

Allez

Dominant Prix
d'Amérique
performance
the highlight of
Paris excursion

Bold Eagle!

by T.J. Burkett



AS THE SUN SET on a chilly Friday night in Paris, we set off up the hill in Montmartre to search out provisions for the evening. ✱ My wife, Maria, was with me. Our day had been bursting with sightseeing. We gawked at the imposing Gothic façade of Notre Dame Cathedral; the soaring stained glass inside Sainte-Chapelle; “modern” works by Dali, Picasso and Matisse in the Georges Pompidou Center;

Impressionist masters Renoir, Monet and Manet at the Orsay Museum; and ancient and Renaissance works in the Louvre before returning to our hotel to prepare for an evening at the famous Moulin Rouge. ✱ The duck confit and steak frites lunch had long passed and we were hungry for some French cheese, wine and fruit to snack on before setting out for dinner. We stopped in De Verre En Vers, a wine





shop halfway up the hill to the Sacre Coeur cathedral overlooking the city. The helpful (and English-speaking) clerk recommended a choice for us—we went with a red from the Faugeres region.

As he thankfully accepted our American Express card, we started to chat about our purpose in Paris: to see the Prix d’Amerique in two days.

“I like the trotters,” he said, “but I don’t like that race. It seems like the horse that is supposed to win never does.”

We found out that weekend that the clerk was to be proven wrong.

Bold Eagle, the heavy favorite in the 95th edition of the €1 million race, turned in a dominating performance with driver Franck Nivard, sweeping to the lead midway through the race and winning handily in a stakes- and track-record time.

WEEKEND IN PARIS: *This page, clockwise from top: The author and his wife, Maria, got only this close to the Eiffel Tower on their trip. • Ads for the Prix d’Amerique showed up on pillars and buses throughout the city before the race. • Marveling at the stained glass in Sainte-Chapelle.*



While the center is state-of-the-art, the architecture of the barns and moss on the roof make the place look like it’s been there 200 years, despite it being founded in 1962.



Last November, Equi-Tours, a Swedish travel agency specializing in arranging trips to major equestrian and horse racing events around the world, contacted the USTA, asking for help in marketing their upcoming tour to Paris for the Prix d’Amerique. Over the past several years, the firm had conducted several successful trips for Americans and Canadians with a harness racing background to travel and see French racing first-hand.

Equi-Tours can usually count on 10-12 North Americans to travel to Paris for their annual trip, but in 2015 they wanted to do better. Arrangements were made and on Nov. 5, ads and press releases began appearing on the website and in *Hoof Beats*.

All this talk of Paris inspired me. At dinner that night, I asked my wife if she would be willing to go to France with

TOUR OF GROBOIS: *Top:* Trainer Stefan Pettersson tells the tour group about his horse, Oasis Bi, who finished third in the Prix d’Amerique the next day. *Bottom:* The Grobois Training Center in the Paris suburbs, home to some 1,500 horses, was built on the site of a 17th-century palace.

me. Maria, who holds a master’s degree in architectural history, jumped at the chance to experience the culture and historic buildings of the 2,300-year-old city.

Two weeks later, on Nov. 13, Paris was besieged by a series of coordinated terrorist attacks. The mass shootings and suicide bombings claimed 130 lives and sent the western world into a state of high alert. Suddenly, when we told people we were going to Paris, our plans were met with clucks of disapproval and fear.

Our response consisted of two parts:

“Such an event will make Paris even safer as security will be higher, and if we let these attacks determine how we live our lives, then the terrorists’ aims were successful.”

As January waned and the trip neared, my first trip to Europe was getting closer and closer to becoming a reality. We got the passports out of the safe deposit box, bought neck wallets to deter pickpockets, and began to decide which landmarks we had to see on our free time during the tour. Maria had to see Sainte-Chapelle, the 13th-century Gothic chapel that was world-famous for its enormous stained glass windows. Apart from being there to see French trotting, I wanted to spend my tourist portion of the trip eating French food, drinking French wine, and seeing artwork only previously seen in the pages of books.



After an overnight flight, we landed Thursday, Jan. 28, to a dreary morning in Paris. Having slept less than an hour on the plane, we stumbled through customs and contacted Moira Fanning from the Breeders Crown, who is a defacto guide for Equi-Tours and offered to split a shuttle from the airport for the hour-long ride into Paris. Moira was in Paris for three reasons: she loves the city, was tasked with presenting the Prix de Meadowlands trophy on the Prix d’Amerique undercard, and to invite European trotters—including the big race winner—to the Breeders Crown Open Trot.

Along with Moira and two unknown travelers in the van was John Burke, who got to travel to Paris when he was gifted the trip from the winner of the Standardbred Retirement Foundation’s raffle giveaway, who couldn’t make the trip. The three of us were the lone Americans that were part of the tour.

We eventually arrived in the Montmartre district and our home for the weekend, Hotel Terrass. We chose that hotel as it looked like the most historic building of the two offered by the tour. After checking in and freshening up, we went downstairs with plans to hit as many churches as we could before the formal tour began at 5:30 p.m.

In the lobby we chanced to meet up with Marie Nyberg, the CEO of Equi-Tours. A svelte, blond Swede that towered over my wife and me, Marie told us



VINCENNES COLOR: This page, clockwise from above: Our party sat at the Moni Maker table at Vincennes Racecourse. In 1999, Moni Maker was the last American-owned horse to win the Prix d’Amerique. • Fans take a selfie with the mascot for the Timoko fan club. The real Timoko finished second in the race. • A display at the track tells how it is “super easy” to play the races. *Opposite:* Bold Eagle, the heavy favorite in the race, had thousands of fans ready to cheer him on.



that the van tour had been moved to 2 p.m.—something she had sent me in an e-mail that I had failed to note.

We climbed into a van with Moira, John, and Anneli Stahlfors, a Swede living in Paris who would serve as our tour guide. We whipped into traffic and began our whirlwind tour.

As Paolo, our driver, navigated the narrow, winding streets, Anneli gave the four of us a comprehensive, yet concise, background of the history and significance of each landmark we passed. Let me tell you, everything is a landmark in Paris. We drove past the Eiffel Tower—where we jumped out for a photo, reminiscent of the Grand Canyon scene in *National Lampoon’s Vacation*—the Louvre, the Pantheon, the Arc de Triomphe, down the Champs Elysees, and dozens more sights that jet lag decided were too much to remember. It was the best way to see the most of Paris in the shortest amount of time.

Paolo dropped us off at the top of Montmartre at the steps of Sacre Coeur cathedral, the highest point in Paris.



Our three days in the city had already dispelled the old notion that the French are rude to and dislike Americans, but this spectacle [at the track] warmed the heart, nonetheless.



We toured the cathedral and began the descent down the hill back to the hotel. Anneli showed us the squares and plazas where artists would paint your portrait while you waited, along with the dozens of tourist junk shops selling the same Paris-themed souvenirs throughout the city. John stopped for a crepe, but we decided that we could wait until dinner that night.

Dinner was held at a tiny place off a side street called Le Bouclard. Our party consisted of the aforementioned American contingent, as well as Jay Farrar, former president of Farlink Satellite Services, a provider of uplink services for racetracks. He is also a trustee of the Harness Racing Museum and the nephew of Immortal trainer-driver Frank Ervin. We sat in the front of the restaurant with Petra Gustafsson of Equi-Tours while the rest of the Swedes sat at a separate table in the back. This was a classic, quirky French place with a bar-like atmosphere.

I looked at the menu and—as my wife can tell you I am notorious for doing—ordered the most disgusting-sounding thing on the menu. This time it was veal

kidneys. My selection was met with more than one mutter and wrinkled nose when they heard my order.

“If it’s on the menu, they must have put it there for a reason!” I said this time and every time this happens.

I’d love to say that I loved my little kidneys, but alas, I did not. They tasted like something akin to a meat mushroom. The texture was too much for my delicate American palate. I ate more of my wife’s excellent veal flank steak than my own meal. Needless to say, the wine—a Syrah from the Costieres de Nimes region—and crème brulee at the end were excellent.

Friday was another tourist day. The tour had an afternoon bus trip to Vincennes Racecourse, home of the Prix d’Amerique, for an equine trade fair with vendors selling artwork, jewelry and clothing, but we opted to stay in the city to see the sights listed at the beginning of the story.



Our Friday night was spent at the famous Moulin Rouge, a cabaret around the corner which is the birthplace of the can-can dance. We knew

it was expensive and a tourist trap, but as first-timers to Paris, we decided to go anyway. We were seated with a couple from Australia, drank champagne, and watched the equivalent of a topless Rockettes show.

Saturday broke gray and drizzly over Paris as we enjoyed another fantastic breakfast on the top floor of our hotel. I grew quite accustomed to breaking my fast with fresh bread and chevre cheese each morning while gazing out at the Eiffel Tower in the distance.

John, Maria and I boarded a bus with the Swedish contingent of the tour—now numbering more than 50, for a trip outside the city to the Grobois Training Center southeast of town. We took the scenic route out of town along the Seine River, marveling at the palaces, buildings and bridges that lined the river.

As we three Americans were in the minority on the tour, the guide, My Nilsson, pointed out landmarks while speaking in Swedish. She switched over to English just long enough to tell us where we were and where we were heading.

We arrived at the training center and walked over to the barn of Team



Westhof, home of Prix starter Oasis Bi. While considered a longshot in the race, the Swedish-bred and Italian-owned 8-year-old son of Toss Out had earned almost a million Euros in his career. He also journeyed to the U.S. last year to place fourth in the Yonkers International Trot.

While Oasis Bi was given a bath and put away for the day, My interviewed the horse's trainer, Stefan Pettersson, in Swedish, asking him about the differences between racing in Sweden versus France and how the horse would fare in the next day's big race. Pettersson said his horse was ready to race, but would face a stiff challenge from the favorite, Bold Eagle, and the ever-tough Timoko.

We then journeyed over to the barn of Pierre Vercruyse, a prominent French horseman who had seen more recent

success as a catch-driver rather than a trainer. Vercruyse trains 12 head at Grobois in his barn, which is laid out in a U-shape around a central courtyard with a willow tree in the center. While the center is state-of-the-art, the architecture of the barns and moss on the roof make the place look like it's been there 200 years, despite it being founded in 1962.

Nilsson interviewed Vercruyse in English. The horseman lived in the U.S. for five years and had even taken an American for a wife. He told the crowd that the biggest difference between French and U.S. training was that the Americans tended to stick to a rigid regimen, rarely deviating their schedule, while the French changed things up almost daily, since they might be racing on dirt one week, turf the next, and under saddle after that. As the rain started to fall harder and the

crowd scurried under the shedrow, he said Bold Eagle was the horse to beat and Timoko would be right there, too.



The next morning, the rain halted as the bus pulled up to the racetrack. We jumped out and got into the security line to get into the track. We had to open our coats and bags and pass through a metal detector before being allowed in, like we were at an airport. We had found the same tight security at the museums we visited.

We were lucky enough to be guests of the Breeders Crown while at the racetrack, which meant that we joined Moira, John and Jay at the "Moni Maker" table in the top-floor restaurant. Also at the table were Alex Dadoyan of the Standardbred Owners Association



HORSE PARADE: Clockwise from far upper left: The parade before the races is a mix of flattering American imagery and downright offbeat characters. • A parade of riders on Harley Davidson motorcycles brought a loud conclusion to the parade. • The drivers in the Prix d’Amerique were brought in on motorcycles as well. Here Pierre Vercruysse, driver of Oasis Bi, shows off.

of New York, who has made several trips to France to broker the simulcast wagering deal to bring trotting races at Yonkers Raceway overseas; Ted Gewertz and Claire Chappell, longtime prominent U.S. owners that didn’t have a horse in the race, but made it a point to attend the festivities nearly every year; and Peter Gerry, whose Arden Homestead Stable ruled trotting in the 20th century. Now he is an avid owner and amateur driver who has even started at Vincennes. The lone non-Americans at the table were Mats Denniger and his wife. Denniger is the head of public affairs for harness racing in Sweden.

The card was not set to begin for another 90 minutes, but the grandstand was beginning to fill. This race was founded in 1920 to commemorate the United States’ involvement in World War

I, so American flags and giant novelty Uncle Sam hats were in nearly all hands and on all heads, respectively. Our three days in the city had already dispelled the old notion that the French are rude to and dislike Americans, but this spectacle warmed the heart, nonetheless.

Apart from the American flag regalia, several groups were decked out in the colors of their favorite horses in the race.

Almost every horse had its cheering section. At this early point in the day, the one for Timoko was the largest. The French-bred trotter was the richest horse in the race, with more than €3.5 million in earnings. Because of this, he was assigned the outside 18 post. Driven by Swedish legend Bjorn Goop, Timoko had already won Sweden’s famed Elitlopp in 2014 and last year had finished second to Papagayo E in the Yonkers International Trot. His fan club wore the black and blue colors of his owner and trainer, Richard Westerink. The group was quite raucous as we walked by because they were making a live appearance on national French television.

We ascended back to the restaurant in time to see the horse parade. From the top of the grandstand, the spectacle was overwhelming. A trotter decked out



THE RACE: Above: As the field passed the grandstand for the first time, Timoko (blue hood) held a contested lead. He eventually yielded to Bold Eagle (three wide with his driver, Franck Nivard, wearing the yellow helmet). Right: Nivard celebrates as Bold Eagle crosses the finish line in front, holding off Timoko and Oasis Bi (white buxton).

in the stars and stripes led a parade of dancers, flag wavers and a band down the homestretch. This was followed by a parade of Harley Davidson motorcycles, 18 of which carried the drivers of the horses in the Prix d’Amerique.



As the races began, we sat down to a six-course meal in the restaurant. The highlight of the meal was the veal filet, which was the fourth meal that we had eaten on the trip that had included veal. We both agreed that the meal at the racetrack was the best meal of the trip.

When the horses stepped on the track for the second race, I decided it was time to make a bet. The French have a varied menu of betting options, but I am a win bettor at heart, so I kept things simple and went to the machine with a win bet in mind.

The trouble began with the program. The program we were given didn’t list any past performances. All it had was the horses’ morning line, connections and its overall performance for the year. I decided to find a horse whose morning line was lower than its current odds, hoping that he was being overlooked. I settled on No. 2, Barrio Josselyn. He had a morning line of 6-1, but was currently at 8-1. I went to the machine when no one was around in order to stay out of

the way of the real punters and punched in my bet.

When I got back to the table, I realized that I had punched in the horse to placé which is really a show ticket. I knew that probably wasn’t a win bet, but I didn’t have time to fix it, so I held on to it. Sure enough, the horse won by 1½ lengths, turning a winning win ticket into a winning show ticket. It was nice to have a winner in an 18-horse race, but I was mad that I had simply doubled my money instead of getting 8-1.

I knew Alex had been here before and was an avid horseplayer, so I asked him what he played. He told me that he plays the 2 sur 4 with three or four horses. The minimum bet was €3, making a three-horse bet €9, but Alex said it keeps your bet alive if your win bet doesn’t pan out. Plus, if all three of your horses make the top three, it pays all the combinations.



The Prix d'Amerique was the sixth race, so I resolved to play a win bet this time along with a 2 *sur* 4. I bet Oasis Bi at 66-1 to win and put Oasis Bi, Bold Eagle—the 1.7-1 favorite—and Support Justice, a 13-1 fifth choice by Kadabra, in my 2 *sur* 4. It was time for the big race.



They kept the area by the glass free of tables, so everyone gathered six-deep near it to watch the race. The start looked like organized chaos: all 18 starters milled around the chute until they all turned around at once and the race was on. Luckily there was no restart.

What amazed me the most about the race was the constant movement. Oasis Bi was first to take the lead, which Vercruyse said was so important when he was interviewed the day before at Grobois. Horses were four-wide entering





the second turn, but soon Timoko pushed to the front. As the field started up the famous hill on the backstretch, defending champion Up And Quick was first-over with Bold Eagle second-over for a bit.

Halfway through the race, Bold Eagle and driver Franck Nivard finally wrested the lead from Timoko. Up And Quick ranged outside, while Timoko was raring to go and nearly climbed up Nivard's helmet. Oasis Bi sat behind Timoko, locked in sixth on the rail.

In the final turn, Akim Du Cap Vert circled Up And Quick and made a bid for the lead. He, Bold Eagle and Timoko pulled away from the field at the top of the stretch, giving Vercruysse just enough room to get Oasis Bi off the rail and into position to strike.

In the stretch, Bold Eagle proved that he was much the best on this day, pulling away from Timoko to win the 2,700-meter (about 1 $\frac{2}{3}$ -mile) race in 3:12.65 for a kilometer rate of 1:11.40. Oasis Bi charged hard to finish third.

From our perch atop the grandstand, we watched the bedlam unfold as the French roared when their hero returned



*From our perch atop the grandstand,
we watched the bedlam unfold as the
French roared when their hero
returned to the winner's circle.*



to the winner's circle. Bold Eagle is a 5-year-old son of Ready Cash, who kept the Prix d'Amerique trophy in France in both 2011 and 2012 with Nivard in the sulky.

I traveled down to the international press room for the press conference, where owner Pierre Pilarski held court holding a bottle of champagne. He told the reporters that his horse was too much to beat this day and even when Timoko had a chance to overtake Bold Eagle in the stretch, he wasn't worried about getting beaten. My Nilsson translated my question into French and Pilarski's answer back into English for me.

My win ticket didn't cash, but my 2 sur 4 did. Unfortunately, it paid only €2.90, meaning my €9 ticket was worth only €2.90.



The 10th race was the Prix de Meadowlands, so Moira took John, Jay and me down to the winner's circle to present the trophy that she had brought with her from New Jersey. As we waited for Vercruysse, the winning driver, to

AFTERMATH: *Opposite top: Owner Pierre Pilarski reacts to Bold Eagle's win. Opposite bottom: Photographers and press chase Bold Eagle as he heads back to the winner's circle, led by a horse wearing an American flag-inspired blanket and hood. Above: The eighth race was the Prix de Meadowlands. Americans John Burke (far left), Jay Farrar (second from left), Moira Fanning (third from left) and the author (far right) present the trophy to the connections of winning mare Cayenne De Houelle.*

bring the horse back to the winner's circle, we were all interviewed for the crowd that remained on the drizzly evening. Moira praised the French for having the "greatest harness racetrack in... Europe," making sure not to slip up and say it was the greatest track in the world and better than the Meadowlands. She invited the French to come visit our tracks in the U.S. and extended the invitation to the connections of Bold Eagle to compete in the Breeders Crown Open Trot in October at the Meadowlands.

We returned to the city, ate one more

meal on the town, and returned to the hotel and to ascend to the rooftop bar for one more nightcap on our last night in Paris. We joined two figures already there: Marie and My, chatting about the day's events. My wife ordered the French version of a Moscow Mule while I opted for a cocktail containing absinthe, the supposed toxic wormwood liqueur that inspired some and ruined other artists in Montmartre over the years.

"I was disappointed that more Americans didn't join us this year," Marie said. "Do you know why more didn't sign up?"

We told her that the terrorist attacks and the divisive U.S. political climate—along with no North American involvement in the race—had probably convinced most people to stay home this year. But as midnight struck, the Eiffel Tower lit up and sparkled with a thousand lights.

"All I know is that they sure missed out," I said.

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