



RIDING INTO THE SUNSET – THE FURSAN ENDURANCE CUP AT SAUDI'S ALULA  
MAGNIFICENT OASIS

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As it is officially named, the thundering hooves of the Fursan Cup (or The Custodian of the Two Holy Mosques Endurance Cup) will return to AlUla in February 2024 for the world's most technically challenging riding competition. This endurance event is a crucial appointment on the Saudi equestrian calendar and not without reason. Each year since 2019, 200 riders from up to 40 nations gather to race through 120km of desert terrain in pursuit of victory. Towering rocks and escarpments rise from scorching sands, forming a dramatic backdrop to the race that plays out across four loops of varying distances. Saudi Arabia is cementing its bid to become the hub of all things equestrian.

Mohamed Abdulhameed Al Hashemi from Bahrain took the title in the most recent edition of the Fursan Cup held in March this year. Starting at sunrise, it took the resilient rider – and his Arabian horse, Leon – just five hours and 47 minutes to complete the gruelling course across the desert of AlUla. Spanish runner-up Maria Ponton Alvarez, on Bolchoi El Akim, led a strong group of female riders – women make up nearly one-third of competitors at the Fursan Cup. Her compatriot Omar Rodrigo Blanco came in third on JM El Sobrino. HH Prince Abdullah bin Fahd bin Abdullah Al Saud – president of the Saudi Arabian Equestrian Federation – presented medals and gleaming horse-shaped trophies to the podium finishers.



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There is simply no question as to why the Fursan Cup is one of the toughest horse races in the world; the route around the ancient city of AlUla certainly poses its challenges. To begin with, Saudi Arabia's Medina Province can top 30°C in February; even this year's winner said that the heat surprised him. The tracks are natural and traced across the sand, making them uncomfortable to ride and challenging to navigate. The event is just as technical as it is physical. Riders must meticulously control their pace across a long distance to conserve energy while gaining ground.

Horse welfare is paramount. Comparable to pit stops in motor racing, veterinary tests are carried out after each of the four loops to ensure that equine competitors maintain good physical condition throughout the race. Vets and caretakers work to ensure that the horses' heart rates are below 64 bpm at each check by cooling them down with water and administering massages. Of the 200 riders competing this year, only 65 completed the race after many of the horses failed the rigorous checks. Each horse is given three to four months of recovery time after the event before training continues.



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