

n the Wings of Progress:

Advances Transform Equine Air Travel

BY ROBIN STANBACK

Recent medical and technological advances have revolutionized equine air transport from an occasionally dangerous and often lengthy process into a modern-day magic carpet ride. This transformation has had a profound impact on many facets of the horse world, but perhaps none so much as that on the Thoroughbred industry, which has seen an increase in truly international competitions as well as the movement of valuable breeding animals from one hemisphere to another.

Larger airplanes capable of flying longer distances in less time, safer traveling compartments, and more effective tranquilizers have all played a part in the metamorphosis of a relatively young industry. The information gleaned from recent research on traveling conditions for horses has also led to changes that have provided safer handling methods to help horses arrive at their destinations in a healthier condition.

Quentin Wallace, the founder and chairman of International Racehorse Transport (IRT), pioneered the practice of flying horses into Australia in the early 1970s. His business has grown exponentially to the point that, today, IRT is known for its ability to regularly move horses around the globe. The company was tapped by the Sydney Olympic Organizing Committee to coordinate the transportation of all the equine athletes to the Summer Games in 2000. This job represented the largest

peacetime movement of horses into and out of Australia. IRT has been a boon to breeding operations around the world and anticipates moving over 80 stallions to Australia and New Zealand this year for the Southern Hemisphere breeding season.

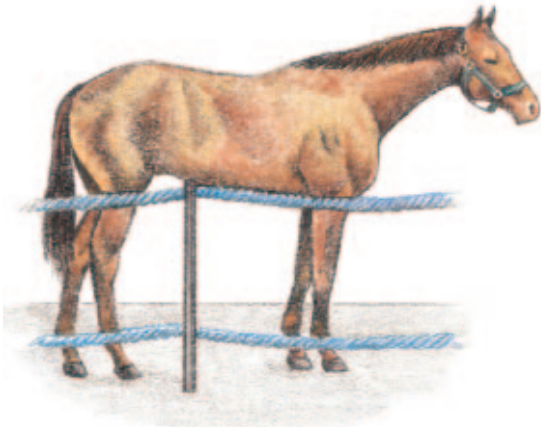
Mr. Wallace has definitely seen the impact the changes and innovations have had upon his business. He explained, "When IRT first began shipping horses, owners would have to wait for a full load to be able to ship their animals. Today, we have regularly scheduled flights that can hold up to 87 horses in one plane. Also, the earlier flights took considerably longer than they do today. The planes were smaller and had to stop for



Padded containers that can hold up to three horses in individual stalls are first loaded, and then carefully lifted onto the plane. Once inside, they are rolled into place and secured for the duration of the flight.

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refueling. In the past, horses could be on the plane for 50 hours or longer. Today, Boeing 747 planes cut travel time. It is possible for a horse being transported from Europe to Australia to spend no more than 36 hours in total travel time from stable to stable. This in itself is considerably better for the animals."

While some companies still have planes that utilize ramps and portable stalls, most have made use of container compartments to safeguard the horses during the flight and to make loading and unloading the plane significantly easier. The containers are made of three padded stalls with 28-inch stall fronts. Horses can be cross-tied, but Mr. Wallace stated, "Most of the time the horses are tied on one side so that they can move a little bit easier to get to their hay nets. It is also possible for their handlers to drop

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a bar on the stall front that allows the horses to put their heads down from time to time. Research has shown that if horses can do this they can clear out their sinuses better and perhaps lessen the chance of developing an upper respiratory problem."

Safety issues have become an even greater concern for every airborne passenger since the tragedy of September 11, 2001, and horses are no exception. At one time insurance policies that covered the life and usefulness of an animal automatically applied to horses in transit. Many policies now have an extra charge for horses that are flown to their destinations. Mr. Wallace feels that liability concerns have also added to the expense of insuring an equine passenger.

One way IRT protects its passengers is to have every horse travel with experienced handlers and veterinarians. One recent flight transported a trio of Kentucky Derby winners—Thunder Gulch, Real Quiet, and Fusaichi Pegasus—from their homes in the United States to breeding shed duties in Australia. As might be expected with such precious cargo, extra precautions were taken. Among them were veterinarians Des Leadon of Ireland, one of the world's leading researchers on equine travel stress, and Fairfield Bain, a partner in the Lexington, Kentucky-based veterinary firm Hagyard-Davidson-McGee. Mr. Wallace explained, "Most of the breeding operations that transport horses from the Northern to the Southern Hemisphere have a good idea of which horses will have the right tem-

perament to make the trip and to do the job required of them. Danehill, one of the most successful dual-hemisphere breeding stallions, is a good example. That horse made the shuttle trip every year from 1990 until this year, when he was given a break from the schedule, and has always been an exemplary passenger. He is very, very quiet. Still, we work diligently to be prepared to meet any problems the horses might have. As a result, IRT has never failed to deliver or return a horse that has been placed in its care."

Mr. Wallace said that the vast majority of horses he has transported have not needed chemical persuasion to travel quietly, but "sometimes a horse will become upset. For these horses, the proper tranquilizer given at the appropriate time can make all the difference." Dr. Bain agreed, saying, "We occasionally need to sedate stallions with Dormosedan (detomidine), usually only when they get anxious during the long loading process. Once airborne, they rarely have much of a problem. The highest risk for injury is on landing where they may get caught off balance, but injuries have fortunately been minor and rare."

Human and equine passengers share a common problem on long flights. Dr. Bain explained, "Horses have hay nets and are watered as frequently as possible to avoid severe dehydration. Minor dehydration occurs as it does in human passengers (you may have experienced the flight attendants filling your water glass often on long trips) but does not seem to cause any clinical problem. In general, most of these stallions are seasoned travelers and make the trip better than the humans do."

Peter O'Brien, the farm manager for Coolmore Australia, is responsible for the health and welfare of some of the world's most valuable equine frequent fliers such as Danehill, Fusaichi Pegasus, and Giant's Causeway when they are in residence at the farm in Australia. Mr. O'Brien agreed that a good temperament is essential for a stallion to be a successful candidate for their breeding program, but he added, "The key to the success we have had with our dual-hemisphere stallions is IRT. Its expertise, attention to detail, and excellent staff allows us to move our horses with confidence."

The lion's share of attention seems to fall upon the stallions that shuttle between hemispheres, but they are not the only horses that make the journey. Often it is the mares that visit the stallion's home breeding shed. Mr. Wallace indicated that the mares are handled in much the same fashion as their male counterparts. He said, "The main goal is to keep the horses safe and to get them to their destinations as quickly as possible." Today's larger and faster airplanes, experienced ground and flight crews, and the careful attention to detail paid by everyone associated with the horses have opened the doors to global opportunities for horsemen. ○○