

Michael Roberts July Win Twentieth Anniversary This Year

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Michael “Muis” Roberts is regarded by many as South Africa’s greatest ever jockey, yet at one stage he had resigned himself to forever being winless in his home country’s biggest race, the Vodacom Durban July.

Roberts was riding full time in the U.K, so the best July rides were usually booked, and the July also coincided with the Gr 1 Coral Eclipse which he often rode in.

His wife Verna used to brush over the missing July jigsaw piece by pointing out the Epsom Derby was the greatest race in the world and in his circumstances he would have a fair chance of winning that.

However, the July blank remained a sore point.

He said it had never gone as far as causing sleepless nights, but admitted, “What used to hurt me was when I would go to the cattle shows (Roberts owned a cattle farm) and the farmers who knew nothing about racing used to say to me ‘But you have never won the July’. The championships I had won meant nothing to them.”

Roberts won eleven South African championships before his 17 year stint in the UK, where in 1992 he became only the sixth non-British or Irish jockey to have won the British Flat Jockey Championship.

One of Roberts’ biggest July disappointments was in 1975 on Sledgehammer, whom he regards as one of the best he ever rode in South Africa. In the 1970s the Queen’s Plate was run in mid to late-February and in retrospect Roberts wondered whether horses like Sledgehammer, who had endured arduous campaigns during the Cape Summer season, were quite ready for the July.

He added, “I also thought I had a chance on Majestic Crown (fourth in 1976).”

Then in 1979 he landed a plum ride on the brilliant three-year-old Bold Tropic. Durban readers woke up on the morning of the race to the front page headline, “Muis sleeps as July fever soars” which summed up both the importance of the race and just how idolised Roberts was. However, he could only manage fifth place and Roberts recalled, “I think he was tired by the time of the July.”

Roberts’ best finish in that era came on the 1981 runner up French Mustard, who was a pick up ride after his original mount was scratched.

In 1987, now riding full-time in Britain, Roberts bumped into prolific South African owner Laurie Jaffee at Royal Ascot. Jaffee believed he would win the July that year with Bush Telegraph and offered Roberts the ride as the horse’s regular rider Garth Puller was going to battle to make the weight. However, Roberts could never have considered abandoning the great horse Mtoto. Bush Telegraph duly won the July, while Roberts steered Mtoto to two successive Coral Eclipse victories.

Then in 1997 Roberts' agent told him at the races one Saturday that South African trainer David Ferraris had phoned and offered him a July ride on a horse called North By Northwest. After the races Roberts gathered this horse had won the Gr 1 Daily News and was the ruling July favourite.

"We were excited," he recalled.

Roberts phoned Ferraris the next day on a Sunday morning. However, there was bad news. He was informed that stable jockey Weichong Marwing had changed his mind and had opted for North By Northwest. Roberts recalled the immediate disappointment. Ferraris then offered him the ride on his other runner Super Quality, whom he described as a "game little bugger", but he added he would understand if he did not want to make the journey. However, Roberts did not have any Coral Eclipse commitments and always liked to visit his farm in the Karkloof in the KZN midlands, so he accepted.

He recalled the big day, "The worst part was when I was in the parade ring. I saw this tiny little horse walking in. Then I got on him and I couldn't believe how small he was. I thought to myself, oh no, how embarrassing, journeying all this way to ride this horse. I asked the groom if he liked him and he replied, 'No I like North By Northwest, he is a very nice horse.' So my mood was down. But, then he went down to the start like an absolute bomb. I pulled him up at the 2400m mark and Garth was alongside and I remember telling him how good the horse had felt. David had only given me one bit of advice, which was not to bring him through horses, so to try and bring him to the outside."

Roberts recalled having a rough passage in the early part of the race. "I remember screaming at Garth on my outside to give me some room because I thought I was going to go over the fence. But, after rounding the Drill Hall he was absolutely cantering. It was the first time I had travelled that hard in the July, you were usually starting to come off the bridle at that stage. And then as we were turning for home a big gap opened to my left. I was able to switch to the outside and the rest is history. I remember thinking how often a July leader is caught in the closing stages, but fortunately it did not happen."

Roberts shed tears of emotion in the winner's enclosure and recalled, "I couldn't talk."

Later, he bought a bottle of champagne for his weighing room colleagues and remembered having a fantastic party in "the middle" (known these days as "tent town").

He was inundated with well wishes from all over the country and a TV sports channel also had an interview with him at the airport before he flew back to England the following day.

Roberts concluded, "It was the pinnacle moment of my career in South Africa."