

Kentucky Equine Research and Its Team Members Play Important Role in Formulating Nutrition Programs for Olympic Equine Athletes

BY ROBIN STANBACK

Over 300 horses from 35 countries will converge upon Sydney, Australia in early August to prepare to meet the challenge of Olympic competition. They will perform in three separate disciplines, dressage, show jumping and three-day eventing. Each horse has a distinctive role to fill for their owners, riders and home countries and each is an individual with very specific needs. First and foremost, each one of these athletes requires a nutritional program that will fuel its engine. Helping to coordinate the feeding program for this large number of individual horses from every corner of the globe is a company uniquely capable of meeting the challenge. Kentucky Equine Research (KER), an international equine nutrition company with years of experience providing globe trotting equine athletes with the feeds they need to succeed, is also a veteran of the Olympic challenge having supplied the feeds for the 1996 Summer Olympic Games in Atlanta, Georgia.

KER President Dr. Joe Pagan stated, "For many of these athletes this is a chance of a lifetime. Some of these riders and their support staffs have worked for years to make it to this point. It is vitally important for these horses to be kept at their peak. Keeping their nutritional programs as similar as possible to

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that which they receive at home is essential. We learned just how essential in Atlanta, and we have taken that experience and built upon it to assist the organizers and feed suppliers in Sydney."

Dr. Pagan and the international staff he has gathered at KER are accustomed to facing quarantine stipulations and unique feeding needs. For many years they have been providing world-class racehorses, world champion endurance horses, breeding stallions serving dual hemisphere duty and many others with consistent feeding programs that help to

fuel their success. The company's staff of equine nutritionists and veterinarians is complemented by Team Members, regionally and nationally respected feed manufacturers, that span the globe. Working together, they can provide a consistency of quality in the feeds that are provided to the horses and, when necessary because of quarantine or availability issues, help transition a horse onto a different feed than that to which it is accustomed.

This experience was of great value to the horses competing in Atlanta. KER was responsible for the formulation, manufacture and distribution of the horse feed to the 230 equine athletes representing 27 different countries. The concerns in Atlanta involved protecting the athletes from the spread of piroplasmiasis, a contagious protozoal disease that has been eradicated in the United States but is still a concern in Europe and South America. This concern meant that KER had to import a range of hays including timothy, alfalfa, and a mixture of orchard grass and alfalfa from the Pacific northwest states of Washington and Idaho to be certain hays were free of ticks, one of the main vectors of the disease.

Another issue in Atlanta was the heat. Feeds formulated especially for the Olympic horses had to be kept in refrigerated trailers to keep them fresh. Because of the heat, many of the athletes shipped into the Olympic venue early so that their horses would have time to acclimate to the environment. This meant that a very large amount of feed, hay and bedding had to be on-site and kept fresh for the horses.

As many of the horses were coming from climates more temperate than Atlanta's, horsemen and veterinarians were especially worried about the horses losing key electrolytes in sweat. KER nutritionists worked with a number of research groups from around the world to develop a special formula, Summer Games Electrolytes, which would help to replace these essential minerals. Feed formulas were also modified to include higher levels of corn oil. Dr. Pagan explained, "High fat intakes reduce the level of grain intake required to meet energy requirements and also reduce the total heat load placed on the

horse." Also, KER research had determined that chromium supplementation could improve metabolic response to exercise, so many of the feed formulations were enhanced to include additional chromium.

Heat concerns at the 2000 Games will not be as serious a problem but quarantine issues for feeds and horses could be. Dr. Pagan stated, "The key difference between the 1996 Games and the 2000 Games is that the Australian authorities are much more stringent about what can be brought into the country. Because of this careful concern it will be necessary for the horses to be fed feeds and hays grown in Australia. I'd like to point out that Australian feeds have some of the best ingredients in the world and feed manufacturers in that country feed some of the top equine athletes in the world, so quality is certainly not an issue."

What does become an issue for the world-class equine athletes that will be gathering at Sydney's Horsley Park is a change in the types of feeds to which they are accustomed. While most of the feed ingredients that make up a quality feed will be available, certain ingredients, such as beet pulp, are not. Horses that are accustomed to having this in their feed will need to be weaned off of it. In this respect, KER is uniquely positioned to be the technical liaison between the feed manufacturers in Australia and Salmon River, a Perth, Australia company that has been tapped to be the official feed and bedding vendor for the Games. Dr. Pagan stated, "We have two distinct advantages to offer the athletes. One is that we know what these teams need and expect. From our experience in Atlanta and from feeding horses that travel regularly around the world to compete, we understand the unique needs of these athletes and can accommodate them. The second advantage is that the athletes know us and have a greater comfort level with our involvement."

An example of the partnership between KER and equine athletes is the connection between KER Team Member Pennfield Feeds and David and Karen O'Connor. The O'Connors were members of the silver medal-winning 1996 United States Three-Day Event Team. They very successfully compete on an international basis every year. Both have been chosen to be on the short list for the 2000 United States Olympic Three-Day Event Team and their horses are currently quarantined with the other short-listed equine athletes at Jim and Janet Richards' Foxhall Farm in Newnan, Georgia.

Pennfield Feeds is a sponsor of the O'Connors' horses and has been their feed supplier for some time. Mathew Butler of Pennfield Feeds stated, "We are very well aware of how important the consistency and quality of the feeds are to these athletes. We knew the quarantine situation in Australia would require us to modify their diet and we wanted our athletes to be acclimated nutritionally to the best of our ability. Dr. Kathleen Crandell, KER's East Coast nutrition-

ist, traveled to Australia and met with the people at Hy Gain Feeds, the KER Team Member in Officer, Victoria who will be one of the feed suppliers to Salmon River. Dr. Crandell and Dr. Peter Huntington, Director of Nutrition for KER Australasia, worked with the people at Hy Gain to develop a feeding program for these horses that would be as similar as possible to what they are currently receiving. Working with the nutritionists in Australia and at KER's home office in Versailles, Kentucky, a transition diet was developed to help the horses make the switch. We named the diet Olympic Gold and it is a combination of 10% protein, 6% fat, and 9% fiber, and has a low pellet to grain ratio with flaked grain. It was important to us to create a feed that had a similar mounding quality to it so that the horses would not be put off their feed by a change in texture."

Mr. Butler and the staff at Pennfield also worked with Don Westbrook at Mid Atlantic Hay to be certain the proper bedding and hay would be provided to the athletes during their quarantine period in Georgia. Mr. Butler explained, "Quarantine restrictions are very specific, and it is quite helpful to be able to work out the transportation of feeds and beddings so that everything is on one truck going into the quarantine area. Mr. Westbrook and his staff were wonderful in helping us to locate the highest quality timothy hay and the cleanest straw and other bedding material for these horses. The transition for our team will be as seamless as possible."

Every athlete making the trip to Australia will have the KER advantage as the company has provided a website specifically for the use of equestrian federations to help in developing their own feeding strategies. Dr. Pagan stated, "Through the miracle of the World Wide Web, we are able to put together the nutritional information, including photographs of the feeds and hays that will be available, and share this with everyone. We want every athlete to come to the Games with every possible advantage we can give them."

Dr. Pagan and a staff of KER and Team Member volunteers will be on hand to assist Salmon River and all the Olympic athletes when they arrive at the venue. Rebecca Savage, an employee of Pennfield Feeds, is also an assistant to Abigail Lufkin, one of the riders short-listed for the United States Three-Day Event Team. She will be there along with Gwen Overtom, an employee of Akey Corporation, a company closely associated with KER, and Catherine Hudson, a KER intern from England. Their goal is to be available to help answer questions and provide assistance to the riders and their horses.

KER's continuing involvement with the Olympic Games is something of which Dr. Pagan is very proud. "It is certainly an honor to have a hand in helping athletes like these. We are looking forward to being there in Sydney and hope to also have an active role in assisting the athletes that travel to Greece in 2004." 