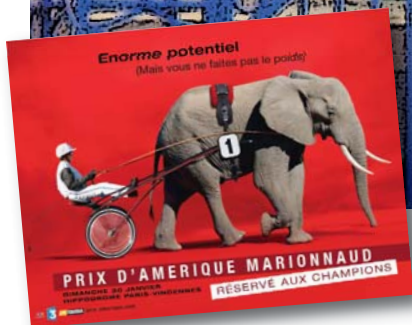
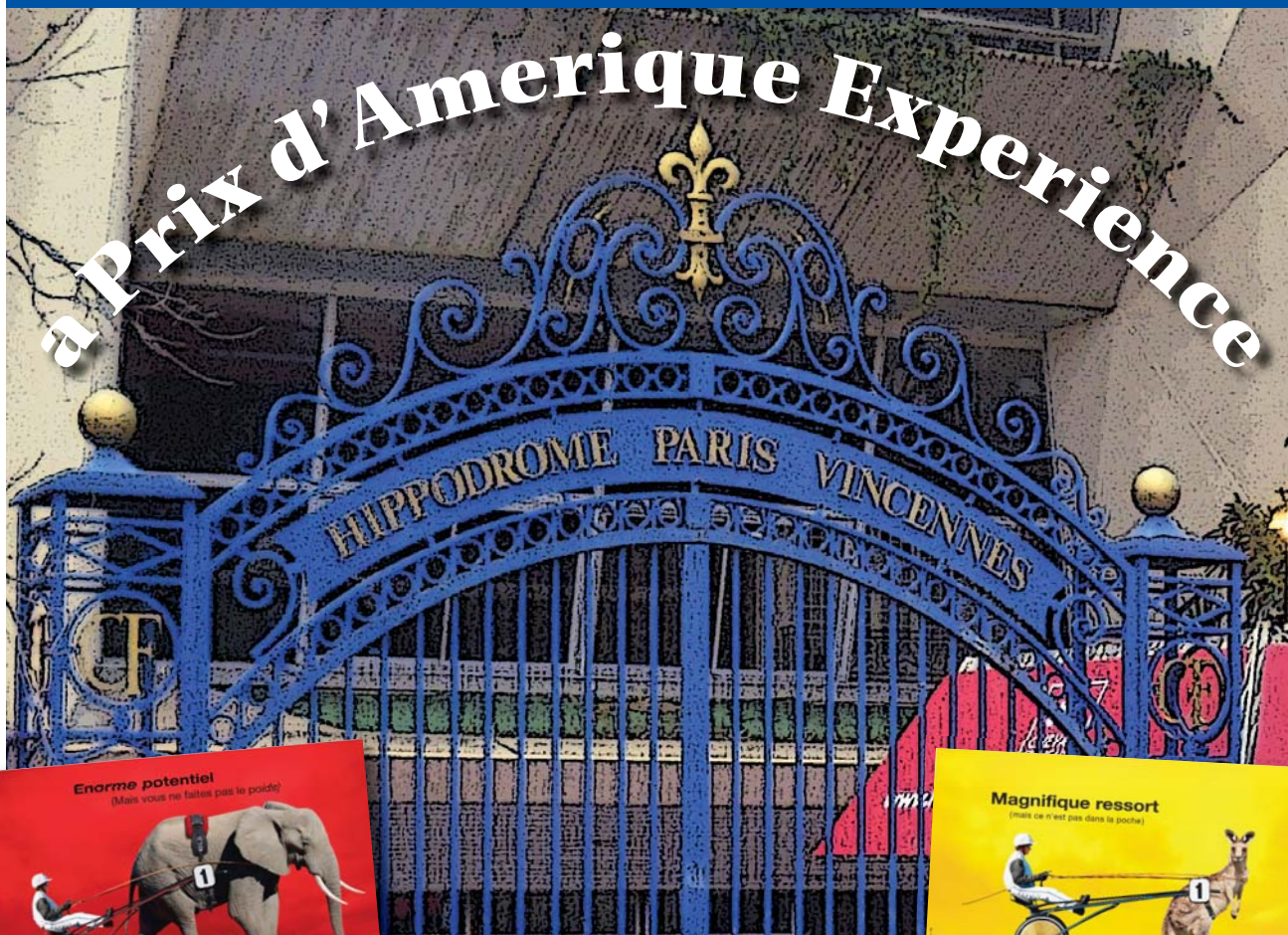


à Prix d'Amérique Experience



By Kimberly Rinker

While MWT covers Thoroughbreds and Quarter Horses, we think readers might be interested in learning of Kim Rinker's experience while attending France's premiere Standardbred race, the Prix d'Amérique Marionnaud in Paris.

On Jan. 30, I had the good fortune to attend the 2011 Prix d'Amérique Marionnaud in Paris. It was the 90th edition of France's most prestigious trotting stake, and is held annually on the last Sunday in January in the City of Lights, sporting a purse of one million Euros (about \$1.4 million).

If you've never seen the Prix d'Amérique or horse racing in France, it's time to schedule a trip. Fans of both Standardbred and Thoroughbred racing will also be delighted to know that *Monte* racing, or the art of racing trotters under saddle is also commonplace, and steeplechase racing is nearly just as popular as traditional flat racing.

The Prix d'Amérique was created in 1920 in honor of the United States' entry into the First World War, and takes place at the Vincennes racetrack, a 42-hectacre venue situ-

ated in the 12th arrondissement of Paris, in the heart of the Bois de Vincennes. The race pits 18 of the world's best trotters at a distance of 2,700 meters (1 & 5/8ths miles).

Amazingly, the Prix d'Amérique was publicized throughout Paris—there were rolling and stagnate billboards throughout the city and suburbs, as well as fliers plastered on newspaper kiosks and on street corners and in television ads. It seemed everywhere you turned, everywhere you looked, from the Left Bank to the base of the Eiffel Tower to the Louvre, there was a poster, flyer or billboard touting the Prix d'Amérique.

That being said, it's no surprise that the French racing industry excels once you understand the attitude of the French government and society toward all racing sectors—trotting, flat and steeplechase.

The System

In France, the equine industry is an integral part of French agriculture and society. Jobs directly affected by the equine industry total over 100,000 and that number is ever-growing. According to French statistics, the equine industry employment rate increased by 7.7% in 2010 over the previous year, with approximately 43,530 breeders and 10,597 owners who have over 150,000 horses in training, with 17,000 races contested annually at over 900 racing meetings. Not bad for a country slightly smaller than the state of Texas.

Although its most prestigious tracks are located in or around Paris, France has 252 racetracks and 7,100 equestrian training facilities dotted throughout the country. Races are regulated in their various disciplines by the French Galop (flat and jumping races) and the by the Society for the Promotion of the French Horse (SECF-trotting), which was established in 1864, and works in tandem with the PMU (the leading horseracing wagering system).

PMU stands for *Pari Mutuel Urbain*. It provides the French racing industry with 80% of its financing, along with a Common Racing Fund which grants subsidies to cover operating expenses to all racing jurisdictions throughout France. This fund benefits all disciplines and helps to sustain all the country's racetracks. The PMU offers customers the opportunity to wager through various outlets—from local coffee houses, to Internet and phone wagering and interactive television. That, in turn, has made horseracing, breeding and wagering a mainstay among the French people on a daily basis.

The PMU's newsagents—small cafes—where you can buy newspapers, tobacco and sweets, and get a good cup of coffee, also offer fans a chance to wager on horseracing. In some of the smaller villages and Paris neighborhoods and suburbs, these *bureaux de presse*, as they are known, are a great hotspot to get the local gossip and a possible inside note on the horses, trainers and jockeys.

Adding to the public persona of the French equestrian industry, are the strict standards to which racing is required to uphold. For instance, the SECF has implemented a stringent anti-medication policy, based on prevention and repression, and is seen as unwavering and uncompromising—which in turn garners respect from the 6.5 million gamblers who wager on French races annually. In fact, the SECF is considered by many within the European racing industry to have the strictest anti-doping standards of any nation, performing pre- and post-race drug tests on all racing events, as well as on qualifying races and workouts at both racetracks and training centers. The SECF is also planning to begin testing at stud farms in the near future. France's strategy has worked: of 15,000 horses tested last year, only 30 had positive tests, and most of those were for medications we view here in the U.S. as therapeutic—not performance enhancing—such as bute and banamine. That infinitesimal



Monte Hippodrome de Vincennes



Deauville Clairefontaine galop



Deauville Clairefontaine obstacle

amount of positives represented 0.2% of the entire race-horse population.

Interestingly enough, while studying the program, I noticed there were no lines for which to gauge a horse's past performance. When I asked one of the locals why this was so, he told me that there was no need for lines, because the horses are deemed the favorite, second favorite, and third favorite based on their earnings, and, on the trainer's assessment of how his horse trained the previous week. Many of the trainers are interviewed briefly before each race, giving a short synopsis of what they think of their horse's chances. For instance, the conditions of a race might be for horses that have not yet earned 300,000 Euros. Therefore, the



Photos compliments of Kimberly Rinker

Ready Cash and Maharajah

horse with 295,000 Euros on his card would be the favorite; the horse with 280,000 Euros in earnings would be the second favorite, and so on, and so on. This system, coupled with the SECF's medication standards and trainer's pre-race interviews, makes for a very healthy betting public.

Wagering

The French wagering is pari-mutuel, and offers similar wagering formats to ours in the United States. Wagers are win (Gagnant), place (varies depending on the size of the field: if the field has seven horses or less, you get paid for first and second; if there are eight or more horses in the field, you win if the horse you picked finishes first, second or third). A "Trio" or trifecta and a "Jumele Place" are also offered. These wagers allow a gambler to pick two horses that can finish in any order, anywhere in top three spots. Larger fields—such as those with 15 to 20 horses typically have a larger, jackpot-type wager, such as a Superfecta.

The Prix d'Amerique

This year, 32,000 people showed up on a chilly (25F degrees) Sunday afternoon to watch 18 trotters go postward in Europe's biggest trotting race. The enthusiastic crowd wagered 2.3 million Euros, a substantial amount, given the weather, on the nine-race card. The greatest amount wagered on this event was in 2006, when 37.9 million Euros were bet. The interesting thing about the Prix d'Amerique crowd was that they didn't dissipate after the featured event, which was the third race on the afternoon card. There were just as many people on the apron grandstand and in the dining room at 5 pm that day, as there had been at noon. These are true horse racing fans!

Unlike traditional sulky races in this country, the Prix d'Amerique doesn't use a starting gate—common with many European races. Horses are assigned post positions

and a handicap. That handicap might be 10, 20 or 30 meters, and horses will circle in a chute prior to the start, which is marked with those handicap distances, and horses cannot start in front of those markers. The starter attempts to bring all the horses in a straight line—in their respective positions—behind their markers at the same time, before he shouts "go." Once he does, it's a mad dash as horses scramble for position.

Prior to the start, it behooves the drivers to make sure their horses are facing in the proper direction, or they will literally get "left at the start." Trotters then travel over a quarter of a mile down the long straightaway, which has a downhill slope to it, before they hit the first turn.

The two favorites this year consisted of a Swedish invader—Maharajah—and France's hope, Ready Cash. Maharajah is truly an international horse, as his pedigree carries mostly American blood, highlighted with a trace of French genetics. That breeding combination has proved to be lethal when it comes to producing Europe's top trotters.

Maharajah's trotting style is often questioned by the stewards, however, because he doesn't possess the smoothest gait in the world. In France, even if a horse stays on stride and doesn't break into a gallop, the judges can disqualify the horse simply because they don't like the way he's trotting on a particular day.

As the race unfolded, Maharajah was closely following the Italian mare Lana de Rio who had grabbed control of the race at the start. When Lana de Rio went off stride suddenly after half a mile, Maharajah inherited the lead while Ready Cash sat patiently outside of him. One mile later, it appeared that Maharajah was going to hold off the indefatigable Ready Cash, but the French trotting sensation dug in, and gamely passed Maharajah, winning by a little over a length, much to the delight of the enthusiastic crowd.

On Feb. 13, Ready Cash and Maharajah met up again at



Prix d'Amerique chariot



Hippodrome de Vincennes restaurant

Vincennes, this time for the start of the 2011 European Grand Circuit. The two clashed in the 400,000 Euros Prix de France, a 2,100 meter event—with Ready Cash once again besting Maharajah. Ready Cash became just the 11th trotter in history to capture both the Prix d'Amerique and the Prix de France in the same year.

In conclusion, this American definitely feels the French do things right when it comes to horse racing. The Prix d'Amerique and the all of the hoopla surrounding the race, including a spectacular pre-race show that featured chariot races, bands and horses of all breeds, is something every horse racing enthusiast should experience at least once. U

If You Go...

Auteuil Racecourse

Auteuil Racecourse is located on the edge of Paris and plays host to the Gras Savoye Grand Steeple-Chase de Paris, held on the last Sunday in May. This steeple-chase is one of the longest of any French races and has 23 obstacles for the horse and rider to negotiate.

Chantilly Racecourse

Chantilly holds two internationally renowned races in June, and the Prix du Jockey Club is one of the largest Group 1 races held in Europe, with colts racing over a mile and a quarter. The second is the Prix de Diane for the best European fillies and is also over a mile and a quarter.

Deauville Racecourse

Deauville-La Touques is one of the leading flat racing venues in France and is a short trip from Paris, located near the sea shore. Situated on 75 hectares, Group 1 races are held in August, during a seven-month race meeting. Deauville's training center accommodates almost 600 horses in August, and is located near yearling sales and stud farms.

Enghien Racecourse

Enghien plays host to trotting and jump races. Enghien hosts the Grand Steeple-Chase d'Enghien in October, and the Prix Léopold d'Orsetti, held in either late October or early November.

Hippodrome de Vincennes

France's premiere trotting track, with two ovals featuring both trotting and Monteracing. Located just outside of Paris on the city's southeast corner. Home to the Prix d'Amerique and other top European contests.

Longchamp Racecourse

Longchamp is located at the heart of the Bois de Boulogne just outside Paris—the flagship for France Galop—and is spread out over 55 hectares. Longchamp holds 16 Group 1 events, plus the prestigious Qatar Prix de l'Arc de Triomphe, held on the first Sunday in October.

Maisons-Laffitte Racecourse

Maisons-Laffitte is the largest racecourse in the Paris area and is located in a



Hippodrome de Vincennes pese

leafy park next to the River Seine. Together with Newmarket Racecourse in the UK, it boasts a 2,000 meter home straight that is the longest in Europe. Maison-Laffite plays host to Group 2 races throughout the year.

Saint-Cloud Racecourse

Saint-Cloud racecourse sits on a hillside overlooking Paris' west side, offering brilliant panoramic views and a spacious area ideal for picnics and relaxation. Flat races include Group 1 events the Prix de l'Arc de Triomphe and the Grand Prix de Saint-Cloud.