HOME

THE SOUL OF LEBANON



Marlo Thomas

THE LEBANESE-AMERICAN MEGASTAR BEHIND
ST. JUDE CHILDREN'S RESEARCH HOSPITAL

LEBANON THROUGH THE EYES OF
FRENCH AMBASSADOR
H.E. Bruno Foucher

RAGHIDA DERGHAM
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LIGHT-HEARTED HUMOR,
SHAKING THE STATUS QUO

JOE SANDOUK
TRAINING "MAN'S BEST FRIEND"

Canine sports are taking hold in Lebanon. Dog trainer and sports enthusiast Joe Sandouk would like to see them grow.

Joe Sandouk has a dog lover's ultimate dream job; he hangs out all day, every day with furry, fun-loving canines as one of Lebanon's leading dog trainers. Sandouk is also an accomplished dog sports competitor, who said he is happy to see canine sports gain a foothold in Lebanon.

Two groups have taken the lead in pushing this development: the German Shepherd Club of Lebanon *(Societe du Chien de Berger Allemand)* and the Kennel Club of Lebanon. The first is a breed club, an association of fans of a particular dog breed. The latter is an organization for people who share a devotion to purebred dogs. Both groups are holding dogs shows, trials and other events.

"But they are more about presenting purebreds to a panel of judges and less about competing in a sport," said Sandouk.

The German Shepherd Club recently began holding IPO trials. IPO stands for *Internationale Prüfungs-Ordnung*. It is a sport that tests dogs' tracking, obedience and protection skills.

These organizations are part of international associations that hold competitions. Sandouk, who competes in dog sports internationally, has recently acquired sponsorships, which he considers a sign of growing support for dog sports in Lebanon. He has represented Lebanon numerous times at the Federation Mondial du Berger Belge (FMBB), one of the world's most prestigious competitons for German Shepherds.

The future of pet ownership will be about engaging with dogs in an intelligent way," he said. "Instead of having a dog that simply protects and sits around, it is better to have a well-educated dog, trained in sports and discipline. It's fun for both the dog and the handler."

A childhood interest

Sandouk's love of canines goes back to his childhood when his father brought a German Shepherd HOME. Then, at the age of 13, Sandouk discovered a dog kennel near his residence in Beirut. "I would pass by every few days and just watch them train the dogs," he explained. Fascinated by the intelligence and obedience the dogs displayed under the guidance of trained handlers, he later chose to specialize in dog training himself.

In 2001, he was certified under the *Syndicat National des Epreuves de Formation en Milieu* Canin in France. It required undergoing a rigorous five-month course. He continues to go to Europe to attend workshops and to train.

Training dogs for a living

Sandouk established his company and training club K9 Academy® in Chanay, near Bhamdoun. His clients include dog owners from across Lebanon, and government and private security companies who use dogs in patrol and detection work.

While the dog training school is Sandouk's main profession and source of income, he also breeds and trains high caliber dogs for competing in international dog sports. His canine of choice is the Belgian Shepherd Malinois.

"They have incredible speed which I admire. They are also generally healthy and disease free," he told HOME. Kim vom Haus der Drachen (Kim for short) is the official name of his Malinois that he is training for the FMBB and FCI Championship, in which he has participated each year since 2015. His highest score was achieved in 2016 when he came in 38th place (out of 135 competitors). His next goal is to make it into the top 10. Last but not least, Sandouk will represent Lebanon at the FCI IPO World Championship in Italy in September 2018, an annual international competition for utility dogs that is considered a high point in dog sports.

Sandouk performs in the IPO discipline. The IPO is a three-part sport which includes tracking, obedience and protection trials, and the dog must pass all three to be eligible to win. He is currently the only person in Lebanon who owns dogs with IPO Level 3 status. This means when he goes to the FMBB or FCI championships, he is the only representative from Lebanon (each country is allowed six representatives in this competition category).

This situation is all about to change. Currently, 17 dog handlers are training at his academy to be eligible for the IPO. "If they keep up the same pace, in two years they'll gain qualifications and I may not be the only one going," he said, rolling his eyes in a playful expression. "No, but really I am very excited that finally I will have competitors from Lebanon." He said he is also very grateful for his wife, family and team who always support him.



Photo by Ahmad Hamdan

"Sandouk will represent Lebanon at the FCI IPO World Championship in Italy in September 2018.

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