

Q&A with Egypt's Gladiator: Fight with Lion still on!

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Given the current state of the economy, it comes as no surprise that many Egyptians are doing all that they can to revive international interest in their country. What is surprising, though, is that one man has somehow managed to convince himself - and a few others - that he can single-handedly "boost tourism in Egypt" by fighting a full-grown African lion in direct hand-to-paw combat, in front of the Pyramids at Giza.

Inexplicably, al-Sayed al-Essawy, a 25-year-old from Daqahlia, has come to believe that "the world will flock to see the Egyptian man who defeated a lion with his bare hands."

The fight, or "battle" as Essawy, prefers to call it, was announced two weeks ago, immediately igniting a firestorm of international protests and online petitions from individuals and animal rights organizations alike. The negative reaction surprised Essawy, prompting the self-proclaimed "strongest man in the world" to admit to being "confused and heart-broken."

Nonetheless, Essawy insists that the fight is still on, even if he has to stage the battle in a secret location.

Al-Masry Al-Youm: When, and more importantly, how did you come up with this idea?

Al-Sayed al-Essawy: I discovered my incredible strength at the age of 13, and, almost immediately afterwards, promised myself that, one of these days, I would fight a lion. Since then, I've been thinking about the best way to go about it, and, after the revolution, with the economy the way it is, I've been given the perfect opportunity to realize my dream.

Al-Masry: You claim this event will revive the tourism industry. What makes you think anyone on earth would want to see this fight, let alone travel specifically for it?

Essawy: If America, or any other country, had a man with the ability to combat the strongest creature on the planet, they would properly promote him, and use his strength to their advantage. He would become a worldwide phenomenon, and people would come from their countries just to see him. This is what I want to do for my country. Do you understand what an amazing spectacle this will be? It will appeal to everyone. The Gulfis will watch and laugh, the Arabs will be entertained, and the Americans will be fascinated, from a scientific point of view. They will marvel at a truly unprecedented feat. This show will have something for everyone.

Al-Masry: What about animal lovers? Are you aware of how many people your lion-fighting plans have angered? People are threatening to boycott Egypt and any Egyptian products because of you.

Essawy: That's because they don't understand what I'm going to do. They think I'm going to kill the lion. I'm not going to kill it, nor will I be armed with a sword or dagger - those are all false reports circulated by the media for reasons I don't understand.

Al-Masry: So, you're not going to kill the lion?

Essawy: No. Unless it's a matter of life or death, in which case I will be forced to kill it.

Al-Masry: When is fighting a lion not a matter of life or death?

Essawy: It's up to the lion. If he chooses to withdraw, or surrender, and lets me tie him up, then I will not kill him and the fight will end. But, like I said, if it comes down to either me or him, I will have to kill him. But I don't want to kill the lion, nor am I planning on it. I want to make that clear.

Al-Masry: What will you do with its corpse?

Essawy: I will have it stuffed (laughs).

Al-Masry: What do you have to say to your attackers? How is this, for example, in any way different from, say, bull-fighting, which is a major part of Spain's tourism industry?

Essawy: Exactly! I made that same point to several other people. To my attackers I say, if you think this is wrong, maybe you should change your perspective, or at least, take it out on the bullfighters too, instead of just me. Besides, this isn't just for fun, what I'm planning on doing. It's to help my country, and to send an important message.

Al-Masry: What message are you trying to send?

Essawy: When I defeat the lion - which I will - I will pull an Israeli flag out of my pocket, and drape it over the lion, and put my foot on it. Israel led me to this, through all their atrocities which, as a child, I grew up watching on television. The message is that even though Israel and America may be as strong as a lion - the strongest creature on the planet - they too can be defeated.

Al-Masry: By you?

Essawy: By the Arab youth, which is about to explode. Soon, they will be ready to take on the mightiest foe.

Al-Masry: But, technically, the lion's only fighting because you're forcing it to.

Essawy: Yes. It's a caged fight, so there will be nowhere for the lion to run. I have challenged the lion, and I will defeat it.

Al-Masry: So, to dismiss this as just some really crazy guy beating up an innocent lion would be, in your opinion...

Essawy: Completely inaccurate and misleading. I'm not a crazy person. There's a political reason behind what I'm doing.

Al-Masry: Besides the international outrage you've provoked, have you run into any other difficulties on your quest to fight this lion?

Essawy: So far, I haven't been able to secure any permits. I sent an official request to the Interior Ministry and they never replied. And there are reports in the media that say I was arrested and my lion confiscated which, as you can see, is clearly not true. But even if I don't get permits, I will still fight the lion. I will just have to do so in a secret location, and make it only open to journalists who can ensure the type of exposure this event deserves.

Al-Masry: So, without proper exposure, this event will be a failure.

Essawy: Yes. If this battle does not get the positive reaction I'm expecting, then I will be forced to leave the country and go somewhere where they can appreciate a man like me: the strongest man in the world. Which is very upsetting, especially since I've announced that 50 percent of the profits from this event will go to the families of the martyrs of the revolution.

Al-Masry: Why do you think it's been so difficult to get official approval from the government?

Essawy: Undoubtedly because of the misguided international reaction, which I truly don't understand. God made me, and he made the lion, and he put us both on the same planet, which means the lion is fair game. Ethically, there should be no problem.

Al-Masry: If the event is successful, how will you follow it up? More lion fights?

Essawy: I have a whole series of shows planned in my head. I will pull an airplane with my teeth, and I will pull an airplane with my hair. I will also be run over by an airplane. In between each of these acts, there will be lion battles.

Al-Masry: Have you fought any other beasts before? Will this be your first lion fight?

Essawy: This will be my first battle with a lion, yes. I have fought other animals, mainly dogs. On separate occasions, I have fought three of the most ferocious dog breeds.

Al-Masry: You punch dogs?

Essawy: I punch and kick them.

Al-Masry: How are you training for this specific event?

Essawy: By doing a series of mental exercises. Nothing physical, just brain-training. I visualize the fight for two hours at a time. I visualize the lion, and all the possible ways it could attack. Will

it go for the head, or will it grab me by the feet? I ask myself these questions and visualize how I will dodge these attacks.

Al-Masry: What about the lion? Have you been preparing it for the fight by provoking it in any way? Maybe abusing it physically or even verbally, like with trash talk?

Essawy: No, I don't spend any time with the lion at all; I haven't even given it a name. I don't want to get too attached to it. It's on a friend's farm, and he's responsible for it until the day of the battle. I'd also like to point out that the lion will not be tranquilized, and I will give it a blood test directly before the fight in order to prove it.

Al-Masry: What combat techniques will you be implementing against the lion? Will you use martial arts, or will you be resorting to regular street-fighting tactics, like dirt in the eye and crotch-punches?

Essawy: I don't know about the dirt, but the lion will probably not let me punch its crotch. I will have to use a new fighting style I've developed, which is called "Life or Death." This will be a caged fight, and I will be desperate to survive, which is why I've called the style "Life or Death."

Al-Masry: As in a 'life or death' situation, like "kill or be killed?"

Essawy: That's right.

Al-Masry: Even though you're not going to kill the lion...

Essawy: That's right.

Al-Masry: How confident are you that you yourself will not be killed?

Essawy: 200 percent. No worries whatsoever. If anything, I'm worried for the lion (laughs).

Al-Masry: Can you elaborate on this "Life or Death" fighting style? Is it more kicking or punching? Fists or open-palmed slaps?

Essawy: Everything. It consists of a series of combination moves. I will start off with the slaps, but, you should know, my slaps are unlike any other. My strength is truly incredible and unprecedented.

Al-Masry: Do you have any advice or suggestions on how to fight a lion for any young children out there interested in following in your footsteps?

Essawy: I don't think anyone can follow in my footsteps; I have a special gift, and I just want to share it to make people happy and to help my country. But the key to fighting a lion is maintaining eye contact, and, really, not wanting to die. You have to recognize in that situation, it's you or the lion, and you have to really want it to be you.

Al-Masry: So, basically, you have to be prepared to kill the lion, which you're supposedly not going to do.

Essawy: Exactly.

Al-Masry: Finally, do you have anything to say to the angered public that you feel might change their mind about this lion fight?

Essawy: I think it's time we start celebrating genuine talent. For years we've been celebrating nothing but sex. I've taught children how to chew glass and pull cars with their teeth - the proof is on YouTube. I can raise a generation of super soldiers. I've jumped from ten-story buildings, I've hung myself many times and have been repeatedly run over. So, when I say I have the intellect and strength to take a lion down, people should take me seriously. Why isn't anyone listening to me? I don't know, but it's very frustrating...

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