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Kadyrov Makes Name for Himself in Horse Racing

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Gitano Hernando being ridden during practice for the Dubai World Cup in the United Arab Emirates in March. **Kamran Jebreili**

DUBAI, United Arab Emirates — Repeatedly accused of human rights abuses, Chechen leader Ramzan Kadyrov is drawing protests in the sports world as he becomes an increasingly avid thoroughbred owner.

The bearded, 34-year-old leader is not just running horses in Russia. He has become a major player on the international stage during the past two years, spending millions of dollars to acquire well-bred horses that this year competed in the world's richest race — the $10 million Dubai World Cup.

He also had a horse in the $1.8 million Audemars Piguet QE II Cup in Hong Kong earlier this month and will have one in this weekend's $3 million International Cup in Singapore.

"You have a guy who is very passionate about horses and cares about horses," said Robert Harrison, Kadyrov's racing manager. "When his horses are injured, he takes them

to Chechnya where they have a great life. There are not very many owners who will do those kind of things. He has a very compassionate side to him."

The glamorous world of horse racing seems an unlikely place for a former rebel whose feared security forces are known to pursue anyone suspected of opposing his rule in Chechnya. But his acceptance at racecourses from Dubai to Australia gives the charismatic Kadyrov a degree of international legitimacy and bolsters his reputation as a sportsman. He also runs a local football club, has mingled with celebrities such as Mike Tyson, and even played football this month against a team that included Diego Maradona.

His membership in the racing world has done little to quiet the criticism of rights groups, which accuse him of turning the war-torn region into his personal fiefdom and going to extreme lengths to silence his critics. Since succeeding his father, who was killed in a May 2004 bombing in Grozny's stadium, rights groups have accused him of using his personal security force to impose his rule, and several of his foes have been gunned down in contract killings in Moscow and as far away as Dubai.

The most brazen might have been the daytime killing of former Chechen commander Sulim Yamadayev in a Dubai parking lot — on the same day that the 2009 World Cup was run. Kadyrov had a horse in the Dubai Duty Free, which was run earlier in the day, but it was unclear whether he was in town for the race.

The case stunned Dubai authorities and took on added intrigue when the two men convicted in connection with the killing — one of them an Iranian who worked in Kadyrov's stables — had their sentences reduced from life to three years after Yamadayev's family submitted a letter disavowing any desire for further punishment.

"I think he should be barred from these races to demonstrate that what he is doing in Chechnya is not acceptable," said Tanya Lokshina, a Russian researcher for New York-based Human Rights Watch. "That would be a possible way to demonstrate that people around the world care about human rights violations in Chechnya. Since this is not happening, he is being in a sense convinced of his own impunity, his own invulnerability."

Kadyrov, who has denied any involvement in the alleged abuses, did not respond to questions from The Associated Press submitted to his spokesman.

When he first came on the racing scene in 2009, Human Rights Watch initiated a campaign to highlight Kadyrov's "unacceptable" rights record.

It sent a letter to the Australian government ahead of the Melbourne Cup demanding that Kadyrov's horses be excluded from the race. The nation's media had a field day with the story, calling Kadyrov everything from a "brutal dictator" to a "tyrant," and politicians jumped on the anti-Kadyrov bandwagon suggesting that the presence of his horses was staining the reputation of the famous race.

"If this nasty character were to get his hands on the Melbourne Cup, it would be the lowest point in Australia's sporting history," Senator Bob Brown told The Sunday Age at the time.

Brown also called for any of Kadyrov's winnings to be withheld.

In the end, Kadyrov's horse, Mourilyan, was allowed to race and placed third, earning the Chechen more than $450,000.

Kadyrov didn't have a viable horse to run in last year's Melbourne Cup, but Harrison said he's planning to run Gitano Hernando — the same horse featured in Hong Kong and Singapore races — in Australia this year. The 2009 Goodwood Stakes winner placed sixth in this year's World Cup just after the Chechen leader purchased him for $4 million, according to the British-based Racing Post.

Shaun Kelly, a spokesman for Racing Victoria, said Kadyrov would be allowed to race as he did in 2009 since he is currently a licensed owner in the Northern Hemisphere. He did not speak directly to Kadyrov's rights record, only saying: "Victoria's Rules of Racing deal with individuals convicted of criminal offenses and provide stewards with the discretion to exclude them from participating in thoroughbred racing within the state of Victoria."

Paul Scotney, director of Integrity Services, Compliance & Licensing for the British Horseracing Authority, said Kadyrov was also a licensed owner in Britain, South Africa and Dubai. He said it had found no basis to prevent Kadyrov from racing in Britain.

"We are aware of allegations made against Mr. Kadyrov including by international human rights organizations," Scotney said. "However, British Horseracing operates within guidelines on the suitability of individuals to be registered owners which are set within the parameters of the law applicable in Great Britain. Matters which will be taken into consideration must objectively relate to an individual's suitability to be an owner, which naturally focuses on matters relating to finance and animal welfare. We can find no objective grounds on which to base a refusal of his registration."

Kadyrov hasn't raced a horse in the United States, but Harrison said he wouldn't rule it out in the future. One of Kadyrov's recent purchases, Sweet Ducky, has returned to the United States after running in the UAE Derby in March.

The picture that emerges of Kadyrov the horseman is in stark contrast to the one painted by rights groups. Harrison and several of his trainers portrayed Kadyrov as a "gentleman" and a hands-off owner who is exceedingly polite and rarely seen. Trainers said most communications are made through Harrison and a Russian middleman since Kadyrov doesn't speak English and they don't speak Russian.

"I wouldn't know him from Adam. I've never met him. I've never spoken to him," said Gary Moore, a former jockey who trains at least three of Kadyrov's horses for races in Europe from his stables in Britain. "I wouldn't have a clue what he looks like or anything."

Harrison said Kadyrov has 10 international horses, seven of which race at the Group I level. He keeps his horses in the United Kingdom, Dubai and the United States, and has scores more at home in Russia.

Kadyrov doesn't often attend races, though in March he was among Dubai's expatriate elite roaming the grounds at the World Cup, a showcase event for the emirate's ruler, Sheik Mohammed bin Rashid Al Maktoum.

Neither Harrison nor the trainers could say where Kadyrov gets the money to finance his expensive hobby.

But Kadyrov receives generous funding from Moscow in exchange for suppressing an Islamist insurgency. The money has allowed him to bring a measure of stability to Chechnya after years of fighting and to rebuild the shattered capital. He has worked hard to demonstrate that a sense of normalcy is returning to the region — playing in the football match against a team featuring Maradona, Luis Figo and other stars to mark the opening of a 30,000-seat stadium.

In March, Kadyrov brought a team of former Brazilian soccer legends for a match in an effort to show that Chechnya is flourishing.

But corruption remains rife.

"Chechnya is a very corrupt place," Lokshina said. "The way the money is expended is not transparent at all. There are very strong allegations that everyone who has any sort of a business in Chechnya has to pay up."

Similar concerns were expressed by U.S. diplomats in a 2006 classified cable published by WikiLeaks in December. They describe "the Chechen population as the great loser in this game."

"Kadyrov has slowly but surely also taken over most of the spigots of money that once fed the army, and like his father he has started agitating for overt control over Chechnya's oil," the cable said. "Kadyrov is at least as corrupt as the military, but the money he expropriates for himself from Moscow's subsidies is accepted as his payoff for keeping things quiet."

Moore and Herman Brown, one of Kadyrov's other trainers, said they knew little about the allegations against Kadyrov except for what they have read on the Internet. They said their job was to help Kadyrov's horses win races and that they tried to stay out of politics.

"As for as I'm concerned, he is a model owner to me," said Brown, who takes care of his horses outside of Europe and splits his time between Dubai and South Africa.

"We need quality horses and quality owners," Brown said. "In the racing business as it is today, it's difficult to find people prepared to buy expensive horses, quality horses."

Harrison went further, saying it was unfair to single out Kadyrov for criticism when there are plenty of bad apples in the world of horse racing.

"He has nothing hanging over his head so there is no problem going anywhere in the world," Harrison said.

"You look at lots of other owners on the international circuit, some of them have worse reputations," he said. "There are a lot of characters in England that you raise your eyebrows at and a lot of characters in America that you go 'Wow!' That is the sport all over the world unfortunately."

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