

On the Mark: U.S. Thoroughbreds Impress Middle Eastern Buyers

By Ronald Verdonk

Consider it a homecoming of sorts: in 2000 alone, the United Arab Emirates (UAE) imported \$80 million worth of horses from the United States. According to UAE government data, 240 U.S. horses were bought.

That's not bad considering that the Middle East is widely considered to be the birthplace of the Arabian breed. This breed dates from roughly 2500 B.C.—somewhere in the Fertile Crescent, the region that is now Syria, Iraq, Iran and part of the Arabian Peninsula.

A Market Made for Exporting

"The UAE and the Middle East in general are import-dependent when it comes to agriculture," says Hovaguim Kizirian, an FAS senior agricultural marketing specialist studying the thoroughbred fever gripping the UAE. "Thoroughbred horses happen to be the crown jewels of U.S. agricultural exports."

And what was on the shopping list of UAE buyers?

- Thoroughbreds in training: colts and fillies 18 to 21 months of age, though a smaller group of older horses—30 to 33 months of age—were imported for winter training.
- Thoroughbred mares imported for breeding purposes, ranging in age from 4 to 12 years.
- Pure-bred Arabians from 3 to 5 years old, imported for racing.
- Seasoned racers, ranging in age from 4 to 10 years, for long-distance events.

Royal Support for U.S. Breeds

One reason importers in the UAE know and appreciate U.S. racehorses is that the country's leadership has seen first-hand what U.S. thoroughbreds can do.

Dubai ruler Sheikh Maktoum bin Rashid Al Maktoum, Deputy Ruler Sheikh Hamdan bin Rashid Al Maktoum and Dubai Crown Prince Sheikh Mohamed bin Rashid Al Maktoum own large, state-of-the-art horse farms in Kentucky, in addition to several others in the United Kingdom (U.K.). They train and race, and have been doing so since the 1970s.

QUICK, NAME THE MOST VALUABLE U.S. AGRICULTURAL EXPORT TO THE UAE! NOT LEATHER, NOT SNACKS. DID SOMEONE SAY THOROUGHBREDS?

There is another reason why U.S. horses are gaining popularity in the UAE, a factor that motivates buyers more than any other: the crown jewels of American horse racing, the three races that make up the Triple Crown.

The allure of capturing the Kentucky Derby, U.S. horse racing's most prestigious title, has propelled the Al Maktoum family and others in the UAE, as well as the greater Arabian Gulf region, to invest heavily in U.S. thoroughbreds.

This year in fact, Express Tour, the entry of the UAE ruling family's premier stable, placed fifth at Churchill Downs.



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Point Given, the winner of the 2001 Preakness and Belmont Stakes, is owned by Prince Ahmed bin Salman of Saudi Arabia.

Aspirations of a Kentucky Derby victory—or even a Triple Crown—have spurred purchases of U.S. racehorses from just \$1 million in 1997 to the \$80 million registered in 2000.

What Are the Long-Run Odds?

The reputation of U.S. thoroughbreds and the status of U.S. competitions should cause this market to grow. The United States still has to outpace Europe, though. The UAE imported 331 horses from the U.K. in 2001, and 318 from France.

For the foreseeable future, given its nascent agricultural economy, the UAE will be dependent on imported horses, feed and other inputs. Hopefully, U.S. suppliers will be even more responsive in answering the bell! ■

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