



RICK SAMUELS

Mersant coordinates the shipment and arrival of a filly entered in a race at Keeneland.

## COME FLY WITH US

MERSANT INTERNATIONAL IS A PREMIER SHIPPER  
OF THE WORLD'S FINEST THOROUGHBREDS AS WELL AS  
EXOTIC ANIMALS, NETWORK NEWS CREWS,  
AND OTHER UNUSUAL CARGO

By Cynthia Grisolia

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On a warm, sunny September afternoon Joe Santarelli Jr. and his partners, Harry "Pancho" Zahariou and Christopher Santarelli, sit on the brick-lined patio just outside the walking ring in the Keeneland sales pavilion, collecting buyers' sales slips like offerings as the drone of the auctioneer and the bang of the hammer send yearling after yearling on its way: A bay filly is bound for a breaking and training center in Florida; some California buyers are having their chestnut colt shipped back to the Golden State; and foreign buyers may need tickets for exotic places far across the globe: Korea, Kazakstan, Argentina, and other points north, east, south, and west.

The Santarellis and Zahariou are principals of Mersant International Ltd., a global livestock and freight shipper that is considered one of the premier agents serving the Thoroughbred industry — whether a horse is headed to a major racing hub across the country or to a breeding shed in one of the four corners of the globe.

A three-generation, family-owned business, the company originated in the 1950s with grandfather Joseph C. Santarelli working as a customs broker and freight forwarder at Harlo-Air Cargo Brokers. He passed the baton to his sons, Joseph Sr. and Charles, who founded Mersant with business partner Charles Merendino in 1977 (the name is a merging of Merendino and Santarelli). Today the company is run by Joe Jr., his brother Christopher, uncle Charles, and cousin Chuck, along with Zahariou. While

company headquarters are based at JFK airport in New York, Mersant also has an office in Lexington, Ky., where conveying horses from one place to another is central to business.

As horse transporters, Mersant provides what it likes to call “barn to barn” service. And the company has established itself as being one of the best in the biz, shipping approximately 18,000 horses annually for everyone from trainers such as Kiaran McLaughlin and Sir Michael Stoute to such notable breeding farms as Darley America and William S. Farish’s Lane’s End. Mersant has even helped out a world leader or two. “We were contacted



Above, a horse arrives safely at its destination. Below, Andrea Branchini, right, oversees the transfer of a filly from a DHL flight to the van that will take her to Keeneland from Cincinnati/Northern Kentucky International Airport.

to bring Alysheba back from Saudi Arabia on a chartered aircraft in 2008,” said Joe Santarelli. At the time, the Kentucky Derby winner and 1988 Horse of the Year was being returned to the United States (specifically to the Kentucky Horse Park’s Hall of Champions) as a gift from His Royal Highness King Abdullah to then President George W. Bush. “We did everything for that,” added Santarelli, “which was really cool.”

Short domestic trips are fairly straightforward, with horses usually headed to the opposite coast for a big race day. “Typically this can be done quickly utilizing Federal Express,” noted Santarelli. But the logistics of foreign travel, taking, say, a stallion in California to a farm or racetrack in England, Australia, Russia, Japan, the United Arab Emirates, or Libya is nothing short of Herculean, and this is where Mersant’s expertise truly kicks in. “It can be very intricate,” said Santarelli. “The European Union would sort of be standard. But

once you get into some of the Middle Eastern countries and places like Australia or South Africa the requirements will vary quite a bit, based on the demands of that ministry. Our job is to handle it from A to Z,” he added, noting that this includes fulfilling each country’s veterinary conditions, making quarantine arrangements, preparing travel documents (horses have passports, too), to scheduling all vans, flights, and professional “fly” grooms. “We like to make it a simple process for the client,” he said.

Mersant will also work to make it as economical as possible for the client. Santarelli estimates that an average trip



From left, Harry “Pancho” Zahariou, Joe Santarelli Jr., and Keeneland’s Tom Thornbury

to Europe can cost an owner between \$8,000 and \$12,000, depending on specifics. Meanwhile, a trek to the Middle East or Australia would be more like \$15,000 to \$21,000 per horse.

When traveling internationally, horses go via plane. (“We do a lot of ocean freight,” said Santarelli, “but not with horses.”) And Mersant has partnerships with numerous airlines, including KLM, Singapore Airlines, Lufthansa Cargo, Emirates, and Federal Express. The oversized passengers travel on “pallets” that are more or less movable stalls that accommodate three equines — think of this as flying coach. A client can request more legroom for his horse, such as only two on a pallet (sort of like business class) or even one (luxury first class).

Needless to say, when dealing with 1,200-pound animals a lot could go wrong at 37,000 feet. But interestingly,



RICK SAMUELS

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with more and more horses racking up frequent flyer miles these days, Santarelli says little has over the years. The weather, on the other hand, can sometimes be much more of a sticky wicket — but not for the reasons you might expect. “In order to load cargo we use something called a scissor lift,” he said. “If the hydraulics on the lift freeze, it won’t work. Planes can fly in snow or rain, but if the loading equipment doesn’t work ... it’s very detrimental.”

With the attention to detail that’s required, Sarah Munoz, who manages Mersant’s Lexington office, compared a successful journey to a symphony performance. At a recent shipping “I was standing there by the aircraft thinking, ‘This is like an orchestra — everybody has a part to play,’” said Munoz. “And

when the plane is finally in the air, it’s like, ‘Yeah!’ Everything has to go right,” she added. “And it’s our job to make that look simple.”

Mersant has been the official agent for the Breeders’ Cup World Championships since 1985 and the official U.S. agent for the Dubai World Cup since 1996. Consequently, it has had the privilege of transporting some rather classy horses around the world. To name drop just a few, Mersant sent “the invincible” Cigar to the inaugural Dubai World Cup in ‘96 (a race he won with authority) and ushered English champion Ouija Board to the United States for her double wins in the Breeders’ Cup Filly & Mare Turf. In 2013 it escorted American super mare Royal Delta and Kentucky Derby winner Animal Kingdom on the roughly 18-hour flight to

Dubai for that year’s World Cup.

Barry Irwin, CEO of Team Valor International, which co-owns Animal Kingdom, credits Mersant with helping to keep its champ ready to race. “When we ship horses long distances, we have a hydration protocol that we use, which takes a lot of preparation,” said Irwin. “It takes expertise to administer, and we need help from them while the horse is in the air. Some companies balk; some say they’ll do it and don’t. But these guys have always been extremely helpful and very reliable. They know what they’re doing.” (They must: Animal Kingdom won the Cup by three lengths.)

Show horses traveling to international competitions or circling the globe for breeding purposes are also regular cargo. The company recently imported several Grand Prix jumpers from Europe for rock superstar Bruce Springsteen whose daughter, Jessica, is an international competitor. Town & Country Farm owner Kiki Courtelis just imported two Warm-blood geldings from Holland.

But while Mersant has built a reputation in horse transportation, not every payload is of the equine variety. Over the years the company has expanded its services to include other out-of-the-ordinary — even exotic — cargo, making it one of the few multi-faceted freight-forwarding businesses in the United States. “We’re the official pet-traveling company for Emirates Airlines,” said Chuck Santarelli, who is Mersant’s vice president of operations. “So we send a lot of dogs and cats to the Middle East for expats being relocated for new jobs. It’s a part of our business that has grown significantly in the last five or 10 years.”

Chuck Santarelli also oversees shipments of exotic animals for zoos, from San Diego to the Bronx, and the freight-



Racehorses are loaded into an Emirates Airlines cargo plane en route to Dubai for the World Cup.

ers have transported enough rare critters to fill an issue of *National Geographic*. Giraffes have gone to China, spectacled bears to the UK, falcons have traveled from San Francisco to the UAE, and the Bronx Zoo even sent spray toads to Africa to be reintroduced to the wild.

News and sports agencies are also customers. Mersant handles paperwork for traveling network reporters, delivers Indy 500 tapes around the world for ESPN, and regularly courier game tapes to Japan for the NFL. Other goods include luxury cars, American-made trucks (Toyota Tundras are popular), designer fashions, and even fresh fish. “The industry has changed,” said Joe Santarelli, “and Mersant has had to adapt to the current times. We have had to find new revenue streams — not just horses — to be able to compete on a global scale.”

There’s even one boutique service available that the company doesn’t advertise on its website or in brochures: personal shopping. “We do a lot of work for several royal families,” said Joe Santarelli. “They will ask us to get them an Hermes Birkin handbag or Fendi purses,” he said, adding that one client

recently asked them to shop for quite a few pricey home goods at New York’s ultra-stylish ABC Carpet & Home store. “We’ve bought perfume from Chanel. We’ve gone to Crate & Barrel and Toys R Us — how cool is that?” he said. “We’re very diverse!” Expertise and professionalism aside, Santarelli believes it’s this kind of relationship with a client that sets Mersant apart from the freight-forwarding pack.

Back on the patio, the yearling sale begins to come to a close for the day, but the affable Santarelli is still meeting and greeting. “This is our area,” he pointed out. “Everyone knows we’re here. We thought about putting in a bar,” he added with a laugh as he wandered off to say hello to a patron.

Mersant’s customers have come to expect the best, and the Santarelli family is only too happy to deliver (pun intended) — whether it’s a cherry red Lamborghini landing in Qatar or a stakes winner safely arriving from Newmarket. “Our clientele is extremely loyal, and we’re very proud of that,” said Santarelli. “It’s really humbling to have these people entrust you with their horses.” KM



From hot rods and luxury sports cars to exotic cats and penguins, Mersant moves a diverse array of cargo.



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