

IN MOROCCO

THE AMAZONS' VICTORY

Simulating a military assault, the women ride out in a wild charge, their muskets pointed towards the sky. Synchronizing their shots, they fire off so that only a single shot is heard. The crowd's "yuyu" screams rise, their intensity designating the winner. Halima Bahraoui heads one of the first female teams of the Fantasia, a traditional equestrian art formerly limited to men. A symbol in a country where equality between sexes remains to be conquered.

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Rabat, early summer. The best Moroccan Fantasia teams meet at the very exclusive Royal Equestrian Polo Club of Dar Es Salam for the Hassan II Traditional Equestrian Arts Trophy ("Tbourida") presided by he

King's sister, HRH Princess Lalla Amina. Night and day the festival is in full swing near the racing track. The teams, all categories combined (men, women and juniors), are getting ready for five days of intense competition. This





COMMUNAL LIFE

Tents are set up near the racetrack to accommodate the teams during the five-day competition. Halima and her riders are getting ready. Some of them are immersed in the Koran, while others put on perfume, relax... Tension builds up.



PROTECTIONS

The compulsory bandage reinforces the wrist. The rifles are made to order. They weigh 2.5 kg, and although they have been designed to be held at arm's length by the young women, the strong recoil when they are fired is rough on their delicate wrists.



FASHIONISTAS

Before donning their ceremonial costumes, the riders look just like contemporary young girls: jeans, dark glasses and the "hottest" accessories; clinging to their cell phones, they share mirrors and secrets.

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REHEARSAL

Ties are getting closer. Like a ballet, they once more conscientiously rehearse the Fantasia figures, in rhythm, to be perfectly synchronized, until the gunpowder explosion, the final shot that will determine their ranking.

is the culmination of long months of unremitting training for both riders and horses. Halima, 22, is a "mouqadama" (team leader), like her father, a renowned authority in this field. He taught her to ride when she was 14. At first, Halima rode with the men. The only girl amidst twenty-three men. But her determination, her strength of character soon made her want to go further, to create her own team. A team of women. The very first. The beginnings are difficult, punctuated by pressures and va-

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rious intimidation attempts: the Fantasia is a men's world. Yet Halima doesn't give up, supported by her family. Gradually, thanks to a combination of discipline and hard work, the women riders' performance compels recognition. Halima indeed spares neither her efforts nor her team's. To the mastery of horsemanship and dressage they must add the handling of weapons, long, old-fashioned one-shot flintlock rifles. And handling a gun while controlling a wildly galloping horse is quite



SUPPORT

Under the King's portrait, life in the tent is masterfully organized by Halima's mother. She is busy helping the cook... Like genuine coaches, they make sure everybody is happy and concoct delicious, appeasingly fragrant dishes.



THE POWER OF INCENSE

Incense burners are brought into the tents. They are set on the ground in the center of the tent, and the riders step over them according to a precise ritual, following the rhythm of their incantations. Their heady fragrance brings purification and protection.



MAGNIFICENT ATTIRES

Prepared by the grooms, the barb horses are splendidly bedecked. The richly embroidered and intricately worked saddles, rugs and bridles are a tribute to regional handicrafts.

FINAL DETAILS

Halima reviews the riders' outfits with great attention, down to the smallest detail. Everything must be impeccable, perfect. Nothing must impede the flow of carefully planned and rehearsed gestures. Stares are intense. A silent dialogue takes place.

INCH ALLAH

The women are huddled together in a circle, it is prayer time. Chanting incantations, the riders meditate and concentrate. Just like warriors, they seek divine protection.



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FINE TUNING

Like a coach, Halima's mother calls the little group to order. Concentration has reached its peak, which is essential to boost the troop's morale.



EMOTION

Before mounting the horse, one must perform final limbering up exercises. And it is now time for hugs! Kisses on the brow, good luck, success, and victory wishes are exchanged... At last the time has come, the horses are waiting!

hazardous. The exertion can be read on the young women's gunpowder-streaked faces. Hence the very strict behavioral rules they must all unfalteringly follow. Safety, etiquette and good behavior: Halima is uncompromising on these key points. She knows that those she calls with tenderness (and authority) "her" riders must do as well as the men, and even outdo them. She also knows they must be flawless. And her demands prove worthwhile. Victory follows victory. Halima has mana-

ged to impose respect, give rise to admiration and inspire followers. In her wake, other feminine teams have been created. Today, these are the ones challenging her riders. And under the tents, tension rises. In a pre-established order, the horsewomen prepare and follow a vast array of specific preparatory rituals. The fragrance of purifying incense invades the atmosphere. Stomachs are knotted and the young women have hardly touched the delicious dishes specially prepared for them. Outside, the

grooms are very busy. The horses will soon be ready, magnificently harnessed in gold and embroideries. Halima confidently casts a last look at her team members. And indeed, that day in Rabat, the many time repeated, perfectly oiled choreography will once more prove its efficacy. At the end of the five days of festivities, Halima Bahraoui's team leaves Rabat with the Women's Gold Medal.

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STARTING LINE

Before mounting the horse, Halima throws salt on the horses' necks to bring luck. She is now the leader, she comes forward, self confident, concentrated, tense as a bow-string as the "yuyu" screams rise.



HEREDITY

Halima and her father in their Mohammedia estate. Halima's father is a famous "mouqadam" in the small world of Fantasia. As the team's coach, he has supported and encouraged his daughter in this woman's version of Fantasia.

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DUO

Halima and her fetish horse, a magnificent barb horse with a black coat, named "La Carda". A strange word play around "cardan". "Because it must go forward" explains Halima, bursting out in laughter.

The Hassan II Traditional Equestrian Arts Trophy ("Tbourida") takes place in Rabat at the Royal Equestrian Polo Club of Dar Es Salam during the horse show in June. For more informations : www.visitmorocco.com