

Reaching Asia – Horse Racing in Macau

The local property market in the former Portuguese colony is currently enjoying an upward trend. Investors eye the recent flurry of investment in the casino and hotel sector and are hedging dollars on the wave of tourism that is expected to follow. Such developments spell money. In a city that has ridden fluctuating economic fortunes in recent years, and where half of the government's revenue derives from its gaming industry (and nearly 30% of its residents benefit either directly or indirectly from it) such investment is a matter of some significance. The question on everyone's lips however is what specific role horse racing will play in this "Vegas/Monte Carlo of the East"?

Perhaps surprisingly given its (then) 143 years of legalized gambling, Macau did not hold its first official thoroughbred horse race until 1989. From no dedicated track (the existing harness racing track needing to be expanded and converted to a suitable surface), no horses, and limited infrastructure, the Macau Jockey Club ("MJC") is now one of the largest local private employers with over 1400 employees (of whom 700 are stable assistants). There's also a distinct 'Down Under' flavour to the Club with (amongst others) a Director of Racing and Chief Stipendiary, 6 (of the 33) local trainers, and 3 jockeys (including visiting female jockey Bernadette Cooper) all sporting Australian accents.

One well known expatriate is former Hong Kong champion jockey Gary Moore (French champion in 1987 before winning 7 HK riding titles) whose record tally of 693 winners and four consecutive Hong Kong titles was only recently eclipsed by Douglas Whyte. Brother to 5-time champion Hong Kong trainer John, and son of legendary jockey and leading Hong Kong trainer George, Gary has just completed his fourth season as a trainer in Macau. After twice ranking second on the leader board during that period Gary successfully claimed the trainer's premiership for the 2004/5 season with 92 winners (13 ahead of last season's champ Alan Tam).

It's trainers like Moore that are continuing to change the face of Macau racing.

Four years ago, Macau burst into the international racing spotlight when the region's top horse – Active Bo Bo - claimed victory over the reigning European sprinter Nuclear Debate in the Mahab Al Shimaal - a 1200m lead-in race to the Dubai World Cup meeting. Macau's only other runner – Gold World Winner – ran third in the same race. 13 months later, Taipa welcomed Frankie Dettori, Olivier Delouze, Pat Eddery, Paddy Payne, and Glen Boss to its Derby Day; the same year Royal Treasure became the first Macau representative at the Hong Kong International meeting. These achievements followed from other 'firsts' for the Club: pioneering the Macau International Apprentice Jockey Invitation Races; and being the first Asian Racing Organization to invite the press to attend racing enquiries to increase the transparency and integrity of such procedures. Macau also hosted the 26th Asian Racing Conference in 1999.

Despite its successes, these days Macau racing is not treading an altogether easy path. Where as once the horse population topped 1200, nowadays it totals just 823 horses who will support 99 race meetings for the 2005/6 season (44 day meetings and 55 night meetings). That's a few empty boxes considering that the air-conditioned stable complex can accommodate up to 1,256 horses.

There are varied reasons offered for the drop in numbers. They range from fluctuating economic conditions in Asia since 1997, an increase in internet gaming and illegal bookmakers drawing money away from the Club, to increasing competition for the entertainment dollar. Perhaps the most significant factor in the decline relates to the paralyzing effect of the May 2002 Hong Kong law that prohibited Hong Kong residents from gambling outside the confines of its borders. The two Special Administrative Regions share strong links - separated as they are by immigration counters and an hour's ferry ride (or 23 minutes by helicopter if it's been a particularly successful day on the punt). Shutting the betting door meant that cash-rich Hong Kong gamblers (and the HK owners who patronized Macau's stables) were denied access to telephone betting. The law's effectiveness in stemming the amount of illegal offshore betting remains difficult to ascertain. What it did achieve however was an initial decimation of MJC betting revenue – and longer term, its number of horses/owners.

There's a gritty resilient edge to this town – and its Jockey Club - however. The Club's vision has seen new initiatives adopted in an attempt to stem the decline in horse numbers, and boost turnover. Macau one-way betting on Hong Kong races was launched on 30 January 2005, internet betting is overseen by the MJC, and the Club has also introduced bookmakers at the Taipa track. The compulsory retirement age for race horses has been removed, and the Club has issued 400 Private Purchase permits for the import of horses for the 2005-6 season. In addition, the first 50 horses which arrive with an overseas rating of 80 or above will have their freight expenses reimbursed to the owner. The principal owner of each of these horses will also be provided with a HK\$50,000 betting voucher when the horse has its first start.

Macau prize money is nothing to sneeze at. According to a 2003 report produced by the International Federation of Horse Racing Authorities Macau is ranked 6th in the world for average prize money per race (Hong Kong, the United Arab Emirates and Japan filling the top 3 positions). Macau hosts just 0.61% of the total races held globally each year yet offers owners an average race purse of HK\$251,604 (AUD\$42,562).

"The quality of horse in Macau has certainly increased since I rode and then started training here," Moore says. "A couple of the tried horses we bought in this year we paid AUD\$180,000 – AUD\$200,000 for. So there are definitely owners willing to buy a better horse to go after the prize money on offer."

It may be good prize money but Macau is a town that demands much from its horses. Horses race all year round, there are limited spelling facilities, and a precedent was set some years back that saw a number of horses being run 35 times in a year. Such conditions require a certain type of horse and Moore says that a lot of the time this horse isn't one that is bred in the Northern Hemisphere.

"We've had very little success with horses out of Europe," he says. "Australasian horses are better on price, they're a tougher breed, and they seem to adapt better. You need what works for the environment".

He runs his eye down his list of horses and does a quick pedigree calculation – Approximately 50% of his stable comes from Australia, with another 30% from New Zealand.

Supporting the Australia statistics, another expatriate trainer who has had demonstrated success at the Taipa track is Len Maund whose stable includes former Melbourne/Brisbane sprinter Express Ball who won the rich sand sprint race - the HK\$750,000 Group 3 Macau Galaxy on June 25, and former Port Macquarie galloper Oriental Prince who won the AJC Goodwill Trophy. Maund was also involved in the early career of the Group 1 winning Natural Blitz who last year ran third to world champion sprinter Silent Witness in the Cathay Pacific Hong Kong Sprint.

Whilst the majority of the local horse population is sourced from the Southern Hemisphere, Moore's owners include a mix of Hong Kong, Macanese, and international addresses (including a number from Australia); many of whom have businesses or family connections in the region and who reportedly enjoy the relaxing atmosphere of Taipa when they get to visit it. Training expenses are also lower than in Hong Kong but the prize money is competitive.

Moore speaks highly of the Australian thoroughbred sales. "We've had a lot of success buying horses out of the Magic Millions sales whether at the breeze-up or feature sale," he states. "From an international point of view the opportunity to visit the Gold Coast in January with all the surrounding fanfare is quite extraordinary. Gerry and John have really strived to make this a better and better sale and it seems to be very popular with the breeders. I encourage my local owners to attend the October breeze-up sales in particular. It's a good affordable sale for many of them."

Like others, Moore emphasizes the importance of owners seeking expert advice before purchasing horses out of yearling sales for racing in Asia.

"Racing on sand and turf allows me to tailor pedigrees for tracks but you need to understand what type of horse will stand up to the rigors of racing in this part of the world," he warns "and it isn't every yearling or tried horse. I've seen too many people with no experience end up with problem horses."

With Macau's economic outlook rosy and the region's primary focus remaining on the entertainment and gambling dollar, it seems a sure bet that the Australian thoroughbred and those that court it will continue to play an integral role in the territory's future.

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