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Hoof prints in time



The Hindu

Members in the dressage arena. Photo: M. Srinath



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The rope ladder and the stands with mounted saddles. Photo: M. Srinath



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A horse being hosed down. Photo: M. Srinath

Deepa Alexander spends a morning at the oldest riding school in the city watching the members and horses jumpstart their day

Somewhere in the steppes of Central Asia is a menhir with these words carved on it — ‘If on earth there be a paradise, Tis on horseback it lies.’ It’s half past five on a muggy weekend morning when I set out to find the truth about these lines.

The broad gates of the Madras Riding School at Velachery open to a car park cloaked in neem-scented darkness. Long blades of grass muffle the sound of fading hoof beats. Somewhere, a cuckoo calls and a bat flits past my shoulder. In the faint light I make out the outlines of horses... quiet, imposing and magnificent. Pelican Creek (most horses have grandiose names) paws the ground impatiently as instructor Alagesan tacks up, fastening the saddle and tightening the girth behind her forelegs. The saddle blanket is proudly emblazoned with the letters MRS.

A young girl stands on the mounting bench, places one foot on the stirrup and with a practised heave seats herself on the saddle. She reins in the horse and heads to the dressage arena where other members of the school are lining up under the watchful eyes of riding instructor Anita Ojha. I stumble through the underbrush, my nose guided by the smells of leather and horse (and the imaginary cologne), to join a group of parents lounging at the stiles that enclose a moist patch of sand.

Inside the ringed arena, 16 thoroughbreds blur past in colours that range from black to sorrel and chestnut to grey. On them, sit confident riders in red and grey T-shirts, breeches and equestrian helmets; some of them hold a crop in their hands. These men and women, boys and girls, professionals and students trot past silently eyes fixed ahead, reins resting in their sure hands. In that quiet dawn, with the sun breaking through huge banks of clouds, it seems like the perfect marriage of man and beast.

The Madras Riding School is the oldest and one of the most well-known riding establishments in the city. Founded in 1951, it was then located in the vast grounds of Raj Bhavan, across the road from where it now stands. Inaugurated in 1959 by Pt. Jawaharlal Nehru, the club counts among its earliest members eminent personalities of Madras. It later relocated to the Race Course premises and has as its patron, industrialist and chairman of the Madras Race Club, M.A.M Ramaswamy. Open to anyone who loves to ride, the school has members between the ages of six and 60 who have won laurels at many equestrian championships.

At one end of the arena is N.V. Ravi, the club’s president and an architect by profession. At the other is K.S. Premkumar the club’s secretary, who calls out the commands for the morning routine. Between them ride the others — entrepreneurs, school students and businessmen — including little Sameer who boldly steers his brown pony, Pack-a-Punch.

“Walk”, “Trot” “Canter” calls out Premkumar as the riders lead the horses through circles, semicircles and figure of eights. A few step out of line but are reined in and their hooves pad past in unison once again. “Two Point”, shouts out Premkumar and all the riders lean forward, their seats slightly raised from the saddle, their legs taut, their brows furrowed in concentration in anticipation of the jump. The class wheels in again and lies back on the horse, while some of the younger boys do a saddle stand with ease — an exercise that calls for the near absence of a tummy. An hour later both horse and rider have worked up a fine sweat and the class draws to a close. But not before Premkumar calls out “Make much of your horses!” — an old ritual where riders pat and stroke the horse, along with words of approval — whispers of “Good girl!” “Well done!” and soft whinnys. The younger riders dismount while Ravi, Namrata Kishore, Hisham Osman and Sai Arun Shanthamohan head for the show jumping arena. Jumping while astride a horse counts for one of life’s greatest pleasures. In short, a leap of faith.

The arena has strategically placed gates and striped bars. One of the boys is challenged by a ‘horse refusal’, no amount of coaxing can make Elite Empire jump. The other takes a tumble but manages to mount again and gather up the horse like satin. By now the sun is searing the grounds and I head back to the cluster of buildings and the mango tree with its tree-house and rope ladder on which are perched two boys.

It’s seven-year-old Samartha’s birthday and while the members are celebrating I wander off to the stables reading up on horse markings while All That beats a tattoo on the flagstone with his hoofs. He has sighted the bran and carrots coming his way. Fans whirl overhead and mynahs peck at the grain bins. A horse is getting his muck hosed down by a syce. One of the boys is watering his pony. Another is having a face-to-face talk.

I leave the school, the smell of horses, dew and hay on my mind. Those lines are true...especially here at the Madras Riding School where they “make much of their horses”.

FACTFILE

- MRS has 30 thoroughbreds between the ages of 4 and 7 years weighing approximately 500 kg each. These horses have retired from active racing.
- The club members also play cycle polo to help them learn the sport.
- ‘Fall’ breakfasts are held to humour riders and help them get over the indignity of a fall.