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PENTATHLON PERSONALITIES: BOND OF BROTHERS — MEET THE ELGENDYS



In a new 'Pentathlon Personalities' series, a strong family ethos keeps two Egyptian brothers driving on towards Paris — and beyond

Written by Joe Callaghan

Ahmed Elgendy has just pulled up outside his family home in New Cairo City, southeast of Egypt's capital. The 35-minute commute from another busy day training at Cairo Stadium has left him feeling peckish. But he fears that when he gets inside he's going to have to source his own lunch. That's because his devoted mother Mona will be concentrating on another meal — his brother's.

"Many times I will come back home after training and I see my mother is preparing for Mohamed a very nice dinner and she hasn't even yet asked me if I wanted to eat something," Ahmed says. "So you know, he can't lie about it, Mohamed is my mum's favourite!"

Mohamed, the younger of these two remarkable brothers and the baby of four Elgendy siblings in total, is sitting in the driver's seat having navigated the route home from training. He can only laugh and nod just a little to acknowledge that yeah, maybe he is his mum's favourite.

Ahmed Elgendy made history in Tokyo two summers ago when he became the first African pentathlete to medal at an Olympic Games. His silver there followed a stream of prizes at youth and senior level as he rose to the very top of the sport at the age of 21. But just two years on and one year out from the Paris Games, he finds his brother, himself now 21, hot on his heels.

They currently sit third and tenth respectively in the UIPM World Rankings. But in second place is compatriot Mohanad Shaban, who is enjoying a brilliant season highlighted by a gold medal at the UIPM 2023 Pentathlon World Cup Final in Ankara (TUR) in June.



With a maximum of two qualifiers per country for next summer's Games, the Elgendys could well find themselves going toe-to-toe for an Olympic ticket. But as UIPM learned when joining Ahmed and Mohamed on the Cairo commute via FaceTime, theirs is a strong and co-dependent brotherly bond.

"I think our relationship is very special. We are sticking to each other very strongly. We love each other and are always trying to help each other: in life and in our sport. Mohamed just entered the senior level in the last year but I am always pushing him to be better," Ahmed says, revealing that he found it hard to concentrate on his own performance as his little brother made his silver medal breakthrough at the UIPM 2022 Pentathlon World Championships in Alexandria (EGY) last year.

"I was even supporting him in the Laser Run. I was focusing on him. I was not too far from the podium myself but I had just returned from shoulder surgery and trained for three weeks so after the last shooting series I was fifth and maintaining my position so I was always looking at Mohamed. I wanted him to get gold but maybe next time!"

On the afternoon we catch up it is Mohamed who is weaving through Cairo traffic and Ahmed who does most of the talking. "He is a good talker," Mohamed laughs later. With just two years separating them, it's no surprise that little brother has followed big brother. But they have their differences.



Ahmed started pentathlon at the age of six with Mohamed beginning his journey in the sport at five. While Ahmed stuck with it from Biathle all the way up, Mohamed drifted away, trying squash, fencing and for a while nothing at all.

“He stopped for three years without any sport and then he gained too much weight in these years. He was maybe a heavy boy then!” smirks Ahmed as he looks over at his brother. “When he was 14 or 15 he started to do Fencing only. He was very talented in Fencing. In 2019 he turned back to Pentathlon. When you stop for eight years in Swimming and get back it’s very hard to get back to that level but he’s done well. He was coming back gradually in Laser Run too but now he is one of the best in the world.”

Ahmed has had lots of time to admire his sibling’s development — a little more time than he would have liked. Surgery on that shoulder injury kept him on the sidelines for a while. But it also helped him to finally understand how his parents and family feel watching him.

“I didn’t know the feeling of my family until I started to watch Mohamed in the competitions! It’s much easier to compete than to watch your brother or son or daughter. When I started to watch Mohamed in the last year when I was injured, I found myself very tense and getting way too nervous for him.”

With Egyptian pentathletes riding the crest of a wave, both brothers say there is an energy and spirit in the national team camp driving everyone on. But Mohamed has personal inspiration too.

“After each competition that Ahmed goes to and comes back with a medal, that is what motivated me,” says Mohamed. “He inspired me to make achievements like he has made.”

They drive each other on too, even when they come face to face on the piste. “It’s so, so hard when we are against one another in the Fencing,” says Ahmed. “I want him to win. He wants me to win. It’s a very difficult match.

“Last year in the senior World Championships in Alexandria, in the first match against each other, I got the victory. But after that, Mohamed got second position in Fencing overall. I was 16th or something. When I won that first match, I was worried. ‘Oh, will it affect him?’ But he did brilliantly.”

“I think actually I fired him up,” Mohamed laughs.

While Shaban’s incredible form has made the possibility of both Elgendys qualifying for Paris look tricky, they’re not ruling out the possibility. “The only way that Mohamed and me can qualify for Paris together is that we both have to get a medal in the Senior World Championships in 2024. It’s a very hard target and it needs a lot of work but it’s not impossible,” says Ahmed. “The competition between the three of us has got so much harder but it’s a good motivation to try to be better.”

Ahmed’s mantra is to “Be or Be”, his adaptation of the Shakespearean “To be or not to be” but with the negative outcome removed: “You have to have the mindset of winning. No other option than winning,” he says. “There is no ‘not to be’, it has to be called ‘be or be’ because when there is another option, an option to lose, you can think about that.”

What about a fitting slogan for Mohamed? Be [like Ahmed] or Be [better than him]’ perhaps? The two laugh at the suggestion. They may both be at the earlier stages of their career but the tight bonds suggest their rivalry can only become so fierce. Family is central to their lives, with parents Mona and Osama a huge influence. Their mother is also a key part of their team.



“Our family stick to each other. We are giving our family the priority in everything,” says Ahmed. “When we were young and wanted to go on an outing on the weekend with friends, we first had to see if there was a family day because that is the priority.

“My mother, since I started Pentathlon, she has been committed to supporting us everywhere. Because my father was working a lot, my mother took all the responsibilities. She was a teacher but in 2017 she retired early to concentrate with us on our sport. She has sacrificed a lot. She takes care of every detail. She is a nutritionist, taking care of all of our food, driving us to training and maybe that’s the best thing because driving in Egypt is very bad! It’s very stressful.”

Another reason why it’s good to have a little brother: driving you home and driving you on too. The Elgendys’ journey to Paris is not easy but they’re determined to make it work their way.