

Racing in Chile

by Jane Henning

An invitation to visit Chile as a guest to attend 'El Ensayo', the premier race in Chile, is hard to pass up. Add the opportunity to be shown around some of the major stud farms and racing stables of the country by a pair of charming Chilean gentlemen and it is impossible for me to refuse.

Chile, which clings to the west coast of South America, is headed by the city of Santiago. On the same latitude as Sydney, the climate and consequently the plant life of Santiago is similar. Like Sydney too, Santiago is a mixture of old and modern architecture, however the similarities end there - you need only raise your eyes above street level to be hit with the snow capped majesty of the Andes Mountains.

Like most of the people of South America, Chileans love horse racing. Santiago, a city of 5.5 million, boasts two racetracks, a 'TAB' type network called Tele Trak and a phone betting system called FonoTrak. Club Hipico is a turf course run clockwise, while Hipodromo Chile is run anticlockwise on dirt.

Club Hipico is the venue for El Ensayo - "the test" - a set weight race for 3 year olds over 2400 metres, which is the circumference of this expansive track. This is roughly 180 metres more than Randwick's course proper, the largest track in New South Wales. The course is overlooked by an imposing stone grandstand which was built over 150 years ago. Surrounded by a high wall and iron gates and with fountains and statues adorning the pebbled grounds, the stand is reminiscent of a European castle, its ivy clad entry opening into a magnificent marble hall and timber paneled rooms.

Like many of our tracks, it is bordered on one side by training stables. These open directly onto a long, straight, tree lined sand track which is used exclusively for walking horses. There, after morning trackwork (which goes on until about 11am on the inner sand track) each horse is walked by its rider for up to an hour. This ritual is repeated in the afternoons, giving the horses at least two hours of daily activity and social interaction. The horses seem to enjoy this time and look exceptionally fit and relaxed. Many of the male horses remain entire and socialise perfectly well with the other horses.

Except when doing fast work, the horses are ridden 'bareback' in a saddle cloth and belly band only. The riders, rather than carrying whips, carry scarf-type cloths which, at the walk, they are constantly flipping on either side of the horse. Whether this is for swatting flies (of which I saw very few) or pacifying the horses, is not clear.

The population of racehorses in Santiago is about 2,000 and they tend to race them more frequently than our average of once a fortnight.

Six race meetings are held monthly at both tracks, with Friday (Club Hipico) and Saturday (Hipodromo Chile) being the main meetings. They are marathon affairs. On El Ensayo day, which was held at the end of October, there were 20 races commencing at 2.30pm and finishing at 10.50 pm under lights. In the festive tradition of the Spanish influences of Chile, the racehorses are often decorated with mane plaits intertwined with brightly coloured ribbon.

An interesting inclusion to the normal race day information about starters is their weight. The race book lists the horses' weights on their last four previous starts and the runners' weights on the day are posted on an in-field board.

Living in a country which broadcasts several meetings concurrently a day, we are used to our races generally starting on time. With no competition for airtime however, races in Chile can start up to half an hour late without inciting comment! Even the race book puts the disclaimer '(aprox)' after the start time for each race.

This year's El Ensayo held particular interest for me as it included a son of Arrowfield's new import, the stallion Hussonet. The leading sire in Chile, Hussonet's sale to Australia is a huge loss to their breeding industry. He is however a big gain for us, especially as he has worked very well with a broodmare sire in Chile whose pedigree is genetically similar to Danehill's!

Hussonet's son Homenage, a neat chestnut like his sire, certainly gave me a run for my money. Coming from a seemingly impossible position at the back of the field when they straightened, he met with closing gaps and after changing his line several times, came right down the outside to miss out by a nose. I'd like to know his sectional!

Hussonet stood at Haras de Pirque, which like our Hunter Valley nurseries, is nestled in the bosom of a famous wine growing region and surrounded by scenic hills. In this case however, the hills are a splinter range of the Andes Mountains. And like an upper class Hunter Valley stud, Haras de Pirque's buildings sit in beautifully manicured gardens surrounded by lush paddocks. Feeling the fresh loss of their star stallion, the proprietors proudly showed me Hussonet's latest foals through to his two year olds in training on their private track. Overlooked by their own state-of-the-art winery, Haras de Pirque is in close proximity to several other commercial studs, including Haras du Jockey, Haras Santa Monica and Haras el Sheik, which is owned by the President of Criadores Fina Sangre de Carrera S.A. (the Chilean thoroughbred breeders association). His wife is a Director and substantial share owner in the race club, Hipodromo Chile, the Chilean race clubs being publicly listed companies.

Knowing a director of Hipodromo Chile was a bonus – Saturday's meeting backing up from El Ensayo was a complete contrast. While Club Hipico is steeped in stately elegance and verdant expanses, Hipodromo Chile is a smaller 1900 metre dirt course served by a workmanlike grandstand built in the 1970's. The racing however, is much closer to the stand and consequently quite exciting.

The Director and her husband raced one of Chile's best race mares, Moscona, top filly on the Two Year Old and then the Three Year Old Free Handicap before being named 1989 Chilean Horse of the Year. She was sold and then imported to Australia by Mike Willessee's Trans Media Group in 1990. Three years ago, they decided to buy back a daughter of Moscona to continue her line in Chile and their agent asked me to find one for them. I duly bought a mare named Chile Snippets, who as the name suggests, is a daughter of Snippets. Sending Chile Snippets over was a first, no horse ever having been exported from Australia to Chile before. It is unlikely however, that it will be the last time horses fly this route.

Chile Snippets was in foal to Danzero at the time and I had the pleasure of also being invited to see the cracking two year old colt which has resulted. In training for the start of Chile's two year old racing season in January, he has appropriately been named Chilean Dancer.

Chilean breeders, who commonly use South American bloodlines, also source their bloodstock from the USA. Many of their stallions are from the North and while they admit that they haven't wanted to pay much for their stallions and mares in the past, many are keen to upgrade their stock in order to compete on the international stage. Several of Hussonet's top racehorses (Wild Spirit and Wild Storm and most recently the outstanding colt Host) were bought by astute American trainers such as Bobby Frankel. From her few starts in America to-date, Wild Spirit has won the Grade 1 Ruffian Handicap, immediately putting a bounty on the stock of Hussonet and lending credibility to Chilean form in general. It has whet the Chilean appetite for producing stock which can command high figures. Importing new blood and ensuring they have other stallions to continue to upgrade the small mare band in Chile is the best way of ensuring continuing interest from bigger buyers.

Following the last race at Hipodromo Chile, after which I was rushed to the airport for the 16 hour flight home, I had witnessed 38 races over two days of racing on both turf and dirt. During the other four days of my whirlwind stay, I had visited four stud farms, about eight training facilities, a winery and met many enthusiastic and devoted Thoroughbred owners.

After being initially taken aback by the tradition of being kissed by *everybody*, whether a business acquaintance or social, I found it was a fitting and pleasant symbol of the Chileans' genuine hospitality and festive attitude, so befitting the universal heart of horse racing.