

REVELRY, JOY AND PASSION AS RACING STRUGGLES ON IN THE TOUGHEST CIRCUMSTANCES

On Location in Senegal

Beetle Holloway with a fascinating insight into a day at the races in West Africa



RHYTHMIC drumming, ripened mangoes and drying muck greets racegoers as they filter into the grandstand bedecked in the green, yellow and red of the Senegalese flag. The central VIP section, a colourful wave of national dress lightly fanning racecards, is wedged between an almost exclusively male crowd at the grandstand's hips. Elbows lean over the course's railings, legs dangle from the hippodrome's perimeter wall, silhouettes fill the rooftops that overlook the circular, left-handed track reminiscent of Chester, albeit in West Africa.

It's one of the biggest days in the 30-meeting Senegalese racing calendar, which takes place every Sunday from January to June, and the going at the Hippodrome Ndiaw Macodou Diop in Thies is heavy sand, plastic bottles in places. The temperature is a clammy 32 degrees. There is a calm carnival atmosphere throughout the day as the well-mannered spectators prepare for the feature of the six-race card, the Grand Prix de la Renaissance Africaine, a 'Fusion Group 1' over 2,650 metres (roughly 1m6f).

Horseracing with a twist

Senegal might not be the first country that springs to mind when pondering international racing, but mainland Africa's westernmost country has a long and complicated history with the sport; one that has left an indelible mark on its present.

"People who are passionate about horseracing here are not very interested in the pur-sangs [thoroughbreds], they prefer the demi-sangs [cross-breeds] as there are more of them," says Moctar Ba, a young breeder and author of a book on Senegalese horses, who explains that this predilection for the demi-sangs has its roots in colonialism.

"The colonials took all the best stallions from the villages, so the villages could no longer cross-breed with good stallions. During World War Two, the French army exhausted their supply of good horses and afterwards they set up stallion depots across the country and the first stud at Dahra Djoloff - 'Senegal's Newmarket' - in 1948."

Fast-forward to today and, although cross-breeding imported thoroughbreds with local horses remains prevalent across Senegal's studs, the younger internet-enabled generation of breeders like Ba are helping professionalise the practice.

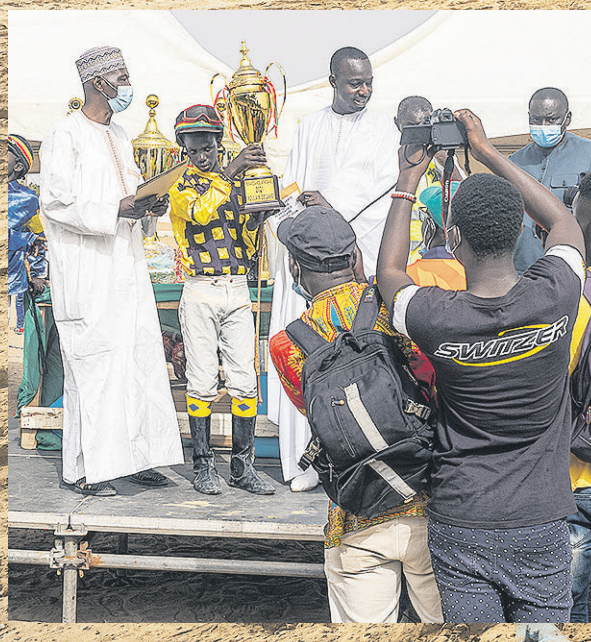
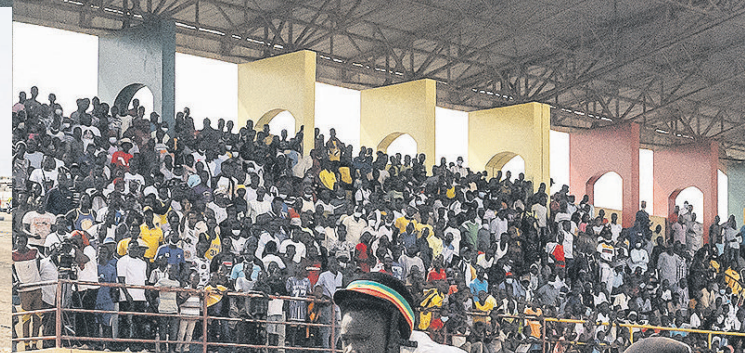
"We find stallions in France and then bring them back to Senegal. We buy the cheapest ones. The ones with problems with their legs, but who still have a good pedigree. For example, my last colt's father was Kenacross [11th of 12 in his only race at Chateaubriant], whose father was Kendargent [the third most accomplished sire standing in France in 2020 and sire of last season's Champion Stakes runner-up Skalleti]. I use the internet to find that out. I find a horse, I look up its father and check the characteristics. Was it a speedy horse? Was it precocious? Next time I'm going to try to get a son of Galileo."

Studying the day's racecard and the listing of a horse's blood ratio - ranging from 1/2 to 63/64 - is not the only feature that catches the eye. Only the lightest of weights can sit atop the diminutive demi-sangs and the bottomweight in the day's first race for two-year-old colts is carrying just 38kg (6st).

"We choose jockeys depending on their weight and a two-year-old should have about 38kg on its back," explains Abdallah Fall, the external relations and administrative manager of Ecurie Reunies, one of Senegal's largest and most successful stables with 196 horses and a record 19 wins in the country's most prestigious race, the Grand Prix de Chef de l'Etat. As such, many of the jockeys are in their teens with the stable providing a place to stay, eat, learn and work.

"Jockeys sign contracts with the stable. We then choose them for the race, but most horses are linked with a jockey. For example, Buraax is always ridden by Omar Sa. If not, you can get another jockey for 10,000CFA [£13.50] per ride [and 15 per cent of winnings]," says Fall.

The racecard also lists the sire, prize-money earned and number of wins, with the latter determining qualification for races like a league system. For instance, a Group 1 is for four-year-olds who have won a race



The first race of the day is won by Diofor (centre in main picture), after which his jockey holds aloft his trophy (bottom left). An almost exclusively male crowd packs the grandstand (top right) and VIP area (bottom right). The event has no problem attracting youngsters (top left)

plus the best winning two- and three-year-olds.

Interestingly, neither jockey nor trainer are named on the card, but the owner is. That's because horseracing is an expensive hobby and most owners have their own stables. "The owners must house the trainer, provide food, transport, petrol and still don't win very much [65 per cent of prize-money]," explains Fall.

Today, one of Ecurie Reunies's main hopes in the big race, a horse called

Major, is not listed in the owner-trainer's name (Pr Sakhir Thiam), but that of its breeder, Mansour Sylla.

"I sold him to Ecurie Reunie, but they wanted to keep my name as the owner," says Sylla. "In Senegal, owners often do that. Sometimes it's for superstition or luck, but also to promote horseracing and encourage people to join in. If you see the same names of owners all the time on the TV, it doesn't interest young people. In Ireland, you have Coolmore, Godolphin all the time. In Senegal, we have lots of different names to encourage interest and investment."

Underlying challenges

Encouraging investment is a key priority for the industry and the four races preceding the Grand Prix lay bare the scale of the challenge.

First, the climate. The first race starts at 4pm and, while the grandstand is shaded from the beating West African sun, the horses and jockeys are directly in the sun's gaze both in the parade ring, which is marked out by cones on a football pitch in the centre of the course, and on track.

Then there's a safety and quality aspect. The first race of the day is for two-year-old colts over a mile (1,650 metres) and is won by Diofor, trained by prominent owner/trainer Oumar Bao Jr in 2min 28sec (for reference, the last mile Class 6 on the Southwell Fibresand on April 29 was won by Susie Javea in 1min 46sec).

The level of disparity was stark in the opening stages with two horses 30 lengths behind after half a mile and horses strung out over the final circuit

Pictures: MAXIME BUREAU



as if it was the end of the Grand National, not a mile on the Flat. One horse died (the only casualty of the day), the ambulance got stuck in the sand and the jockey, 21-year-old Salif Koba, continued to race that day despite evident bruising to the head.

"Horsing in Senegal has evolved a lot in the last ten years, but our current position is still very far from where we want to be," says Mansour Sylla. "It's hard here for a number of reasons. There is not much

water in sub-Saharan Africa. That means no hay to feed the horses so we use straw and peanuts instead. We also don't have good terrain to train horses. Currently, they use the sand pistes near Lac Rose, but the sand is deep and horses struggle and can injure themselves."

Whether it's the horses' nutrition or the jockeys wearing ski goggles and ripped silks, it all boils down to funding. Senegalese racing is organised by the CNG (Comite

National de Gestion), which establishes the racing calendar, manages race inscriptions, handles raceday operations and, crucially, divvies out the prize-money.

"The president has declared that two per cent of LONASE's [the Senegalese national lottery] receipts are given to the CNG," says Bibo Sy, the premier vice-president of the CNG. "This happens at the end of each month, but there is always a battle between the CNG and LONASE as we want two per cent of revenue and they say two per cent of profits. We currently get about 200 million CFA per year or €300,000, which covers 60 per cent of our budget. The rest comes from sponsoring, entry fees for horses and donations. In total, we therefore have about €500,000 each year and

each raceday costs about €15,000."

This lack of funding makes the prize-money for evening racing on the all-weather look like Champions Day. Today, for instance, the prize-money for most races is two million CFA (£2,600) and five million CFA (£6,500) for the Grand Prix de la Renaissance Africaine; minimal winnings which has a knock-on effect throughout the industry.

"Prize-money is poor and upkeep is expensive," says Mansour Sylla. "That's why trainers want to run their horses two to three times per month to pay all the other fees. It's self-defeating as it harms the horses."

Khadim Sall, part of Moussa Mbacke's Ecurie (one of the few owners who has runners in Europe), agrees. "We need to double the prize-money. Then the jockeys will work harder, the trainers will get better, we'll be able to buy better food and improve the standard of horses and racing. We also need a real stadium with restaurants, a concourse and a parade ring. And shade for jockeys and horses."

Solutions on the horizon

While certainly functional and almost majestic in the late evening glow, the Thies hippodrome lacks the tools to meet Senegalese racing's ambition and a new racetrack is the CNG's number-one priority, according to Bibo Sy.

"We had land near Diamniadio, but the state wanted it back and offered us something bigger near Lac Rose. That's where 80 per cent of the horses are. It's like our Chantilly."

Next on the CNG's wishlist is a desire to "increase the price of the horses, develop a certified training school for trainers and jockeys like you have in Europe and develop the media. At the moment, we have a YouTube channel that is live, but would like to make deals with the likes of Equidia [French racing broadcaster] and show their racing to our audience."

Mansour Sylla believes that better broadcasting will help the sport grow by tapping into new markets of popularity.

"The racing is now broadcast on 2STV, but until three or four months ago it wasn't live and was reduced to a 30-minute segment. Nine out of ten Senegalese people love horses but it's hard to make racing more popular if it's not televised. After football and the Lutte [Senegalese wrestling], it's our third sport. With the right investment it could go past la Lutte."

What's more, developing the industry could create an array of predominantly rural jobs in a country where around 70 per cent of the population is under the age of 30. One way to build the industry is to privatise it, says Fall.

"We need to privatise horseracing. The two per cent LONASE grant is not enough. Ten or 11 per cent would be okay, but if racing was private we could earn a lot more and we could also move to exclusively pur-sang racing like the rest of the world. It would help us get up to an international standard and eradicate doping as it would be regulated by professionals. We have spoken to the minister of breeding and the minister of sport, they are interested, but it's a case of political will."

Improving the standard of racing

and better regulation would also pave the way for betting on Senegalese racing, which is seen by many in the industry as the holy grail in terms of revenue generation. According to Moctar Ba, "the French PMU currently gives around two per cent of the Senegalese bets on French horseracing. We say keep your money, but let us bet on our own racing". A new stadium with on-course betting would be a great start.

The main event

In the meantime, the lack of betting and alcohol at the hippodrome could be one of the reasons for the placid excitement of the crowd. The sounds of clapping and the wafts of camaraderie emanate from the grandstand as racegoers are entertained by showman jockeys who could teach Mickael Barzalona a thing or two about early celebrations.

The winner of the second race claps his hands to the crowd and smiles well before the line. The winner of the fourth race blows kisses to the crowd before and after the post. A famous wrestler and his entourage treat the crowd to a synchronised dance. A red carpet is rolled across the sandy track for winning connections.

There's even a West African version of the Shergar Cup with the inaugural Grand Prix de l'integration Africaine hosting horses and jockeys from Senegal, Mali and Burkina Faso; the crowd standing in attention for all three countries' anthems and the announcer proclaiming: "Vive les courses Africaines, vive le sport Africain, vive l'Afrique" (Long live African racing, long live African sport, long live Africa).

A military band stands in preparation as the 20 runners and riders parade in front of the stands before the big race as one section of the crowd vigorously cheers the runners of Omar Bao Jr. As the stalls open at the far end of the track, the level break is an instant indication of the step up in class, with Major leading them along in the early stages. The runners remain about ten lengths first to last for the first two circuits, but heading into the final quarter-mile two break clear from the pack by around eight lengths.

It's set to be a thrilling head-to-head until, with a kick of late speed that Stradivarius would be proud of, the yellow and blue silks of Aminah Oumah, trained by Omar Bao Jr, hunts them both down and strides seven lengths clear rounding the final bend. Aminah Oumah drifts to the far rail as his jockey snatches a rear glance down the home straight, celebrating with a raised fist as he crosses the line in a winning time of 3min 57sec (Galileo Chrome won the 2020 St Leger over roughly the same distance in 3min 37sec), with Major finishing in fifth and the others crossing the line within 15 lengths.

Spectators and connections flood the sandy track. The winning jockey pumps his breastplate to the crowd. The winning stable boys run up and down the track blowing whistles and swinging Aminah Oumah's blanket like a matador's cape. The police temper the celebrations, but they needn't have worried. Like the whole day of racing, this was pure revelry, joy and pride. An unadulterated love of horse racing. Racing in its essence.

'IN IRELAND, YOU HAVE COOLMORE, GODOLPHIN ALL THE TIME. IN SENEGAL, WE HAVE LOTS OF DIFFERENT NAMES TO ENCOURAGE INTEREST AND INVESTMENT'