

ITBF Member Bahrain, and its international breeding & racing expansion ...

‘We mean it, we want to be Victorious Forever’ - meet the all-action prince spending big to become racing's newest superpower

Tom Peacock speaks to Victorious Forever's Shaikh Nasser about his big ambitions and longstanding love of horses



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Shaikh Nasser shares a moment with Caballo De Mar after his win in the Prix Du Cadran © [redacted]
Shaikh Nasser shares a moment with Caballo De Mar after his win in the Prix Du CadranCredit: Â© APRH / QUENTIN BERTRAND

Shaikh Nasser bin Hamad Al Khalifa must lead as varied and active a life as just about anyone on earth. One day the Bahraini prince might be signing an accord with international leaders, the next competing in an Ironman, commanding the Royal Guard or visiting the training ground of Paris FC, the Ligue 1 football team in which the country's sovereign wealth fund owns a stake.

It does, though, seem as if he makes time to follow his latest interesting enterprise, Victorious Forever, which is quickly becoming one of European racing's new superpowers.

In **Bay City Roller**, who stunned when winning the Coronation Cup by ten lengths and has the season's biggest races on his agenda, it has the sort of red and white flagbearer it was founded for.

There is an opportunity to find out more about Shaikh Nasser's ambitions for Victorious Forever because he is, temporarily, standing a little more still.



*Bay City Roller turned the Coronation Cup into a procession*Credit: Edward Whitaker
([racingpost.com/photos](https://www.racingpost.com/photos))

A world champion endurance rider, he was competing in a team race in Slovakia this month when he fell off his horse and broke his collarbone.

The 39-year-old somehow continued in the saddle despite being able to ride with only one arm and finding himself blacking out from the pain.

"I had to screw some titanium into it and so now I'm bionic," he laughs down the line from Bahrain. "I'm much stronger, of course."

Shaikh Nasser and his brother, Shaikh Khalid, were very young when they were instructed to learn to ride in the desert by their father, King Hamad, a keen equestrian and close friend of the late Queen Elizabeth II.

"I come from a family that have horses as a passion and tradition, and a national treasure as well," he says.

"We're famous for our Purebred Bahraini horses, that we reserve and preserve and have a logbook for.

"I grew up to become an endurance rider, where I wanted to become more involved in equestrian sports.

Now I'm 26 years into the sport as a rider. So horses is life, basically."

He continues: "To seal the deal, I got into Flat racing. It was around 2018 when I really got interested in the sport. I wanted to explore more than just endurance and become an owner. And you know, with beginner's luck, I got hooked."



Vandeek, seen winning the Richmond Stakes in 2023, was an early star for KHK RacingCredit: Edward Whitaker (racingpost.com/photos)

His first iteration, Victorious Racing, cracked Royal Ascot almost immediately, with future champion sprinter and now stallion Bradsell winning the Coventry Stakes in 2022.

Meanwhile, his brother's KHK vehicle was going head-to-head, discovering unbeaten juvenile starlet Vandeek and St Leger winner Eldar Eldarov from the breeze-ups.

It was only at the end of last August that it was announced that the pair would be joining forces to become something akin to a mini-Godolphin.

Victorious Forever quickly established its brand with two international Group 1s placed on the table by George Scott before the year was out as Caballo De Mar took the Prix du Cadran and Bay City Roller won the final top-tier event in the European calendar, the Grosser Preis von Bayern.

"We both have high hopes," says Shaikh Nasser. "We both projected some really good Group 1 winners and stand stallions under our names.

"So we've been competing at a large scale domestically and internationally. Then we just had this idea, roaming around in the back of our heads, we decided, why don't we just join forces, let's lift our hopes even higher and become Victorious Forever. And by the way, Victorious translates to my name in Arabic and Forever translates to Khalid's name in Arabic."

He chuckles. "But again, we mean it. We want to be Victorious Forever."

A team game

Given their respective individual success, it seems as if it must have been quite a big decision.

"This was natural, to be honest," he answers. "I was always wondering but I think Khalid was braver to ask, and the answer was yes, immediately.

"I told him, 'Let's think about it thoroughly. Let's plan how we do the transition, how we do the ownership, how we combine our budgets together, how we do purchases, all of these details'.

"So, it isn't messy in terms of management. I think we have the best people. We're two brothers who love the sport and are passionate about it. So everything is fluent and smooth. Now we are both either happy or grumpy at the finish line!"

They have been able to draw on the combined expertise of bloodstock agent Billy Jackson-Stops, the Victorious Forever racing manager, as well as former KHK lieutenants Chris Wall and Anthony Stroud. There was not a Royal Ascot winner this time, but there have been other results to keep the siblings' spirits up.

Senorita Bonita, a statement of intent as the 900,000gns top lot from this year's Tattersalls Craven Breeze-Up Sale, was second in the Queen Mary for Simon and Ed Crisford, which she backed up with a

decisive victory in the Duchess of Cambridge Stakes, while the likes of unbeaten Efsixteen are still on the runway.

So, is Shaikh Nasser happy with progress?

"Oh yes," he replies immediately. "And believe me, in the pipeline we have some exciting two-year-olds, exciting horses that aren't raced yet and are coming along slowly.

"You'll hear some new names coming in the field. I'm excited; I love waking up in the morning, reading reports about my horses and feeling ambitious. Every single day hearing about the ones that are racing, the ones that have won and the ones that are getting ready to race."



Senorita Bonita (Oisin Murphy, left) beats Libertango in the Duchess Of Cambridge Stakes Credit: Edward Whitaker (racingpost.com/photos)

Both the princes' advisers acknowledge the pair to be deeply involved in the recruitment at the sales, and Shaikh Nasser visits the roster of trainers, which, alongside Scott, includes the likes of Archie Watson, Roger Varian and Ralph Beckett, whenever he is in Britain, "to see the horses with my own eyes".

They have decided to stick with a system that works.

"I put my trust in Billy, who has a great eye selecting horses in the ring," says Shaikh Nasser. "Basically, we have a good effort split between breeze-ups – my brother Khalid claims that he's the expert at breeze-ups, so he looks closely into them – and yearlings, which I look closely at, and that's how we work out our purchasing.

"I look at the names they put a star next to, then we discuss which ones we'll fight very hard for and which ones we can have a good fight for, and rank them.

"I think we have some good discipline, then sometimes, with horses like Senorita Bonita, we may look at each other and say, 'Just one more [bid]'."

All roads lead to Longchamp for Roller

There is one concrete ambition this year for Bay City Roller, who has been outside the first two on only a couple of occasions in 13 runs.

Originally owned by Clive Washbourn, the New Bay colt changed hands within Scott's stable after making his winning debut almost exactly two years ago at Sandown and went on to lift the Champagne Stakes for his new connections.

Shaikh Nasser says: "This horse is such an exciting stallion for the future, and such an exciting racehorse. He's a professional horse, top to bottom.



George Scott with Victorious Forever's Isle Of Jura at Eve Lodge Stables in Newmarket in 2024 Credit: Edward Whitaker (racingpost.com/photos)

"When I text or call George Scott every single day about horses, I have to ask about Bay City Roller.

"He's a fascinating horse to have. We were so lucky to acquire him privately, because we saw something special about him, and you know, we're aiming so high with him.

"The days that he didn't win were the days that we thought he wasn't lucky because of circumstances. We always knew he was an outstanding champion and one of the fastest horses in the world at a mile and a half."

Bay City Roller's Munich triumph was achieved on soft ground and, for all that his debut was on good to firm, his team are mindful of not taking risks on anything too quick.

"Softer would probably help him more, but he wouldn't mind any ground," says Shaikh Nasser. "I'll leave the decision to the trainer.

"Our highest aim remains the Arc, so we'll build our way up to the ultimate goal. Whatever happens before it, it's just a step forward."

'We're only just starting'

Shaikh Nasser's wife, Shaikha, is a daughter of Sheikh Mohammed bin Rashid Al Maktoum.

His time in endurance riding overlaps with that of Sheikh Mohammed and his sons. He credits the ruler of the UAE for not only inspiring him to achieve in the saddle but for pushing him into increasing his investment in racing.

Throughout our interview, Shaikh Nasser is by and large easy-going and informal. When he explains the importance of the Victorious Forever operation, his tone briefly becomes more serious.

"This is something that we're proud of, to have the red and white colours, and then representing Bahrain all over the place and, you know, we're only just starting," he says.



Fred Darling winner Duty First is now in the Victorious broodmare band Credit: Edward Whitaker (racingpost.com/photos)

"I have high ambitions of this organisation; I look at it as a proper organisation. One of those big ones. I look up to Godolphin as Sheikh Mohammed bin Rashid is my role model in the horse and equestrian world. At the same time, he's my father-in-law, so at the end of the day I have no excuses – I just try to follow the footsteps."

One of those steps will include breeding. There are around 20 broodmares boarding at Barton Stud in Suffolk, including Group winners Duty First and Fast Attack, as well as Dubawi sisters to Group 1 winners Sottsass and Bucanero Fuerte.

"I have a line of really interesting homebred colts and fillies that are coming through," says Shaikh Nasser. "I want to see more of my homebred horses, that you rarely find on the market, and also a strong base of good mares. Then hopefully in the future to have more valuable stallions to serve the market." The odd one has appeared already, but much higher hopes lie in the longer term, as he adds: "I'm talking to the team that's handling them and we have some exciting ones that will come in the next year or two. We have some fantastic foals, a couple that I just can't wait to see."

He is cautious not to nominate any names in particular, having already learned the lesson of every owner in getting his hopes up prematurely.

"I want to be surprised like everyone else," he says.



Racing in Bahrain is taking giant strides Credit: Edward Whitaker (racingpost.com/photos)

There is a longstanding interest in horses and racing in Bahrain, but it has taken a new, younger generation to bring it to greater prominence.

Its racecourse, at Riffa in the centre of the island nation, used to be a parochial affair, but, under the direction of Shaikh Isa, the eldest son of the crown prince and owner of Irish Champion Stakes winner Economics, it now has floodlights and has developed a winter racing programme which attracts European visitors.

That Scott and Victorious Forever's Isle Of Jura could go right through the domestic grades and then beat Goliath in the 2024 Hardwicke Stakes epitomised the intentions of the organisers, albeit beyond their wildest dreams at this early stage.

The Asian Pattern Committee has just awarded Bahrain its first Group 1, November's International Trophy, and Wimbledon Hawkeye has been purchased for Shaikh Nasser and Shaikh Khalid with the race in mind.

"This is transformational progress that happened in our racing in Bahrain," says Shaikh Nasser. "Sheikh Isa did a tremendous job by internationalising our races, and having a Group 1 this year as our top race. "Bahrain is a place where, when people come here, they want to come back again, and we're proud of this. We're proud of the vibes that we're creating, proud of the community we're creating, and the competition. "Different owners and colours are being introduced, making our season interesting. So I think it's hats off to our team that's working on producing great, reputable and also fair races here in Bahrain."



Shaikh Nasser and Shaikh Khalid bin Hamad Al Khalifa both have a keen interest in sport Credit: Getty Images

The site, with its intimate, European-style turf track, is in the process of receiving upgraded stables, auxiliary buildings and parade ring, with plans for a golf and hotel complex in the future.

"When His Majesty decided to build the racecourse, they hired the team that designed Ascot racecourse," says Shaikh Nasser. "It's why, when you look at the aerial view, it looks exactly like Ascot – minus the trees and the stand!"

A plan through sport

With a population of just 1.5 million and an economy far smaller than nearby UAE, Saudi Arabia and Qatar, Bahrain has no delusions of outspending its Gulf Cooperation Council neighbours.

It tends to do things more discreetly. Racing endeavours, which include longstanding sponsorships at Newmarket and Leopardstown, are part of a wider drive of promoting Bahrain as a business and tourist destination through sport.

Last year it hosted the Asian Youth Games, and it has even had Luke Littler on the oche in a PDC-sanctioned darts tournament.

Shaikh Nasser and Shaikh Khalid, who has competed in mixed martial arts, are also keen to increase nationwide participation and create centres of excellence.

Last year he made a personal contribution by appearing in an Amazon documentary with Bear Grylls.

While undoubtedly great publicity for the country, in the adventurer's typically high-octane, dramatised style, it is still hard not to find the Sandhurst graduate an impressive figure as he parachutes, rides camels and parts with a well-intentioned message of peace.

"I think we've achieved a bold statement that Bahrain is an active nation; we punch above our weight," says Shaikh Nasser. "We're the number one Arab nation in the medal counts in the Asian Games and the Olympics previously at Paris.

"So we're strong in our fields, and with our professional athletes, and then, tapping into sports like Flat racing and introducing our professional cycling team, which is now racing and fighting for a top-ten position in the Tour de France, it's great to soft-sell Bahrain's name around the world.

"Last but not least, the biggest one is Formula 1, our ownership of McLaren and being the first country in the region to host Formula 1 races. These things, through sport, I think are always positive messages and always get the right crowd to the country."

It is helpful for British racing that the Bahrainis are avowed Anglophiles; it was a British protectorate in the 19th century and, through an enduring alliance, there remains a naval base today. That the sport is still considered an aspirational investment is encouraging, but should certainly not be taken for granted.

In Victorious Forever, it does at least have supporters with an appreciation of the horse itself and, as he begins to look at his recovery schedule, Shaikh Nasser also holds a certain empathy with the dietary regimen of the jockeys who ride his thoroughbreds.

"A very tall jockey," he says. "I tried it for an amateur race once; I thought the stalls were too tight for me. "I'll be racing soon, hopefully targeting mid-August, and then ultimately November to defend my world title. It's a huge target. This is why, whenever I take a small bite from a cake, I just remember the world championship."