

TDN & A

FRANK GABRIEL

After serving as Chief Executive Officer of the Dubai Racing Club in the United Arab Emirates for nine years, Frank Gabriel has decided to return home to the U.S., where in mid-April he will begin a new job as New York Racing Association racing secretary for Belmont Park and Saratoga Race Course. His return will be a homecoming in several ways, as he previously worked as NYRA's director of racing in 1998-99.

Gabriel--who left his executive position at Arlington Park to take the job in Dubai--will bring back experience unmatched by any other racing executive in the U.S. Not only did he oversee the building of Meydan, the world's largest racecourse, in only about a year during the aftermath of the global economic crisis, he also managed to expand the Dubai World Cup meeting, the richest day of racing on the globe, to \$27 million for eight Thoroughbred races. His leadership of the DRC allowed him to become active with the Asian Racing Federation and its Asian Racing Conference, and he also has directed Dubai's venture with racing in Chengdu, China, where he will travel for a special day of sport on Apr. 6 featuring Dubai-based horses and jockeys.

Known to be driven by an intense work ethic matched by a firm standard of fairness and a wry sense of humor, Gabriel, 59, has had to balance working within the unique qualities of Middle Eastern culture that, for one example, prohibit wagering locally on racing, while simultaneously reaching out to connect with racing participants worldwide.

With only a few days remaining before the 19th running of the G1 Dubai World Cup on Mar. 29 and the subsequent mission to China, Gabriel looked back over his Dubai tenure and forward to his re-engagement with NYRA in an interview at Meydan with Michele MacDonald.



Frank Gabriel
Racing Post

MM: Are you feeling some degree of sentimentality knowing that this will be your last Dubai World Cup as CEO of the Dubai Racing Club?

FG: It probably won't hit hard for me until I get on the plane to leave. There definitely will be some sorrows and I will miss the experiences I've had here in Dubai--it's been a great nine years. Those 'little bit' of work duties, including the upcoming Dubai World Cup and then getting on a plane to go to Chengdu to create this racing event on Apr. 6 has not let my mind have a chance to think about it. Maybe that's good, maybe it just keeps the engine going. But yes, at the end of the day, it will be missed, definitely.

MM: Looking back over your years here, what makes you the most proud? Obviously, you oversaw the development of this huge Meydan grandstand (which equals the distance of 22 Boeing 747 airplanes parked nose to tail).

FG: I didn't do this [alone]. Everyone built Meydan through the vision of His Highness Sheikh Mohammed and the board [of directors of Meydan]. Everyone



Meydan grandstand
Racing Post

worked hard in creating this new racecourse and this experience here. But I'm proud I was able to work to just maintain the level of quality racing that we present on World Cup night and through the [Dubai World Cup] Carnival and the whole UAE program. We have worked hard to improve

the quality of UAE racing and we work hard to be an integral part of the Asian Racing Conference through working with the executive committee. And that's something we're all proud of.

MM: Considering everything involved, would you say that CEO of the Dubai Racing Club is one of the most challenging jobs in horse racing?

FG: I definitely would say it is different. Challenging? Yes. We are in a different region and we have different situations that come about by being a Thoroughbred racetrack with a non-wagering format for a business model, and also there is the time [early in the year] that we fit into the calendar. We have to create the atmosphere; we have to bring the horses here. That's no different from other parts of the world--Singapore and Hong Kong have to create the atmosphere. But we have a lot more entities that we deal with in bringing a lot more horses into this country. And that becomes a whole different facet of the operation. Back in the States, we would have a race and maybe have one or two international runners--of course, Breeders' Cup has more than that--but we have much more than that here. FG: And it's not just about having a race.

There is shipping, there are quarantine protocols for health, there is travel, there are people, staff, owners and trainers [to be coordinated]. When you lay it down on paper, there is a long list of things to do that have to be checked off.

MM: In overseeing the building of Meydan, what were the most difficult aspects?

FG: The first thing you would say about building Meydan is time. For me, it was so much time here [on site]. It did affect my family. My wife, Christine, had to sacrifice my time with her and our time together. It was just a 24-hour gun. I don't think I would have made it without her support. She sacrificed for me to do what I had to do. You need that. She did it and it was a big plus for me because it kept my engine going. There were times the tank was empty and she was able to fill it up with her support and keep me going. I love her for that.

MM: Do you ever look back and wonder how Meydan came to fruition, considering the size and the time frame?

FG: If you go back and look at some old pictures, you're just amazed. It wouldn't happen anywhere else. And we did it through a financial crisis. That has to be a credit to everyone here because there were a lot of bumps in the road, but we were able to continue to push through with the support of His Highness and the board to just get it done.

MM: What would you say is your fondest memory of racing in Dubai?

FG: Definitely the Dubai World Cup evening is a very unique experience. [Big racing days are] different for each region. Since I have been able to be involved in committees with the ARF and the Pattern Committee, I have experienced racing in Korea, Singapore, Japan, Australia, Hong Kong, and now China. You learn something new from each jurisdiction about what they do, and I don't think you could ever teach that in a book. I've been very fortunate and I am very proud I've had the opportunity to experience those things. Then, when you do have your big event, you can take the pluses and minuses of everything and try to change the experience, make that little tweak, because nothing is perfect and we try to change that. But you have to be kind of proud that the Dubai Racing Club and the board created this Dubai international carnival, and I came on about the second year and we've really grown it. We've worked hard to grow it. Everyone has a carnival, but what we're trying to do in bringing some 200 horses in and create a 10-day program for \$10 million and simulcast that around the world--it's pretty unique. And this place should be very proud of that.

MM: What would you rank as the single best performance by a horse in Dubai?

FG: That's a tough question for me. But I'll never forget the [inaugural Dubai World Cup] night of Cigar [in 1996]. I was on the roof of Nad Al Sheba, working for Arlington Park disseminating the signal to North America. That was the only place I could go; they wouldn't allow me to go anywhere else. But you couldn't create that atmosphere: we were in the desert with all the lights and a horse like Cigar winning the event. Picture it. [They decided] they were going to get this horse and they got him here, and then he wins. And it was a great stretch battle with Soul of the Matter. You say to yourself, 'Wow!' And you always think about that. Every World Cup, when the horse is going across the wire, you flick back [in your mind] to that 1996 race and then you go back through all the races that followed and the special circumstances. When Victoire Pisa won [in 2011], you say to yourself that doesn't seem that great. But because of what had happened in Japan [with the tsunami disaster], all of a sudden it was like we were giving something back to Japan--it was more than just horse racing, it was emotional. Dubai Millennium [in 2000] was special. When [Godolphin's] Electrocutionist won [in 2006], it might not have seemed special, but for some reason on that night there was chaos [with excitement] in the whole parade ring--it was a zoo! And you say to yourself, 'Why this night?' But that night [led to] the creation of Meydan. That was the mindset [of Sheikh Mohammed] that 'I want to do something different.' Experiences create happenings and that was one of them.

MM: Before you leave Dubai, you will be going to China for the special racing event at Chengdu. What are some of the logistical issues and complications you have had to manage?

FG: Logistical issues--yes--because there was no protocol to take horses into China and bring them back. That was the first step because it was not our intention to send horses to Chengdu or China without being able to bring them back. We were looking to do a race meet with Chengdu some time last year but we had to get the first step. We were able to secure that in December, but we were into our season, so we decided to [proceed] after the World Cup. And so we'll be sending 50-some horses for five races [all on turf] and creating a race event run under the ERA regulatory rules. We'll have all our officials there, we'll have our staff there, and we've been there many, many times working on the surfaces and the conditions of the tracks and stuff of that nature to make sure there are safe and reliable surfaces. We are going to do our best to offer a safe experience for our horses and riders that we are bringing there.

MM: From what you know so far, what do you think the future holds for racing in China?

FG: China has a big future for everything; it is a country that is important to everywhere in the world. And it is to racing, too. Of course, the Hong Kong Jockey Club is working on building their training center there, so they understand it's important. But overall, everyone has to get the right things done, a regulatory body has to be developed, the governing rules of racing have to be unified in China, and there have always been a lot of provincial race meets. We're not trying to build a track there, we are trying to create an experience. Our quarantine barn and our vets are there, and we're bringing the right things for safety, for stabling. As far as the racecourses, we've created a lot of things they didn't have there and we're doing our best to show them what the experience is of a race meet and how we would run it, and hopefully that will be a tool for future things for them and they'll go on from there.

MM: Your involvement with Dubai racing and the Asian Racing Federation has given you a depth of experience and understanding for your new position at NYRA that is unprecedented in American racing. How will this help you in your new job?

FG: I'm very appreciative of the NYRA and Chris Kay and Martin Panza for the opportunity. Martin has already made a great avenue into NYRA for making changes to create more big-day experiences for the fans and for the horsemen, and I'm really excited about working with him. I've told Martin that I'm there to support his lead and to support NYRA to continue the quality program they've always had and to try to create these new venues of world-class international exposure. I'm not there to create international racing; I'm there to help improve experiences. I've got some international connections, and Martin does too. But I also want to work with the New York horsemen in supporting them. They've got a great program and we'll work hard on continuing the quality they have and giving them the service they need. I've already had a few [international] trainers call me about possibly running horses in America and that's good. Hopefully we can make that connection from a phone call to an actual ship to a race. That's what racing is all about. We're all about connections in racing and cooperating and working together. In the end, it will be a great opportunity at NYRA and I'm really appreciative of that.

MM: What will be your priorities for Belmont and Saratoga?

FG: I'll sit down with Martin and talk about his direction, but I know a little bit about where he is and where he wants to try to get to as far as the racing goes. Shorter time periods and less racing is always good and that's probably going to be the venture of America, not just NYRA.

FG: That's what you see here. How these horse [in the UAE] can run at nine and 10 years old--and they run good--is mainly because they get time [off to reset]. You can't give them that much time in America, but it is a direction you need to look at down the road because that's the only way you can get the good-quality horses maintaining [their ability]. Ideally, [you have to] keep the pedal on the metal and push for a quality program but never lose the quantity because that brings wagering. So it's a two-fold thing in the program like NYRA, which everyone in the world wants to wager on: maintain the quality and also maintain the quantity because a good betting race has to have a good minimum number [of entrants] or you are not successful.

MM: What are you most looking forward to in getting back to the U.S.?

FG: It will be nice to watch some sports. That's one of the things you miss here. There are sports--you probably could watch every soccer game from around the world--but the normal NCAA basketball game or a baseball game comes on too late. I'm sleeping by then [with the nine-hour time difference]. The number one thing would be to be home with family, my brothers and sisters; I haven't seen them for a long time. And while Christine has been here, she has not been here year-round, so it will be nice to get back home. That probably is the number one reason I'm headed back, and to secure the job with NYRA has been a great addition. There will be a little bit of a transition and fast pace because I come from here and go right there and don't get a chance to breathe. That's probably one of my faults--I never do that, and my wife is not happy about it. But it will be good in the long run and I'm most appreciative.

MM: What will you miss most about Dubai?

FG: You can't knock the weather! And this definitely is a beautiful place. It's safe, and a very warm and friendly environment; you would never go wrong visiting Dubai or the UAE region. You'll enjoy your time here and the great hospitality that the country offers. And that I will always miss. [CLICK HERE TO SHARE THIS STORY](#)