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# Chantilly, a Horse Racing Town (and Forest)

By Amanda Duckworth

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Determining the winner of a horse race is usually a straightforward affair. How a horse is trained, though, can vary widely around the world. In the United States, thoroughbreds are usually based at a racetrack, but in Europe, they are much more likely to reside in their trainer's private stable, or yard.

Newmarket, England, is known for the copious number of stables that surround its open heath and the famed Warren Hill gallops. But another one of Europe's more unusually scenic training centers is found in France, where a majority of the country's top racehorses are conditioned in the Chantilly Forest.

About 35 miles outside of Paris, Chantilly Racecourse is home to two of France's most important races: the Prix du Jockey Club, also known as the French Derby, and, on Sunday, the Prix de Diane, or French Oaks. For the past two years, the track, which has the Château de Chantilly and the Great Stables serving as its backdrop, also hosted the Prix de l'Arc de Triomphe while Longchamp Racecourse was being renovated.

Day to day, though, the surrounding forest is where horses stay fit ahead of competition.

"Chantilly is basically a city that has been built around racehorses, like Newmarket," Olivier Delloye, the chief executive of France Galop, the national governing body for horse racing, said in an email interview.

"It is the biggest training center in the country with up to 2,000 horses in training at onetime. You have got all the facilities in the world, and it is a tribute to the thoroughbreds' dedication. If they were human beings, that's where they'd want to live and train."

Undeniably picturesque, Chantilly has been associated with horses for hundreds of years. In the 16th century, the city was known for its fox hunts, and through the years, wide paths were cleared in the surrounding forest for the activity. The thoroughbred training center, which is run by France Galop, was established during the 19th century, and it made use of those cleared paths.

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Different areas of the training center go by different names — Les Aigles; Lamorlaye and Coye-La-Forêt; and Avilly St. Leonard — but together, they cover over 2,000 hectares of forest, about 5,000 acres, and offer a multitude of tracks for horses to exercise on. These paths vary from traditional grass to sand to fibresand, which is an all-weather surface that can withstand training even through the winter.

The city of Chantilly is aware of its rich equestrian culture and will arrange tours of the training center, the racecourse and even a racing stable for those interested in discovering the area's history. The training center visit involves a morning exploring Les Aigles.

“Visitors can discover the history and the specificity of the place,” Marie Lemaire, the head of the Office de Tourisme de Chantilly, said in an email interview. “In Chantilly, the training center and the racecourse are two different places. Chantilly is the oldest racecourse in France, and some places are protected as historical monuments. The training center was built in 1898, and it's one of the oldest in Europe. Visitors can admire the performance of the best horses.”

Many trainers based in Chantilly maintain their yards on the edge of the forest, and each morning they will take their string of racehorses into the woods.



The Château de Chantilly is a backdrop to Chantilly Racecourse, which is home to two of France's most important races. Boris Horvat/Agence France-Presse — Getty Images

“French trainers, like their patrons before, like to do things their own way,” Delloye said. “Training has never been as standardized as it is in the United States. Most of the stables in Chantilly and the surrounding area are private. Some are fully rented to trainers, some only partially, and some are for sale.”

The trainers Elie Lellouche and Criquette Head-Maarek recently stopped using stables at Chantilly, he said, but those properties were quickly occupied by others.

Head-Maarek, who hails from one of racing’s best-known families and is one of the sport’s most successful trainers, retired in February. Her yard is where the likes of the European Horse of the Year Trêve was conditioned. Head-Maarek began her training career in 1977; saddled her first Group 1 winner, Sigy, in 1978; and earned her final Group 1 score with National Defense in the Prix Jean-Luc Lagardere in October 2016.

“Les Aigles is the best spot to train horses in the world,” Head-Maarek said before National Defense’s victory. “You won’t find facilities like here; it doesn’t exist. The guy who did the place was a visionary. He was incredible, that guy, because it’s been this way since then. It hasn’t changed at all, except that they added two Polytracks. I’ve got drawings of my great-grandfather and great-great-grandfather training here, and it’s the same.”

About 10,000 racehorses are trained in France; at any given time about one-fifth of them are in Chantilly. How the town came to be the star attraction for thoroughbreds racing on the flat mainly has to do with location and history.

“From the start, as the French Jockey Club founders were only formalizing an existing pattern, Chantilly has been at the heart of the thoroughbred action in France,” Delloye said. “When the Duc d’Aumale passed away, he gave his chateau to the Institut de France, and the Société d’Encouragement, founded by the Jockey Club to organize horse racing, was in charge of the gallops.

“Money and power are in Paris, and so were the top races. As the city was expanding, it was increasingly difficult to train in the immediate surroundings of Paris. The facility is so amazing that it is still seen today as a major asset for the top trainers in the country.”

The most famous of the training tracks is known as the Piste des Lions, or Lion track, a two-and-a-half-mile straight sand path that links the Château de Chantilly with Lamorlaye.

“A gallop on the Piste des Lions,” Delloye said, “is truly a unique experience. Obviously, the forest makes a great setting, and it’s especially great when it’s sunny and warm, as the shade helps the horses to cope with the heat. It costs about 85 euros per month per horse in training at the Chantilly training center, and a few extras depending on which track you get your horses to train on.”

Beyond the value it brings to the thoroughbred industry in France, the uniqueness of Chantilly and its forest remains a point of pride for many, including Delloye.

“If you haven’t seen it, you just can’t start to imagine it,” he said. “Every person I have met after a first visit to Chantilly is simply awed by it. I am not saying that because I was raised there — my father was training there when I was a kid — or because I manage France Galop, but only because that’s the truth. It is just a magical place to see. It is Disney meets horse racing, if you like.”

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