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Working in the Equestrian Industry Overseas: Hong Kong, Part 2

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Focus: The Management of the Ex-Race Horse

Horse racing is collectively also known as “The Sport of Kings”. Comparable to any sport and athlete, nearly all the rehabilitation work of the ex-race horses are as equally applicable and draw close parallels to any horse that may be in need of either a change of career or when re-entering their work after a period of rest for whatever reason.

Racehorse rehabilitation is not a new idea; there are many examples of ex-race horses that have gone on to lead fulfilling second and third careers. However the evolving development and demand for cross breeds as riding and competition horses, coupled with the past escalation in production and the recent economic crisis means that there are increasing numbers of ex-racehorses needing a system to care for them at this time.

In Hong Kong, more than just a few retired race horses go on to work successfully in riding schools, working from the total novice rider, or the happy hacker, up to aspiring competitors, even internationally. Initially there is a period of “quiet time” and re orientation once they have come off the track, at a different venue from where they raced and importantly, their abilities are correctly assessed for appropriate rehoming, before they move on. These roles can be pretty diverse, and also include going to China to equestrian facilities for duties in individual and team competitions, police display, ceremonial work and the modern pentathlon as examples. In other countries they may go into polo and endurance racing as well.

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Out of the 29 horses that I managed in Hong Kong, 20 of them were ex race horses and each one was a key player within our riding club with duties varying from lunge lessons for the complete beginner, to the weekly rider with others being taken on by livery holders and competing from clear round jumping up to CIC1* eventing. Others went on to compete overseas with both young and seniors riders up to 1.45 show jumping, and 4* eventing. Competitive pure dressage above PSG in today's climate would in all likelihood be a big ask, only because of the type of horses they would be competing against and not to do with their ability to train to GP level even.

Management:

Feeding:

As with all of the horses and ponies, we had to import all of our feeds into Hong Kong as well. Our concentrates came from Europe in cube form, as it has a longer shelf life than a mix and the hay came from America. Research has shown that race horses (amongst many others), in particular are prone to gastric ulcers and so bearing this in mind we sought a feed that was low in starch, high in fibre and oil – we also fed soya bean oil and sugar beet, as well as electrolytes on a daily basis from around March to December depending on the temperature of the weather. During the stage of leaving the race track to working productively in another career can take up to 6 - 18 months for the muscles to slowly change “jobs” as well and it is paramount that the horse is allowed to work through this time physically and psychologically in his or her own time.

It's my experience that it's during this cross over stage where misinterpretation of the thoroughbreds' personalities, temperament and abilities can be misread. However, they nearly always have a warm and friendly personality to woo unsuspecting owners under their spell and is very often their life saviour! It's my belief that it's the correct management keeps them

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manageable and the ability to be able to reduce that adrenaline kicking in!!

Heat and Humidity

In Malaysia, the temperatures fluctuate by around 4-6 degrees throughout the whole year although the humidity does vary and there is a strong rainy season to contend with too. The seasons in Hong Kong loosely follow the UK seasons with the winter months averaging around 8-13 degrees Celsius, and in the summer months temperatures can soar up to the high 30's and rarely drop below 25 Celsius. However, it's more of a problem dealing with the humidity which sets in around April and hangs about until usually October, November time and can feel extremely oppressive.

All of the horses in racing are stabled in air conditioned environments although our centre had large industrial fans instead in each stable working 24/7 for around two thirds of the year. This also helps control the mosquitoes and flies too – but not all the time. Although the underlying cause has not yet been determined, some horses in these environments suffer with Equine Anhidrosis or Dry Coat; a disease in which a horse is unable to sweat in response to temperature extremes. So trying to prepare horses for say, the cross country for a CIC1* event with speeds of 520 mpm over a 3,200 meter cross country course is particularly challenging, whilst holding back the wrath of heat stroke and so on.

You can imagine why the teams were worried during the 2008 Olympics in August and that's without mentioning the typhoons which are renowned to pass by at the same time! Luckily during the x/c phase of the Olympics there was a soft rain which helped to keep things a tad cooler. One of the ways in which heat stroke was held off for horses immediately after work, in all disciplines, was

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by being washed down with ice and water which, and herein lies the main key, had to be scraped off instantly and then reapplied until their body and core temperatures were within reasonable limits.

By way of another example, horses imported from some parts of Australia to Hong Kong had to be regularly clipped during the summer as “back home” those months were their winter! So, it can be seen that the challenges of working overseas are a continual learning curve!

Shoeing and Veterinary

The shoeing and veterinary side in Hong Kong for all of the horses whether in racing or retired, is taken care of by the HK Jockey Club and is second to none especially with regard to their facilities and professional system in practice. Generally, although not always, horses retire from racing through under-performing or an injury of some sort – and this is a fundamental part of taking on one of these horses and then striving relentlessly in order to keep them sound. As with any sport injury the horse should be medically deemed fit for work by a vet before embarking on a lot of time, effort, patience, not to mention the financial and emotional investment that’s involved.

It is my experience, that this can be greatly enhanced predominantly through correct and sound training practices and riding techniques whilst supported by ancillary professionals such as vets, farriers, osteopaths, physiotherapists, masseurs, nutritionists and so on, as well as supporting diagnostic techniques such as thermography, scanning etc. It has to be said that realistically, sometimes, even with every box ticked that is humanly possible, not all rehabilitation will result in a sound horse. But that’s all horses for courses and not just the ex-race horses.

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Relaxation

Although I struggle with this concept personally, it has to be said that many thoroughbreds, contrary to popular belief, survive very well living out all year round! However we have seen and heard especially recently, of horses being abandoned and so it is extremely important that they are maintained on a daily basis even though psychologically, they may prefer to live outside. Says she whose horse during Christmas was tucked up in his cosy stable with banks up to his elbows, 2 under rugs, an over rug and hood!... well he has only just arrived from that heat and humidity we were talking about before.

As with us humans though, relaxation also comes with variation. And so next month I will look at the various training systems that I use for horses to implement, balance and dovetail physiological and psychological aspects, for rehabilitation and maintenance on a long term bases during training, for whatever career they started out from and for whatever they will go on to.