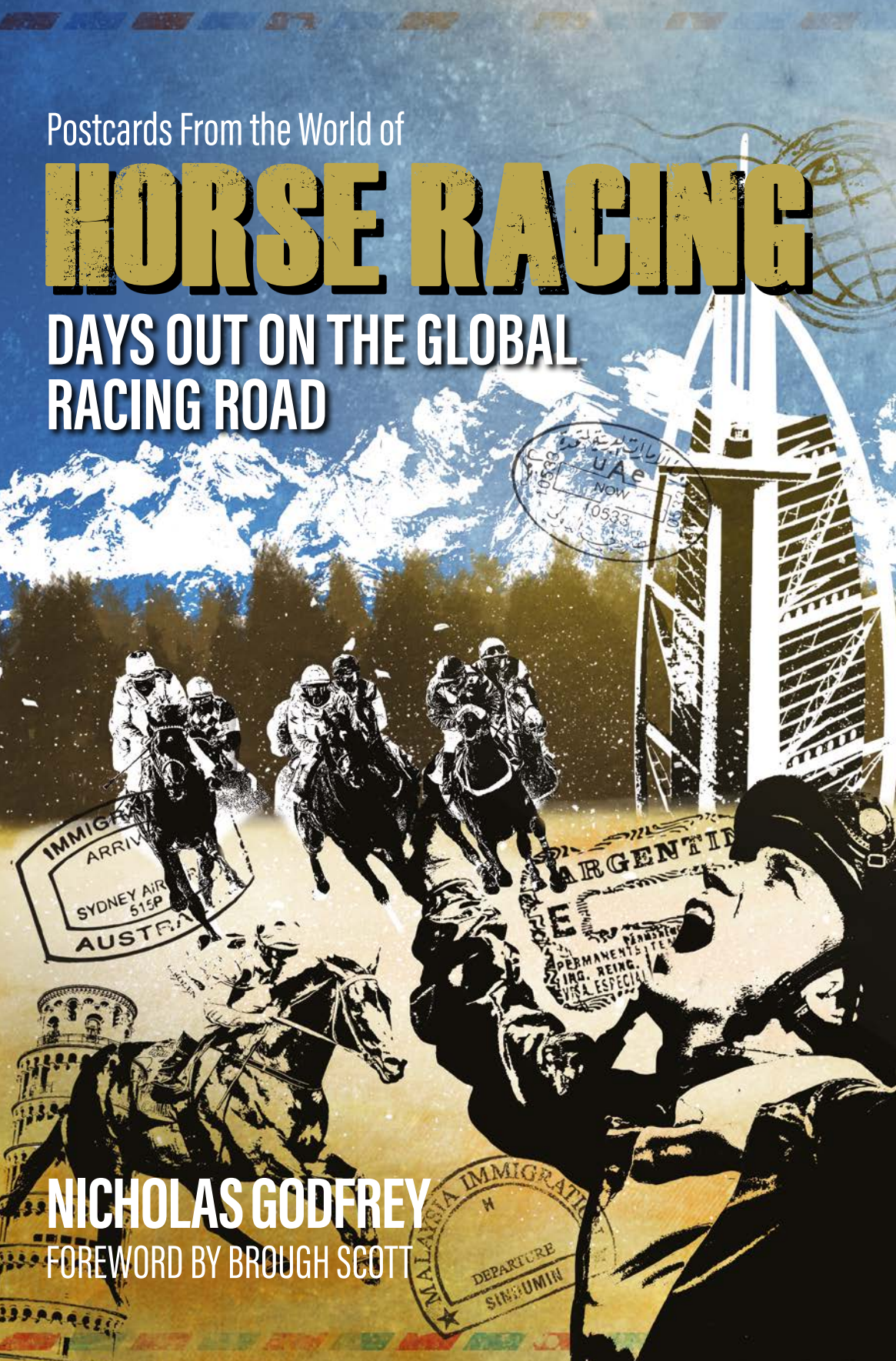


Postcards From the World of

# HORSE RACING

DAYS OUT ON THE GLOBAL  
RACING ROAD



**NICHOLAS GODFREY**  
FOREWORD BY BROUGH SCOTT

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# Introduction

**P**EOPLE sometimes ask why I have spent chunks of my life visiting racecourses around the world. In the Polish section of this book, international racing pioneer Barry Irwin offers an answer. ‘Before I was a racing fan I was an athletics fan, track and field,’ explains the Team Valor principal, who has had runners on six continents. ‘I always liked the foreign stuff better – it’s always more mysterious and interesting, so when I started to get involved in horse racing it was the same thing. I was following Sea-Bird, even though I was living in California.’

So there it is. It isn’t necessarily better by any means, but it is different, and therein lies the attraction. Or, to put it more simply, I like horse racing and I like travelling, and I’ve been in the lucky position to have been able to combine the two. Call me an anorak, if you like. I couldn’t really argue.

The world is full of horse racing, from Mongolia to Mexico, Baghdad to Budapest and most points in between. Admittedly, that does not always mean it is of the thoroughbred variety that dominates in major racing arenas like Europe, America and Australia, but the sport nevertheless exists in one form or another across six continents, fulfilling what seems to be some atavistic need in all four corners of the globe.

Since ancient times, human beings have felt the need to test their equine beasts of burden against each other, long before the modern-day thoroughbred was created in the late 17th and early 18th centuries when three stallions – the Byerley Turk, the Darley Arabian and the Godolphin Barb – were imported from the Middle East and north Africa and mated with British mares to produce a racehorse noted for its speed and endurance. This man-made construct heralded what is known as the ‘Sport of Kings’, an unfortunate epithet given that racing is the pastime of both princes and paupers, as anyone who has ever visited a racecourse or a betting shop must be well aware. There is an old saying which suggests that nobody who owns a yearling

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commits suicide; the same might be said of anyone who has 20 quid on something in the 3.30 at Plumpton.

If horse racing was exported alongside Britain's imperial ambitions around the world, its true origins were elsewhere. Chariot racing and bareback mounted races were both popular public entertainments for the Greeks and the Romans; horsemanship was highly developed in ancient civilisations such as Persia and Arabia. Their legacy is an established sport in more than 100 countries, give or take a few where it has fallen by the wayside (Israel, Portugal) or where there are rumours of new-builds (St Lucia, Portugal again) or revivals (Freudenau in Vienna).

Frankly, I have barely scratched the surface within these pages, which feature a series of one-off visits since my previous book *On The Racing Road* was published in 2007, detailing a nine-month round-the-world trip in 2005. After that journey, I wrote: 'I don't know if I will ever step out on the racing road again, though I suspect the odd flying visit will always be somewhere on the agenda. Once you step out of your everyday environment, it can be hard to sit still, even when circumstances dictate that you must.'

Those 'flying visits', weekends away, provide the content for the postcards contained within these pages: I still like horse racing and I still like travelling, though family and work circumstances (plus lack of available funds) have long since precluded another extended trip.

Without wishing to sound overly self-righteous, generally speaking I have paid my own way, apart from welcome contributions in terms of expenses on occasion from the *Racing Post* or subsidies from various racing authorities. I was also keen to ensure some of the world's foremost racecourses and racedays were included – not to mention equine greats like Zenyatta, Black Caviar and American Pharoah, each of whom I was lucky enough to see in the flesh in their homelands.

As such, I have not ventured too far off the beaten track or taken the racing road less travelled, yet the multiplicity of horse racing around the world never ceases to amaze. There are racecourses almost everywhere: on several islands of the Caribbean, for instance, and a plethora of African nations such as Chad, Ghana and Namibia. Betting may be outlawed in most Islamic countries, but Dubai and Qatar are among the most influential horse racing nations on the planet. Although Hong Kong and Macau are gambling hotbeds of

long standing, betting is also illegal in China – but that hasn't stopped a succession of entrepreneurs building racetracks in the hope it will one day be legalised. Despite a tiny population, they even have racing of a sort on the Falkland Islands with a once-a-year Boxing Day meeting. Despite decades of strife, racing has continued at Baghdad's Al-Amiriya racetrack, although it was said to have been taken over by the local 'mafia' for a spell and become a target for fundamentalists opposed to gambling.

Then there is Mongolia. When the five-year-old gelding Mongolian Saturday won the Breeders' Cup Turf Sprint in 2015 at Keeneland, he was greeted by trainer Enebish Ganbat and owner Ganbaatar Dagvadorj dressed in their Mongolian national costume: brightly coloured one-piece kaftan-style 'dil' tunics, elaborate belts, distinctive brocade headwear and shoes not far off a pair of wellies designed to be worn on either foot. Horse racing, it seems, is a very popular pastime in the land of Genghis Khan and the steppes. 'Mongolian people are horsemen people and everybody rides but Mongolian racing is very different,' explained Ganbat, who left his homeland to train in the bluegrass heartland of Lexington, Kentucky. He recalled once winning a race commemorating the 80th anniversary of Mongolia's founding. His horse beat 720 rivals; the trainer, who also kept dogs and a golden eagle for hunting foxes and wolves, won a Russian-made car. 'In Mongolia, we don't have any racecourses, we just race outside cities,' he went on. 'We have races of 25 kilometres, and we ride from four years old. But then we go to Lexington to train thoroughbreds; we switch from Mongolian ponies to a big, faster horse. But a horse is a horse.'

Maybe so, yet while other forms of equine competition continue to thrive – Quarter Horse racing, Arab racing, harness racing (also known as trotting or pacing) – this book is primarily concerned with standard-style thoroughbred racing. Racing can go off on a tangent, but generally I haven't done so.

Although general guidebooks tend to cover sporting venues such as football stadia and baseball parks, they sometimes aren't quite as helpful when it comes to racetracks, so every chapter is also prefaced with a few details for anyone who fancies following in my footsteps. But even if you don't, here's hoping you enjoy learning about these places as much as I did visiting them.

# Argentina

**20 tracks • 5,708 races • 11,776 horses**

**Racetrack:** San Isidro (Buenos Aires)

**Dateline:** Saturday 9 January 2010

**Where is it?** Affluent northern suburb of San Isidro, 22km north-west of city centre

**Address:** Hipodromo de San Isidro, Avenida Márquez 504 San Isidro (1642), Provincia de Buenos Aires, Argentina

**Website:** hipodromosanisidro.com

**Telephone:** +54 11 4743 4011/19

**Fixtures:** 120 (two or three times a week, split between turf and dirt cards, all year round)

**Major races:** Gran Premio Carlos Pellegrini (December), GP Jockey Club (October), plus Carreras de las Estrellas (Argentine Breeders' Cup) in odd-numbered years only (shared with city-centre track Palermo)

**Getting to the races:** 20-minute train journey from central Retiro station, then free shuttle bus to racecourse entrance

**In the neighbourhood:** Buenos Aires is the most European of South American cities with several attractive districts ('barrios') headed by Palermo – itself split into several smaller units, such as arty Palermo Soho and Palermo Chico, the most fashionable neighbourhood in the city – and La Boca, the colourful working-class district that is home to the celebrated Boca Juniors football team.

**Local knowledge:** They keep late hours in Buenos Aires – don't expect to go out for dinner before 9pm, or even later at weekends. A light meal ('merienda'), probably a toastie or a cake, will keep you going between lunch and dinner; they're not big on breakfast either.

■ THERE are several potential reasons why gracious San Isidro, set in acres of parkland in a chi-chi northern suburb of Buenos Aires, is renowned as Latin America's greatest racecourse. Maybe it is the impressive approach to the track, a tree-lined boulevard where a punishing sun struggles to pierce the canopy. Or perhaps it is the equine facilities, epitomised by the venue's training centre a couple of miles from the racecourse, featuring no fewer than five training tracks and 3,000 stables. Or maybe it could be the striking 1930s stands, which bring an unlikely hint of the art deco to the racecourse, all white painted curves and portholes.



However, San Isidro's reputation is more likely down to the racing circuit itself, as wide as they come in South America with a circumference of a mile and three-quarters – a galloping track by any standard – plus a straight chute for five-furlong sprints. Although San Isidro houses an inner sand track, European-style turf racing dominates here, where they host 120 meetings a year, mainly on Wednesdays and then one day at the weekend, when Saturdays and Sundays are shared with the Hipodromo Argentina in the city centre. Better known simply as Palermo, this houses all the best dirt action; the two tracks are by far the most prestigious of the nation's 20 racecourses. Both Buenos Aires venues feature in the Argentine Triple Crown, which requires a high degree of versatility as the 2,000 Guineas and Derby on dirt at Palermo sandwich a second leg on grass at San Isidro, the Gran Premio Jockey Club over a mile and a quarter.

Opened in 1935, San Isidro nevertheless trumps its grandiose neighbour because it is home to the most prestigious race on the continent in the Gran Premio Carlos Pellegrini, the international mile-and-a-half event early in December that functions as a South American Arc. The race dates back much further than San Isidro itself, having been inaugurated in 1887, five years after the foundation of the Jockey Club, and named after that body's initial president. The father of the Argentine turf, Pellegrini must have done a decent job: he was to become president of the republic between August 1890 and October 1892.

As well as acting as a magnet to the continent's top horses, the race named after him also provides the stage for a huge party for *Portenos*, inhabitants of Buenos Aires making the short journey out from their vibrant, cosmopolitan metropolis. About 80,000 of them did so for the 2009 running; the record stands at 102,600 in 1952, the year in which Eva Peron died from cancer.

Considerably fewer bother to show up when I visit San Isidro a month after the big race for a more run-of-the-mill meeting on a sleepy Saturday when the place isn't exactly heaving. The crowd is thinly dispersed among half-a-dozen stands in various states of decrepitude spread out at intervals along the straight, and people drop in all day (and night) for a typically endurance-testing card of 16 races, starting at 2.15pm and ending under lights at 9.30pm. Go

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racing in South America and it is usually a marathon, not a sprint. San Isidro-based trainer Hugo Perez suggests this crowd is especially poor because we are slap bang in the Argentine holiday season. 'It is summertime and lots of people are on vacation,' he claims.

A Uruguayan by birth, Perez is a distinguished trainer, having won several Grade 1 events including the 2008 Derby Nacional at Palermo with Tecla Shiner, who went to Dubai and was never seen again. 'Uruguay is a more provincial place and people like horse racing but here not so much,' he explains. 'For it to be comparable here to Uruguay looking at the size of the population we would have to take \$2m every day in betting. Here there are a million other things to do but, look, this used to be a major social occasion with everybody drinking. Now people are all drinking mineral water!'

Recognising my cue, a couple of Quilmes beers are ordered. Hugo seems pleased, though maybe that has more to do with his having saddled a winner with a son of Giant's Causeway, the first of that formidable racehorse's offspring to win in Argentina. It is a privilege to have Hugo as a guide, akin to having someone like Luca Cumani showing you around Newmarket, though it must be doubted Luca would treat everybody he comes across to a song. Hugo clearly rates his talents as an amateur tango singer.

It cannot be any worries about cost that hits the attendance figure, generously estimated at just into four figures. Entry is free to all enclosures – it always is, but tickets for Beyonce's concert at the same venue the following month start at the equivalent of about £30 – while a return train journey to San Isidro, about 22km from the central Retiro station, costs the princely sum of 2.20 pesos (about 50p at prevailing exchange rates). That is less than 50p for a 35-minute ride skirting the backstretch at Palermo en route to the port of Tigre, its ultimate destination.

A short walk from San Isidro, past McDonald's on the right, takes you to the grounds of the Argentine Jockey Club, which owns the track and its extensive training area. A *colectivo* (bus) allegedly makes regular trips to pick up racegoers at the gates, but I walk the mile or so under the shade of the arboretum to the racecourse proper, dominated by the esoteric collection of grandstands that line the straight. None of them are particularly large, but they are a distinctive collection:

museum pieces of 1930s modernist architecture from the era when Oscar Niemayer was starting out.

There is a downside, however, for while San Isidro is playing on a glorious history, it certainly feels more than a little dated in places. If the track's outer garments are startling, the interior is stolid: presumably the dark-wood saloons and betting parlours were elegant in their day, but they aren't state-of-the-art anymore – unless the art in question is ready-made for the racing version of *Antiques Roadshow*. Any such observation includes the antiquated crowd, which has no women and fewer kids, though perhaps the latter is forgivable as children were banned for a 20-year period until a few years ago after some interference by the Church, overly concerned for the morals of the youth in the San Isidro district. 'Gambling at the track is seen as a bad role model,' explains Hugo, dapperly attired in blazer and tie. 'Horse racing is associated with betting and for that reason it is often frowned upon. But then if a politician owns a horse, he will sell it straight away as soon as he is elected or runs for election because they don't want to be seen as part of an elite.'

We enter the weighing-room complex via a mock starting gate. Facilities all round seem fairly basic – runners and riders for every race, for example, appear on chalkboards rather than electronic screens. With 16 races, someone somewhere may well be suffering from a touch of writer's cramp.

A creakingly slow, wrought-iron cage lift, operated by an elderly attendant who asks Hugo for a song, takes patrons upstairs in the main stand. The backlot needs care and attention; the pre-parade ring is a rough, rutted, overgrown shambles behind the stand. Criminally for such a giant racecourse, there is no big screen, although there is no shortage of small TV screens, said to number about 200 altogether in the stands.

For all that, it is only fair to repeat that this was the sleepest of afternoons for San Isidro – I have missed the Lord Mayor's Show, and you know what follows soon after – and it takes no massive leap of faith to imagine how wonderful it might have been a month earlier for a packed-out Pellegrini. Moreover, one thing is virtually guaranteed at San Isidro: you will see good horses. Argentina remains one of South America's equine powerhouses with a much respected bloodstock

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industry that produces nearly 7,000 foals every year, mainly from the lush Mar del Plata region. 'The Mar del Plata region is the best place in the world for horse breeding,' claims Hugo. 'The quality is unmatched.'

A hometown verdict, perhaps, but Argentina's bloodstock industry is certainly blessed with a fine reputation. Exports have thrived, particularly in North America, where a distinguished list of top-flight performers in the last couple of decades is headed by dual Breeders' Cup Distaff winner Bayakoa, the unstoppably courageous parrot-mouthed supermare, a top-level winner at home as a three-year-old who went on to win 12 Grade 1 races in the States in a two-year spree in 1989–90. Top-class fellow exiles include Paseana, who also scored at the Breeders' Cup, and star older horse Gentlemen, an Argentine Guineas (Gran Premio Polla de Potrillos) winner in 1995 with half a dozen American Grade 1s to his name, plus Candy Ride, who looked a world-beater in two top-level Californian victories in 2003 before injury ended his career. Dubai Classic winners Asiatic Boy, Honour Devil and Gold For Sale originally raced in Argentina. The 2006 world champion Invasor, who flew the flag for Uruguay where he was trained, was actually bred on the other side of the River Plate. Such an equine exodus is like that of star footballers habitually moving to Europe for money and prestige: the locals continue to treat them as their own, following their foreign exploits accordingly.

Even on this quietest of afternoons, San Isidro is still full of stars. Riders include multiple champion Pablo Falero and new star Edwin Talaverano, a Peruvian who earned a slice of history last month when winning three Grade 1s on the Pellegrini card, including the main event with Interaction. Brazilian legend Jorge Ricardo, who had six months off in 2009 to be treated for cancer, is also back in action. Although he is said to be riding as well as ever, 'Ricardinho' has aged markedly, understandably much greyer and thinner than when he visited Ascot for the Shergar Cup in 2008. He has also lost the lead in his epic battle with North American rival Russell Baze for the world record in career victories.

Ricardo, Falero and Talaverano are all in action in the feature race of the afternoon, a £14,000 Listed handicap called the Clasico Botafago, a seven-runner event over 2,000 metres in which Hugo saddles a longshot against odds-on favourite City Banker. One of the

best horses in the country, this four-year-old won a leg of the 2008 Triple Crown before taking the Gran Estrellas Classic, the Argentine Breeders' Cup.

City Banker is returning after a six-month absence and conceding at least three kilos (about 7lb) to his rivals, and Hugo sounds confident of his chances against him. 'Give me kilos and I will make a turtle out of the cracks,' he says, gnomically. Maybe he's a fan of Eric Cantona.

In the parade ring, Hugo introduces me to his jockey, 'the prettiest boy in racing'. There is a real danger of a Blackadder 'Bob' moment until I notice the earrings and a ponytail sneaking out underneath the helmet and gratefully realise this is, in fact, a woman – none other than leading female rider Lucrecia Carabajal. 'She is the best woman jockey, very strong,' adds Hugo, but the partnership is never seen with a chance in an intriguing race.

Ricardo offers a Paul Carberry effort on his mount, not moving a muscle until two out, by which time no amount of muscles would aid his cause as City Banker hits the front. There is a shock, though, as the market leader is outfought by second favourite Brave Halo, lack of fitness and weight telling its tale in a driving finish.

By now it is twilight, with six races to go. I give it a couple more before Hugo ferries me back to the train, offering en route one final word on the disappointing attendance. 'There should be better promotion to get young people,' he says, frowning. 'Eventually the old people are going to die.'

It is just as well he can sing. With that sort of outlook, he is never going to make much of a comedian.



*THERE was a good reason why, in June 2016, the relentless Jorge Ricardo finally seemed destined to surpass Russell Baze to reclaim top spot in their long-running battle for the all-time record in career victories: his North American-based rival announced his retirement.*

*Ricardo, who turned 55 in September 2016, and Baze are a truly remarkable pair, having been involved in a ding-dong battle – albeit separated by the length of two continents – for more than a decade. It was Baze who became the winningmost rider of all time on 1 December 2006 when he rode his 9,531st winner to surpass a mark established seven years*

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*earlier by Panamanian legend Laffit Pincay. To put this into context, the British record still stands at Sir Gordon Richards' mark of 4,870. Baze had overtaken Ricardo only a few months before – and when Pincay's record was broken, the South American rider was just 27 behind. Four weeks later, Ricardo emulated Baze in surpassing Pincay's mark.*

*Ricardo, who won 26 riding titles in Rio before moving to Argentina in 2006, became the first jockey in the world to reach 10,000 wins in January 2008, but Baze beat him to 11,000, which he reached in August 2010. The lead flip-flopped several times in the following months until Buenos Aires-based Ricardo established a decent gap – only to forfeit his advantage when he was forced to spend more than six months on the sidelines to fight cancer in 2009. Ricardo did retrieve the lead for an 18-month spell after May 2012, only for injury to intervene and allow Baze yet again to regain the upper hand in December 2013.*

*Ricardo benefits from riding on cards featuring as many as 20 races, while Baze has spent the vast majority of his career away from the bright lights on the second-tier northern Californian circuit at tracks like Golden Gate Fields and Bay Meadows.*

*What the two jockeys share are the superhuman levels of consistency, durability and self-discipline that enable them to ride to a high standard, day in, day out, over several decades. The numbers boggle the mind: both topped the annual 400-mark several times, with Ricardo's personal best of 477 in Rio de Janeiro in 1992–93 outshining the 448 achieved by Baze in 1995. While it seemed as if both could go on forever, Baze surprised the racing world when – typically sounding no trumpet before him – he announced the end of a 42-year riding career when he had the last of more than 53,500 rides at Golden Gate on 11 June 2016. His final winner, number 12,842 in North America, had come 24 hours earlier on the Tim McCanna-trained Vow To Be Tops in a low-level claimer at the San Francisco Bay Area track, where the jockey amassed no fewer than 5,765 winners.*

*Baze's career total of 12,844 victories includes two in Brazil when he met his great rival Ricardo in a jockeys' challenge in Porto Alegre in September 2014. Given that Ricardo's career total stood at 12,670 at the end of June 2016, he was almost certain to overtake Baze's world-record total, injury permitting. 'More power to him,' commented Baze, who turned 58 in August 2016.*