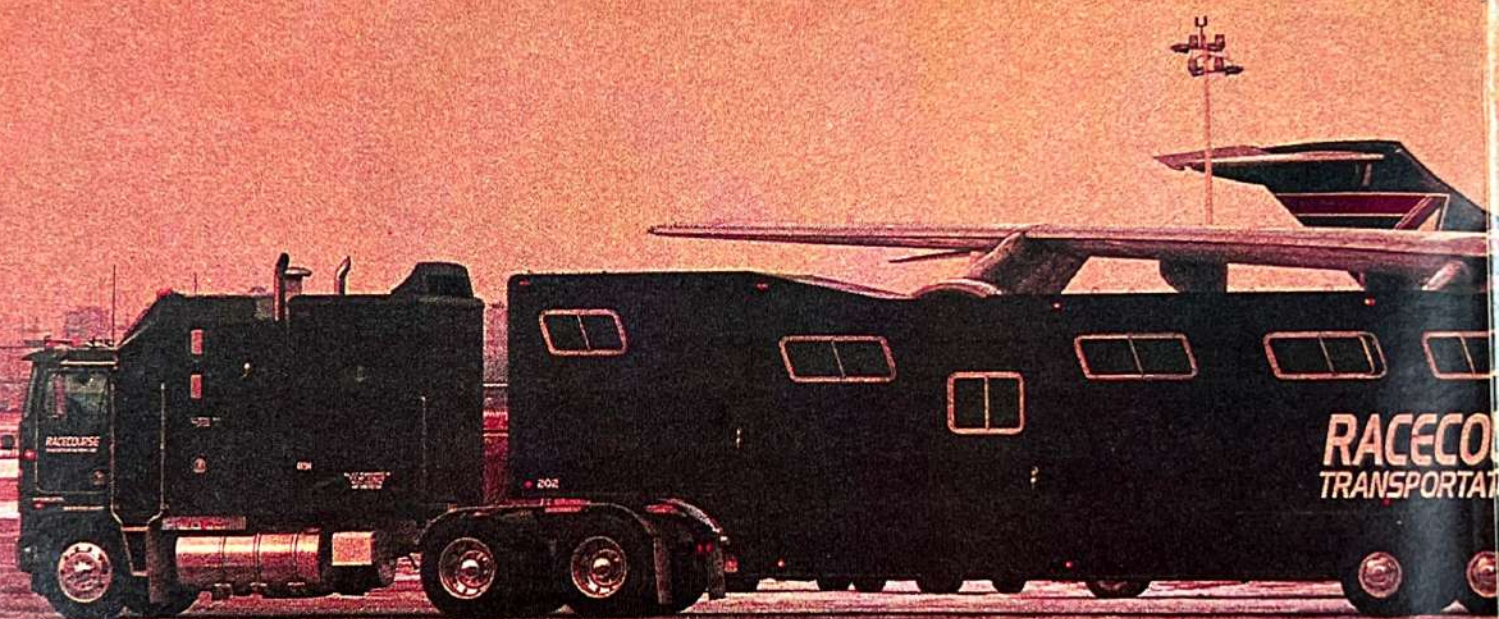


THEY FLY HORSES, DON'T THEY?



Travelling in a plane full of thoroughbreds has been compared to driving a bumpy road in a truck loaded with explosives. Ted Conover joined a Jumbo carrying 71 horses on a flight from Toronto to Auckland and Melbourne. Photographs by Nicholas DeVore

A PROTEST OF whinnies and pounding hooves against wooden stalls reaches the cockpit as the 747 accelerates down the runway. The pilots take off at a gentle angle, trying to ease passenger anxieties, but it doesn't seem to make much difference. The horses know something weird is going on, and as you look at the high-tech cockpit controls, and try to mesh that with what sounds like a stampede downstairs, you know it, too.

There are 71 horses down there, and they are flying.

We are leaving Toronto, headed west on a 30-hour trip to Melbourne. Around the horses, stationed at strategic intervals, is a squad of 10



or so grooms, most of them employees of International Racehorse Transport Pty Ltd of Melbourne. They are cooing, murmuring, reassuring the horses with their voices and their hands.

They spend more time in the company of horses, these grooms, than with other people, and they speak a special language. One of them gave me a card from his moonlighting job: "Timothy Burke," it read, "horsebreaker". One hundred years ago, these men would have been the ones riding the margins of a large cattle drive, urging the animals to market. But *Lonesome Dove* has been updated: these days prize livestock no longer walk, they fly.

The idea of horses flying — with us since Pegasus — has acquired a new dimension in the past 15 years, with the injection of large amounts of money into world thoroughbred markets and races. Like fine art, another prestige commodity of the super-rich, horses are now commanding record prices.

"Never before have so many people chased so few horses with so much money," said James Paltridge, who should know. Aged only 28, Paltridge is international director of charter operations for IRT. After raising horses at the family property south of Adelaide, Paltridge spent years in England and the US learning the horse trade.

Victory by a given horse in an important race sets off "a mad hunt for its relations", according to Paltridge. Brokers in the US, Europe and Australia try to buy or lease the related horses for wealthy breeders. Once the deal is made, the new owners want to make the travel as easy as possible on their investments. Ships, trains and trailers are out; planes are in.

Unlike most purchases of fine art, the deals are highly speculative — as risky as horse racing itself. A horse may turn out to be worth millions, or may prove almost useless. "You don't buy a racehorse thinking you're going to make money," said Quentin Wallace, founder and managing director of IRT. "You'd have ►

At disembarkation a government veterinarian checks the horses' markings to make sure they are all who they purport to be



to be nuts." What you get instead, in exchange for the astronomical sums spent on horses, grooms, trainers and airfares (about \$7500-9500 for this trip), is prestige and other intangibles. Many owners, according to Paltridge, even donate their winnings to charity.

IRT, the world's largest horse transporter, shipped 4000 highly-credentialed horses last year, with an average value of \$40,000. Many of the horses' owners wanted them Down Under to take advantage of the extra breeding season horses get when they cross the equator. Others come to race, in contests with fast-growing purses such as the Melbourne Cup. IRT shipped past winners Beldale Ball (1980), At Talaq (1986) and the American horse, Rosedale (third in 1987). A DC-10 load of 55 horses in August, including eight of the most valuable stallions ever to go to stud in Australia, was valued at more than \$100 million — IRT's richest consignment of thoroughbreds.

TWO SUCH top-rank English thoroughbreds are on our flight from North America — Highland Chieftain and LaPierre. In contrast to the 'ordinary' thoroughbreds, already treated like gentry, these two enjoy box seats: modular containers lifted from the ground directly into the plane, to minimise trauma to the horse (the containers sit in the 747's 'first class' section — right near the nose, so they'll be last on and first off).

They also enjoy human servants — 16-year-old Simon, of Liverpool, and 19-year-old Meg, of Arundel in Scotland. I catch Simon pouring some Guinness into LaPierre's meal of grain, eggs and special powders — he drinks half a pint a day, the groom confesses. And almost any animal would be lucky to have the devoted Meg serving him: she dotes on Highland Chieftain, grooming him often, keeping food and water fresh, and even sleeping on the floor of the box, in an adjoining compartment, in case he needs anything during the night.

"He's worth it," she insists, when I comment on all the attention. "He has a very relaxed temperament — no vices at all. I've never been thrown. He's bomb-proof."

Meg, sitting on her bedroll, is covered with straw. Proudly she shows me Highland Chieftain's UK 'passport'. It's in English and French, and lists, among other things, his sire (Kampala) and dam (La Primavera), recent injections (more than 20 in the past three years), and recent trips — more than 40, mostly by plane. The horse's itinerary would keep most businessmen jet-lagged. Instead of a photo, there are diagrams of him seen from both sides, with arrows noting the location of whorls. "He's a bit difficult to identify because he's completely bay — no markings," Meg explains.

It's Highland Chieftain's second trip to Australia; last trip's winnings exceeded \$205,000. I begin to understand how it could be that, ounce-for-ounce, as Quentin Wallace told me, "the sperm of some of these horses is worth more than gold". Among them are the most expensive animals in the world.

By the time we start to cross the Pacific, the dimly-lit cabin has pretty much settled down.



Valuable thoroughbreds settle down in the body of the Boeing 747 following the scare of take off, tended by ever-watchful grooms who are with them almost constantly for the 30-hour flight across North America and the Pacific

Susie Stubbs, a young groom from New Zealand, has begun the complimentary beverage service — watering the horses, which she tells me may lose up to 23 kilograms on the flight. "They'd lose a lot more than that if they knew where they were," quips James Paltridge. The cabin is blessedly windowless.

From the staircase leading to the cockpit, I can look back and see most of the 71 heads, many munching straw. Most of the other grooms have bedded down in the aisles left between stalls, but you can bet they're sleeping lightly: travelling in a plane full of thoroughbreds is like driving a bumpy road in a truck loaded with explosives. And this particular voyage is somewhat complicated by the presence of some Spanish miniature horses and six bison, bound for New Zealand, which are travelling in crates behind the rearmost row of horses.

Right after take-off one of the mares, apparently spooked by the bison behind her, somehow managed to loosen the rope connecting her harness to the front of her stall and slowly, with much racket, climb out. A groom grabbed her as she ran down one aisle and now, anaesthetised, she's resting quietly.

Upstairs, behind the cockpit in the area of a 747 which often is used for a cocktail lounge, is a galley and about 15 comfortable seats. In the morning the grooms come up to eat. When a moment of turbulence lights the seatbelt signs, the grooms surprise me by heading not to their seats, but downstairs, to calm the horses.

Next to me, Tim Rhodes puts down his *World of Beef 1989 Sire & Semen Directory* and chuckles. His import business has filled the darkened pressurised baggage compartment in the plane's belly with 39 fancy cattle in crates. Shaking his head, he reassures me that his is the only sane business.

"Bloody horses are crazy things," he says.

"These horses are on a mission to kill themselves."

They do make you wonder, these high-strung thoroughbreds. But if they're crazy, they come from good families, and the grooms must coddle, cajole and otherwise make sure they arrive in the best possible condition — "or better than when we got them, if possible," says Paltridge. Preparation, he explains, is the key to success. Besides requiring pilots to make shallow climbs and descents, IRT:

- Vacuum-cleans all the horses' hay, to reduce dust and the possibility of lung irritation.
- Removes the horses' shoes, to improve their footing on the metal floor and lessen the damage from kicks.
- Shaves their undersides, to keep them cool.
- Feeds them stomach oil, to calm their digestive tracts.
- Diagrams their placement before loading, to keep rivals and troublemakers apart and give skittish mounts the extra room they need.

IT'S A STRIKING contrast to the early days. David G.H. Benjamin, a stud owner awaiting mares from our shipment on the tarmac at Auckland, recalled the first mare he imported from England, in 1979. "They shipped her in a crate on the deck of the boat. Well, she got seasick and there was hardly anything left of her."

In the early days of air transport, according to the 747's pilot, Stan LeBedis, "planes were full of dead cattle all the time". Ventilation was inadequate, and planes were kept waiting overlong on the boiling-hot runways.

And there were crashes, such as the decrepit Boeing 377 Stratocruiser which went down on a Mexico City highway during rush hour in 1987. Seven people in the plane and several on ▶



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the ground were killed; of those horses not killed instantly, some were found running dazed amidst the jammed traffic, and finally put down (16 horses died; the one surviving groom now flies for IRT).

Now, however, equipment is excellent, fatalities are rare, and IRT's business is growing rapidly. It has eight offices worldwide, and annually grosses about \$32-38 million a year, up from \$3.8 million only seven years ago.

The Auckland landing is in the dark, about 4 am. Six waiting semi-trailers form a semi-circle around the front of the plane, covered-wagon style, to prevent horses from escaping. One of them, shiny and silver, reads 'BMW Showjumping Team'.

The nose of the 747 flips and, in groups of three, with the help of a hydraulic lift, some of the passengers disembark.

A government veterinarian checks their whorls and blazes, making sure they're all who they purport to be. They prance and strut and sometimes rear, unbelievably beautiful creatures.

Shortly we're in the air again, and by early afternoon we're descending toward Melbourne. It's been 30 hours aloft, which should lend the enterprise some sense of routine, but nobody's taking it easy. The grooms, ever vigilant, are again standing by their horses as we come in on final approach. And from up in the cockpit, my hallucination returns with a jolt — the whinnies of worry as wheels strike runway. Corral or cargo jet? It's the arresting sound of a brave new world. ●