



The Rail

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Window or Aisle Stall? Equine Frequent Fliers Check In

By [JULIE JUNE STEWART](#) June 1, 2013



Deborah A. Roma

Michael Payne, an operational manager for H..E. Sutton, an equine air service, gently guiding a horse from a plane.

LOUISVILLE, Ky. — A worn and yellowed catalog for the 1937 Annual Sale of Thoroughbreds at the Lexington Sales Paddock offered 547 stallions, broodmares, yearlings and weanlings. Every page is marked in faded pencil with prices and codes like “O.K.,” “good class,” “poor” and “W,” which possibly denoted the horses won by the catalog’s original owner. Each page notes the final auction price (\$85 to \$2,000). Many famous Kentucky farms offered horses, and sires included the Kentucky Derby winners Omar Khayyam (1917), Morvich (1922) and Burgoo King (1932). But equally fascinating are the notes on the back cover with estimates of train transportation costs.

- Saratoga, N.Y., to Los Angeles, 12 horses on a car: \$1,245. \$70 for each additional horse. Total of 16 horses for \$1,458.

- Renton, Wash., to Frisco (12 horses): \$339.
- Renton, Wash., to Los Angeles (12 horses): \$429.

In the 1930s, trains were the primary transportation for cross-country equine travel. A decade later, the Army Air Forces tested transporting horses in the Fairchild C-82, a 25-ton cargo transport.

KLM Royal Dutch was the first airline to transport a live animal, in 1924. Nico the bull was flown from Rotterdam, the Netherlands, to Paris and is purported to have munched on the plane's wicker seats. Today KLM still transports thousands of horses, dogs, cats, zoo animals and ornamental fish. FedEx also transports animals, including two giant pandas from China to the National Zoo in Washington in 2000 and Olympic equestrian teams.

Besides FedEx, one of the biggest names in the United States for equine transportation is Tex Sutton, who started arranging train travel in 1954 and with Dave Clark eventually built an airline service now known as the H..E. Sutton Forwarding Company.



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Flights can carry up to 21 horses, their grooms, tack and equipment. The smallest stall is 31 by 82 inches.

One morning in late April, the H..E. Sutton operational manager Michael Payne was on the tarmac at the Louisville airport waiting for a plane carrying several horses, including the stakes-winning filly More Chocolate and the 6-year-old multiple graded stakes winner Slim Shadey of Britain,

to arrive from California. Payne ignored the honking from the nearby taxi holding pen as he organized four horse vans and several support vehicles into a caravan.

Payne, who grew up on a farm in Illinois, has been working for H.E. Sutton for 23 years, starting as a horse handler.

“My biggest day was my very first day,” Payne said. “I had only flown in a little Cessna back in 1990 and had not flown with horses, so I didn’t know what to expect. It was pretty exciting.”

Flights carry up to 21 horses, their grooms, tack and equipment. The smallest stall is 31 by 82 inches. The Boeing 727-200 jet from Kalitta Charters, H.E. Sutton’s partner, allows horses to be placed two or three wide. Most are either experienced racehorses or show horses flying throughout the United States, Canada and Mexico. The aircraft is loaded by the horse’s destination. Sometimes precautions like sniffer panels are used to separate horses by sex. They travel with hay and water.

H.E. Sutton moves about 2,300 horses a year on domestic flights at a cost of \$3,250 to \$4,950 per animal, depending on the length of the trip.

The pilots use techniques like long, gentle ascents and descents to accommodate the horses and try to find calmer flight paths in case of bad weather or turbulence. If a horse becomes agitated, Payne said, a tranquilizer is sometimes necessary, but most horses travel well. Although the company has no frequent-flier miles program, owners can receive volume discounts.

In Louisville, airport employees in orange vests guided the Sutton aircraft to a remote space on the tarmac. A large cargo door on the side of the jet opened slowly and a red-and-white ramp was moved into place. Horse vans lumbered forward one at a time and parked, with their side doors open and linked by bridges.

The handlers guided the horses one by one down the jet’s ramp into the vans, where they were organized by destination. As horses peered over the ramp, handlers encouraged them to continue walking without tugging on the lead lines; the horses disembarked with the nonchalance of well-experienced travelers. One horse paused inside the door to take in the view.

Inside the airplane, Sutton workers were collapsing the stalls as each horse left, making room for the rest to walk through. It was cool inside the jet, and it smelled of hay.

To meet sanitation and quarantine regulations, the jet was sterilized before its next flight, which was to pick up Lines of Battle, who had just flown to New York from Europe, and bring him to Louisville for the Kentucky Derby.

Payne said he would always remember traveling with Cigar, the 1995 and 1996 Horse of the Year, who won 16 consecutive races, including the Dubai World Cup and the Breeders’ Cup Classic.

“That was pretty surreal because there were a couple of times where they would charter the whole plane to take him to a race,” Payne said. “Here we were with Bill Mott, his trainer; the exercise riders; his assistants; and grooms. We are all on a 727 with one horse, the best horse in the world. Everywhere he went, there was a police escort to meet him planeside and escort his truck directly to the barn.”

As for Cigar the traveler, Payne said: “He was great; he did anything you asked him to do. A lot of times he would take a nap. It was like hauling a rock star around. There was always a lot of press around then. He would always pose for photographers at the top of the ramp.”

On the day Zenyatta retired in 2010, H.E. Sutton flew her to Lexington to begin her new life as a broodmare at Lane’s End Farm.

“We had her up front,” Payne said. “Everyone was happy and glad to see her. She never did any dancing on the ramp or airplane, but she always stopped at the top of the ramp if someone was there to take her picture.”

Equine transportation has come a long way since 1937. Little did anyone know then that horses would someday fly.
