

UP IN THE AIR



New horse movement guidelines may deeply impact the future of international racing, although barriers still remain. In the following pages Jason Gregory reports on both positive and negative factors which could still tip the balance either way...

THE connections of top Australian speedster Snitzerland spent last summer privately considering a bold plan for the mare to compete in some of the United States' biggest sprint races. Any success would have furthered the reputation of Australia's sprinting stocks, made the Gr1 winning mare a valuable, dual-hemisphere breeding commodity and – win, lose or draw – been one hell of a ride.

Trainer Gerald Ryan said, however, that the dream remained just that after it became obvious that simply getting the horse to California would have been too great a risk to her health and future.

"I wanted to take another horse over to the States a few years ago but we decided against it after the airline told us the steps we had to go through to get over there," he said. "I called (the airline) again hoping things had changed but they hadn't. They said we would have to go up to Hong Kong for a connection, then over to Helsinki and then another flight over to New York and then to California.

"You factor this in with quarantine and all the other requirements and there is a very good chance our healthy and happy horse may not even have gotten to the track and may not been the same once we finally get home. So we just moved on."

The logistical nightmare encountered by Ryan, along with race scheduling woes and the myriad of red tape, rubber stamps and roadblocks to planning international campaigns, are common topics in the trainers' hut while normal people sleep.

These include differing, and sometimes contrary, regulations, legislation and racing rules across jurisdictions in regards to differing approaches to quarantine, vaccines, biosecurity and laboratory testing. Application of excessive, inconsistent sanitary regulations, a lack of consistent regulations for temporary importation and differences in allowable equine treatments and medications, such as steroids, in and out of training and racing periods.

Racing authorities have worked for years to remove these impediments to a truly global racing community but became frustrated at being ignored by government veterinary services.

Because of this the sport horse industry partnered with the World Organisation for Animal Health (OIE) - the global animal health standard setting body – three years ago to develop a safe, practical and predictable method of travel which does not transmit disease.

The fruit of that labor was franked on 28 May this year after the OIE's 178 member nations voted to adopt the "high-health, high-performance horse" (HHP) principle within a new OIE Terrestrial Animal Health Code.

International Federation of Horseracing



Travelling horses to the US is logistically challenging

Authorities (IFHA) chair Louis Romanet said it was vital for the growth of racing that horses be able to move quickly and easily to and from the world's biggest races and that adoption of the standards would "have a deep impact on the future of international racing".

Under the guidelines, based on existing OIE standards and principles, a HHP horse would be defined as a subpopulation separate from all other horses. The rationale is HHP horses are a lower level of disease risk as they are already under close veterinary supervision, are highly-supervised and identified and traceable, welfare is essential to performance and they enter countries on a temporary basis only and not for breeding.

OIE director-general Bernard Vallat said the organisation had recognised the "important constraints to the movement of horses" after working with the IFHA and Fédération Equestre Internationale (FEI).

"It was concluded that having globally

"OIE announcement has renewed hope that racing authorities can create a truly integrated circuit..."

standardised testing and quarantine requirements – which currently is not the case – for this particular group of horses, which by necessity must be in impeccable health, would facilitate easier and more streamlined international movement," Vallat said, noting, "There has also been a recognition of the economic impact of the

equine industry and this concept will allow countries to tap into the potential income associated with increasing numbers of FEI and horse racing events."

FEI veterinary director Graeme Cooke said the guidelines, developed by a task force of racing and equestrian industry players, veterinarians, laboratory directors and disease and trade experts, were a "quantum leap" on the road to policy change.

The HHP concept will be first tested in South Korea this year after import requirements were altered, based on the guidelines, for horses competing in the 17th Incheon Asian Games.

Dr. Susanne Münstermann, from the OIE scientific and technical department in Paris, told ABR that the concepts underlying principle was based on compartmentalization, something currently only applied in the artificial insemination, poultry and pig industries. A compartment consists of a separated sub-population with a distinctive health status.

Horses would only qualify for a temporary import HHP Health Certificate and equine passport after passing a series of government and private veterinary examinations, specific laboratory tests, and receiving certain vaccinations during a short isolation period. The information would also be entered into a global database under the aegis of the industry.

"It is envisaged that HHP horses will be able to travel for an extended period of at least three months and to several events," Dr Münstermann said.

Requirements for biosecurity at the home stable, the event venue and during transportation are currently being finalised but standards for equine disease free zones (EFDZ) will also be developed to allow



Racing NSW chairman John Messara

countries who cannot control all equine diseases in their territory to declare just parts of the territory free of equine diseases.

According to Dr Munstermann, “This concept was successfully applied during the 2010 Asian Games (held in China) and the combination of the HHP and EDFZ will allow countries not recognised as an approved country for free movement of horses to participate in the international circuit of races.”

The OIE announcement has renewed hope that racing authorities can create a truly integrated circuit of major races for star gallopers between all the big international race days. The challenge now is for the OIE and racing authorities to fully develop the HHP framework into a practical and attractive option to be embraced by governments and national veterinary services.

The guidelines were given extra weight after a tripartite agreement between Great Britain, Ireland and France – announced last month – allows racehorses of higher health status to travel between the nations with a valid horse passport.

A word of caution, however, comes from Racing Victoria’s head of equine welfare and veterinary services Dr. Brian Stewart.

Dr Stewart said the thoroughbred racing industry must accept that horse movements were controlled by national government authorities, and national veterinarians were “inherently conservative and naturally risk averse.”

“To make change, we can’t just wish it to be so, or force it to be so,” Dr Stewart, who is also chair of IFHA’s movement of horses committee, said.

In April this year Sydney’s inaugural

Championships race meeting was launched as a must-stop on the international racing circuit and was a runaway success. Thankfully for organisers the two overseas-trained horses which lobbied for the event – Japanese mare Hana’s Goal (All Aged Stakes) and Irish sprinter Gordon Lord Byron (George Ryder Stakes) – both saluted in premium events.

It would be assumed these twin successes would have connections of even better international gallopers queuing up to chase the events’ vast riches next year. But, under current conditions, there is no guarantee at all.

Such a globetrotter is Gordon Lord Byron that the Championships organisers would perhaps have felt slated had he not come to Australia. His trainer, legendary Irish horseman Tom Hogan, said prior to their departure that “the logistics of the trip are horrendous.”

Hogan explained: “Theoretically, there is nothing wrong with the quarantine, except it is too long. If the restrictions are relaxed for the racehorse, it would encourage a lot more people to come with their horses. We have raced all over the world and this has been by far the toughest in quarantine and regulation, which is a shame because of how far you have to travel in the first place and that you forgo closer race meetings to come here (Australia).”

Gerald Ryan agreed that the industry, especially in a very isolated Australia, demanded a harmonised process for the cross-border movement of superior horses.

“In this day and age you cannot have anything wrong with your horse if you are going overseas or you wouldn’t bother,” he said. “They are fit athletes and if there was

something wrong with the horse we would know, the whole process just makes it a really hard call to compete internationally even if you have the right horse.

“I personally like the Australian requirements being as stringent as they are for horses who are not coming to race or for brood mares, but there should be different standards for fit racehorses and (the OIE guidelines) are basically what we need.”

Ryan’s stance is why government should not suspect the industry is attempting to loosen movement controls for business priorities when both sides were so affected by the 2007 Equine Influenza - an acute, highly contagious, viral and respiratory disease -

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- Gerald Ryan

breakout.

That event in a naïve population of horses was the most serious emergency animal disease in Australia for many years, and horse movement was locked-down in NSW and Queensland. At its peak, 70,000 horses became infected on nearly 9,000 properties at an economic loss estimated at \$1 billion.

Racing NSW chair John Messara AM was Australian Thoroughbred Breeders president in 2007 and well remembers the disaster and how it could have been so much worse.

“The onset of EI caused a complete re-



Japan's Hana's Goal won the All Aged Stakes

evaluation of all quarantine protocols and a less flexible attitude by the Australian authorities, and Australia wants to jealously guard its clean status as an island," he said.

Messara said organisers only wanted a few top quality competitors to commit to the Championships, and did not believe the length of quarantine, the Werribee arrangement or travel to be major deterrents. However, he conceded that Australia's current laws would be a major impediment to its inclusion in any World Series of Racing.

"Firstly (the industry as a whole) would need to make alterations to the timing of certain race meetings (for the series to work), which could well be injurious to the pattern in certain countries, and thus be difficult to effect," he observed.

"The more problematic issue is the length of quarantine both here in Australia and in the country of origin such as the USA and, in Australia's case, the quarantine will be something of a stumbling block which will need a lot of work and, look, length of quarantine is out of our hands."

Currently, there is not an approved quarantine station on a US training track that would allow horses wanting to enter the Championships to keep working pending shipment.

Nick Smith, Royal Ascot's head of international racing, told ABR most European-based connections dropped the idea of coming to Australia once they fully understood the logistics and requirements.

"The prize money is very compelling, of course, but the proximity to Dubai's lucrative, established and prestigious meeting isn't ideal – you can't do both," he said. "Sadly, racing Australia-wide is suffering from the prohibitive quarantine rules which don't apply to other options. It is difficult because each racing authority has to comply with their own individual government's requirements."

Smith said other current inconsistencies,

such as differing in and out of training and racing medication rules, stopped some top-line horses competing internationally, although there is currently a concerted push to standardise rules on steroids.

But there are other inconsistencies.

For example, there is no quarantine entering the UK, but a UK horse must be isolated for weeks before travelling. French and Irish horses currently have to quarantine in England before going overseas. The Japan Racing Authority do not allow horses going to Australia to quarantine at their training centres, so Hana's Goal, for example, went to Nakayama.

Perhaps the quirkiest situation was outlined by Racing South Africa CEO Peter Gibson after South Africa's dual horse of the year Variety Club won the Champions Mile at Sha Tin Racecourse this year.

Gibson said London News became the first South African-trained Gr1 winner in

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Hong Kong 17 years earlier after 30 days quarantine and direct shipping. But Variety Club had been on the road and in the air four times longer due to rules around African Horse Sickness – South Africa's Achilles' heel.

"How is it possible that South African exporters face greater constraints than they did 17 years ago?" Gibson asked.

The African situation however now appears the exception rather than the norm with clubs and governments in isolated cases making strong headway in overcoming travel barriers.

The best example of how the HHP concept could work on a global scale may be the Breeders' Cup World Championships. Breeders Cup senior vice-president Dora Delgado told ABR that the organisation could now easily attract top overseas gallopers after decades of working with the US Department of Agriculture (USDA) on transitioning horses.

"Now it is one of the easiest and least stressful processes in the world," she said.

Those agreements mean horses can be imported from Great Britain, Ireland, France, Germany and Japan on accepted equine passports and health certificates on an on-track quarantine compound without having to clear quarantine at an off-site facility.

When the horses initially touch down in the US, USDA agents meet the plane and draw blood for re-testing and, if the tests are clear, the horses are released to the track within 42 hours.

"This is as fast a process as you will find in the US. Our difficulty comes in trying to get a runner from South America, South Africa or Australia because of the import and equine health regulations that are in place between those countries and the USDA," Delgado said. "Australia has serious restrictions in place as well, but mostly for the return of a horse to Australia or a horse importing into Australia."

According to Delgado, "For an Australian horse to compete in the US, it has to take a very complicated flight here and then after the races, it must serve a two week quarantine in an Australian-approved quarantine facility of which there are only two in the entire US and then it must be quarantined for another two weeks in Australia."

South American and South African runners must be imported to a USDA facility in Miami for up to 60 days and, by the time they are released, have lost peak conditioning and can rarely then compete at Championship level.

On the other hand, US trainers have told Delgado that a trip to Dubai was exhausting for horses, and trainers were becoming reluctant to ship horses at the beginning of the US racing season and then have to take most of the summer to get them back into top shape.

Thirty years ago Ryan flew over the Nullabor to have a crack at what was then massive prize money and a seriously big summer carnival in Perth. The carnival wound down and Ryan attempted to return home a winner but could not find a flight for his horse.

"All the carriers went on holidays over Christmas and we were left in Perth for about three weeks to twiddle our thumbs," he said. "Luckily we then had time to win another race, but we still had to go this way and that to get home!"