

New sport takes off



Above: Shaikh Mohammed and his two daughters circulate on their mounts awaiting the start of a race.



Left: Two competitors flying toward the finish with a packed gallery watching.

Below left: Princess Anne competes in the third race of the season.

by Matt Howard and John Weld
in Dubai and Abu Dhabi

It was almost history repeating itself when 40 Arabian horses charged across the dunes and rough terrain in search of victory. The scene was spectacular as the desert literally came alive on the day of the first official long distance flat race.

The inaugural event in this, one of the toughest and most testing types of equine event in the world, took place in the Al Asayl region of Abu Dhabi in early December.

It was a daunting 40 kilometres of desert terrain that lay ahead of the competitors as they lined up at the start waiting for the flag to be dropped.

The start scene was to become familiar as the event grew in popularity throughout the season, a mad dash



towards the first of the veterinary checkpoints in what seemed to be organised mayhem as the riders began their conquest on the UAE's untamed desert, followed in force by a multitude of four-wheel-drive vehicles.

With the helicopters hovering overhead, it was HH The President's horse Rahal and Obaid Ghadeer Al Thahiry who came out of the dust cloud and across the line, followed home quickly

by Caroline Kettle on Roy-naz.

With the first event under their belts, the organising committee were able to address all the problems in readiness for the next event.

This time taking place in the Ghantoot region, it was a second pillar-to-post victory for Rahal and Al Thahiry. The changes which had been made for this event included a more substantial pre-race veterinary examination,

where a number of horses were disqualified demonstrating how seriously the safety issue is now being taken.

Dr Patricia Ellis, head of the Veterinary Committee, commented: "The pre-race check is vital and gives us an idea of any horses which may need to be monitored throughout the race."

HRH Princess Anne, The Princess Royal, was the headline attraction at the third race which took place during the Holy Month of Ramadan. Galloping alongside Princess Anne was HH General Shaikh Mohammed bin Rashid Al Maktoum and his two daughters in this incomparable day of desert thrills.

Abdullah Humaid, one of the UAE's top showjumpers, aboard Cetanol took the race in a time of just over one hour; meanwhile the Princess Royal was demon-

Future of long-distance racing assured — Mansoor

The future of the new and exciting sport of long distance flat racing looks assured after the positive responses following its first season in the UAE.

"This is a new sport different from elsewhere, which has grown very fast, and I am especially happy to see so many nationals training and riding in these events,"

commented Shaikh Mansoor bin Zayed Al Nahyan. "I hope that we have reached the point where the sport will become better organised with a schedule, maybe racing once every fortnight."

Another keen follower and supporter of the sport is Shaikh Sultan bin Khalifa Al Nahyan, director of the UAE Equestrian and Racing

Federation, who commented: "The organisation of endurance racing becomes better with every event that is held. We will do even better next time."

The organising committee are already busy preparing a programme which could include as many as 20 races over the course of the next season.

strating the philosophy of endurance riding — 'To compete is to win' — and the common sense of an experienced horsewoman as she voluntarily retired her fatigued mount, finishing the race instead on the horse of trainer Bill Smith.

The final long distance flat race took place at the beginning of April. Weather conditions were quickly becoming far from ideal, but by the time the race began the temperature had dropped to a reasonable level.

It was Qatar's champion jockey Talib Al Saaq who successfully switched his talents from the racecourse to claim the honours on Belvedere Laska. Better organised, the fourth event of the season was a vastly superior product than even the beginning of the winter.

As the race began a number of riders went off at what can only be described as a suicidal pace, but they quickly dropped away.

This was when Al Saaq took up the running showing the kind of skill that had earned him third place in the Qatar International Desert Marathon. Al Saaq had a number of challengers but always looked like being the winner, competing the 28 kilometre course in 44.33 minutes with an average speed of 38kmph.

Shaikh Hamdan bin Mohammed Al Maktoum proved that age was no barrier as he skillfully rode his horse Najwaan into fourth place.

The improvements made between each race this season bode well for what must be a very bright future for this innovative and exhilarating equestrian sport.



Trainer Ali Al Amri outside the Al Wathba endurance stables with champion endurance horse Rahal.

Stables in the sands

by Matt Howard and Steve Best
in Al Wathba

In a mere six months, Shaikh Mansoor bin Zayed Al Nahyan has created an equestrian training centre which he feels is at the forefront of the development of the new equine sport.

With long distance flat racing in the UAE flourish-

ing and being taken seriously, the horse and riders who compete regularly need to reach and retain their peak level of fitness and performance.

The first purpose-built endurance training stables are located in the arid desert region of Al Wathba, just half an hour drive outside the sprawling Abu Dhabi metropolis. As you head out into the desert and

the tarmac turns to rough track carving through the smooth dunes, you come across a magnificent white structure at the top of a far dune. As you approach, it is instantly recognisable as the UAE's leading stable for endurance horses.

It is here among the dunes that Ali Al Amri, endurance horse trainer, is based.

"This winter we have firmly established long distance flat racing as a sport, and I now hope that we can work to lay down guidelines on how the sport is to be run," Al Amri said. "Long distance flat racing takes the stamina of endurance racing but without allowing for the periods of trotting and walking.

"This means to be successful we must have the horses fitter than they would be for endurance."

The current stable star is seven-year-old Anglo-Arabian Rahal, who has been first past the post on two occasions in the UAE, both times ridden by Obaid Ghadeer Al Tahiry.

"He is a fantastic horse and great to train," commented Al Amri.

With the five kilometre training track and the equine swimming pool it is easy to see why the horses of Al Wathba are so fit.

"We train each of them six days a week over 25 to 30 kilometres, which can be boring so we alternate with the swimming pool.

"We are also planning to grass the inside of the track so that the horses are able to be turned out and relax," said Al Amri.