

Reaching Asia: Horse Racing in Singapore

The year was 1842. Singapore's first official horse race offered the (then) princely sum of S\$150 to the winner. 162 years later the Group 1 Singapore Airlines International Cup carries prize money of S\$3million. A lot more has changed in the intervening years than just the difference in prize money. These days, "the gateway to Southeast Asia" has become a unique role model for a number of countries in the region including Malaysia, the key islands of the Riau Archipelago of Indonesia, Thailand, and the Philippines.

Strategically located at a natural junction of sea routes at the tip of the Malay Peninsula, Singapore has long been prized as one of the world's leading trading ports. Considering the island's proximity to the equator and its consequent year-round humidity, a frequent question is how a racing industry ever evolved here? In light of its trade status and in a bid to control the lucrative spice trade, the British colonial umbrella extended over Singapore from 1819. Perhaps not surprisingly then, a group of expatriate racing enthusiasts formed the Singapore Sporting Club ("SSC") in 1842.

Over the course of the next 91 years the SSC changed its name to the Singapore Turf Club ("STC"), the Straits Racing Association was formed (which subsequently became the Malayan Racing Association "MRA") to regulate the sport, official rules of racing were introduced, and the track played host to all number of events from polo to landing Singapore's first aircraft, until the sport moved its base to Bukit Timah in 1933.

As in a number of countries during World War Two, racing was suspended for the duration of hostilities. However with its re-introduction (plus a few extra years) the public finally gained admittance to the sport that had previously been the purview of members and owners. The show piece – a world-class track at Kranji that cost a reported S\$550 million - was opened in 1999. The inaugural running of the Singapore Airlines International Cup in 2000 pushed this quiet country into the international spotlight, and was promptly followed in 2001 by the International Standards Committee (ICSC) according Group One status to the race (and Group 3 status to both the \$1million Singapore Airlines KrisFlyer Sprint and the \$1m Singapore Cup).

Asia's Lion City had arrived on the international racing stage.

A man whose career has epitomized success is Singapore's most successful trainer - the now retired Ivan Allan. Allan trained for 39 years (first in Singapore and then in Hong Kong). As a number of prominent racing identities have described him "what [Ivan] hasn't achieved or attempted in international racing, as owner, trainer, breeder, and bloodstock salesman is hardly worth worrying about". He is also a man who has long been a proponent of the globalization of racing.

Reflecting on the changes that Singapore has witnessed in its 160+ year history, Allan agrees that there have indeed been many. He recalls his entry to the sport in the early 1960's, where owners comprised of 90% sporting and 10% gambling orientated. "In the 70's and early 80's there was a big move towards gambling and probably in the 80's it was 50% gambling owners and 50% owners for the sport of horse racing," he says. Quite open about his love of gambling and the fact that its

proceeds constituted the major part of his income, he readily admits that "these were the 'golden years' of Singapore racing".

The images he creates are redolent of days when local racing really did dominate the entertainment dollar.

"Racing became an overnight casino laced with colour and glamour and competition for the rich to flash their wealth," he says. "On a race day in the 70's and mid 80's everyone remained in Singapore for the gambling action. Casinos in nearby Genting could not lure the Singapore punter until the weekend racing was over. There was an abundance of cash available to the horse gamblers that most of them mid week would fly over to Taiwan for a few days of relaxation and entertainment.

"Unfortunately, the gambling was largely controlled by the illegal bookmakers. Ironically, they bankrolled the sport. Admittedly, they siphoned off a large portion in profits but the overflow was more than sufficient to give the totalisator a healthy turnover and income. Prize money escalated and quality of racehorses improved".

In 1986 the government was required to put a stop to this rampant illegal betting and a law was passed with mandatory jail sentences for offenders.

"The effect was like throwing a spanner into the mechanism," Allan states. "This combined with the arrival of the pagers and mobile phones whereby bets laid off the course could be relayed almost instantly to the racecourse totalisator brought the "golden years" to an abrupt end. For Singapore society it was necessary. But betting turnover dropped dramatically".

The Industry clawed its way back. In 1998 the STC's turnover from horse racing amounted to S\$1.4 billion. By 2000 turnover had climbed to S\$1.9 billion. Unfortunately, in line with a number of other countries in the region, by 2004 the trend was in reverse - a 26% decline seeing revenues of just S\$1.4 billion.

Allan says that the sustained effort of the Singapore Turf Club has succeeded in improving totalisator turnover. "Also, the recent Government drop in betting tax ensures healthier dividend pay outs and this has suppressed illegal bookmakers from raising their ugly heads."

The Club has adopted other initiatives to boost turnover:

- By investing S\$300million to boost the industry at the same time that racing went live on cable in July.
- Ensuring punters will gain more by increasing the dividend payout (rebate of between 3-5%).
- Mobile phones are now allowed on course; and
- By increasing starters rebates for owners, trainers, and jockeys.

The link between Singapore and Australia is an established one. In a highly urbanized country with no local breeding industry, Singapore has been reliant on imports to populate its thoroughbred ranks. The first horses to arrive in Singapore came from Java and China. Australia sent its first thoroughbred in the 1880's. Approximately 900 Singapore-based horse owners are nowadays registered with the MRA. However, like certain other countries in the region (Macau for example, and

now China), ownership is not restricted to those who are resident in the country. There is also no cap on the number of horses that an individual can own. Today's stables at Kranji can accommodate 1,200 horses and trainers have use of seven training tracks. There are currently 22 trainers in Singapore of whom 6 are Australian (including the well credentialed Donald Baertschiger and John Meagher). There are also a number of Australian jockeys: Matt Pumpa, John Powell, and new faces Aaron Spiteri and Stephen Maskiell. Visiting riders have included Glen Boss, Steven King, Danny Nikolic, and Lenny Beasley.

Allan states "The clearance for expatriates to be engaged in the stables has been a positive on the quality of local racing. Previously, racing was restricted to mainly Javanese immigrants who were good but now with the exposure to foreign expertise the handling and care of horses in Singapore has improved".

In addition to the trainers and jockeys, the horses arriving from Australia have played a significant role in the evolution of the Industry. Two of the most successful horses in Singapore's history were bred in Australia: Fischer - whose multiple victories include winning the Silver Cup, Sultan Gold Vase, Penang Sprint Trophy, and Selangor Gold Cup (three times); and Smart Bet - whose wins included the Orchid Cup, Chairman's Trophy (twice), Kranji Mile, Singapore Gold Cup, Singapore Derby and Raffles Cup. In fact, of the top seven horses in Singapore's history, five were bred in the Southern Hemisphere. Mummify also went across from Australia and won the Singapore Airlines International Cup (Int-Group 1) in a thrilling finish in 2005. In 2002, another three-year-old from Australia, North Boy won the Singapore Airlines KrisFlyer Sprint (Int-Group 3) in course record time of 1 min 9 secs (Toledo running third in 2001).

Other noteworthy horses in Singapore with the AUS suffix (past and present) include Recast, Superior Star, Mayo's Music, Hulk, Ninetyfive Emperor, Really Good, Distinctive Choice, Lead to Victory, Lord of the Pines, Sloane Street, Strategic Prince, and Wyndam Glory.

Allan agrees that Australian horses have performed extremely well in this part of the world. "The Australian thoroughbred features prominently in the race horse population because they are tough and sound. From birth they are exposed to sunshine all year round and do not have to endure severe winters as those born in the Northern Hemisphere. Also they are trained and raced on circular tracks, similar to Singapore".

Cost is also an important factor and it has continued to make the Australian sales attractive to Singapore buyers. "The air freight is a lot cheaper from Australia than it is from New Zealand, Europe, and the USA," reports Chris Pearson, director of Instone Air Services. "The US in particular is considerably more expensive and it's a critical factor. A lot of people forget that the bulk of Asia doesn't have the same amount of money to spend as say those in Hong Kong. Yes it's the quality of the horse but also the cost of getting them there. The purchase price of a horse and the freight costs from Australia give us a distinct advantage over the rest of the world."

Allan agrees "Australian horses are usually cheaper to purchase and the cost of transport to Singapore is about 60% the cost of importing a horse from the northern hemisphere".

Entrenching the relationship between the countries, Magic Millions has also been involved in local initiatives such as sponsoring Singapore racing since the early 1990's when the AUD\$1million Argyle Diamonds Singapore Magic Millions Classic carried its name. The STC also recently announced that from 1 November 2005 they will simulcast 37 races from Western Australian Turf Club (WATC). Chairman of Perth Racing, Ted van Heemst commented: "Perth Racing has long recognised that our future is intrinsically linked to our time zone, and to strengthen our links with the STC which has established itself as an international force in the world of thoroughbred racing, is an exciting outcome for our Club. The aim is to increase crowd size and betting turnover".

"Singapore horse racing is 'clean' and provides entertainment for those who love a wager," concludes Allan. "Racing here has also gone International with the S\$3 million SIA Cup. Along these lines and with tight controls Singapore racing will emerge very successful and should enter a new 'golden era'."

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