



*The tropical island of Martinique offers sun, sand and—surprise!—harness racing*

*Al Terwilliger, founder and president of Protecto Equipment, is a world traveler who enjoys few things more than a good race or a relaxing vacation. He was able to combine both on a 2005 trip to Martinique, where he discovered harness racing in the most tropical of settings. Here is his story.*

**Martinique is a beautiful French tropical island in the Caribbean, with its soft black sand, warmth, unique French cuisine with an added touch of Creole dishes, and its Caribbean music and dance is truly an island with style.**

**And on a recent visit there I had a chance to practice my French, swim, dance, party, and show harness racing equipment. That's right, harness racing equipment.**

**My trip was the result of an e-mail from Jean Francois Gate, a high official of this beautiful island, wanting to purchase harness horse equipment for the Virgin Islands' only harness racing program.**

**The Hippodrome de la Martinique is a brand-new track in the heart of Martinique, about a mile from its Fort of France Airport. This beautiful new track with its tropical settings would compete with any modern track in the world, possessing modern facilities with new rooms for the video system, photo finish, drug testing, office of the police chiefs, and a room for the drivers.**

**Not only does the island have pari-mutual racing, but the stands were full of bettors to watch harness races, mixed with some Thoroughbred racing. The horses raced at different distances, so the fans never get bored.**

**People can only bet at the racetrack. The type or a classification of a race depends on the number of horses in the race (the maximum is 12). Prize money for the owners is paid in euros and is always the same: €1500 for the winner, €800 for second, €450 for third and €250 for fourth. For €1, a bettor may win more than €60 (One euro equals about 1.18 U.S. dollars).**

**Harness racing in Martinique started at the end of the 1980s by the island people. Owners and horsemen were at the time all from Martinique, but it has evolved to attract more participants from France who work in Martinique, or retired Frenchmen enjoying the good life.**

**Horses come exclusively from France after their professional career is over. The island people own these horses, and many also handle training duties as well.**

**Martinique recently had a Harness Festival, where many of their most famous drivers and jockeys were imported from France to race during the festival time.**

**Jean Francois Gate is a very distinguished looking Frenchman whose title is "commissaire de la direction générale de la concurrence, de la consommation et de la répression des fraudes," and his job is to coordinate the racing efforts. His job is part of the Ministry of Economy for the French Government.**

**Gate arrived in Martinique in 1979 to do his military service as an economical technician, and went back to France two years later, but the Islands called him back in 1985. He has a master's degree in public law, and is also a horseman who loves trotters.**

**Gate said that most of the trainers on the island are amateurs, but I am not too sure about that. One of his trainers worked at the famous training center of Grosbois near Paris, which is the largest training center in Europe. He also says that trainers and owners on the Island have regular jobs, and race the horses for the fun and enjoyment.**

**I dined with Gate and some horsemen at the famous "Ferme de Perrine," a French-Creole restaurant, and asked Gate what things American race fans should know about Martinique Racing--how is it the same or different than what American fans know? He laughed and**

said that the only difference is a unique location on a tropical Caribbean Island with racing trotters.

But differences can be found.

Picture a Standardbred horse and driver resting under a coconut tree! As I walked through the training center I saw just that, and it sure looked comfortable.

Last year they only had a total of 16 days of racing, with hopes of more dates to come in the future. When the track is closed, horses go deep in the countryside, or stay in the stalls and paddocks at the racetrack. Sometimes, the horses are taken to the beach and can swim in the ocean.

Indeed, island trainers are no different than any other horse person. They love their horses and their racing, and except for speaking in French, they would fit in any barn in the U.S. On the French mainland you will find some of the best trotters in the world, and the French have some terrific horse trainers and drivers.

Growth plans for racing's future in the islands is dependant on three things, said Gates:

1. Prize money comes from the Société du Cheval Français, which is the equivalent of the USTA. It is the national institution that supervises all the trotting races in France, including Martinique. It provides the prize money, but it cannot hope to make ends meet in the islands because of transport costs and the price of shipping food to this island.

2. The condition of the track is a concern for training and racing their horses. They have only one track at their disposal for the training and racing of their horses. The track can get very damaged from the rainy season and can become dangerous. They also are prone to hurricanes.

3. Because of the strictness of the "Société des Courses," it is a permanent fight to obtain anything from the Societe des Courses, being thousands of miles from the French mainland. The cost of shipping horses, food, equipment for the horses, etc., can take its toll on the island horsemen.

There is no hay on the island, but the island is abundantly covered by tall kelly-green grass, as high as six feet. The island people cut this grass in three- to six-foot lengths, tie it in bundles, and feed this grass to their horses. I am sure this grass is loaded with the best nourishments and the horses just loved eating it, but I am equally sure my own horses would colic just looking at it. Horses seem to adjust to any and all environmental conditions.

The island horsemen seem to have some positive things going for them—most notably the ability to use racing to attract tourists. During the winter months when tourists flock to this paradise, they seek something extra to do, and racing would fit the bill.

Using most of the live racing dates during these busy winter months would allow travelers to flock to the island sun, and racing would flourish in Martinique. Simulcasting could also be offered year-round with a small investment by the parties. As in the States, the Martinique horsemen would get a percent of the bet to be used for their purses or prize money, and local government would likely appreciate the extra money it would receive.

The French island horsemen had a strong camaraderie and a strong curiosity about American horses and equipment. I only hope our bond grows even stronger.

Oh, and about that black sand...

On May 8, 1902 Mount Pelée, a volcano on the island, erupted, and the volcanic ash turned the sand black. The volcano destroyed the town of St. Pierre, killing over 30,000 people. Only one resident survived this volcanic blast--a prisoner, who was protected by the thick walls of his prison cell.

I really hate to say au revoir to this enchanting island in the sun, but I know I will be back.

**SEE PICTURES BELOW**





