Equine air transportation is big business in the horse racing industry

Words | Jennifer Harrington-Snell

Just as there are many breeds of horses, there is also a wide variety of horse transportation companies. And given the recent spate of back-to-back racing events, including the Melbourne Spring Racing Carnival, which included the Melbourne Cup on November 1, and the Breeder’s Cup Championships on November 4 and 5 in Louisville, Kentucky, there was no shortage of business available.

International Racehorse Transport (IRT) is one of the many companies responsible for transporting horses to and from Australia for the Melbourne Spring Racing Carnival. There were 20 foreign horses racing in this year’s events, including the Caulfield Cup on October 15; 10 participated in the Melbourne Cup.

IRT is a global organization, with offices in Australia, New Zealand, the UK, and the USA. The company has been in operation since 1972 and claims to have an average of one horse in transit every hour of the day. It ships everything from competition horses to family pets, to locations in every corner of the globe. The company also offers a range of other services, including road transport, customs clearance, health certifications, blood testing, quarantine services, registration transfers, and insurance.

H. E. Sutton Forwarding, on the other hand, is a small, private company that was founded in 1954 by Halford Ewel ‘Tex’ Sutton. He had been transporting horses by railcar since the 1930s and shipped his first horse via airplane in 1969. He is generally credited with revolutionizing the horse transportation industry.

Today, the company claims to be the only US-based horse transportation firm to use a dedicated aircraft: it leases a Boeing 727 on a long-term basis from Ypsilanti, Michigan-based Kalitta Charters, and transports thousands of horses per year within North America. For this year’s Breeder Cup Championships, the company leased a second 727 to handle the large volume of horses it transported.

Meanwhile, UK-based Intradco is a charter broker that specializes in the transport of horses. It not only employs full-time air grooms to accompany the horses in flight, but it also designs and manufactures its own flight stalls, which are leased by a number of airlines. The company has been in operation for 21 years and offers a range of other services, including aircraft management, passenger charters, VIP flights, ground handling and support, and aviation consultancy.

The shipping process
Some aspects of the shipping process remain the same, regardless of which company is shipping the horse. International Air Transport Association (IATA) regulations state, for example, that all horses must be accompanied by competent air attendants (or air grooms). The horses must be

H. E. Sutton revolutionized the way horses are transported
watered and fed throughout the duration of the flight, and secured in special air stalls.

Most companies avoid tranquilizing the animals, especially if they are going to be competing within a day or so of arrival. Occasionally it is unavoidable, however.

“We always reserve the right to tranquilize if there’s an emergency, but we had better have a good reason to,” says Mike Payne, operations manager at H. E. Sutton. He adds that yearlings and horses known to be a problem are tranquilized as a matter of course. “There’s no sense in taking a chance; otherwise, it’s a very small percentage that gets tranquilized.”

The actual shipping process, however, differs between companies. One of the most basic differences is the shipping method. Companies such as IRT and Intradco rely on a variety of scheduled carriers and charter operators, while H. E. Sutton uses a dedicated aircraft.

IRT-Australia, for example, uses FedEx Express, Singapore Airlines, Cathay Pacific, and Malaysia Airlines, among others. It posts a schedule of flights on its website and plans the shipments weeks, sometimes months, in advance due to Australia’s strict import regulations.

Moreover, the company tends to fly into larger airports such as Amsterdam Airport Schiphol, Frankfurt Airport, London Heathrow, London Stansted, and Paris Charles de Gaulle. In the east, the company regularly flies into Hong Kong, Singapore, and Kuala Lumpur.

In the USA, there are only three ports of entry for carriers transporting foreign animals. As a result, IRT-Australia flies to Los Angeles International, Miami International, and New York – usually JFK Airport, although it occasionally uses Newark International in New Jersey.

Intradco uses a variety of carriers, ranging from small charter operators to scheduled airlines. The company aims to find “the right aircraft, at the right price, in the right location”, so every detail is dependent on the job in question. It has chartered everything from Antonov An-12s to Boeing 747s.

Although the company does use the larger European airports when necessary, it frequently uses Ostend-Bruges International Airport and Liege Airport, both in Belgium; Maastricht Aachen Airport in the Netherlands; and London Stansted. Recently the company flew into Cambridge Airport in the UK, and praised the airport for its “very good, very prompt” service. “We were in and out in three hours,” says Charlie McMullen, an aviation broker at Intradco. “When we get service like that, we have no qualms about going back.”

Because H. E. Sutton is primarily a domestic carrier, the company has more options and tends to use the smaller airports. When flying through Dallas, for example, the company uses Dallas Love Field as opposed to Dallas/Fort Worth.

“Everywhere we go, we try to avoid the large airports,” Payne says. “We like to fly under the radar, get everyone in and out.”

One of the main problems with using the larger commercial airports is the significantly increased taxi and holding times, not to mention that some airports, such as JFK, will not allow the horses to wait on the airport grounds until the incoming airplane being used for their transportation has landed.

“We try to do everything as quickly as possible to keep the horses moving,” Payne says, adding that it is not always possible to do that. “When the horses are just sitting there, they’re more apt to become antsy and hurt themselves.”

The company’s employees also prefer the level of service provided by various FBOs, including Atlantic Aviation, Landmark Aviation, Signature Flight Support, and TAC Air.

As far as the FBOs are concerned, their role is minimal. “There’s not a lot that the FBO does, except handle the aircraft and provide escorts for the trainers and horse handlers,” says Jeff Miller, general manager of Landmark Aviation’s Dallas Love Field location.

The entire process – bringing the horses to the field in trailers, then loading them onto the aircraft with special horse ramps – is very quick, Miller says, adding that the FBO does not take part because of the risks involved. “These are million
dollar horses, and it takes a lot of coordination [to move them],” he adds. “You don’t want to spook the horses or scare them. You don’t want them to start kicking and break a leg. It’s a very expensive process, and there’s a lot of liability.”

The cost to ship a horse varies considerably and is dependent on a number of factors, including the number of horses being shipped, the length of the journey, and the type of aircraft being used. The total cost could be anywhere from US$5,000 to US$100,000, perhaps more. In terms of cost per horse, it would be more expensive to ship a single horse on a Boeing Business Jet or an Airbus Corporate Jet, than it would be to ship three or four horses on an An-12. Insurance also adds to the overall cost. In general, the horse owner (or the person shipping the horse) is responsible for insuring the animal. The carriers themselves do not hold extra insurance. Some companies, such as IRT, also provide insurance coverage as part of their business. Policies include coverage for mortality and theft, surgery, and air transit.

International transportation
Bringing a horse to a larger airport is a bit more involved, especially if a horse is traveling from one

Top five airports in the USA for horse transportation

Louisville International Airport
Kentucky’s Louisville International Airport is located only minutes from Churchill Downs, home of the Kentucky Derby and the 2010 and 2011 Breeder’s Cup Championships. The airport has a significant amount of general aviation traffic, and Atlantic Aviation’s FBO is a popular transit spot for charter operators transporting horses.

Lexington Bluegrass Airport
Lexington, Kentucky, bills itself as ‘The Horse Capital of the World’. It is home to two racetracks – Keeneland and the Red Mile – and is less than 76 miles from Churchill Downs. Lexington Bluegrass has a number of general aviation facilities and serves around 1.1 million passengers annually compared with Louisville International’s 3.5 million passengers per year.

Stewart International Airport
There are only three ports of entry into the USA for carriers importing foreign horses: New York, Miami, and Los Angeles. Although most of the horses arrive in New York via JFK Airport, the US Department of Agriculture Animal Import Center is located at Stewart International, approximately 70 miles away. The facility consists of 18 buildings, 10 of which are reserved for horses. The center can accommodate up to 125 horses at a time.

Miami International Airport
The Miami Animal Import Center is located adjacent to Miami International Airport. The 6,038m² facility opened in 2004 and has 84 concrete block horse stalls and 20 portable horse stalls.

Los Angeles International Airport
The Jet Pets US Department of Agriculture (USDA) quarantine facility, located at LAX, has 48 import stalls and 20 export stalls. The facility is unique in that it offers private services, in addition to USDA quarantine procedures. Among the services offered are domestic and international shipping of horses and livestock, and a pick-up and delivery service.
country to another. In addition to the various forms of horse identification and customs paperwork required by each country, there are different quarantine protocols that must be adhered to. Some countries are easier to enter than others.

“We have a saying about some destinations,” says Chris Burke, an operations manager at IRT-Australia. “When the weight of the paperwork equals the weight of the horse, it’s ready to ship.”

Among the most difficult countries to fly in and out of are China, South Africa, and Australia. A horse traveling from South Africa to the USA would have to stay in quarantine for 30 days, for example. A horse flying from Australia to the USA, on the other hand, can be shipped at a moment’s notice and would spend approximately 48 hours in one of three US Department of Agriculture (USDA) quarantine centers in New York, Miami, or Los Angeles.

A horse flying from the USA to Australia, however, would have to receive a series of tests and vaccinations six to eight weeks prior to the journey, and spend two weeks in quarantine prior to the actual departure. Once it arrived in Australia, it would then spend another two to three weeks in quarantine.

“It’s a three- or four-day process to send a horse to the USA, but it’s more like a two-month process to import a horse. It’s a very complicated and dragged out procedure,” Burke says, explaining that there are certain diseases in the USA, such as equine influenza, that Australia does not have.

“It sounds quite dramatic, but it’s just like getting the flu,” says Leigh Jordan, the international recruitment officer for Victoria Racing Club, which hosts the Melbourne Cup. “Horses don’t die from it. It just stops them from competing.”

Another concern, however, is the spread of the Australian Hendra virus, which can be transmitted to humans and has killed 34 horses since 1994. Four humans have also died over that period.

Not all quarantine procedures are that difficult, however. It depends on the protocols established in each country. Horses flying into the UAE for the Dubai World Cup, for example, will generally only stay at the Meydan Racecourse quarantine facility for 48 hours.

Many quarantine facilities are privately run. Victoria Racing Club, for example, operates its own quarantine facility, the Werribee Quarantine Center. IRT also manages quarantine facilities in Newmarket in the UK, and Karaka in New Zealand. Churchill Downs, the racecourse hosting the Breeder’s Cup Championships, also has a quarantine facility. This year, 29 foreign-born horses were pre-entered for the two-day event.

In the EU, some airports have inspection facilities, such as the Lufthansa Cargo Animal Lounge at Frankfurt Airport, and the Air France-KLM Cargo Animal Hotel at Amsterdam Airport Schiphol. In the UK, horses are processed through border inspection posts at various airports, including London Heathrow and London Stansted. The EU also requires that horses have passports, which include micro-chip details, the horse’s age and breed/type, and its health history. Passports can be obtained through most horse associations and societies. Otherwise, horses can obtain a Fédération Equestre Internationale (FEI) passport, an internationally recognized identification required for most international events and includes vaccination information.

When choosing a horse transport company, owners should choose one that is not only familiar with the paperwork requirements of various countries, but also knows horses.

Too many companies just see a horse, McMullen explains. “Different breeds have different sizes and different shapes,” he says. “We know if a horse weighs 500 kilos or 700 kilos, and we’ll know how many we can put on the airplane and what type of stalls we should be using.”

Safety is one of the most important issues,” he adds. “But we also want to make sure the horse arrives in good condition and isn’t stressed.”

Top five airports in Europe for horse transportation

Amsterdam Airport Schiphol
Air France-KLM Cargo and Martinair Cargo operate a 24-hour Animal Hotel for animals transiting through Amsterdam Airport Schiphol. The hotel can accommodate everything from insects and tropical fish to exotic zoo animals, such as lions and tigers. For its equestrian guests, the hotel provides professional attendants, state-of-the-art stalls, veterinary care, and grooming services.

Frankfurt Airport
Lufthansa Cargo operates an Animal Lounge at Germany’s Frankfurt Airport. In 2010, the facility accommodated nearly 2,000 horses, around 15,000 domestic pets, and around 3,000 tons of ornamental fish.

London Heathrow
The Heathrow Animal Reception Centre, a 24-hour facility that provides care to the millions of animals that transit through Heathrow Airport, is operated by the City of London. The center serves as a border inspection post for live animals and provides veterinary care and border crossing certificates to everything from tarantulas and snakes, to racehorses and baby elephants.

London Stansted
London Stansted has established itself as a major hub for horse travel, given its close proximity to Newmarket. In 2010, 957 horses were imported and 690 exported via the airport. The border inspection post at the northern end of the airport offers equestrian charter operators a quick turnaround of about an hour.

Paris Charles de Gaulle
Nearly 8,000 live animals pass through Charles de Gaulle’s ‘Station Animalière’ every year. The facility serves as a border inspection station and provides care and veterinary services to animals awaiting custom inspections and for those with delayed boarding. It is currently being upgraded to accommodate a greater variety of animals.