02 041 1451 1362 1354 1326	M	02 041 1451 1362 1354 1326
Mohamad Fouadfar	205	52 S	5	F. Adam	02 041 1451 1362 1354 1326	M	02 041 1451 1362 1354 1326

Time Course No. 1429 Départ : 13:30 Prix : ENGIN  
FOUR CHEVAUX A 4 ANS ET 5 ANS  
Poids Course 52 Kg. Avec Demerage Aux Jockeys Et Chevaux Poids  
Prix : 30 000 000 L

Propriétaire	No Cheval	Spéc	Pg	Jockey	Entraineur	St	Performance
EC Chouly	301	52 S	1	E. Chouly	07 041 1445 42 1309 04	M	07 041 1445 42 1309 04
Michel Prasson	302	52 S	2	M. Ali	02 041 1445 42 1309 04	M	02 041 1445 42 1309 04
Elas Zaima	303	52 S	3	M. Hussein	02 041 1445 42 1309 04	M	02 041 1445 42 1309 04
Elas Zaima	304	52 S	4	M. Dabbou	02 041 1291 1233	M	02 041 1291 1233
Wafiq El Agha	305	52 S	5	F. Adam	02 041 1445 42 1309 04	M	02 041 1445 42 1309 04
Elas Zaima	306	52 S	6	M. Hussein	02 041 1445 42 1309 04	M	02 041 1445 42 1309 04
Michel Prasson	307	52 S	7	M. Ali	04 041 1445 42 1309 04	M	04 041 1445 42 1309 04
Elas Zaima	308	52 S	8	M. Dabbou	02 041 1311	M	02 041 1311
Scarbouche Chata	309	52 S	9	C. Karbouche	01 041 1234 1112	M	01 041 1234 1112

Time Course No. 1430 Départ : 13:30 Prix : ANGIN  
FOUR CHEVAUX A 4 ANS ET 5 ANS  
Poids Course 52 Kg. Avec Demerage Aux Jockeys Et Chevaux Poids  
Prix : 30 000 000 L

Propriétaire	No Cheval	Spéc	Pg	Jockey	Entraineur	St	Performance
Joseph Sarrafine	401	52 S	1	M. Hussein	02 041 1307 1234 1155 1161	M	02 041 1307 1234 1155 1161
Michel Prasson	402	52 S	2	M. Ali	01 041 1307 1234 1155 1161	M	01 041 1307 1234 1155 1161
Hussein Higmoud	403	52 S	3	A. Hussein	04 041 836 862 21 231 180	M	04 041 836 862 21 231 180
Joseph Sarrafine	404	52 S	4	M. Dabbou	02 041 1307 1234 1155 1161	M	02 041 1307 1234 1155 1161
Joseph Sarrafine	405	52 S	5	M. Dabbou	02 041 1307 1234 1155 1161	M	02 041 1307 1234 1155 1161

Time Course No. 1431 Départ : 14:30 Prix : ANGIN  
FOUR CHEVAUX A 4 ANS ET 5 ANS  
Poids Course 54 Kg.  
Prix : 30 000 000 L

Propriétaire	No Cheval	Spéc	Pg	Jockey	Entraineur	St	Performance
Joseph Sarrafine	501	54 S	1	M. Dabbou	04 041 1307 1234 1155 1161	M	04 041 1307 1234 1155 1161
Michel Prasson	502	54 S	2	M. Ali	03 041 1001 804 1321	M	03 041 1001 804 1321
Elas Zaima	503	54 S	3	M. Dabbou	02 041 1152 021 163 111	M	02 041 1152 021 163 111
Elas Zaima	504	54 S	4	M. Dabbou	02 041 1152 021 163 111	M	02 041 1152 021 163 111
Arbacha Har	505	54 S	5	M. Dabbou	01 041 1234 1155 1161 1321 1322	M	01 041 1234 1155 1161 1321 1322





part is that, once done, the park will be commercially evaluated, which is expected to reach a phenomenal value as it is located on 2 main avenues and offers unlimited real estate opportunities. But the priceless loss would be that Lebanon will lose a long tradition of Arabian horse breeding. It will lose the great cultural value of the racetrack and the role of competition, excitement and cultural events for the citizens. The racehorses might not survive and Beirut would lose its second biggest green space. Thousands of families would lose their income, with a big number of them being fully dependent on Arabian horse breeding for generations.

*Savier: What specific hope for peace do you have in Beirut?*

**Nasrallah:** Today we are confident that we are coming very close to the peace and need much more support to correct the prize money and to rehabilitate our racetrack and replace the obsolete equipment, with modern digital techniques. This will spread our races worldwide.

*Savier: Thank you, dear Nabil Nasrallah. I very much hope that many breeders and lovers of Arabian horses will take these pieces of information to heart and will support and make a financial contribution to save the horses and the hippodrome in Beirut.*







S.P.A.R.C.A.  
**HIPPODROME**  
DU PARC DE BEYROUTH

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Dear Horse lovers and breeders,  
Help the horses and the racetrack to have a future.  
Please donate now! Any sum will help.  
*Thank you*

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