TOUGH HORSES ARE IN THE PIPELINE IN SOUTH AFRICA, VIA THE KAROO ARID REGION IS HOME TO YOUNG HORSES BEFORE THEY GO TO SALES GAYNOR RUPERT, OTHER BREEDERS INSTILL RESILIENCE IN THEIR STOCK

Team Valor’s South African partner Gaynor Rupert recently provided a fascinating glimpse of the unique conditions that young horses from her Drakenstein Stud go through in the year after they are weaned from their mothers.

Drakenstein weanlings are shipped to massive paddocks in the Karoo, a flat, semi-desert region where they are turned out with the hope that they will grow up into tough racehorses. This will include the stock out of broodmares Captain’s Lover, Ebony Flyer, Flaming Dame and Little Miss Magic, who are all owned by Mrs. Rupert and Team Valor International.

“I thought it might amuse you to see why South African horses are so resilient—they have to deal with all sorts of adversity, which they do with equanimity as you can see,” Mrs. Rupert said to Barry Irwin.

Irwin has long appreciated the toughness of the South African Thoroughbred, and he incorporates some of the same principles in the U.S., although the methods are necessarily different.

“They try to raise the horses naturally in South Africa,” Irwin said. “It just toughens them up. If you're interested in raising good horses, this is the way to do it. In the U.S., if you have yearlings that you are going to sell, you hot-house them and try to make them look as perfect as possible. The horses that I am going to keep to race here in the U.S., I tell the farm not to manipulate the legs, and I do not want them sale prepared. I want them prepared to be racehorses. So they spend more time outside. A lot of the stables in the past in this country used to do the same thing, but when you breed to sell, you can't do it. In South Africa, they don't care. They treat most of the horses the same way, and if they get stuck with a horse that doesn't sell, they are usually just as happy to race it.”

Robin Bruss, an international bloodstock agent based in South Africa, referred to the Karoo as the central hub of the country’s breeding industry for much of the 1900s.
“In the 1960s, things started to change,” he said. “A champion sire called Persian Wonder went into the Robertson area where the farms are nestled in a beautiful valley which is known for growing grapes. Wine country and horses always go together well with the soil bases, and there the farms are smaller but the ground is extremely rich. Most of the champion breeders and most of the best bloodstock are there now, in the southern part around the Western Cape.

“In recent times, a lot of the big breeders have thought that it would be best to move the horses after they have been weaned from the mothers up to the Karoo in the central part of the country. It is like a desert scrub, and you could drive from one side to the other and it would take you around 8 hours, on a dead flat area with scrub bush everywhere.

“Although, it looks like a desert, the scrub bush is nutritious for animals, and that is why it is very good country for sheep. The mineral base in the soil is very good, and there is a lot of nutrition that the horses can get from the natural vegetation. They are turned out in these great, big paddocks day and night.”

An American commercial horseman would probably be most shocked to see springbok antelopes in those paddocks, grazing alongside the Thoroughbreds. Only in Africa!

Bruss said “I suppose we are one of the few countries that in order for us to find a natural advantage compared to other countries, we need to breed tougher, sounder, more durable horses. I think it is always a combo effect—the way you rear them in the most natural way possible, the way they use their athletic ability from the time that they are small, where they are not standing in little paddocks, the way they gain concussion on their joints and knees doing their early exercise on hard ground, those bones will be harder when they mature.”