

"Horses, War, Industrial Sewing Machines, and Nothing Else!"

This interview with Master **Babak Shaki**, one of the greatest figures in the history of Iranian equitation, was conducted on April 22, 2026, at the **Shaki Equestrian Club**. It took place during the days of the U.S. and Israeli military aggression against Iran, at a time when the international internet was completely shut down, blocking access to primary sources, and a dark cloud of despair, emotional stress, and economic tension hung heavily over a large portion of society.

Despite these circumstances, I consider myself profoundly fortunate that two professional filming and photography crews turned up with utter devotion and camaraderie. This conversation was recorded inside one of the industrial workshops of the Shaki Club, right next to the fifth industrial sewing machine rebuilt and upgraded by Master **Babak Shaki**. Behind the lenses of the cameras stood **Soroosh Milanizadeh**, **Jalal Zargani**, and **Helia Joulaei**, facing **Babak shaki** (Babak khan) and me, capturing three hours of this interview with pure passion, without a single cut or break. The ultimate objective of this interview is to map the atlas of one of the most exceptional horsemen in the history of our country—a figure who emerged at the zenith of contemporary Iranian history.



Sanaz Seyed Esfahani:

According to the testimony of Iran's equestrian history, you are the sole remaining survivor and the true, rightful heir to principled, classical equitation in Iran. Your father, Colonel Masoud Shaki, was an army cavalry officer, a riding instructor, and the captain of the national polo team. His teachings and experiences are held by you like a rare gemstone, which was later channeled into the Shaki Club.

My question concerns the relationship between your father and you and your brothers (**Piran** and **Ramin**), all of whom played a vital and foundational role on the country's racetracks—though, as history progressed, you became your father's only professional successor. Was the transmission of this passion and knowledge

from father to son rooted in family tradition and custom, or was it driven by your own inner pull?

In artistic professions, we often see children who either inherit their artistic traits from their fathers or, conversely, pursue a career completely detached from their father's art—such as painting, acting, or music. My exact question is about your father's influence on you. Furthermore, you come from a German mother and a Caucasian father, and your profound sense of Iranian identity, your devotion to Persian culture, and your commitment to safeguarding it have always been deeply fascinating to me. Given that your two paternal uncles, Mansour Shaki—a renowned scholar and philologist of the Persian language—and Anvar Shaki—the first lung surgeon in Iran—are also among the luminaries of the country, what specific role did your father play in your professional development?

Babak Shaki:

I will answer these questions paragraph by paragraph, as you have raised several points at once.

Well, this has two dimensions. As you mentioned, most children do not follow in their fathers' footsteps; they have their own reasons, or perhaps they lack the talent and passion, or there was simply no insistence for them to continue down that path. In our family, however, this happened due to very specific conditions of time and place. What do I mean by that?

I mean that my father was a military man, a cavalry officer at the Military Academy. Right there, he was a riding master himself and one of the heavyweights of his era. This knowledge had been passed down to them through a five-thousand-year-old equestrian tradition we possess in Iran, as well as by French officers who arrived between 1912 and 1918 from the Cadre Noir of Saumur—the greatest equitation school in the world. They settled here and, over the course of seven or

eight years, transmitted their knowledge and training to Iranian officers. These were the most classical forms of training that fundamentally existed in the world. Now, stepping away from this background, let me address your question. My father was an officer who, after 18 years of service, left the army following the 1953 coup d'état and never returned. By a stroke of fortune, he ended up right where we are standing today. Back then, this place—Evin—was very far from the city; it was a completely remote village located 15 kilometers away from the city center. At the same time, my father used to play polo at the Jalaliyeh field and was the captain of the national polo team, alongside prominent and professional polo players like the Zolfaghari family, whose children and grandchildren continue to play polo today. Most of the horses belonged to the Military Academy. The polo players would come from there to play, and the army usually covered the expenses of these horses. I remember I was only 5 or 6 years old when, during a chukker—a period in a polo match when the horses rest and the riders remount—I would ride these horses. I was always by my father's side.

Sanaz Seyed Esfahani:

Right, but what I actually mean is, did your father insist on you tagging along, or did you have an innate passion for it yourself? I am asking about your father's influence, as well as your mother's—you have spoken less about your mother.

Babak Shaki:

My father never insisted that I go with him, but if the circumstances permitted, he wouldn't object either. If he had a good horse, we would ride it, and he would never say, "Don't ride this horse."

Sanaz Seyed Esfahani:

But he didn't strictly demand that you accompany him either.

Babak Shaki:

He just knew that we loved it. Later on, we came here—to Evin—which was a village exceptionally abundant in water, with vast farmlands and numerous orchards. My father started working here from absolute scratch. He said, "I am not looking back at the past; I will start utilizing the very alphabet of my life to rebuild it all over again."

My father began his work here with a single horse named Setareh (Star), and later on, more horses were added to the stable. As I have mentioned before, there was a man here named Mash Hasani who owned a donkey—a very clever and sharp donkey. I used to rent it on Fridays and go wandering around the beautiful landscapes surrounding us. I didn't gallop it much; I just roamed around and brought it back by noon.

Sanaz Seyed Esfahani:

You didn't speak about your mother's role.

Babak Shaki:

My mother was always supportive. Not only did she never object, but she actively encouraged us.

Sanaz Seyed Esfahani:

Meaning that, as a German, she didn't view this profession as something still nascent and unrecognized in Iran?

Babak Shaki:

Not at all, not at all! You see, from a very young age, my father was raised in the Cossack Brigade. He started at the Cossack Brigade elementary school, which was located at the "**Meydan-e Mashg**" (The Drill Square). Today, this square houses the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the old police headquarters, the Presidential Palace, and a very specific historical compound. My father spent his childhood there, and his own father was extremely strict. My grandfather was also a military man who had come to Iran from Russia. Consequently, my father was brought up in the Cossack Brigade under an incredibly rigid discipline. That system existed in Iran, and the Cossack Brigade system had its own unique severities. My mother, on the other hand, was born during the rigorous and strange Hitler era. She used to say it was an extraordinary period!

Sanaz Seyed Esfahani:

In what sense was it extraordinary?

Babak Shaki:

In the sense that the opportunities and facilities they created for children and the younger generation were phenomenal and never repeated. For instance, they had to exercise every morning, and every possible resource had to be put at the disposal of children and youth for their advancement. Despite what many say about the Hitler era being a terrible time, Germany progressed immensely. They were roughly at their peak from 1920 to 1940. Perhaps Germany hadn't held such power for centuries, and therefore, what they did for the younger generation had never happened before.

Sanaz Seyed Esfahani:

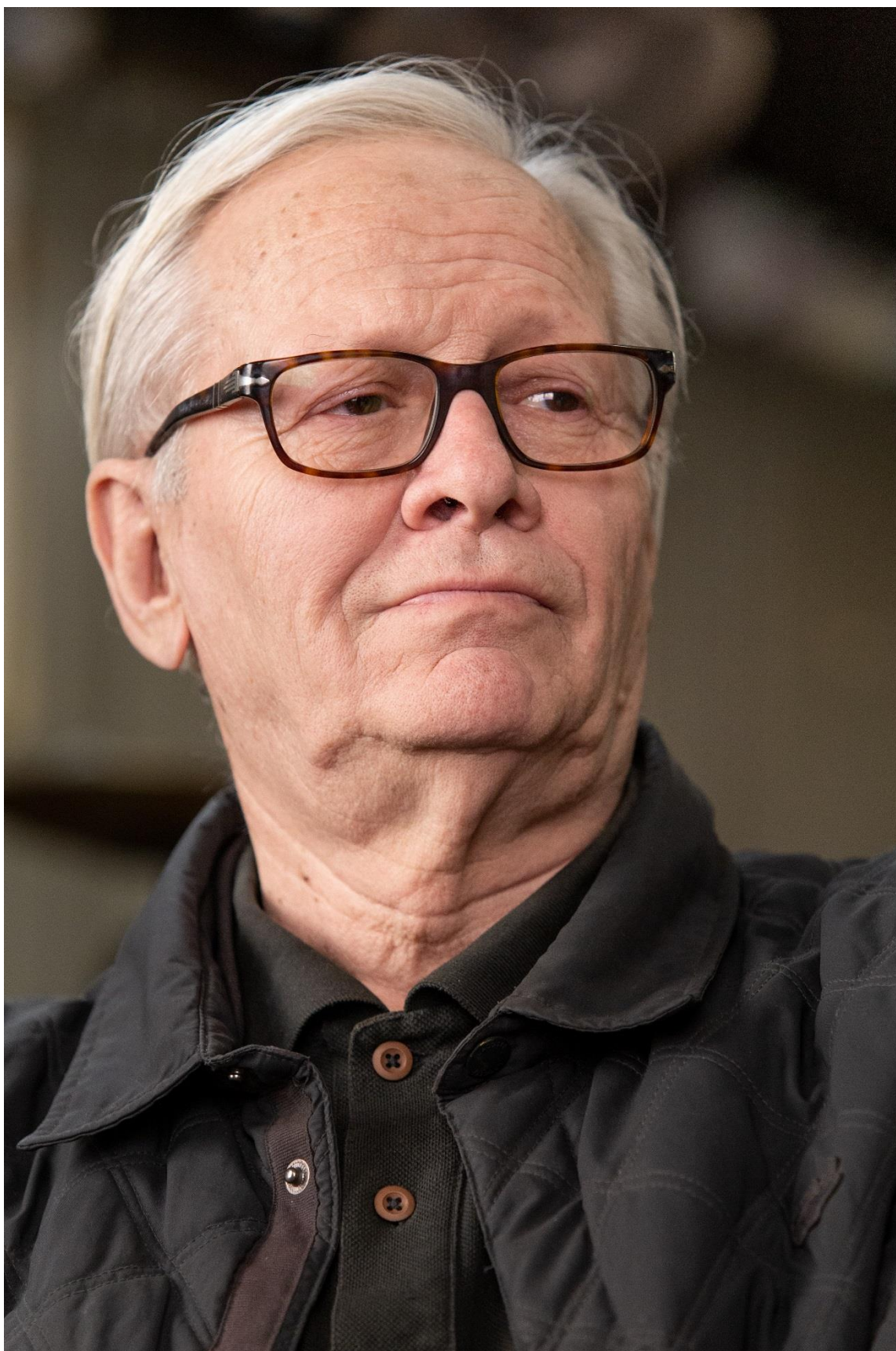
How did your father and mother meet, marry, and come to Iran? And fundamentally, what was your mother's perspective on riding in Iran?

Babak Shaki:

Well, that is a long story. My mother was born in a very small coastal town in northern Germany. She deeply loved nature and was closely bonded with animals. During that time, she was studying livestock and poultry farming.

The story of how she met my father goes like this: back then, young people from our country would go to Germany for education, particularly for engineering fields. One of my father's friends was living and studying in Germany. On weekends, he would pick up my mother's sister and they would go sightseeing. That man, Abolghasem Sami, eventually married my maternal aunt, Elli, and they came to Iran together. Anyway, back then people got to know each other quickly. Elli had a fight with her husband, came to my father, and said, "I actually want to become your wife!" My father replied, "Go away, go away (we laugh), you are my friend's wife, I don't want you to be my wife." Of course, my aunt was a rather mischievous and troublemaking woman. She told my father, "I have a younger sister, so you should come and marry her." My grandmother used to say, "I wish someone would come, take this Elli away, and leave, because she has turned the whole town upside down with her mischief."

In short, not only did she turn that town upside down, but she did the same to Tehran as well. Eventually, my aunt suggested this to her younger sister. My mother, in the post-war era around 1950, traveled by train through the Soviet Union—which had recently been Germany's enemy—to Baku. From there, she crossed the Iron Curtain to Bandar Anzali, and eventually made her way to Tehran all by herself! That is how they met, and it became the prelude to their marriage.



Sanaz Seyed Esfahani:

You didn't mention what your mother thought about your father's profession and horses.

Babak Shaki:

My mother was a highly supportive woman. It didn't matter to her at all where she lived—whether in a village or the center of the city, it made no difference. My father was an officer and had the income of an officer, and my mother was an incredibly adaptable, content woman.

My father came here—to Evin—with his mother. The moment my grandmother saw this place, she said, "I love it here, Masoud; let's secure this very spot." At that time, there were no houses here, only orchards. It wasn't even a village yet; it was just a summer countryside retreat. In short, my mother came here and established a poultry farm. They would sell eggs here and there, and in the meantime, she gave birth to three children, of whom I was the eldest.

Rebuilding from Scratch and Early Innovations

Babak Shaki:

...Yes, my mother established a poultry farm here. She managed to build a production line of about ten to fifteen thousand chickens. Back then, producing this volume of poultry and eggs in a remote village like Evin was a massive and highly demanding undertaking. She handled all the logistics, the feeding, and the distribution almost single-handedly while raising three boys. My father, on the

other hand, was entirely focused on the horses and clearing the land to set up the very first structured riding arena.

Sanaz Seyed Esfahani:

It sounds like an extraordinary environment to grow up in—deeply connected to nature, animals, and manual, physical labor. But how did you balance this intense farm life with your formal schooling and education? Did your parents expect you to follow a conventional academic path, or was it understood from the beginning that your life would be intertwined with this land and the horses?

Babak Shaki:

There was never a formal blueprint or an explicit script written for us. Everything happened organically through daily survival and growth. We went to school, of course. I attended school in Tehran, which meant commuting from Evin every single day. Back then, there were no paved roads or regular transport systems connecting this area to the city center. It was an arduous journey, especially during the cold winter months when the snow would block the dirt paths.

But the moment I returned from school, my real education began right here on the ground. I didn't just ride horses; I learned how to build their stables, how to mix their feed, and how to fix mechanical equipment. My father possessed an incredible military discipline, but he also had a brilliant, practical mind. He taught us that if something is broken, you don't wait for someone else to fix it—you figure out the mechanics and repair it yourself. That philosophy shaped my entire outlook on life and technical work.

Sanaz Seyed Esfahani:

This brings me exactly to one of the most fascinating aspects of your personality, Babak Khan. You are widely recognized as a master horseman, but you are also an inventor, a restorer of industrial machinery, and someone who can engineer complex structures out of raw metal and steel. We are currently sitting next to an industrial sewing machine that you completely rebuilt and modernized. Where did this intense passion for engineering and industrial mechanics come from? Was it a necessity born out of running the club, or was it an innate curiosity that manifested early in your childhood?

Babak Shaki:

It was a combination of both curiosity and absolute necessity. When we were developing this place, specialized equestrian equipment and industrial machinery were incredibly scarce in Iran, and importing them was practically impossible or prohibitively expensive. If you wanted a proper tractor to level the riding arena, or if you needed heavy-duty leather sewing machines to repair saddles and tack, you had to source old, abandoned machinery and breathe new life into them.

From the age of twelve or thirteen, I became utterly obsessed with understanding how things worked. I would dismantle old engines, study the gear systems, and put them back together. I realized that metal has its own language, much like horses do. If you approach a machine with patience, respect, and a precise understanding of its mechanics, it will respond perfectly. Over the decades, I have collected and rebuilt dozens of industrial machines. To me, designing a stable, building a precise jumping obstacle, or restoring a vintage industrial sewing machine is an extension of the exact same creative and disciplined energy that you need when training a horse for high-level dressage. It all stems from a desire for precision, balance, and absolute functional perfection.



The Philosophy of Horsemanship and Technical Discipline

Sanaz Seyed Esfahani:

It is deeply compelling how you draw a parallel between the language of metal and the language of horses. In Iran's equestrian community, many view riding merely as a sport or a leisure activity, but listening to you, it feels like an integrated lifestyle—a discipline that demands mastery over both the living animal and the physical environment.

When your father, Colonel Masoud Shaki, established this foundation here in Evin, how did the transition happen from a private family haven into a professional, classical riding school? And how did the elite of Tehran's society, or the cavalry officers of that era, react to a structured equestrian center being built from scratch in what was essentially a remote countryside village?

Babak Shaki:

You see, it did not happen overnight. When my father left the military, he brought with him a wealth of knowledge that was entirely unmatched. He wasn't just someone who sat on a horse; he understood the biomechanics, the psychology of the animal, and the strict adherence to the classical French and European schools of equitation.

Initially, people from the city started coming here because they knew Colonel Shaki. They knew that if they wanted their children to learn *principled* riding—not just wandering around on horseback—this was the only place where true discipline was taught. We began with very limited infrastructure. The arena was simple, and the stables were built with whatever raw materials we could harvest or salvage.

But what set this place apart was the standard. My father treated every single lesson with the gravity of a military operation. The position of the rider's leg, the softness of the hands, the absolute respect for the horse's mouth—these were non-negotiable laws. I was constantly watching him teach, absorbing the corrections he gave to the students, and applying them to my own riding.

Sanaz Seyed Esfahani:

And during this formative period, you also witnessed major historical shifts in Iran. The equestrian landscape changed dramatically over the decades, transitioning

through the pre-revolution era, the 1979 revolution, and the grueling years of the Iran-Iraq war. Many prominent riding clubs disappeared or were confiscated, and a vast number of purebred horses were lost or neglected during those times of upheaval.

How did the Shaki Equestrian Club manage to survive these existential crises? How did you, your father, and your family shield this sanctuary and preserve the continuity of classical riding when the very fabric of society was undergoing such radical transformation?

Babak Shaki:

It survived purely through sheer resilience, adaptability, and an unyielding refusal to abandon the craft. When the revolution happened, and subsequently when the war started, everything came to a sudden halt. Feed became scarce, veterinary medicines were non-existent, and the luxury of sport riding was the furthest thing from anyone's mind. During the war years, when bombings were a frequent reality, keeping the horses calm and fed was a daily battle. We couldn't rely on outside help. This is where the poultry farm that my mother ran, and our agricultural activities, became our lifeline. We sustained the horses through the income of the farm. We didn't close our gates. Even when there were no clients or students, the horses still needed to be exercised, groomed, and cared for according to the exact same rigorous schedule. We kept our heads down and focused entirely on the work. We proved to the changing authorities over time that we were not a symbol of aristocratic indulgence, but a center of profound agricultural, technical, and cultural heritage. We spoke to them through the language of productivity and discipline, and that is why we are still standing on this ground today.



The Changing Tides of Competition and Institutional Shifts

Sanaz Seyed Esfahani:

Following those volatile years of social transformation and war, the entire structural framework of sports in Iran underwent a massive reorganization. For a discipline like classical equitation, which was historically tied to the military academy and a specific cultural elite, adapting to the post-war bureaucratic systems must have been exceptionally complex.

When competitive riding slowly began to resurface and the equestrian federation started functioning under new management and regulations, how did you navigate these institutional shifts? Did you find that the core principles of classical horsemanship were being preserved, or did you feel a widening gap between the traditional, rigorous standards taught by your father and the new approach to competitive sports in the country?

Babak Shaki:

The gap did not just widen; in many respects, the entire foundation was altered. You have to understand that previously, riding was governed by a profound sense of duty, discipline, and long-term education. When the new administrative systems took over, the focus shifted heavily towards immediate competitive results rather than the meticulous, years-long development of both rider and horse.

Many individuals who assumed leadership positions in the sports committees and the federation lacked a background in classical cavalry traditions. They viewed equitation through a purely administrative or short-term commercial lens.

Consequently, the deeper, nuanced understanding of equine biomechanics, classical dressage, and the philosophical patience required to train a horse properly began to erode.

Despite this, I chose to engage with the system on my own terms. I participated in competitions and continued to train students, but I never compromised on the core methodology passed down to me. If the federation introduced superficial regulations or prioritized rapid, unprincipled jumping over proper flatwork and foundation, we simply doubled down on our principles here at the club. True authority in this field isn't granted by an official title or a bureaucratic seat; it is earned on the sand of the arena, through the soundness of your horses and the flawless execution of your riders. We let our results speak for themselves.

Sanaz Seyed-Esfahani:

It seems you effectively created an ideological fortress here at the Shaki Club—a space where the external political or bureaucratic noise could not penetrate the daily sanctity of the training.

But turning specifically to your personal competitive journey during this era: you became a dominant force on the tracks and in the jumping arenas, winning numerous national titles and accolades. How did it feel to enter those arenas representing a classical, purist methodology, competing against a newer generation that perhaps relied on different, more fast-paced training techniques? Was there a sense of executing a silent, artistic rebellion through your performance?

Babak Shaki:

It wasn't a rebellion out of spite; it was a demonstration of absolute truth. When you ride a horse that has been prepared strictly according to classical principles—where the horse is perfectly balanced, supple, and mentally aligned with the rider—the performance possesses a distinct quality of effortless grace that cannot be replicated by shortcuts or aggressive training methods.

When I entered the arena, my objective was never merely to clear the obstacles faster than the others through chaotic riding. My goal was to show that adherence to correct form, precise pacing, and deep respect for the animal's rhythm is precisely what yields the most consistent, flawless victories. The newer generation often mistook speed for skill. They would rush their horses, forcing them over fences through sheer tension.

Winning under those conditions felt deeply satisfying because it wasn't just a personal victory; it was a validation of my father's teachings and the timeless validity of classical equitation. Every trophy brought back to this club was proof

that our quiet, disciplined sanctuary in Evin was right, and that shortcuts ultimately fail when confronted with true, deep-rooted mastery.



The Resurgence of the Sport and Structural Confrontations

Sanaz Seyed Esfahani:

As we move into the 1990s (the 1370s Iranian calendar), there was a noticeable resurgence in the equestrian community. Official national championships were

organized with more regularity, and a new generation of riders emerged who had not experienced the old military academy or the pre-revolution structure.

From your perspective, as someone who was actively winning championships during this period, what was the internal atmosphere of the community like? Did you feel that the technical standard of show jumping and dressage was progressing, or was it becoming merely a commercial pursuit for the affluent class of Tehran?

Babak Shaki:

It was a dual reality. On one hand, the fact that horses were returning to the spotlight and more youth were entering the sport was a positive development. It meant the complete collapse of the sport, which we feared during the war, had been averted.

However, from a technical and pedagogical standpoint, a profound decline began to take root. The new system lacked mentors. The great masters of my father's generation were either gone, retired, or marginalized. Therefore, the training of these young riders fell into the hands of individuals who themselves had never undergone a rigorous, classical education.

They began teaching a style of riding that I can only describe as purely reactive. They taught students how to survive on a horse over a fence, but they did not teach them how to *educate* the horse. The emphasis shifted entirely to buying expensive, already-trained horses from Europe rather than developing the partnership from scratch through patience and proper flatwork.

Sanaz Seyed Esfahani:

This reliance on importing European horses seems to have fundamentally shifted the economics and the culture of Iranian riding clubs. It turned the sport into an exhibition of wealth rather than a demonstration of horsemanship.

When you observed this trend, how did you maintain the training philosophy at the Shaki Club? You have always insisted on breeding, raising, and training your own horses, or taking difficult horses and correcting their foundation through classical dressage. Was it difficult to convince your clients and students to take this longer, more arduous path when they could see others achieving quick results simply by purchasing expensive imported warmbloods?

Babak Shaki:

It was difficult only for those who did not understand the true nature of the animal. To me, buying a pre-trained horse and riding it without understanding its foundation is like buying a beautiful house but not knowing how to repair a single brick when the storm hits. It is a fragile illusion of success.

At our club, we never focused on the superficial trend. I told my students: "If you cannot balance a horse on a flat circle using your seat and weight aids, you have no business pointing that horse at a one-meter-twenty obstacle."

We focused on the technical truth. When you train a horse yourself, when you spend months correcting its spine, establishing a soft contact with its mouth, and building its confidence, that horse becomes an extension of your own body. In a demanding, technical jump-off, an imported horse ridden purely on tension will eventually fail or refuse when the pressure hits. But a horse that has been systematically educated through classical principles will give you its absolute soul because it trusts the system. Our students saw this truth on the scoreboard and in the longevity of our horses, so they stayed committed to the principled path.



The Pedagogy of Absolute Focus and Academic Knowledge

Sanaz Seyed Esfahani:

When observing your teaching methodology, one notices a rare synthesis of military discipline and scientific precision. You often emphasize that a rider must not only possess physical coordination but also an acute academic understanding of the horse's anatomy and psychology.

In an era where attention spans are diminishing and students look for immediate gratification, how do you enforce this level of intellectual and physical rigor? Do you find that modern students have the capacity to absorb this classical depth, or

do you have to continuously alter your teaching to adapt to their psychological traits?

Babak Shaki:

I never alter the truth to please the student. If a student cannot maintain absolute focus for forty-five minutes, they are not ready to handle a creature as sensitive as a horse. The problem with modern education, not just in riding but across society, is the indulgence of superficiality.

When a young rider comes to me, the first thing I strip away is their vanity. Riding is an exercise in absolute humility. You are interacting with a half-ton animal that mirrors your hidden anxieties, your arrogance, and your lack of balance. If you do not understand the mechanics of the horse's spine, or how your weight shifts affect its center of gravity, you are merely a passenger, not a horseman.

I tell my students that they must study. They must read the classical manuals, understand veterinary basics, and observe the horses when they are resting in their boxes. Those who genuinely love the craft welcome this rigor. They realize that this strictness is not an act of tyranny, but the only protective shield against accidents and failure. The rest, who only seek a social status or a quick trophy, naturally sift themselves out. We do not run a commercial amusement park here; we safeguard a classical academy.



Sanaz Seyed Esfahani:

This unyielding dedication to the academy is precisely what preserves the purity of the Shaki name. But it also creates a stark contrast with the external environment. Today, we see an inflation of titles—everyone calls themselves a "coach" or a "master" after a few years of competitive success.

How do you view this inflation of expertise within the country's equestrian landscape? Does it concern you that the technical vocabulary of classical equitation is being misused, thereby confusing the younger generation about what true mastery actually entails?

Babak Shaki:

It is a natural consequence of cultural decline. When you remove the objective, rigorous standards of evaluation, titles become cheap commodities. Anyone can print a certificate or claim a title on social media, but the arena is a place of absolute transparency. You cannot bribe a horse to perform a flawless pirouette, and you cannot fake a perfect approach to a maximum-height fence.

The misuse of vocabulary does concern me, because language shapes thought. When a trainer misidentifies a horse's rhythm or fails to see that an animal is performing out of fear rather than balance, they are destroying the horse's potential and misleading the student.

But I do not waste my energy fighting the external noise. My responsibility is to ensure that within the boundaries of this club, words mean exactly what they are supposed to mean. When we say a horse is "on the bit," it means absolute mental and physical submission and harmony, not forcing the horse's head down with harsh reins. We preserve the integrity of the science here, and those who seek the genuine truth eventually find their way to our gates.



The Psychological Alliance Between Horse and Rider

Sanaz Seyed Esfahani:

Beyond the anatomical and technical aspects, you often speak about a psychological alliance between the horse and the rider. It is said that a horse can detect a rider's heartbeat and sense their exact emotional state from the moment they enter the box.

In your decades of experience, how do you handle this immense emotional mirror? When you are facing personal stress, external societal tensions, or the heavy

weight of managing this large club, how do you compartmentalize those feelings so that they do not negatively impact the sensitivity of the horses you are training?

Babak Shaki:

You cannot trick a horse. You cannot pretend to be calm when your blood pressure is high and your mind is racing. They feel it through the reins, they feel it through the tension in your thighs, and they feel it through your very breath. Therefore, the concept of "compartmentalization" is not about hiding your stress; it is about undergoing a complete internal transformation before you touch the horse.

When I walk through the stable doors, I consciously leave the external world outside. It is a form of meditation, though a highly active one. If I am angry or preoccupied, I do not mount the horse immediately. I might spend twenty minutes grooming the animal myself, listening to its breathing, and matching my rhythm to its calm state.

The horse demands your absolute presence. It is perhaps the only creature that forces human beings to be entirely in the "now." If your mind wanders to your financial worries or structural problems for even a second during a complex movement, the harmony is broken. So, the horses actually saved my sanity during the most turbulent periods of my life. By demanding absolute presence, they shielded my mind from breaking under external pressures.

Sanaz Seyed Esfahani:

It sounds like the club is not just a school for horses, but a monastery for human discipline and healing. Yet, you bear the sole responsibility for maintaining this sanctuary.

With your brothers pursuing different paths over time, you became the lone standard-bearer of your father's professional legacy here. Does this isolation ever

weigh on you? Do you feel a sense of historical loneliness, knowing that the specific depth of knowledge you hold is becoming rarer with each passing year in Iran?

Babak Shaki:

Loneliness is the natural price of keeping a pure standard. If you want to be popular and surrounded by constant validation, you compromise. You follow the commercial trends, you hand out cheap compliments, and you let people ride incorrectly as long as they pay their fees.

But if you choose the path of uncompromising quality, your circle naturally shrinks. I do not view it as a burden; I view it as a duty. My father did not build this foundation for it to be turned into a superficial social club. He built it to preserve a science.

Yes, it is true that few people today truly comprehend the intricate details of classical training, but those few are the ones who matter. If I can pass down the exact, unaltered alphabet of this art to even two or three dedicated students who will carry it forward properly, then the continuity of this lineage is secured. One does not look at the crowd to find validation; one looks at the alignment of the principles.



The Evolution of Breeding and the European Influx

Sanaz Seyed-Esfahani:

Let us analyze the technical transformation of the horses themselves in Iran. For a long period, Iranian riders relied predominantly on native breeds or crossbreeds that had been adapted over generations to the local climate and terrain. Then came the massive wave of importing European Warmbloods—such as Holsteiners, Hanoverians, and Dutch Warmbloods.

How did this structural shift change the mechanics of show jumping in Iran? From your perspective as a breeder who has meticulously produced horses right here at the Shaki Club, what are the hidden biological and psychological challenges of

trying to compete with European-bred giants using horses that are bred under domestic conditions?

Babak Shaki:

The arrival of European Warmbloods completely altered the dimensions of the sport. You see, these European breeds are the product of centuries of highly scientific, state-backed breeding programs designed specifically for modern show jumping and dressage. They possess immense bone structure, natural scope, and a massive stride length that allows them to cover ground and clear high obstacles with far fewer strides than our traditional horses.

When the influx started, many Iranian riders immediately abandoned local breeding because it was faster and easier to buy a ready-made athlete from Germany or the Netherlands. But what they failed to realize is that a horse is not a machine you simply import and plug in. A European Warmblood is raised in a damp, cold climate on rich pastures with a very specific mineral profile. When you bring that animal to the dry, high-altitude environment of Tehran, its entire metabolism, hoof quality, and respiratory system face a massive shock.

Sanaz Seyed Esfahani:

And that is exactly where the art of domestic breeding becomes a necessity rather than a choice. You didn't follow the trend of simply becoming an importer; instead, you focused on cultivating a breeding philosophy that could withstand these challenges.

Babak Shaki:

Precisely, because I knew that true independence in this sport comes from breeding animals that are native to this air, this water, and this soil. At the Shaki Club, we

began combining the bloodlines of exceptional European horses with carefully selected domestic mares. The goal was to create a horse that possesses the scope and power of the European Warmblood, but inherits the resilience, intelligence, and dense bone structure required to thrive in our specific Iranian environment. Breeding is a lesson in extreme patience. You make a genetic decision today, and you have to wait five or six years just to see if that choice can correctly approach a one-meter-thirty fence. It requires a profound understanding of bloodlines, conformation, and equine psychology.

The imported horses can give you temporary victories, but a domestic breeding program built on scientific foundation is what ensures the permanent survival of the sport in a country. When one of our home-bred horses enters the arena and defeats a multi-million-toman imported horse, it proves that our methodology, our patience, and our understanding of genetics are superior to a fat checkbook.





Structural Continuity and the Future of the Academy

Sanaz Seyed Esfahani:

It is clear that your breeding program is not merely about producing athletic horses, but about preserving an entire ecological and technical lineage that belongs to this country. When we look at the educational structure of the Shaki Club, you have established a system where students must progress through specific, non-negotiable stages before they are allowed to compete.

In many modern clubs, there is a tendency to rush young riders into competitive show jumping as quickly as possible to satisfy their families or secure regional

medals. How do you manage the expectations of parents who might pressure you to skip the foundational stages of flatwork and dressage? How do you enforce the patience required for classical training in a society that is increasingly driven by immediate, superficial recognition?

Babak Shaki:

I simply give them an ultimatum: either you follow the rules of science, or you take your horse and go to another club. I do not negotiate the safety of the rider or the well-being of the horse.

You see, show jumping without a solid foundation in dressage is a dangerous hazard. If a rider cannot control the horse's stride length, balance, and straightness on the flat, they are essentially pointing a blind missile at an obstacle. When an accident happens, it is the horse that suffers and the rider who gets injured. Parents often come to me wanting their children to jump one-meter fences within three months. I tell them, "Your child will spend the first six months learning how to sit properly at the walk and trot, and how to develop an independent seat."

Those who understand that riding is an art form—akin to learning classical piano or ballet—appreciate this depth. They realize that building a correct physical posture and a refined set of aids takes years of daily practice. The ones who leave because they want shortcuts usually return after a few years with a ruined horse or a broken confidence, asking us to repair the damage. We do not compromise our curriculum for commercial gain.

Sanaz Seyed Esfahani:

This educational uncompromisingness is precisely what makes your alumni stand out on the national tracks. But as we look towards the future, the responsibility of maintaining this academic standard becomes a question of succession.

You have dedicated your entire life to keeping this flame alive in Evin, navigating wars, economic blockades, and institutional shifts. When you look at the current landscape of young instructors in Iran, do you see individuals who possess the technical capacity and the ethical devotion to inherit and maintain the purity of classical equitation? Or do you fear that once your generation steps away, the true science of horsemanship will be completely overshadowed by commercialized sports?

Babak Shaki:

The danger of commercialization is real, and it is a global trend, not just restricted to Iran. Money has entered the sport on a scale that was unimaginable during my father's era. When huge financial stakes are involved, the ethical treatment of the horse and the purity of the training often take a back seat.

However, I am not entirely pessimistic. Knowledge has a strange way of surviving through historical dark ages. There will always be a small minority of riders who are not satisfied with superficial victories. They will feel an inner pull to understand the deeper truth of the craft. They are the ones who look for old books, who study the methods of the old cavalry masters, and who spend hours analyzing the balance of their horses.

My duty is to ensure that as long as I am standing on this arena, the correct knowledge is completely accessible to them. We record our methods, we maintain the strictness of our lessons, and we lead by example. The structure of the academy will survive as long as there is even one master and one dedicated student who refuse to speak the language of shortcuts.



Administrative Decay and Technical Integrity

Sanaz Seyed Esfahani:

It is clear that your defense of the academy is rooted in a structural understanding of the sport's history. However, when we look at the institutional framework in Iran today, we often see a massive disconnect between the bureaucratic decisions made by sports officials and the practical, grueling reality that trainers and horse owners face daily on the sand.

You have managed this club through eras of extreme instability. How do you handle the sheer administrative friction that comes from institutions that might not

understand the delicate biological needs of the horses or the rigorous, long-term timeline required to train a classical rider?

Babak Shaki:

You handle it by maintaining a position of absolute independence and technical authority. The fundamental mistake many club owners and trainers make is that they compromise their technical standards to appease bureaucratic institutions or to secure short-term favors from sports federations.

From the very beginning, following my father's philosophy, we established a clear boundary: the federation and sports committees operate within their administrative offices, but the moment you step inside the gates of the Shaki Club, the only law that rules is the law of classical science and equine anatomy. When officials who lack a genuine background in equitation attempt to enforce superficial regulations or prioritize rapid, unprincipled sports metrics over proper foundation, we simply do not adopt them.

Administrative systems and political figures change constantly—they come and go with every seasonal shift—but the anatomical truths of the horse and the principles of classical riding have remained unchanged for centuries. By anchoring ourselves strictly to the timeless science rather than passing bureaucratic trends, we have outlasted dozens of administrative cycles. Our stability comes from our uncompromising adherence to the craft itself.



Sanaz Seyed Esfahani:

This historical perspective is precisely what gives your words such weight. It allows the Shaki Club to stand as an unchanging pillar in an ever-shifting landscape. But this independence requires a massive amount of personal energy and daily physical labor from you.

You are not merely an instructor who stands in the middle of the arena giving verbal commands; you are involved in every single physical detail of this facility, from engineering the structural layout to managing the daily care and dietary needs of the animals. Does this total absorption into the physical maintenance of the sanctuary ever distract you from your own personal practice as a master horseman?

How do you prevent the heavy burden of management from consuming your creative and artistic relationship with the horses?

Babak Shaki:

It does not distract me; rather, it is the very foundation of my horsemanship. A true master horseman cannot be detached from the physical reality of the stable. If you do not know the quality of the hay your horse is eating, if you do not understand the mechanics of the ground surface they are stepping on, or if you cannot diagnose a subtle structural error in a shoeing job yourself, then your riding is incomplete.

The labor is demanding, yes, but it is precisely through this deep, multi-dimensional involvement that you develop a complete, flawless understanding of the animal. Designing a safe paddock, maintaining a precise arena footing, or fixing mechanical farm equipment is not separate from training a horse; it is all part of the exact same disciplined ecosystem. It keeps your mind sharp and forces you to practical solutions.

When you sit on a horse after spending your morning ensuring that every aspect of its physical environment is perfectly balanced, the level of connection and mutual trust is completely different. The management isn't a burden that consumes the art; it is the protective wall that allows the art to exist safely in a chaotic world.



Genetic Preservation and the Craft of Shoeing

Sanaz Seyed Esfahani:

Your emphasis on the fact that a master horseman must grasp every single architectural and biological layer of the stable is deeply enlightening. It reclaims the profession from being just a modern sport and restores it as an ancient, holistic craft.

You specifically mentioned the shoeing job. In classical equitation, farriery (the art of shoeing horses) is considered half of the horse's soundness. In Iran, we have faced severe sanctions and economic blockades, which have limited our access to specialized European farriery tools, high-quality steel shoes, and anatomical pads.

How have you managed to maintain the orthopaedic soundness of your Grand Prix horses and your breeding stock under these restrictive conditions? Have you had to innovate or forge your own farriery equipment right here in your industrial workshops?

Babak Shaki:

We did not just innovate; we completely internalized the production. If you rely on imported materials during a blockade, your horses' hooves will deteriorate within six months due to irregular supplies. A horse's hoof grows continuously, and a professional sport horse requires precise balancing every four to six weeks. You cannot tell the animal's anatomy to wait because a shipment is delayed at the customs border.

Years ago, recognizing this vulnerability, I utilized our mechanical workshops to study the exact metallurgy and geometry of European racing and jumping shoes. We began altering and forging raw metal bars to create custom shoes tailored to the specific hoof conformation of each horse in our stable. If a horse has an orthopaedic defect, a subtle imbalance in its stride, or a contracted heel, you cannot solve it with a standard, mass-produced shoe. It requires a bespoke anatomical correction.

I trained our farriers right here on the ground, enforcing the strict old-school principles where the shoe must be perfectly fitted to the hoof, never the hoof rasped away aggressively to fit a poorly made shoe. This mechanical self-reliance is what kept our horses performing at the highest level without a single day of lameness, even when the rest of the country was struggling with supply shortages.

Sanaz Seyed Esfahani:

It seems that every challenge the external world threw at the Shaki Club was systematically converted into a triumph of self-sufficiency. This brings us back to the genetic aspect of your work.

When you are selecting bloodlines for your breeding program under these isolated conditions, how do you maintain genetic diversity? Without the ability to constantly import new stallions or frozen semen from Europe due to banking restrictions and transport blockades, how do you prevent inbreeding depression while still aiming to produce horses that possess the modern scope required for international-standard obstacles?

Babak Shaki:

Maintaining genetic integrity under isolation requires a profound, encyclopedic knowledge of pedigree charting and line-breeding. You have to look beyond the immediate sire and dam; you must trace the genetic traits back four or five generations to calculate the exact coefficient of inbreeding.

We were fortunate to secure excellent foundational stock before the restrictions became absolute. We possess mares that carry the pure, unadulterated bloodlines of great European jumping dynasties. By utilizing strategic line-breeding—where you carefully breed individuals that share a common, exceptional ancestor but are sufficiently removed in their immediate lineage—we fix the desirable traits like courage, bone density, and scope without introducing genetic defects.

Furthermore, I have always placed an immense value on the psychological traits of the mare. Commercial breeders often focus entirely on the stallion's jumping record, but in our experience, the mare contributes at least sixty percent of the foal's character and intelligence. A brave, calm mare will raise a foal that handles pressure effortlessly in the arena. Genetic isolation forces you to become a scientist rather than a consumer. It demands that you utilize the available resources with

absolute mathematical precision, and the horses we have produced are a testament to the success of this rigorous methodology.



The Threshold of Fear and Rational Risk in Equitation

Sanaz Seyed-Esfahani:

Your analytical approach to equine genetics and mechanics reflects a mindset that evaluates every variable before making a decision. This directly connects to how a rider behaves inside the arena when facing a massive obstacle or a difficult horse.

In the equestrian community, we often celebrate a specific type of reckless courage—riders who charge at fences with no regard for the risk. However, you have always advocated for a calculated, rational approach to riding. How do you differentiate between true, principled courage and mere foolishness on horseback? And how do you teach a student to calculate their risks scientifically so that fear does not paralyze their technical performance?

Babak Shaki:

Fear is a completely natural, biological mechanism. Anyone who claims they feel absolutely no fear on a horse is either lying or lacks the intelligence to comprehend danger. The horse itself is a flight animal; its entire survival over millions of years has depended on fear and its instinct to run away from potential threats. Therefore, fear is not our enemy; it is a signal that must be analyzed rationally.

A principled rider calculates the risk. They look at the situation, evaluate the horse's preparation, analyze the footing, and conclude whether the risk coefficient is low enough to proceed. When you know that your foundation is correct, that your horse is balanced, and that you have trained for this exact height, then any lingering anxiety is just a useless fear that must be dismissed.

But when the risk coefficient is objectively high, proceeding is no longer courage—it is pure foolishness. Let me give you a practical analogy: suppose you want to drive through the Chalous road. It has rained heavily, and the mountain cliffs are frozen solid. I know scientifically that at 2:00 AM, the rocks are frozen and stable. Therefore, I must choose to travel at an hour when the mountain is frozen solid, not at 10:00 AM when the sun hits the ice, melts it, and causes massive boulders to come crashing down. Choosing to drive at 10:00 AM under those conditions is not being brave; it is sheer stupidity and reckless gambling.

In riding, it is exactly the same. If you force a horse over a maximum fence when you know its physical condition is compromised or your own balance is off, you are not showing courage. You are committing a technical crime against the animal and yourself. True mastery is knowing exactly when to push forward based on calculated safety, and when to pull back to preserve the horse's integrity.



Pain, the Equestrian Life, and the Burden of Legacy

Sanaz Seyed Esfahani:

Understood. However, I feel I haven't fully received my answer yet, and I would like to transition to my final question. I want to reference Susan Sontag's seminal books, **Illness as Metaphor** and **AIDS and Its Metaphors**, which fundamentally analyze the relationship between pain and human existence. Following that thought, what is the relationship between pain and your equestrian existence? As someone who has historically spent the greatest number of hours with their foot in the stirrup, you have postponed your medical surgery for a long time due to the issues and management of the club. Don't you believe that the equestrian history of this country is waiting to see its legend back in the stirrup and mounted on a horse once again?

Babak Shaki:

They have absolutely no interest in seeing me on a horse.

Sanaz Seyed Esfahani:

Those who have no interest lack common sense, but I truly believe that first and foremost yourself, and subsequently many righteous riders of this profession, would love to see you on a horse again. Why have you postponed your surgery, and what is your plan?

Babak Shaki:

The explanation is extensive. There are numerous and highly complex structural problems.

