

Mielka Warszawska

1ST OF OCTOBER 2023
SŁUŻEWIEC RACECOURSE | WARSAW, POLAND

Listed race for 3-yo and up horses / distance 2600 m

Deadline for entries until 23/08 to 12 PM | Additional entry possible for an extra charge till 20/09.

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PLAN FOR THE DAY

- | 5 international races for 2-yo, 3-yo and older horses
- | 1200 m - 3200 m distances
- | Total prize money 157 879 €/140 028 £



HISTORIC BLACK TYPE RACE FOR

POLAND



ABOVE: Night Tornado (11) and jockey Stefano Mura on their way to winning the Wielka Warszawska 2022, a race they won for the second year running at Sluzewiec Racecourse.

On Sunday, October 1st, Poland's first ever internationally recognised Listed Race will be staged. The €100,000 Wielka Warszawska, for three-year-olds and upwards, is run over 2600m/13f of the impressive, 50-metre wide, turf track at Warsaw's Sluzewiec Racecourse.

At its meeting in Ireland in February, the European Pattern Committee (EPC) confirmed its decision to award Black Type to the race, deeming it to have met the conditions of the recently introduced 'flagship race' scheme. Poland is the second country (after Spain) to benefit from this scheme, introduced last year, which gives EMHF member nations which have no internationally recognised Group or Listed races the opportunity to apply for a single 'flagship race.' This race is treated slightly more leniently than other races when being assessed for Black Type. Normally, the average internationally

agreed rating of the first four finishers in the most recent three runnings of the race should be 100 or over. Under this scheme, a score of 95 in any two of the three most recent renewals is the threshold.

How did the Polish race meet the standard? It was undoubtedly given a boost in 2020, when the globe-trotting Czech-trained Nagano Gold (GB) – who had recently run second in both the Gp.2 Hardwicke Stakes at Royal Ascot and the Gp.1 Grand Prix de Saint Cloud – graced Poland's premier track with his presence. Nagano Gold, then a six-year-old, prevailed by just a $\frac{1}{2}$ length from a locally trained three-year-old named Night Tornado.

No one could tell at the time that Night Tornado would go on to be quite the star of the show, winning both the 2021 and 2022 editions, more recently with French- and German-trained raiders in his wake, including Nania (GER), who was fresh off a victory in a Hannover Listed Race.

>

Jakub Kasprzak



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KASPRZAK BEFORE THE EPC'S DECISION



ABOVE: Warsaw's impressive Sluzewiec Racecourse.

< Attaining Black Type is not only an honour for Polish racing but has wider implications, according to Jakub Kasprzak, racing secretary at the Polish Jockey Club and recently voted onto the nine-strong executive council of the EMHF – another example of Polish racing's growing profile.

Kasprzak reflected on the prospect in the run-up to the EPC's decision: "If the Wielka Warszawska receives the Black Type status, it will undoubtedly be a great distinction and appreciation of Polish racing. The race has a long tradition, and several horses have appeared in the international arena. In addition, for the entire central and eastern European region, it will be a great opportunity to popularise racing."

But Kasprzak is keeping his feet firmly on the ground: "Of course, we know that receiving such an award is really the beginning of the hard work, to show that it was not a 'fluke.' Personally, I am very happy, but I approach it with caution, being aware of the new challenges it poses for us."

The journey that Polish racing has taken to get to this point is tumultuous. It has featured the need to rebuild from scratch on no fewer than three occasions and can only be understood in the context of the history of Poland overall.

The first organised races were run in Warsaw in 1841, on the Mokotow Field, now a large park just south of the city centre, which houses the Polish National Library. At the time, there was no 'Poland.' This was in the middle of a 123-year period during which Poland did not exist—having been partitioned in the late eighteenth century between Austria, Prussia and Russia. Warsaw fell into the Russian area and, since 1815, within a semi-autonomous state entitled Congress Poland. The Russian regime curtailed economic and public activity in the region, and racing in Warsaw was, for example, completely suspended between 1861 and 1863.

Originally a dirt track, four stands were erected along its finishing straight. In 1888, it moved to turf, at a time of fresh prosperity: pool betting had recently been introduced and was providing funds for prize money.

At this time, the horses were predominantly domestically bred, oriental horses, initially favoured by Polish breeders as they had historically provided Poland with success on the battlefield. However, the supremacy of the thoroughbred over racing distances (2km–5km) began to be recognised over time; and a thoroughbred breeding industry developed, drawing stallions and broodmares predominantly from England, France, Germany and Austria.

The stud of Count Ludwik Krasinski was pre-eminent in the four decades leading up to the first World War. Based in Krasne, (100kms to the north of Warsaw), it ranked top across the whole Russian Empire on 14 occasions. It produced the winners of five all-Russian derbies, in Moscow, including the famed Ruler.

This was an outward-looking period of international competition and success, with Polish-breds winning Classic races in Austria, Germany and Hungary. Two-year-old racing was introduced in the 1880s. (Initially, races were for four-year-olds and up only.) Trainers and riders were often brought in from abroad, and a breakthrough in riding styles occurred in 1901 when American jockey Cassius Sloan showcased the shorter-stirruped style to great effect and was soon mimicked by the domestic riders.

World War I put a stop to all this. In 1915, the racing stables were evacuated to the East. However, the racing spirit was not snuffed out and the president of the Horse Racing Society at the time, Fryderyk Jurjewicz, gathered most of the Polish stables at the track in Odessa (Ukraine) and organised races there throughout the rest of the war. Following which, in the Spring of 1919, about 250 thoroughbreds began their return home, arriving at the Warsaw track on June 28, laying the foundations for thoroughbred racing and breeding in a newly reborn independent Poland. In 1919, over 22 racing days, 193 races were run and a Western European-style racing programme, capped by traditional Classic races, was adopted.

There followed a spell of great growth and optimism. In 1924, the first volume of the Polish Stud Book was published. The following year, the Horse Racing Act was passed, establishing the Horse Racing Committee, with representation from a remarkably broad range of government departments: the Ministries of Agriculture, Military Affairs, Interior Affairs and Treasury all had seats, alongside representatives of the racecourses and breeders.

Breeding stock was imported in significant numbers – over 1,000 broodmares from the disintegrated Austro-Hungarian Empire, as well as from England, France, Russia and Germany. By 1930, the number of mares bred – often a useful barometer for the health and scale of the sector as a whole – had climbed back up above pre-war levels.

Many racing societies and racetracks emerged in the 1920s at places like Lublin, Lodz and Katowice. From 1933, racing was staged over the winter at the southern town of Zakopane. These regional tracks not only played an important role in the development of the thoroughbred sector, they also enriched the society by providing focal points for social life. Sadly, for most, their time in the sun was short-lived, as Poland was hit especially hard by the Great Depression of the 1930s, leading to their closure.

Even during these straitened times, a grand project was undertaken to construct a modern track on land from the Sluzewiec farm, which had been purchased by the Society for the Encouragement of Horse Breeding. With the help of international experts and renowned landscape architects, the racecourse – which is present-day Poland's most important track and host to the Wielka Warszawska – was opened on June 3, 1939.

The Second World War caused a complete dispersion of breeding stock. For the third time in a century, thoroughbred breeding had to be started from afresh, and this time, under the constraints of communism. Private breeding was banned and state studs were established in the place of the liquidated private studs. Slowly, activity increased from the 45 thoroughbred mares registered in 1944. A draft of 230 thoroughbreds reclaimed from Germany provided a timely fillip. By 1950, the mares' roster had risen to 150, and this figure grew by an average of 10 per year for the next four decades.

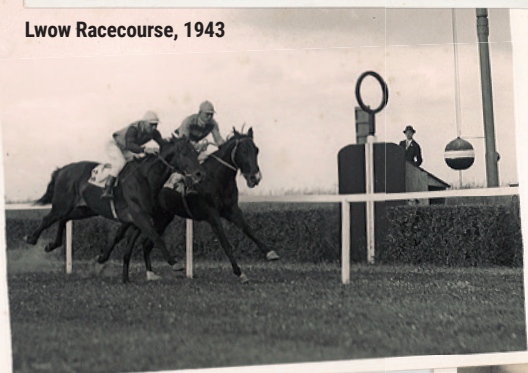
Sluzewiec opening, 1939



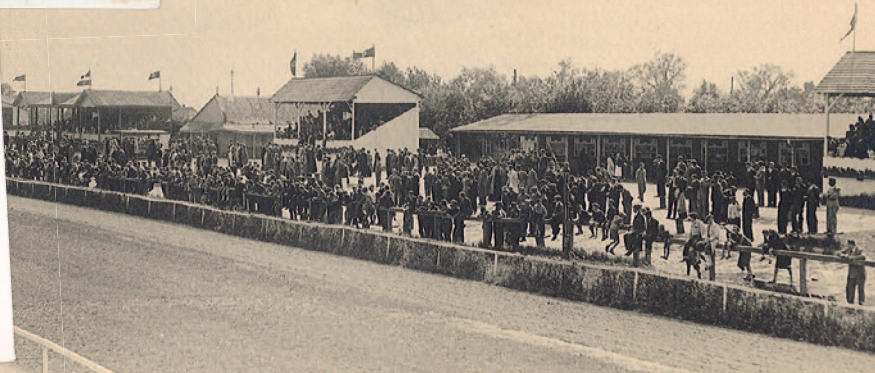
Sluzewiec, 1973



Lwow Racecourse, 1943



Lwow Racecourse, 1943



Runners pass the stands at the Baltic Sea resort track of Sopot.



Polish superstar Va Bank.



(an example of state involvement that was only eventually ended when, in 2004, Poland entered the EU) and one of the last such was Jape (USA), whose second crop included Galileo, who had won the Polish St Leger, placed second in the Polish Derby and been voted Horse of the Year when put up for sale at the Sluzewiec auction in Autumn 2001 and purchased by British trainer Tom George to go hurdling. Winning on his British hurdling debut in February 2002, George went directly the following month to the Cheltenham Festival, where Galileo was famously victorious in the 27-runner Gr.1 Royal and SunAlliance (now Ballymore) Novices Hurdle.

Va Bank's remarkable career began with a 12-race unbeaten sequence, which included the Wielka

Warszawska, Polish Derby and a German Gp.3. Later, while in training in Germany, he added a further German Gp.3 and Italy's Premio Roma (Gp.2) to his tally. He now stands as a leading sire in Poland.

Today, Poland has three active racecourses, all turf, of which Sluzewiec is the youngest. Partynice in Wroclaw, not far from the Czech and German borders, was founded in 1907 and is dual-purpose, hosting all the country's 36 jump races. The Baltic Sea track of Sopot is the daddy of the trio, dating back to 1898.

Sixty trainers are licenced in Poland, with a quarter of these confined to training their own horses – just over half train from their own premises; the rest occupy stables at either Warsaw or Wroclaw. Training fees average around €6,500pa, excluding veterinary and transport costs. The champion thoroughbred trainer last year, Adam Wyrzyk, notched up 36 wins.

Average prize money on the flat is around €4,600; over jumps, it approaches €7,000. Field sizes are knocking on the door of the 'magic 8,' with the flat averaging 7.9 and the jumps 7.1.

< Then, in 1989, came the seismic political changes in which Poland played such a pivotal part and which saw the overturning of communism. Several state studs were closed down, and private stud farms re-appeared in their place. Individuals could now own and lease racehorses, and racing stables began competing on the principles of the free market. Broodmare numbers shot up to 900 – returning at last to the pre-WWII levels.

The story of Polish racing is, indeed, one of immense resilience. It is a vivid example of how societies – in so many parts of the world, after conflict or disaster – hasten at the earliest opportunity to re-establish horse racing, emblematic as our sport can be of normalcy resumed.

What, then, of Polish racing in the 21st century? The exploits of two horses might be highlighted: those of Galileo (POL) and Va Bank (IRE) – both of whom made waves in Western Europe: the first in the jump racing sphere, the second on the flat.

Let us consider the 'Polish Galileo' first. Poland's Ministry of Agriculture continued to own stallions for some years after 1989



Tight finish in front of packed stands at Wrocław.



ABOVE: 2022 Polish champion thoroughbred trainer Adam Wyrzyk and daughter Joanna, who became the first woman to win the Polish Derby when winning in 2021 on Guitar Man.

All of Poland's jump races are open to foreign competition, including the Crystal Cup (€37,000) and Wielka Wrocławska (€43,000). On the flat, of the 278 races, the top 35, including all five Classics, and a few lower-class races, are open. Last year, 82 foreign-trained runners were attracted to race in Poland, from Slovakia, Czech Republic, France, Sweden and Germany.

Recent years have seen a growing reliance upon foreign-bred horses, which now represent the slight majority of horses-in-training. Of the 386 imports, 164 were from Ireland, 128 from France and 43 from Britain. Six years earlier, the picture was very different, when over 70% of horses-in-training were home-bred – a cause of some concern in Poland.

Despite a new television racing channel and internet betting platform, on-track betting is still the predominant channel for horse racing bets. Turnover is buoyant, but the returns to racing from betting turnover are modest.

The Polish Jockey Club, established in 2001, sits beneath the Ministry of Agriculture. Polish racing is heavily dependent upon government support, with 90%–95% of prize money emanating from that source. It is a relationship that is not without its frustrations:

"If we need to change something, like a rule of racing," explains Kasprzak, "we are unable to do so without specific governmental approval; and we, as just one among many organisations, often find we are waiting and waiting for this approval to come through."

What does Kasprzak consider to be Polish racing's prime challenges and opportunities?

"The first challenge is the support of Polish-bred horses, to rebuild our breed. At this moment, we have a few stallions with good pedigrees and race records. Their first offspring will race this year.

"Second, we need new racing rules. Third, we have problems in sourcing stewards. People don't want to be stewards; it is a very hard and responsible job."

"As regards opportunities, these days, there are many possibilities when it comes to spending free time, but in Poland, our three racecourses offer something special. You can meet friends, eat and drink as well as watch horses compete in the flesh. We have the chance to sell to a new audience this unique way of having a good time."

This year, Poland is taking centre stage within European racing in another respect. It will, for the first time, host the EMHF's General Assembly over two days in May. Immediately following this, the inaugural EuroMed Stewards' Conference will take place at the same Warsaw venue.

And then, thoughts will turn to the Wielka Warszawska, whose shiny new Black Type status has been rewarded with a hefty boost in prize money – the winner taking home €58,000 (up from €38,000 last year). So, trainers seeking a realistic shot at Black Type (remember, statistically, the race has been easier to win than any other European Listed Race) and a nice prize money pot with a 2400m+ horse rated around the 95 mark, consider a trip to Warsaw this October. **T**