

Rob McDowall - Alex Scott Assistant Trainers Travel Scholarship 2015

Thanks to The Alex Scott Assistant Trainers Travel Scholarship I was able to spend an unforgettable month in Australia based with Godolphin and their trainer John O'Shea. Before starting with the details of my trip, I would like to express my gratitude to everybody who helped to make this possible including my boss, Sir Mark Prescott, all of team Godolphin who organised so much for me to do and see during my visit and of course, to Mr O'Shea who was very kind and welcoming and made sure my stay was really worthwhile.

My first week in Australia was spent between Crown Lodge Stables which is at the track at Warwick Farm and Godolphin's private training centre, Osborne Park about 40 minutes from the centre of Sydney. During this first week, I watched horses exercise in the mornings, went to races at tracks in Newcastle and Randwick as well as at Warwick Farm and spent time in the office.

There are many differences in the way things are done in Australia and the first thing that struck me was the exercise routine. Back home we tend to do a lot of shorter, sharper canters typically up a hill and would work our horses generally twice a week. In Australia the horses do their speed work 2 or 3 times a week and on the other days would generally just do a very long and steady canter twice around the racecourse. My first thoughts were that the horses would not be as fit as they are back home however as we have seen over the years, Australian horses are very competitive when they run in the UK and are pretty dominant in races such as the Melbourne Cup where the Europeans always field a strong team so it must get the job done.

Working in the UK we tend to worry a lot about the weight of the riders, and would usually only let the lighter riders do the faster work on the horses, however in Australia as long as the riders can accurately do work to the stopwatch then the weight of the rider is irrelevant.

Another major difference in the way that training is organised is in the use of trials which are held under race conditions but aren't competitive. I would liken them to a schooling bumper which are used regularly in Ireland. The purpose of these trials are to educate the horses and for the trainers to give them a nice blow, similar to a racecourse gallop. In the trials the horses jump out of the stalls and in my experience of the races in Australia the horses running for the first time competitively were much more professional and knew their job better than horses back in the UK running first time out. I felt the horses behaved much better in the stalls as well for having already been in the race situation in the mornings. This could also be due to the horses doing all of their routine work on the racecourse, so when they do run it is not such a new experience for them.

My second week in Australia was spent in Melbourne at Godolphin's Carbine Lodge stables at Flemington Racecourse. Racing in Victoria is pretty similar to New South Wales, with the only major difference being they race left handed as opposed to right handed in NSW.

With so many horses in training it is important for team Godolphin to have a base in Melbourne as it gives the option to send horses down for bigger targets whilst some horses can be better suited to the more galloping track at Flemington rather than the tighter right handed tracks in Sydney.

Whilst in Melbourne I was lucky enough to spend a day at Godolphin's Northwood Park stud getting a close look at approximately 50 foals and yearlings. The breeding side of the racing industry is not something that I have had much experience with and it fascinated me to see how much work goes into the foals and yearlings in preparation for their racing careers, from the handling of the horses to corrective surgery and non invasive treatment of limbs.

Before I left for Australia friends who had previously spent time there told me how big and strong the horses were down under compared to back home, something I would have to agree with having seen a number of 600kg+ horses during my trip. Speaking to experienced members of the stud team they think this is probably because as foals these horses are turned out much more in much bigger paddocks and needless to say, in much better weather!

With Melbourne over 500 miles from the main Sydney yards communication is obviously a key factor in the smooth and successful running of the yard. Mr O'Shea was in constant contact via phone with his team in Melbourne and I also sat in on a video call between Dave Charles (who runs the Melbourne yard) along with his foreman(head lad) and Mr O'Shea. During this video call a wide range of issues were discussed, horses weights, horses wellbeing along with future plans and targets for the horses.

One morning clocking horses work in the tower at Flemington I was introduced to Gai Waterhouse who took the opportunity to reprimand me for not looking through my binoculars at the same time. Despite this telling off Mrs Waterhouse was incredibly charming and even though our meeting was very brief I was flattered when Mrs Waterhouse came and said hello to me at the races a few days later even remembering my name.

My third week was spent back at Godolphin's private training establishment Osborne Park, which is located northwest of Sydney in a small town called Agnes Banks. It has 84 boxes split between 4 different yards with it's own grass and AW tracks. Whilst at Osborne Park I rode out and did all the general duties involved with working in the yard.

At Heath House in Newmarket we trot the horses up every evening before they are due to run and the morning after they have run just to check that they are moving well and that there are no issues. At Mr O'Shea's they trotted up every horse that had done faster work in the morning as a matter of course. The trot ups as they are called were watched by the in house vet, Mr O'Shea himself along with the foreman(head lad) and also a nutritionist who would be on hand if any of the horses were looking light or carrying a bit too much condition to change their diets accordingly. This attention to detail and constant monitoring of the horses is so beneficial and in a game that can be won and lost by a matter of inches it can only be a positive thing to be constantly checking and monitoring the horses' wellbeing to try and gain that extra edge.

One thing that I very much liked about Godolphin's routine in Australia was that in the evenings every single horse in training got out of its stable at some point, whether that be to go for a lead out, to go on the walker, or even have a swim. I felt that to get them out in the breeze and away from the stables had to be beneficial and would keep them a lot happier Which I think was reflected by the fact that of over 200 horses, I barely saw a box walker or a horse wind sucking during my stay.

My fourth and final week in Australia was spent at the Crown Lodge stables based at Warwick Farm Racecourse in Sydney. Through this final week I rode out 5 or 6 lots most mornings, a little different to riding my hack in Newmarket!

As mentioned previously, there were no concerns about my weight which at just the wrong side of 11st would generally be considered as being too heavy for fast work back home. This is not the case in Australia, so much so that I rode track work on a 2yo filly who was having her first spell in training.

During my stay in Australia I was lucky enough to watch the great mare Winx win twice. The first victory was over 7f having won her previous racecourse start in the Cox Plate over a distance of 1040metres which equates to just over 1m2f. It amazed me that she had the speed to do this but I was told that this was quite a regular occurrence in Australia, with staying horses having enough speed to win over much shorter distances. This is no doubt due to there being much more emphasis on training for speed in the mornings and also training solely on a flat track.

I was really taken aback by the following Winx had from the general public, especially after her second victory that I was lucky enough to watch. The public really followed her and supported her, even the younger generations attending the races knew who Winx was, with many of the younger race goers sporting Wink for Winx masks. This sort of public following is something I think we miss in the UK, where lots of our racing and footage of racing is geared around the punter and not the horses and their individual stories.

In general in Australia I felt the racing industry was much more accessible to the general public, with a high proportion of horses being owned by large syndicates. These syndicates have horses with some of the biggest and most successful trainers in Australia compared to the UK where the majority of the top trainer's strings comprise horses from owner breeders and wealthy individual owners.

I was also very impressed that each racing state in Australia has it's own website with racing form, replays of all races and also videos of every Trial that the horse has been in. All this information is free to the public, something that again makes the racing in Australia much more accessible to the public and therefore more popular outside of the racing industry.

Finally, Godolphin have a great website including a video feature of Osborne Park and I would highly recommend a watch to get a bit more of an insight into the stables.