By Rob Pilsworth MRCVS

Vetting for Hong Kong

Every new season sees more and more horses sold to race in Hong Kong from Europe, but there will be many others who have been targeted but have not passed the region's stringent vetting process, explained here

ROB PILSWORTH

Figure 1 The population and housing density in Hong Kong (Fig 1a) means that racehorses compete directly with people for space. The racetracks are ringed by tower blocks (Fig 1b). Horses simply have to perform, to make the case for racing

With the horses-in-training sales just around the corner, Newmarket Equine Hospital recently hosted a one-day scientific meeting entitled 'Vetting the Thoroughbred Racehorse'. This meeting covered many of the areas of complexity encountered in 'vettings', and gave the 50 or so delegates present a massive amount of information and food for thought. One area covered was the often contentious vetting procedure required for the importation of a horse into Hong Kong. Dr Chris Riggs, head of the Department of Veterinary Clinical Services for Hong Kong Jockey Club (HKJC), made the trip over from Hong Kong to explain just why vetting for the jurisdiction might appear to be different, and to justify the reasons.

Riggs made the point early on that the HKJC plays no part at all in the purchase of horses, other than a very small number of yearlings for their own annual sale held in Hong Kong itself. The purchase and related veterinary examinations constitute a private contract between the seller, the veterinary surgeon and the prospective owner in Hong Kong. The vetting procedure laid down by the HKJC relates only to the owner being granted permission to import the horse.

Of course, the worst scenario is for the vet to pass the horse for purchase and for the HKJC to deny it an entry permit, so effectively the two things are closely interlinked. To understand fully the pressures involved with those dealing with the importation of horses to Hong Kong one has to understand something about racing in Hong Kong in general.

Racing started there in 1841, when the British drained an area of malarial swampland to produce the Happy Valley racecourse. A second racecourse was opened on land reclaimed from the sea in Sha Tin in the new territories in 1978. At both sites, the huge demands of population and housing (*Fig 1a*) inevitably restrict the land that is available for racing (*Fig 1b*).

Hong Kong Island and the new territories occupy a total area of just over 1,000 square kilometres, less than 0.5 % of the land area of the United Kingdom, yet this land mass supports a population of eight million people – approximately 12% of the British population. This impacts massively on the space available for stabling racehorses.

Racehorses are all stabled at Sha Tin (they commute to and from Happy Valley by horse box) in 'high-rise' stable blocks (*see Fig 2*) and it is this pressure on numbers that impacts massively on the very strict and stringent requirements for a horse to get in at all. With a maximum racing population of 1,200 horses (less than half the number stabled in Newmarket for instance) the HKJC simply cannot afford to have horses arrive for racing, only for them soon to become injured or unable to train.

Size of the industry

In addition to requirements for space, racing in Hong Kong plays a big part in many aspects of the region's economy and development. Betting turnover in Hong Kong is over £11 billion. Payments of duty to the Hong Kong government from racehorse betting total over £1 billion annually, with £707 million donated to local HKJC charities. Average attendance at race meetings is 18,000 people at Happy Valley and 30,000 at Sha Tin; these are huge numbers and reflect the enormous significance of racing to this region. Racing has to work.

Racehorse ownership

Unlike in the UK, where anybody can buy a horse and place it with a trainer, in Hong Kong the acquisition of racehorses is strictly controlled. The HKJC owns all of the facilities in which horses are stabled and trained. The horses are privately owned, but the owner must be an established member of the HKJC, and possess a valid permit, in order to import a horse. Permits are limited in number - the allocation of permits is significantly oversubscribed every year, with a ballot held to determine their distribution. Many Hong Kong racehorse owners are hugely wealthy, highly successful people, who are not used to being told what they can and can't do, so this restriction can set up a degree of anxiety from the outset.

Once in Hong Kong, horses are distributed to one of 23 trainers, according to the owner's wishes, but the trainers themselves are also limited to a maximum of 60 horses each (the introduction of the new facility at Conghua has allowed some trainers to increase horse numbers to 70, but only very recently.)

Public scrutiny

As direct employees of the HKJC, all veterinarians are required to maintain detailed treatment records, and any information which might affect the racing performance of the horse is published for open access on the HKJC 's website. For this reason, there is no possibility of covert action by the vet being able to mask potential problems in a racehorse with a pre-existing condition. Everything is open to public and press scrutiny, all the time.

Racehorse numbers

In addition to the paucity of physical space, the Jockey Club is limited to staging a maximum of 88 race meetings each season. With a maximum of 1,200 racehorses this means that these horses have to be busy. Each horse has to race on average 6.7 times a season, meaning at least every six weeks. Given that high-profile horses would probably race less often, this means that the majority of racehorses in Hong Kong have to run at least seven times per season.

Costs and benefits

All the costs associated with racing in Hong Kong are high. The cost of importation alone is approximately £15,000, and training fees amount to over £4,500 a month. Prize-money is also high — over HK$1 million on average — and the purses involved in Group 1 races are regularly in the order of several million. This all adds to the pressure. These horses are there to race, the prize-money is massive, and if they can't race there's no possibility of the owner recouping any of the significant costs involved.

Vetting for import

Any potential import first has to undergo a rigorous five-stage vetting procedure by a vet appointed by the owner or his agent. The HKJC has published a detailed protocol and a suitable pro-forma document for the vet to complete. In addition, it has specified a list of the exact radiographic projections required in the set of x-rays, and what ultrasound scans to perform. Once the veterinary examination is completed, the vet has a choice of three summary conclusions. The first is that the horse has no abnormality to affect its suitability for racing at all, and that the horse meets the requirements of importation to Hong Kong.

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Figure 2 The 'high-rise' stable blocks, with walkways down to the track, developed to accommodate as many horses as possible in the tight space available

The second alternative is that the horse clinically meets the requirements of the HKJC, but in that vet's opinion there is a finding of a low or moderate potential significance or risk for racing that has been noted. The prospective owner should be made aware of these findings, so that an informed decision can be made whether or not to proceed with the importation.

The third is that the vet considers the horse just doesn't meet requirements for importation. So the examination is often not just a 'pass' or 'fail' situation. There are grey areas, and some horses will need discussion before a decision is made. In addition to this first hurdle, the vet's report, and all of the diagnostic images obtained, then have to be forwarded to a second nominated vet, appointed by the HKJC.

This panel of nominated experts acts as a quality control mechanism on the initial examination, and a second pair of eyes on all of the images. All of these nominated veterinary surgeons are highly experienced and reputable equine veterinarians, in each of the major exporting regions. They act as a filter to reject images of insufficient diagnostic quality, or certification that has not been completed correctly, before these are forwarded to Hong Kong. They may also require re-examination of the horse, and they have the power to overrule the opinion of the original examining vet.

Finally, the nominated veterinary surgeon has to submit a report directly to the HKJC for review and final approval. So what are the common reasons for this process to result in the failure to obtain such a permit?

Horses for courses

The racing conditions in Hong Kong are very different to those encountered in the UK or in Europe. Almost all of the training is done on dirt or synthetic surfaces. While most races are on turf, this turf is unlike that which we are used to in the UK. It is grown on a layer of sand mixed with small squares of nylon mesh which is laid on top of a free-draining, hard base, to cope with the torrential rain which can fall in Hong Kong. This highly efficient drainage system ensures a consistency in the turf, almost irrespective of rainfall. Racing is rarely disrupted by the weather. All racing is on oval tracks, and this puts different potential loads on the limb to those that would be encountered in most racing in the UK. For this reason many racehorses that could continue to train and race satisfactorily in Europe may struggle to be competitive in Hong Kong. It's filtering out these horses that is the prime goal of the importation procedure.

Another difference between Hong Kong and elsewhere is the standard inclusion of a mandatory pre-race veterinary check. Every horse which runs in Hong Kong is jogged-up beforehand by a vet appointed by the HKJC and has to be deemed to have a good enough action to be allowed to race. Although in the UK the BHA is rumoured to have a 'bad-mover list' for horses that might be routinely monitored pre-race, this is not a mandatory part of routine racing. In Hong Kong, such 'bad movers' may simply not be allowed to start, ever.

The most common reason for injury requiring retirement in Hong Kong is over-strain of the superficial digital flexor tendon (a 'bowed tendon'). Although the bane of jumpers in this part of the world, this would most certainly not be the case in Flat horses, where the injury is relatively uncommon. This means that ››

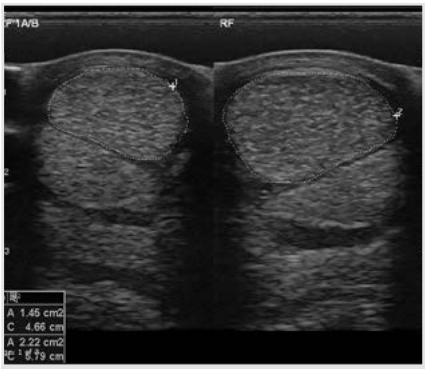

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Figure 3 *Asymmetric cross-sectional area of the superficial flexor tendon in a racehorse. The tendon on the right is significantly larger than the one on the left, despite showing no actual defect in fibre pattern or general echogenicity. Although this tendon would be completely manageable trained within the UK, Hong Kong vets have come to view this type of asymmetry as presenting increased risk for later developing a 'bowed' tendon*

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Figure 4 *A dorsopalmar flexed view of the right fore fetlock of a three-year-old racehorse. There is a semilunar crescent-shaped lucency in the lateral condyl, indicative of the surface of the cartilage wearing through, allowing resorption of the bone underneath the cartilage (the subchondral bone). This lesion resulted in this horse being rejected for importation into Hong Kong. He continued to race at a high level with great success for a further two years, but there is no knowing what the result would have been had the horse continued his career in Hong Kong*

(COURTESY MARCUS HEAD)

Figure 5 *A subchondral bone cyst (white arrow) in the accessory carpal bone of the left knee in a yearling. Whilst this radiographic finding might be of concern in a young horse with its entire career ahead of it, it may well be considered suitable for importation following a proven racing career*

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Figure 6 *An irregular proximal sesamoid bone. This bone may cause concern at a pre-sale vetting of a two-year-old, but may well be acceptable for Hong Kong in an older horse with a proven race record. This apparent inconsistency is totally explicable by the fact that once the horse has reached the age of three or four and has raced and trained without interruption, it is very unlikely that this lesion will cause trouble in the future*

›› HKJC standards will be especially high for tendons. Recently Hong Kong vets have introduced a mandatory requirement for assessment of the cross-sectional area of the tendon, with an upper acceptable cut-off. They have a perception, as yet unsubstantiated scientifically, that horses with enlarged tendons, or which have difference in size between the two tendons (*see Fig 3*) represent an increased risk of the development of later tendonitis.

The second injury 'hot-spot' in Hong Kong is the front fetlock joint, particularly subchondral bone lesions. For this reason they require very high standard radiographs of the front fetlock joints, including flexed views, so that the integrity and composition of the subchondral bone in the fetlock can be fully evaluated. The radiograph shown in figure 4 is from a horse which failed pre-importation requirements to HK but carried on winning at a high level in the UK. The horse clearly bears a lesion of subchondral bone resorption (white arrow) that would always put it at increased risk of developing lameness. This type of case is used to highlight the perceived inadequacies in the Hong Kong vetting system, but of course this horse may not have been able to perform on the different track surfaces encountered there, had the purchase been allowed to proceed.

Another of the listed conditions for potential unsuitability for importation is the presence of a bone cyst, but a cyst would not always be a straight rule-out. A discreet cyst, like the one shown in figure 5, within the accessory carpal bone at the back of the knee, might be of concern in an unbroken yearling, but in a horse of three or four with no problems or career breaks, it would almost certainly be accepted. So the same lesion can both present obstacles, and be acceptable, in differing circumstances. The same is true of some cases of sesamoiditis (*Fig 6*).

Owners of horses put up for sale which don't pass the test may well feel aggrieved at being denied a very advantageous sale for a good price. Conversely, the HKJC vets will be 'blasted' by their racing community if their owners are allowed to buy a horse which later rapidly has problems and is unable to race. As Dr Riggs pointed out, Hong Kong owners have high expectations. They've paid a lot of money, and often see their purchase of a racehorse in the same light as the purchase of a sports car. Both are expected to perform. The HK vetting system is there to give them the best shot at making that happen.