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Salute Thunder Snow, the warrior who just keeps on battling

Michele MacDonald | March 31, 2019



Mutual affection: trainer Saeed bin Suroor and jockey Christophe Soumillon after Thunder Snow's second victory in the Dubai World Cup. Photo: Michele MacDonald

In many ways, he is a horse like no other. Godolphin's Thunder Snow has stormed the gamut of racing, putting the strange and unique chagrin of his Kentucky Derby bucking episode far behind him to make glorious history as the only runner ever to capture two editions of the world's richest race, the Dubai World Cup.

Already a Group 1 winner over European turf as well as Dubai dirt, he can respond to challenge like a tiger, as he proved when answering jockey Christophe Soumillon's emphatic urgings to thrust his nose in front of Gronkowski with a figurative roar at the finish of the \$12 million Meydan showcase event.

Now only a little more than \$1 million behind record-setting North American earnings leader Arrogate, Thunder Snow again will be dispatched to the United States this season on a mission to add to his current bankroll of \$16.39 million and



Never say die: Thunder Snow (near) refuses to yield to Gronkowski (Oisin Murphy) as they race to the wire in the Dubai World Cup. Photo: Michele MacDonald



In a class of her own: Almond Eye (Christophe Lemaire) has the Dubai Turf firmly under control. Photo: Michele MacDonald

to his one-of-a-kind storyline.

“I love this horse very much,” trainer Saeed bin Suroor exclaimed with a flourish of affection for the 5-year-old, who he occasionally has described with the word “cheeky”, as he looked forward to the next chapters.

Thunder Snow’s win marked the record ninth Dubai World Cup victory for his trainer, and Suroor showered the runner with praise for his tenacity.

“He is very brave and always tries very hard,” Suroor said while comparing Thunder Snow to the brilliant but star-crossed Dubai Millennium in terms of what the horse means to him.

Since Thunder Snow has now won Dubai World Cup program races for three consecutive years, having also triumphed in the UAE Derby in 2017, his latest score by whiskers is even more significant to his connections and adds to feats not previously accomplished by any other horse.

Even though he had not won between Dubai World Cup efforts, Thunder Snow had placed in two prestigious U.S. Grade 1 events in 2018, and, with all that history behind him, his success was the headline

story that emerged from the 24th running of the Dubai World Cup program.

However, an array of other sagas unfolded on the mild evening breeze at Meydan, including some that will continue to have an impact on this year’s major racing scenarios, in addition to the focus that Thunder Snow will draw when he arrives back in America.

Playing second fiddle to no one, even a two-time Dubai World Cup winner, Japan’s reigning Horse of the Year, Almond Eye, demonstrated with a smooth rush that she is a global force with which to be reckoned.

Racing kindly for jockey Christophe Lemaire in the middle of the 13-horse field in the \$6 million Dubai Turf, Almond Eye shifted to high gear when asked and cruised to victory in admirable time of 1:46.78 — third fastest in the race’s history — for the 1800m, even though not pushed hard.

“I’m very glad the job is done — let’s look forward now,” said Lemaire, who suggested the race for Almond Eye’s seasonal debut rather than the 2400m Dubai Sheema Classic since he felt it would not take too much out of her and

could be an ideal stepping stone to for main goal of the season: the Prix de l’Arc de Triomphe.

“She broke well and I could take a good position. She was very relaxed and used her powerful stride at the end. She was brilliant,” Lemaire said.

Almond Eye’s future appears to be heading toward a potentially electrifying showdown with Juddmonte’s European champion female Enable, who is, at this juncture, being aimed for her third consecutive Arc trophy. The prospects of this match-up at Longchamp in October are breathtaking, at the least.

With her \$3.6 million payday, Almond Eye now has banked \$10,065,261 and has won all but her debut in eight career starts. The 4-year-old filly by Lord Kanaloa swept Japan’s Filly Triple Crown last year and then set a world record time of 2:20.60 for the Japan Cup’s 2400m while defeating older male rivals.

Trainer Sakae Kunieda exclaimed that “my head was spinning” as he watched Almond Eye in the Dubai Turf. His goal, he said, is to ensure that the filly has every chance to “get better and better”.

Almond Eye likely will have only one

other race, a European prep, prior to her Arc bid, he said, and the owners, Silk Racing, will help make the decision about a specific goal.

Even before the sun went down at Meydan, another star shone in the form of Godolphin’s Melbourne Cup winner, Cross Counter, who delivered one of three Dubai World Cup program victories for trainer Charlie Appleby and jockey William Buick when he sauntered home in the \$1.5 million, G2 Dubai Gold Cup at 3200m.

Showing no sign of rustiness after his global jaunts or the marathon distance, Cross Counter crossed the finish line with his ears up and eyes bright.

“Cross Counter is a special horse for His Highness Sheikh Mohammed bin Rashid al Maktoum and Godolphin,” Buick said. “I was very happy with the way he travelled and he finished off well. It is a great effort when you consider he has been off since the Melbourne Cup.”

A tested warrior

But despite all the subplots and outstanding efforts (including those by the American contingent), this day in Dubai — which began with moderate sand

storms and concluded with Gwen Stefani singing hits like It’s My Life after the horses had returned to their barns — belonged to Thunder Snow.

He isn’t everyone’s concept of a super horse. He is far from undefeated, with a current record of eight wins in 23 starts, but he is a tested warrior who does not faint in battle; he also has placed ten times and raced in five countries - UAE, Britain, Ireland, France and the U.S.

Suroor said he recognized quickly when Thunder Snow was sent to him as a yearling that the horse had the potential to be something out of the ordinary.

“I liked the way he looked — he was a beautiful animal — and, after that, the way he trained in the morning. He showed his class. I was confident he would win big races.”

Suroor doesn’t like to talk at length about Thunder Snow’s Kentucky Derby debacle, which followed a week that featured a few fits of bucking during morning training at Churchill Downs. Exercise rider Daragh O’Donohoe referred to Thunder Snow at that time as just a “big baby”.

“He is very easy to train. He likes to play in his box and he is a very happy horse,”

said Suroor, who has hinted to reporters about what happened after the start of the Kentucky Derby but never confirmed any details.

“He never did that afterward. We ran him next and he finished second in the Irish 2000 Guineas [to Coolmore’s Churchill],” Suroor said.

“Nobody knows,” he added when asked what caused the Derby bucking.

Thunder Snow offered no such antics when he finished third in last year’s Breeders’ Cup Classic at Churchill Downs, behind only champion Accelerate and runner-up Gunnevera. The latter ran on from far back to be third in the Dubai World Cup yesterday but was no threat to Thunder Snow.

Soumillon reflected that he had to work very hard to keep Thunder Snow charging at Gronkowski in the latter stages of a race that had featured constant strategizing by the riders, with his comments offering a bit more insight into the horse.

“I was looking more like a Cheltenham jump jockey in the end instead of an American-style jockey, but you need to keep [Thunder Snow] going and do something different,” said Soumillon, who

repeatedly went to the whip in the stretch drive prior to urging his mount forward with his upper body.

Yet Thunder Snow seemed generously willing for Soumillon, who has been the horse's partner in 17 races, at all stages. Sent towards the front from his slot at the outside of the gate in a field reduced to 12 by the late scratch of Japan's K T Brave, Thunder Snow then obligingly let North America and Gronkowski battle early.

Credit to Soumillon

Stuck between rivals down the backstretch, Thunder Snow did not quit or sulk, and then swung to the outside at Soumillon's direction for the protracted fight with Gronkowski. Even after feeling the whip multiple times down the long stretch, he kept trying.

"Christophe needs to take a lot of the credit, as he has formed such a wonderful relationship with [Thunder Snow]," Suroor said. "The two of them get along so well, and from his stall on the outside, Christophe knew the only way he could win the race was to become competitive straight away."

Soumillon joked that he had promised to let Suroor take the jockey and trainer prize money earned by Thunder Snow if he could just have the Dubai World Cup trophy. Therefore, the jockey added, he will have to come back and win the race again in 2020.

Suroor's goals are narrower, in some respects, and broader in others. He believes there is more to come from the horse he cherishes.

"We will send Thunder Snow to America again this year. I want to see him win a Grade 1 race there," Suroor said. "He is something special, and it would be great to see his name in more record books."

Not to be overshadowed on Dubai World Cup day was the team of competitors from America.

With champion Roy H scratched from the Dubai Golden Shaheen due to a foot abscess, there were no champion dirt runners left to perform, yet, despite that lightness in depth, American-trained runners won three of the six races in which they competed. They also racked up combined earnings, including the dollars earned by place-getters, of \$7,855,000, equal to 22.4 percent of the \$35 million offered by the nine-race program.



The Todd Pletcher-trained Coal Front and Jose Ortiz get the Dubai World Cup card off to a flying start for America, getting up to beat Heavy Metal close home. It was a first victory at the meeting for both jockey and trainer. Photo: Michele MacDonald

Multiple Graded stakes winner Coal Front launched the red, white and blue flag in the \$1.5 million Godolphin Mile, the first Thoroughbred race on the program following the Dubai Kahayla Classic for purebred Arabians, by swooping to pass frontrunner Heavy Metal near the finish.

The victory proved a literal dream come true for jockey Jose Ortiz, who had said earlier in the year that he hoped to ride for the first time in Dubai.

"My horse felt great for me," a jubilant Ortiz said. "He dug in late and won it well." Also making personal history with the win by Coal Front, who raced in the silks of Robert LaPenta and is co-owned by Sol Kumin's Head of Plains Partners, was trainer Todd Pletcher, who recorded his first and long-sought Dubai victory.

It took Ortiz less than two hours to add to his win total as he steered Imperial Racing's Plus Que Parfait to triumph in the \$2.5 million UAE Derby while earning the qualifying points needed for the Kentucky Derby starting gate. The win marked a return to roots for trainer Brendan Walsh, an expat Irishman who worked there for Godolphin for a decade but was saddling his initial runner in Dubai.

"Brendan, he works so hard and he gave me so many shots and we haven't been lucky and now I was able to deliver for him. To win means a lot," Ortiz said. "It's tough to come all the way over and win here, and I have been blessed to have two winners."

California-based Gray Magician finished just three-quarters of a length back in second for trainer Peter Miller, who also had reason to be proud of his turf sprinters Belvoir Bay and Stormy Liberal. That duo finished second and third, respectively, in the \$2 million Al Quoz Sprint won by Godolphin G1 winner Blue Point.

"We just got beat by the home team and that was probably the difference. I think maybe, if the race was at Santa Anita, we might have had the edge," Miller said. "All congratulations to Sheikh Mohammed and his team. Blue Point is a super horse and it was no disgrace finishing second and third to him. I'm hoping maybe I'll see Blue Point in the Breeders' Cup at Santa Anita. We've got a score to settle."

U.S. sprinters ran 1-3-4 in the G1 Dubai Golden Shaheen, with the 7-year-old XY Jet finally winning landing the spoils after losing out in photo finishes in each of the last two runnings.

Seven horses that spent last year racing in America competed in the Dubai World Cup, with runner-up Gronkowski, third-placed Gunnevera, fourth-placed Pavel, fifth-placed Audible and sixth-placed Yoshida collecting \$4.8 million between them.

Gronkowski, who finished second to Justify in the Belmont Stakes, currently is trained by UAE-based Salem bin Ghadayer, and his \$2.4 million check will stay in Dubai with owner Phoenix Thoroughbreds.



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Meet ‘Angus’, the horse who sits like a dog, has a large Facebook following - and is very lucky to be alive

Nancy Sexton | March 03, 2019



This is a normal pose for The Player - sitting upright on his haunches. All photos are from his Facebook page

William ‘Buff’ Bradley knew it wasn’t good as he ran down the Fair Grounds stretch. Moments earlier, he had watched in hope as his fan favourite, The Player, had left the gate under regular pilot Calvin Borel as the 4/5 choice in the G2 New Orleans Handicap. Now he was running towards his horse, left stricken at the top of stretch by a pair of fractured sesamoids.

“I knew it was bad as soon as Calvin pulled him up,” Bradley remembers. “I threw off my sports coat and ran towards him. It was devastating - it didn’t look good at all. Right then, my immediate thoughts were, ‘I’m going to quit training, I’m not going to do this without The Player.’”

“The state veterinarian was there, and I took hold of the horse and loaded him into the horse ambulance. I was riding in the back with him and I said to him, ‘buddy, I will do everything I can to

help you.’ You know things like this can happen in racing, but it doesn’t make it any easier.”

The Player had just surrendered the lead rounding the final turn in the New Orleans Handicap when he lost his action and had to be pulled up abruptly. It is a sight dreaded at any racetrack; in The Player’s case it was compounded further by the circumstances surrounding the horse, one whose quirkiness had prompted a huge fan base across social media and who was seemingly on the verge of a big 2018 campaign for his popular connections.

Remarkably, The Player did survive and now, almost a year on from that dark day in Louisiana, the son of Street Hero is embarking on a stud career at Crestwood Farm in Kentucky.

That he is even alive is testament to the horse’s own personality, in addition to his connections’ hope and persistence.

The Player is particularly special to Bradley in that he co-bred the horse with his father, Fred - fondly remembered as the owner-breeder of Brass Hat and Groupie Doll - and longtime partner Carl Hurst. Indeed, he was one of the last horses bred by Fred Bradley before his death in 2016. Thus, The Player had a great deal of sentiment attached to him even before he had even run.

The Player’s original popularity, however, stemmed from his antics around the barn, much of which came to be portrayed on his popular Facebook page. While the majority of horses spend most of their time upright and mobile, The Player would often lie flat out in his stall with his head under the gate, sometimes eating hay without even a raise of his head. And, when he wasn’t flat out, he would most likely be sat up on his haunches, in other words sitting like a dog.

“He was a character from day one,” says Bradley of the horse known around the barn as ‘Angus’. “My kids are very involved in the farm and what he would do as a foal was lie in the stall while Kim, my ex-wife, had the mare outside ready to go to the field. And the kids would be in there trying to get him up and he’d be like, ‘I’ll get up when I’m ready.’”



The Player “is from a family of tough, honest runners,” says Buff Bradley. “I think he was just coming into his own.”

“Even from an early age, he would sit on his haunches, sometimes doing a 360 just looking at everything around him. Kim kept saying ‘we’ve got to send him to the clinic’, thinking something was wrong. When he got there, Dr Bob Hunt just looked at him and said ‘you don’t need to send him here, that’s just him.’”

While acclaimed equine photographer Tony Leonard once snapped Secretariat in a similar pose at Claiborne Farm, it’s by and large unusual equine behaviour. Yet, in The Player’s case, it was something of a routine.

“He likes to observe everything,” says Bradley. “Every day, he would lie flat out in his stall and put his head down outside of the gate and eat his hay. There were times when you thought someone would trip over him - I remember there was a big crowd at my barn on Kentucky Derby day and there he was, his head out under the stall with people all around him. He never once spooked, never once banged his head. It was a daily routine for him.”

All the while, he was developing into a formidable performer on the track.

The Player’s pedigree is one of tough, honest runners cultivated by the Bradleys and Hurst in the years following the private purchase of his great-granddam, Regal Export, in 1994. The daughter of Regal Classic foaled nine winners, led by Town Queen, who carried the colours of Hurst and Fred

and Buff Bradley in the 2002 My Charmer Stakes at Turfway Park. In turn, her first foal was the triple-winning Gilded Time filly Hour Queen, herself dam of The Player.

“We started with his great-granddam, Royal Export. We bought her primarily as a broodmare, but she won for us shortly after we bought her. We were trying to upgrade our stock at the time and we just liked her pedigree,” says Bradley.

“Town Queen was the first living foal that we had out of her, and she was actually the first stakes winner that we bred too. And then her first foal was Hour Queen. There are a lot of runners in the family - they’re all racehorses, tough.”

The Player took it to greater heights, however. Fourth on his only start at two, he broke his maiden at Churchill Downs the following May before falling less than a length short of G1 winner Cupid in the G2 Indiana Derby at Indiana Grand. He continued to progress thereafter, running second in the G3 Ack Ack Stakes en route to putting it all together when landing the 2017 G2 Fayette Stakes at Keeneland at the expense of Neolithic and McCracken.

The Player was impressive that day but he was arguably even more so the following February when the wide-margin winner of the G3 Mineshaft Handicap at Fair Grounds in a time not far short of the track record. That win

earned him a 100 Beyer figure and thus, it was as the 4/5 favourite that The Player lined up for that fateful run in the New Orleans Handicap.

Bradley still has difficulty in talking of the moments immediately following the injury. With both sesamoids at the back of the fetlock fractured and the surrounding suspensory system in a state of collapse, the prognosis was bleak.

“The x-rays came through and it was then that Dr Bradford Bentz told us that the horse was a good candidate for euthanasia,” says Bradley. “We asked if he could be saved and he said, yes, let’s talk to Dr Charles McCauley [clinical assistant professor of surgery at Louisiana State University’s School of Veterinary Medicine]. Well only a month before, I had met Dr McCauley when he had come to my barn to do a dynamic scope on another horse - I had been really impressed with him.

“Dr McCauley saw the x-rays, called me and said, ‘Buff, I can do this, but it’s all going to depend on the horse,’ and then he listed all the possible complications - laminitis, infection etc.

“We weren’t thinking of a stallion career at all at the time and we made it very clear that we did not want him to suffer. We just felt we had to give it a go.”

The following Monday at the LSU Equine Hospital, The Player had 16 screws and a locking metal plate inserted by McCauley to stabilise the fetlock. Subsequent complications, which included the replacement of a screw, hindered his recovery but, after six long months, the colt was able to return to Bradley’s farm in Kentucky.

“I drove to LSU every day,” says Bradley. “I can’t say enough good things about LSU and their staff. Initially, we hoped he would be there 30-60 days, but it ended up being about six months.

“We could all see that he had a will to survive, despite the ups and downs. His temperament was certainly a big factor in his survival, especially the fact that he was always lying down, taking weight off that leg.”

He adds: “When I went to collect him, I put something on Facebook and we had lots of requests from people



Head out under the stall - another routine position for ‘Angus’

offering to help, some of them offering a place to let him rest on the route back home.

“It was a long ride back home, and I rode in the back with him. We did stop at one place, with a lady and her husband who we had never met before, and they were kind enough to put us up too.”

With his ankle fused, The Player’s gait has obviously altered, although a recent Facebook video of the horse trotting in his field at Crestwood shows how he has adapted remarkably well. He remains shod on his good foot for support but that simple act also comes with its issues - or at least it would for a horse without such a penchant for lying down.

“At LSU, they got round it by shoeing him on the operating table when they had to open him up, but obviously, in a normal situation he would have to bear full weight on the bad leg to shoe him,” says Bradley. “Well, one day the blacksmith turned up and The Player was lying down and he said ‘let’s just see if we can do it here’. So he was shod while lying down.”

The Player flourished back in Kentucky in the company of Bradley’s G1 winner Brass Hat, progressing from turnout in a mobile pen to an arena.

“As he was recovering last autumn, McCauley said to us ‘you know, you can stand this horse’,” says Bradley. “We weren’t really thinking about



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it. But then we thought about it and really, the only people we wanted to take him on were the McLeans over at Crestwood Farm. They’ve always been good to us and we done good business with their stallions Get Stormy and Texas Red. They’re well thought of.”

The McLean family have been at the helm of Crestwood since 1970. Over that time, countless Graded stakes winners have come off the land, notably those outstanding fillies Serena’s Song and Xtra Heat. All the while, the family has maintained a fine stallion roster, one that came to include successful sires Petionville and Storm Boot; today, it comprises a team of eight, including Breeders’ Cup Juvenile hero Texas Red, Kentucky Derby runner-up Firing Line, emerging sire Get Stormy and G3 winner Tu Brutus, the first son of Scat Daddy to retire to stud in Kentucky.

“We try to keep the roster fresh,” says farm manager Marc McLean. “I know Buff well and he had mentioned The Player a couple of times to me. Like any stallion, you have got to like them and their race record.”

The Player arrived at Crestwood just before the New Year in time for the farm’s annual open house during the Keeneland January Sale.

Within no time at all, the farm staff were treated to the horse’s peculiar barn antics.

“I haven’t really seen anything like it before,” says McLean. “I had seen pictures of him doing it and then one night shortly after he had arrived, I went into his stable to give him his medication and there he was, just sitting on his haunches.

“The first day he was turned out here, he acted like it had been his paddock for ten years. He gets around great, surprisingly well in fact.”

The McLeans have already been well exposed to the horse’s powerful fan following. His Facebook page is closing in on 5,000 likes and its posts regularly prompt huge interaction; for instance, a video of him playing in his paddock recently attracted close to 4,000 views and 80 shares.

“I decided to do the page as if it were actually him, just because he’s funny and people like him,” says Bradley.



A more conventional look for The Player

Feelgood story

He adds: “I fully understand people saying ‘I’m not going to put my horse through this’ with such an injury. And I agree. But, of all my horses, I thought he’d be the one able to cope with it, what with his demeanour and quirkiness.

“It’s a feelgood story - he did make it, horses can survive this.”

The Player is priced at \$2,500 for his first season. Neither Bradley nor the team at Crestwood are under any illusion as to today’s difficulties in making a stallion, particularly at the lower end of the market. But what they do know is that they are in possession of an extraordinarily tough horse who was on the cusp of breaking out at a higher level.

“I think he was just coming into his own,” says Bradley. “Calvin eased up on him when he won the Mineshaft, otherwise I think he would have broken the track record. And that was his first time in blinkers. Before, he had been winning so we had no reason to change it. But then, in the Louisiana Stakes, when he was fourth, he was just playing around - he should have won and that’s when the blinkers went on.”

He adds: “We’re trying to breed a racehorse, that’s what I want people to know about The Player - he’s from a family of tough, honest runners and he was just getting going himself.”

The Player was bred at a time when the Bradleys owned around 12 mares.



‘Angus’ with Buff Bradley: “It’s a feelgood story - he did make it, horses can survive this.”

While that number has since dropped to four, plans remain in full throttle to support the horse.

“We have a couple going The Player’s way,” he says. “A few are coming from my owners and then Carl and I have leased a mare to go to him. There is a full sister to Brass Hat going to him.”

Important year

Overall, it promises to be an important year for Crestwood as the first crop of Jack Milton, a G1-winning son of War Front, take to the track and those by Firing Line and Texas Red come under scrutiny at the yearling sales. Then there is the emergence of multiple G1 winner Get Stormy as a

stallion of real note thanks to four early Graded stakes winners, among them the Bradley-bred G3 winner Storm The Hill.

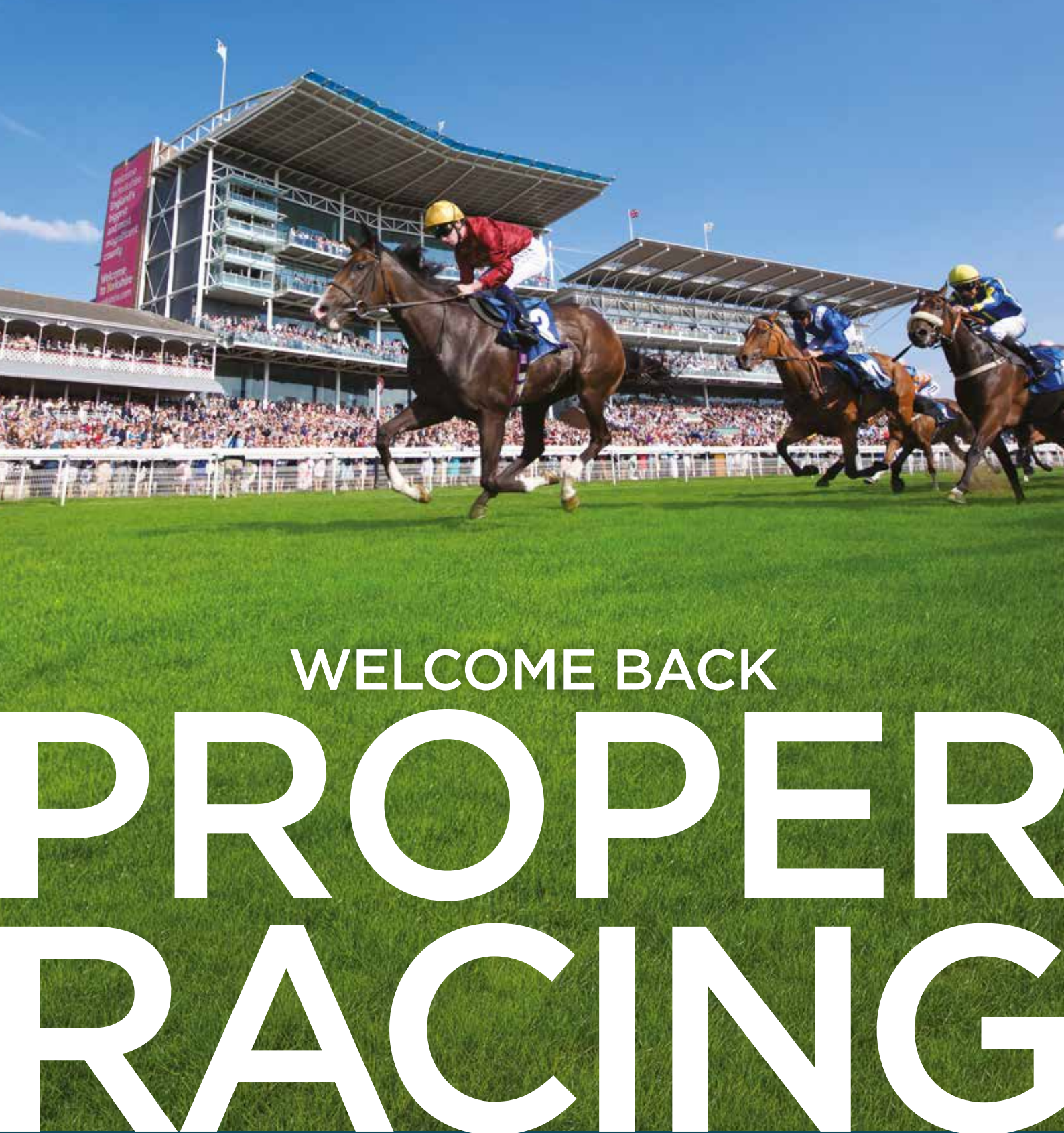
Firing Line, in particular, holds a special place at Crestwood as the product of their Sister Girl family, also responsible for G1 winners Sharp Azteca and Bowies Hero. Bred by Clearsky Farms, the son of Line Of David set a new track record when the wide-margin winner of the G3 Sunland Derby and later fell only a length short of American Pharoah in the Kentucky Derby. His first weanlings sold for up to \$60,000 at the winter breeding stock sales.

“Firing Line’s granddam lives about 100 yards from where he is,” says McLean. “We have high hopes for him - he was well supported at the sales.

“What is exciting about him is that he was a \$240,000 2-year-old himself and from Line Of David’s first crop, who wasn’t standing for very much at the time, so he must have been pretty good.”

And what of The Player? For now, there is a sense of cautious optimism ahead of how he might fare in his second career.

“He was stepping up in class all the time and I think his last win was his best. I think he would have had a good summer,” says McLean. “He’s a little bit under the radar. But you know, this horse has proved a lot of people wrong already, many would have stopped with him after the injury, and he could do it again.”



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Closing Maisons-Laffitte? Maybe that's not the answer to France's financial crisis

John Gilmore | March 18, 2019



The calm, tree-lined training gallops of Maisons-Laffitte. They are due to be modernised to cope with more horses. Photo: Argos pour la Ville de Maisons Laffitte

This could be a make-or-break year for French racing's finances as the state-run PMU bids to halt a slide in turnover from its terrestrial online racing, sports and poker betting, down from €10.4 billion in 2013 to €9.704 billion last year.

The knock-on effect in the past six years has seen the PMU annual horserace funding of around eight percent of total turnover fall from €856 million to €780m. The revenue is used to administer and finance prize money on a

50-50 basis for both trotting, organised by Le Trot, and jump and flat racing, organised by France Galop.

More alarmingly, domestic betting on racing has fallen by €1.8 billion in the past six years to €7.691 billion in 2018.

Additional international racing, sports and poker betting last year totalling €2.104 billion, left overall losses down 2.3 percent compared to 2017, when returns to racing were €13 million higher at €793 million.

The PMU hopes to stem the tide of falling racing revenue by introducing changes this year. It had been adopting a policy of regularly increasing annual meetings covered from 6,400 in 2006 to 17,000 last year. All this has changed from 2019, with around 20 percent fewer meetings on offer as the PMU looks to lower operating costs, realising that increasing the number of daily meetings



Signoro Cabello (Frankie Dettori) winning one of Maisons-Laffitte’s most famous races, the G2 Prix Robert Papin, last July. Under the plans to close the track, the race would be moved elsewhere. Photo: John Gilmore

over a certain level did not equate to extra income from betting revenue.

The daily Quinté-plus race has been revamped, with minimum prize money of €1 million guaranteed weekly - €2 million for major races.

Brave decision on prize money

It’s early days, but 2019 hasn’t started well, with horserace betting turnover down again in January. Not good news, when the PMU Director Generale Cyril Lynette has already forecast profit from its betting operations to fund racing at the end of this year is projected to be €35 million lower at €745 million, principally due to the PMU spending around €30 million on marketing and IT upgrades to try to increase business.

Despite the somewhat uncertain situation, France Galop President Edouard Rothschild indicated last December that there would be no cuts in prize money for 2019. A brave decision in the circumstances, with dwindling reserves standing at just €35 million, not helped by the recent €140 million spent to renew the ParisLongchamp Tribune stand and surrounding area.

By contrast, Le Trot has taken a more cautious approach and reduced overall annual prize money allocation this year by €26 million.

France Galop shocked the racing world last November when announcing plans to close historic Maisons-Laffitte racecourse, with its unique 2,000-metre straight, opened in 1878. Apart from Maisons-Laffitte, due to close at the end of 2019, France Galop also runs the Parisian tracks of ParisLongchamp, Auteuil and Saint-Cloud, as well as Chantilly and Deauville.

The idea is to transfer the 24 annual meetings, which includes three G2s (Prix Robert Papin, Prix Eugène Adam and Criterium de Maisons-Laffitte) to other courses. The privately run Fontainebleau has been mentioned as one possibility.

A key problem is that meetings in the Paris region have a higher daily PMU turnover than provincial ones, so revenue may be lost if any of the 24 meetings at Maisons-Laffitte are transferred to country tracks.

This is part of a planned cost-saving exercise, which will see the delightful, calm, tree-lined training centre there

modernised at a cost of €1.5 million so it can to handle 1,500 horses - it currently has fewer than 500. Additionally, Rothschild estimates another €5 million will be saved annually by cutting 30 of the 42 jobs (racecourse and training area) and closing the track, although much consultation will be needed beforehand.

Mayor Jacques Myard meanwhile insists that closing Maisons-Laffitte makes no economic sense. He said racedays there cost €150,000-€180,000 to run, the lowest of all the France Galop tracks. By contrast ParisLongchamp works out at €600,000 a meeting, and the annual rent to Paris for both Auteuil and Longchamp is €10 million.

France Galop owns Maisons-Laffitte, but the vast open space racecourse area has no commercial value to sell off - as it is impossible to build on, being adjacent to the River Seine and a possible flood risk.

And it will still cost money even if the track closes as France Galop would have to continue paying land tax and union dues, as well as maintaining the Tribune stand and terrain, Myard said. The town council would also lose the one percent

of PMU turnover it receives annually from betting on Maisons-Laffitte’s 24 meetings.

On November 23, just a few days after France Galop announced the closure, Myard wasted no time mustering the troops, and the 32 Maisons-Laffitte Municipal Council members attended an action meeting to save the racecourse. They all voted to fight the closure. Thousands of members of the the public have signed a petition to this effect, either in the Mairie (Town Hall) or on the website. The town is also conscious of the knock-on effect closure would have on local employment, for many enterprises are associated with racecourse activities.

France Galop is now indicating it is exploring all options, which could include the possible takeover of the day-to-day running of the course. Currently, the town council is studying different possibilities, with Regional President Valerie Pecresse likely to be involved in future discussions with France Galop.

A key issue for France Galop is to find increasing ways of maximising income at the tracks it operates from other uses. Maisons-Laffitte is a prime example. The crowd for midweek meetings barely gets past 500. Until recently, that hadn’t been such a problem as it was offset by the thriving betting business. Now, with falling betting revenue, more efficient use of France Galop’s racecourses has become a priority.

The racecourse and the training centre, meanwhile, are intrinsically linked, and closing the track would have a detrimental effect on the number of horses trained at Maisons Laffitte, which has fallen by over 200 in the past five years. Pascal Adda (pictured above right) is one five trainers who have formed a committee to discuss the way forward with France Galop concerning the training area. The others are Patricia Butel, Didier Prudhomme, Yan Lemire and Gianluca Bietolini.

“Without Jacques Myard, the track would have been closed a long time ago,” said Adda “For the past 15 years, Maisons-Laffitte has been living under the threat of closure at anytime, so it’s normal the number of horses trained here has fallen under these uncertain conditions.”

Similarly, in the Chantilly region there are now fewer than 2,000 horses in training, when ten years ago the figure was 2,500.

Owners look to the provinces

Despite the advantage of being ideally placed for the top meetings in the Paris region, both Chantilly and Maisons-Laffitte trainers have suffered from the same problem, with more and more owners looking to save money by having horses trained in the provinces, where basic training fees are around €2,000-€3,000 cheaper.

Both training centres are losing money, with Maisons-Laffitte showing a €2.4 million deficit and Chantilly €3.6 million down for 2017. Chantilly charges €85 a month per horse for use of the gallops and Maisons-Laffitte €78.

Adda, formerly Goffs French Director, has trained at Maisons-Laffitte for the past six years. He has 20 horses currently. He also runs the racing syndicate Ecurie Club Radio RMC, which he set up with a radio station that has four million regular listeners. The syndicate horses are bought by Adda, generally from claimers, and run in the station’s colours.

“There are currently two groups thinking about taking over running the track, under a similar situation that operates at Clairefontaine [racecourse, near Deauville],” Adda said. “The track could get extra income from putting on events, marriages, having a restaurant open all the year, and possibly a Salle de Sport, located in the Tribune area.”

Discussions between the representative trainers’ committee and France Galop officials during March and April will centre on their €1.5 million promised investment and changes required for modernising the training area. “It is vital to include a new training track to replace the old sand track and a well-balanced and more professional and cost-effective service in relation to charges,” said Adda.

There are currently 35 trainers in Maisons-Laffitte. Despite falling numbers of horses and the uncertainty of the track’s future, it has still attracted some new ones in recent years, including Sylvan Dehez, Anne Sophie Pacault and Luigi Maceli.



Former French Finance Minister Jean Arthuis, who chairs the European Parliament’s budget committee, completed a 141-page report on the state of French racing last November, as requested by Prime Minister Edouard Philippe. Among his recommendations was to transfer the organisation of the race calendar, prize money and disciplinary issues from France Galop and Le Trot to the Federation Nationale des Courses Hippiques (FNCH) and thereby reduce the duplication of the two sports.

I asked Arthuis whether annual salaries of 26 top managerial staff at France Galop totalling €8 million, quoted in his report, were reasonable considering the work involved.

“It is essential to justify the corresponding added value for each position, which equally includes the salaries for managerial staff. Certain conventions are historically dated,” he said. “Moreover, in order to make efficient savings and economies, a number of functions must be pooled together in the FNCH, which exist also in the parent companies France Galop and Le Trot.”

Can European ruling be reversed?

Another important conclusion in the report concerned the simplification of the bets offered by the PMU and its withdrawal from the poker and sports

IRISH HORSE SALES 2019

DATE	SALE	COMPANY
January 29th - 30th	February NH Sale	Tattersalls Ireland
February 5th - 7th	February Sale	Goffs
May 2nd	Punchestown Sale	Goffs
May 14th	May Store Sale	Tattersalls Ireland
May 23rd - 24th	Tattersalls Ireland Goresbridge Breeze-Up	Tattersalls Ireland / Goresbridge
June 11th - 12th	Land Rover Sale	Goffs
June 26th - 27th	Derby Sale	Tattersalls Ireland
July 19th	Mixed Sale	Goresbridge
August 13th - 15th	August NH Sale	Tattersalls Ireland
September 14th	Champion Sale	Goffs
September 24th - 25th	September Yearling Sale	Tattersalls Ireland
September 26th	September Yearling Sale Part II	Tattersalls Ireland
October 1st - 2nd	Orby Sale	Goffs
October 3rd	Sportsman's Sale	Goffs
October 25th	Mixed Sale	Goresbridge
November 4th - 6th	HIT & Autumn Yearling Sale	Goffs
November 8th	Flat Foal & Breeding Stock Sale	Tattersalls Ireland
November 9th - 16th	November NH Sale	Tattersalls Ireland
November 17th - 24th	November Flat Foal & Breeding Stock Sale	Goffs
December 11th - 12th	December NH Sale	Goffs



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MARKETING



European deputy Jean Arthuis: VAT rates on the sale of breeding stock and young horses could be halved

betting market, with the possibility also of looking at ways the European Commission might be inclined to reverse a 2015 ruling that separated PMU horseracing on course and betting outlet pools from PMU online wagering pools.

Some bets are in process of being simplified this year by the PMU, but it is unlikely that it is in a position to withdraw from the poker and sports betting market any time soon. Poker and sports betting contributed €873 million in turnover last year, with sports betting 9.6 percent higher than in 2017. However, if the PMU could get the European Commission to reverse the 2015 ruling, this would undoubtedly stimulate betting turnover, with a larger pool base, especially for the Tiercé races.

Arthuis also indicated in the report that VAT rates on sale of breeding stock and young horses could be given a special agricultural tariff of ten percent by the European Commission, which is half the current rate.

By contrast the rival gambling outfit La Française des Jeux, which runs the nation's scratch card, lottery and sports betting, has gone from strength to strength during the period PMU turnover has been falling. It has steadily increased turnover each year from €12.35 billion in 2013 to €15.8 billion in 2018. Lottery and the PMU are competing with each other in 11,000 cafe bar outlets, which offer both services. The French are not typically a horseracing people, and instant lottery/scratch card prizes tends to have more general appeal.

Could this be a way forward?

It's interesting to note that the most successful racing bet is the daily pool race, where you have to pick the first five, four or three home in a selected race. It generates around 25 percent of daily betting. For the lottery, the weekly Euro Millions cross-Europe bet has been a big winner, paying out enormous prizes.

Perhaps this could be a way forward for the PMU - to compete and develop a European superbet once a week, with all European racing nations taking part.

The French Quinté-plus race could be the stepping stone, where players will perhaps need to find the first six home in correct order to make it more difficult to win the jackpot, but with consolation prizes also on offer. The European Commission would hardly object - it already allows state lotteries to do the same thing.

The argument is strong that closing Maisons-Laffitte will not cure the underlying problems facing French racing's finances. And there is also a powerful case for big changes at France Galop - including cuts to administrative costs, more proactive marketing and development of other activities for its racecourses to generate extra income.

All eyes will be on the PMU this year as any further drop in horserace betting turnover will undoubtedly affect France Galop's core funding, making across-the-board reduction in prize money allocation next year inevitable.

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What They're Thinking: VRC chair Amanda Elliott's five great racing moments

Q&A interview | March 05, 2019



Amanda Elliott: everyone in racing should be aware just how crucial integrity is to the sport. Photo: AAP

As chair of the Victoria Racing Club, Amanda Elliott is one of the most influential people in the racing industry worldwide. She became the first female to head the authority that runs the sport in Victoria - and is therefore responsible for the Melbourne Cup at Flemington - when she was elected unopposed two years ago.

She found time to take part in our What They're Thinking series even though it's an enormously busy time at Flemington just now - Mystic Journey was an impressive winner of the G1 Australian Guineas there on Saturday, the G1 Newmarket Handicap and Australian Cup headline this coming weekend's 'Super Saturday' card, and seven days later sees the first running of the new A\$5 million All-Star Mile, for which ten of the field of 14 are chosen by public ballot.

Who do you think is the most important figure in the history of racing around the world?

His Highness Sheikh Mohammed would have to be considered, alongside John Magnier of Coolmore and the late Robert Sangster. For me, in an equine sense – Sadler's Wells and his amazing son Galileo.

What is your favourite venue and race (anywhere in the world)?

My favourite venue will come as no surprise – Flemington. I also love Ascot

and York in England for their beautiful, historic precincts, their wonderful racing and their passionate crowds.

What is your fondest memory in racing?

I can't separate my fondest memories in racing, and I have so many! So here they are, and in no particular order, and for different reasons:

The emotion of Damien Oliver saluting the heavens when winning the Melbourne Cup in 2002 aboard the Irish horse Media Puzzle, wearing the breeches of his brother, Jason, who had been killed in a racing accident a week earlier.

The awe shown by 120,000 people as Makye Diva stood motionless looking at packed grandstands after winning her third consecutive Melbourne Cup in 2005.

The 2012 Royal meeting at Ascot. Black Caviar winning the Golden Jubilee in a desperate lunge at the line ... The mighty Frankel's win by 11 lengths in the Queen Anne Stakes and the reaction of his trainer, the late Sir Henry Cecil. The Queen's unadulterated joy at winning the 2013 Gold Cup with Estimate.

What do you see as the biggest challenge racing faces today?

The biggest challenges for racing are: relevance in an increasingly competitive sporting and entertainment sense, and our social licence in the critical area of animal welfare.

If you could change one thing in racing, what would it be?

The perception around integrity and the awareness of all participants of how crucial it is to our sport.

.....
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\$1,000,000

Coolmore's M.V. Magnier

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Cromwell Bloodstock's
Gatewood Bell



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Introducing the next stage in Hong Kong's ambitious evolution - and a new world- class racecourse

JA McGrath | March 24, 2019



The new track "rides like a right-handed Flemington", says British champion jockey Silvestre De Sousa. Photo: Hong Kong Jockey Club

JA McGrath, the BBC's chief racing commentator for 15 years until the Corporation stopped covering the sport in 2012, was at the Hong Kong Jockey Club's historic opening race day at its new Conghua centre on mainland China on Saturday. Here McGrath, who previously spent more than a decade as a racing broadcaster and journalist in Hong Kong, reports on a flying start for what is a major development in international horse racing.

It must rank as one of the world's most bizarre race meetings. On Saturday, in the northern district of Guangzhou in southern China, 46 horses vanned in from Hong Kong contested a total of five races for prize money of over US\$750,000.

The estimated 3,500 who attended, were mostly Chinese tourists paying as low as US\$15 admission. Officials said 95 per cent of the crowd had never been horseracing but were attracted to the event by online advertising.

To top it off, all races were telecast to Hong Kong on a 15-minute delay, and, crucially, there was no betting.



It was estimated that 95 per cent of the 3,500 crowd had never been racing before, but they certainly seemed engrossed by the action.
Photo: Hong Kong Jockey Club

Not your normal, run-of-the-mill day at the races, that's for certain.

Billed as an 'Exhibition Raceday', this first meeting at the new Conghua Racecourse, a four-hour drive from Hong Kong through border and customs checkpoints, was nevertheless also historic.

It marked the first stage of an adventurous plan by the Hong Kong Jockey Club to introduce China to horse racing of an international standard on a state-of-the-art course that would sit comfortably alongside some of the world's most famous.

Carved out of a hillside and sitting in tranquil surroundings befitting a spa town — one of its selling points for tourism — the Conghua grass track is 2000m (a mile and a quarter) in circumference, with long straights and sweeping bends. It immediately won the praise of professionals.

Silvestre De Sousa, the triple British champion jockey, who won the Guangzhou-Hong Kong Cup aboard the John Moore-trained The Createth, said: "It rides like a right-handed Flemington. You have to be organised at the 1000m mark because that is where the bend starts. At Sha Tin, the bend starts at the 600m."

It is 48 years since racing turned professional in Hong Kong, and 41 years since Sha Tin opened to complement Happy Valley, where racing first took place in 1846.

Hong Kong officials were rightly proud of the first day's racing at their third track,

and it is clear they see Conghua as the next stage in the Jockey Club's evolution.

It was estimated that 95 per cent of the 3,500 crowd had never been racing before, but they certainly seemed engrossed by the action. Photo: Hong Kong Jockey Club It was estimated that 95 per cent of the 3,500 crowd had never been racing before, but they certainly seemed engrossed by the action. Photo: Hong Kong Jockey Club

Their foresight may be praised by some future generation, but in the meantime, Winfried Engelbrecht-Bresges, the Jockey Club's chief executive, is working hard on selling the concept of top-class racing in China as entertainment and sport, and as a focal point for tourism in the area.

"The first day was a great success and is something we can build on," Engelbrecht-Bresges said. "It was a wonderful start, an historic start, and everybody involved should be very proud.

"There will be a review, but I am confident we will look at having another day at Conghua next year. We can expand the number of people [crowd capacity] we have on the site. We have already had a brief discussion, and we will have further engagement with the stakeholders, who can see that the Hong Kong Jockey Club as an organisation can do things, organise things.

"I think it was definitely an eye-opener for many mainland government officials to see how a horseracing event goes. They see it's not about gambling, it's about the sport

— and that it's entertainment. It was a very good atmosphere."

This has been a huge investment by the Hong Kong Jockey Club, and, while Conghua can always serve local racing as an outstanding training and spelling facility — with the occasional raceday, its true worth will be as a world-class racecourse with all the traditional features, which includes tote windows providing the array of bets the punter loves.

Of course, gambling is outlawed in China, a fact that is constantly on official minds.

Engelbrecht-Bresges explained: "We are taking Conghua step by step. We have to be mindful that it cannot be perceived that we are pushing gambling. It is very clear that we cannot venture there because of a major policy issue. And it is not for us to change policy."

Behind the screens, in the back seats of mainland government official cars, the private conversations as they drove away from Conghua must have been fascinating.

As the chief executive said: "You can talk about it [the sport of racing], and people can look at Hong Kong, but this [Conghua] is different."

One final point is that the Conghua meeting is a bona fide fixture under the rules of racing. Wins and placings count towards jockeys and trainers titles, and the handicapper will adjust ratings, up and down, as normal. Some procedures never change.



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TRC GLOBAL RANKINGS



3 March 2019

Jockeys

Rank	Name	Modal Country	Points
1	Ryan Moore	Great Britain	1093
2	Mike E Smith	USA	1063
3	Christophe-Patrice Lemaire	Japan	1054
3	Frankie Dettori	Great Britain	1054
5	Hugh Bowman	Australia	1052
6	William Buick	Great Britain	1046
7	Zac Purton	Hong Kong	1045
8	Mirco Demuro	Japan	1042
9	Jose L Ortiz	USA	1035
10	Joel Rosario	USA	1034
11	Javier Castellano	USA	1027
12	Flavien Prat	USA	1026
12	Irad Ortiz Jr	USA	1026
14	Joao Moreira	Hong Kong	1024
15	Kerrin McEvoy	Australia	1013

Owners

Rank	Name	Modal Country	Points
1	Godolphin	Australia	1076
2	Coolmore Partners	Ireland	1074
3	Sheikh Hamdan Al Maktoum	Great Britain	1045
4	Magic Bloodstock Et Al	Australia	1037
5	Juddmonte Farms / Prince Khalid Abdulla	Great Britain	1028
6	Sunday Racing Co Ltd	Japan	1021
6	WinStar Farm Et Al	USA	1021
8	China Horse Club Et Al	Australia	1019
9	Patrick Kwok Et Al	Hong Kong	1015
10	Head of Plains Et Al	USA	1010
11	Klaravich Stables Et Al	USA	1004
11	Peters Investments Et Al	Australia	1004
13	Hajime Satomi	Japan	1003
14	Michael Dubb Et Al	USA	1002
15	Lloyd Williams Et Al	Australia	1001

Trainers

Rank	Name	Modal Country	Points
1	Charlie Appleby	Great Britain	1078
2	Bob Baffert	USA	1068
3	Chad C Brown	USA	1065
4	A P O'Brien	Great Britain	1063
5	John Gosden	Great Britain	1051
6	Saeed bin Suroor	Great Britain	1029
7	Darren Weir**	Australia	1028
8	John Moore	Hong Kong	1017
9	J Size	Hong Kong	1014
10	Chris Waller	Australia	1013
10	Sir Michael Stoute	Great Britain	1013
12	James Cummings	Australia	1008
13	A Fabre	France	1007
14	A S Cruz	Hong Kong	1006
15	Jerry Hollendorfer	USA	999

Sires

Rank	Name	Modal Country	Points
1	Dubawi	Great Britain	1081
2	Galileo	Ireland	1062
3	Frankel	Great Britain	1046
3	I Am Invincible	Australia	1046
5	Deep Impact	Japan	1044
5	Scat Daddy	USA	1044
7	Sea The Stars	Great Britain	1026
8	Quality Road	USA	1025
9	Kitten's Joy	USA	1024
9	Teofilo	Australia	1024
11	Street Cry	Australia	1023
12	Candy Ride	USA	1020
13	Curlin	USA	1017
13	Lord Kanaloa	Japan	1017
13	More Than Ready	USA	1017