



Jockeys compete at the King Abdulaziz Racetrack

Saudi passion parades at city track

Riyadh

Horses round the track in the soft light of an afternoon sun as Riyadh's "best kept secret", the King Abdulaziz Racetrack, begins another weekend of action.

The horses of Saudis have been major players at the world's biggest racing spectacles, from Royal Ascot to Longchamp and Melbourne.

On home turf, Friday afternoon racing in the Saudi capital is a more low-key affair.

Betting is banned and the buzz is somewhat muted early in the season, but race fans still

crowd the rails for a glimpse of the passing thoroughbreds.

The modern facility surrounded by greenery on the edge of Riyadh offers respite from the highways and urban sprawl of a city carved out of the desert.

"Unfortunately, it's the best kept secret," says track manager Robert Turman, who moved to Saudi Arabia after retiring from the racing business in the United States.

"We would love to have more people here because it's an amazing night out for

entertainment," he says.

"Their goal here is really to achieve international standards and they're really doing a great job." Horse racing is one of the few diversions in Saudi Arabia. Professional sport is otherwise limited to football, with women not allowed inside stadiums.

But such practices are not rigidly in force everywhere.

At the track, men and women sit together in the open grandstand, where a sparse Friday crowd of dozens has gathered for a 10-race card.

Single men get in free and families pay only 10 riyals (\$2.67), a bargain in an economy whose collapsed oil revenues have led to widespread cutbacks.

"This is a beautiful place to be" in a city that otherwise lacks excitement or charm, says Ben van der Klift, a Dutch financial director working in the kingdom.

Trackside picnic

"And if you bring your friends, you can have lunch... watch and have some fun," says the 57-year-old, who with neighbours has set up a picnic on tables between the grandstand and the track.

For a more high-brow atmosphere, a glassed-in clubhouse allows horse owners and royals to watch races in cinema-style seats while being served traditional Arabic coffee.

Among the guests is Prince Miteb bin Abdullah whose father, the late king Abdullah, kept his own horses and founded

the Equestrian Club of Riyadh more than 50 years ago.

After he assumed the throne in 2005, the king ordered the construction of the current facility, which was named after the founder of modern Saudi Arabia, the club's website says.

Horses have been central to Saudi life for centuries and the kingdom is famed for its strong desert-bred Arabians -- from which the thoroughbreds are descended.

Racing is in the blood of Saudis like Faris al-Thiyabe, 28, whose fondness for horses has translated into a job at the track.

Thiyabe announces the races in English as they are replayed on a giant screen near the finish line, just moments after the live race call in Arabic ends with congratulations to the winner.

"My father had a stable," he says, explaining how he inherited his passion for horses.

Standing in the concourse as mounted jockeys parade before the next race, the lively Thiyabe boasts that he is "the youngest race caller in the world".

Later, on a high floor inside the clubhouse, he holds a racing guide in one hand and shouts into his headset as the fourth race reaches a climax.

"Indelible Ink on the outside. Indelible Ink is trying to make it. And Indelible Ink... wins it with a great performance. What a photo finish on the last stages!" Between races, as Thiyabe catches his breath, water tankers spray the track's red-brown soil and tractors drag rakes to ready it for the next contest.

'Best sand' in world

"This is a first-class facility," says Turman.

"The track itself is beautiful. The racing surface is the best that I've ever worked with. It really has the best sand in the world, as you can imagine."

Most of the horses are Saudi-bred.

Their owners and trainers "are from all walks of life, from princes to a normal guy with a family that's got a few horses," Turman says.

One owner, Mamdouh Alarafshah, has spent the afternoon in the quiet clubhouse.

His horse Alahmaaj was supposed to run in the day's first race -- a 1,200-metre event with a total purse of 70,000 riyals put up by a local petrochemicals firm -- but was scratched last minute.

Alarafshah says he hopes the horse will "be getting better" soon, without adding why he was pulled from the race.

Although there is no betting, race fans can make online picks for winners prior to the opening

bell each race day. Only a few stand a chance at prizes, which range between 3,000 and 10,000 riyals.

Riyadh's race season builds up towards the King Abdulaziz Cup, a Group One event over 1,600 metres with a purse of 600,000 riyals in late February.

Some trainers also come from France, the United States or Britain, while jockeys include Saudis and foreigners.

"It's an opportunity for them to come and build up some wins and some experience" in races with a large field of typically 18 horses, Turman says.

In the absence of gambling, which boosts incomes in American and European racing, Turman says the Saudi sport is fuelled by something more fundamental.

"That's where the passion for the horse racing really comes in," he says, as jockeys ride their mounts towards the starting gate for another race in a long Saudi tradition of horsemanship. (AFP)



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