

International Race Day

by Jeffrey Wintersteen

A visit to a Polish racetrack is, in some respects, a visit to the home of Arabian racing. In Poland, race fans see Arabians as racehorses, largely because Arabians comprise about 40 percent of the horses on the track. For the most part, these Arabians come from the three state studs. All three-year-olds go to the track for two years, at the end of which time they are evaluated. The great racers will stay at the track and earn money for their home studs; others that have remained sound will be considered for the breeding programs of their home studs.

Perhaps nowhere else in the world are racing Arabians as welcome as at Służewiec track in Warsaw, where the Polish Arabian Summer Festival hosted nine stakes races. On that pleasant summer afternoon, thousands of spectators filled the stands, and festival VIPs bulged the top floor of the clubhouse. All races are on turf and at much longer distances than United States tracks. The Służewiec track measures 2,400 meters or 1.5 miles. Polish races average a mile-plus, even for maidens.

For the Janów crowd and the Americans in attendance, the International Cup Race brought cheers, hugs, and tears of joy in a celebration of international cooperation. The International Cup perennially attracts the best Russian, German, French, and Polish horses to the starting gate, many of them consistent winners in their home countries and many of them veterans of International Day. So Savannah, a three-year-old bay filly with the listing (USA) following her name in the program, was the object of special interest and speculation.

In the mid-1990s, Tomasz Skotnicki, then manager for Magness Arabians' California farm at Santa Ynez, came to Janów with a plan. In his California barn he had Monarch AH (*Wiking x *Sasanka), the modern sensation of American Arabian racing, and Tomasz envisioned breeding him to *Sarmacja, a Triple Crown mare in Poland, and a descendant of the great *Sabellina, an early import who showed Americans how Arabians can run. "For five generations back, *Sarmacja has Derby and Oaks winners and a Triple Crown winner in every second generation, and her grandam was *Sasanka, the dam of Monarch AH," Tomasz notes. Tomasz arrived at Janow armed with videos and photos of Monarch AH to convince the Poles to send *Sarmacja to California for this purpose. He won over these astute horsemen, and Director Trela of Janów added to the plan, suggesting a foal swap, with one Monarch/*Sarmacja foal each for Janów and Magness. Director Ignacy Jaworowski of Michałów Stud wanted to be a part of the swap and he sent the mare *Dracena in the same arrangement.

When Savannah was foaled, Tomasz liked what he saw. He carefully chose her name. "Savannah has a special meaning," he says, "because this filly was Polish-American, foaled in America of Polish parents and destined to go to Poland. So I named her after Savannah, Georgia, the city where the great Polish general Casimir Pulaski died in 1779, fighting for the American colonists in the American Revolution." So the International Cup Race was a test of Tomasz's breeding wisdom. If Savannah was to best Europe's (and Russia's) finest, she would need all the precious genetic gifts of her parents. The most feared horses and the favorites of the race were the Russian Derby winner Duglas (sired by the Polish race champion Gepard) and his stable mate Matador. The big French chestnut Jamman Al Mels also posed a threat. As the race developed, the French and Russian horses set the early pace with Savannah working to save ground on the inside. As the horses made the final turn, however, the announcer repeatedly shouted Savannah's name as she pulled away from the Russian stallions. She galloped across the finish line, easily four lengths in front of the Russian duo.

"Savannah had already won three races and she is the winter candidate for the Derby," says Tomasz. "But I was so excited that she beat the Russian and German horses. Just the toughest competition. The best was that she beat the Russian Derby winner. And for me to receive congratulations from Sasha Ponomarev of the Tersk Stud - I tell you, that felt pretty good."

"The excitement of Eula in the show ring is about the same as Savannah at the track," says Director Trela of Janów Stud. "Her trainer knew that her first season had to be a pleasure for her, not just hard work. I always questioned him, 'Is this too much for her?' 'Is the competition too strong for this young mare?' She wasn't pushed at all in her first season, but in six starts she had five wins. That's enough. Next year is her Derby year and if she wins there, she will be the sixth generation of Derby winners in her dam line."

Race 7, the Michelin Europa Cup, brought 11 entries for one of the richest races in Europe. Horses from Russia, Germany, France, and Switzerland challenged the Polish horses for a purse of 161,000 zlotys (\$40,000). Here the big money went to Nedjam Lotois, a horse from France who ran the 2,600-meter race in 2:58:7. Royal Tribute, the Michalow offspring by Monarch AH as a result of Dracena's lease to the United States, ran fourth in the race.

The racing strength of Batyskaf came through in his son Major (x Meta by Partner) from Bialka Stud, the winner of Race 8. Batyskaf, 1996 Polish National Champion and Racehorse of the Year, was sold through Polish Prestige to Turkey in 1997 (\$450,000) for Turkey's race program. Results of other races are reported in the charts.

Following the race, guests of Polish Prestige gathered in the park across the way from the track for the traditional end-of-the-festival party. In all, Polish Arabians held their own through International Race Day and in some respects surpassed the toughest racing stock in the world. This fact is all the more impressive when it is remembered that for these horses, racing prowess is just one component for which they are bred - an important component, along with beauty, type, and athleticism of the complete Polish Arabian.