

A Queen's Plate . . . In More Ways Than One!

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The L'Ormarins Queen's Plate Racing Festival is one of the highlights of the racing year in South Africa – and, positioned as it is in early January, it sees a large contingent of international owners and breeders gracing the lawns, private boxes, and marquees of Kenilworth, on, what, one hopes, will be two glorious summer days of superb racing.

The premier event of the two-day racing festival is, of course, the L'Ormarins Queen's Plate itself – a race first run in 1861, with a purse of 500 Sovereigns and a Silver Plate presented by Her Majesty Queen Victoria.

In light of the name of the race, and the 'Royal' terminology, one might think that the Cartier Sceptre Stakes – which is on the under-card, and highlights the first day of the Festival, is actually named after one of the 'Crown Jewels' of the United Kingdom - the 'Sovereign's Sceptre with Cross' – the principal sceptre that has been used at every coronation since Charles II's in 1661. Interestingly from a South African perspective, this particular sceptre was transformed in 1910 (for George V) by the addition of the spectacular South African mined Cullinan I diamond (which, to this day, remains the largest top quality cut white diamond in the world, weighting in at over 530 carats). The Cullinan, before being cut into over 100 stones, and weighing over 3,000 carats, was presented to King Edward VII by the Transvaal Government as a symbolic gesture intended to heal the rift between Britain and South Africa following the Boer War, and the largest of the stones (once cut) set into the 'Sovereign's Sceptre with Cross', would forever, 'tie' in that Sceptre with South Africa in the most spectacular of ways.

But, to disappoint the ardent royalists reading this story, this is *not* from whence the name of the Cartier Sceptre Stakes originates!

The Cartier Sceptre Stakes is named after the great filly SCEPTRE! This filly was foaled in England during Queen Victoria's reign; being bred by the 1st Duke of Westminster in 1899 at his then famed Eaton Stud, and, following his death, she was sold as a yearling in 1900, for the then world record price of 10,000 Guineas! That she was by the great sire Persimmon, out of a fullsister to Triple Crown winner Ormonde, no doubt contributed to her record price.

If a horse ever lived up to her illustrious pedigree it was SCEPTRE – and she proved to be worth every penny of her extraordinary (at the time) purchase price – soon becoming possibly the greatest filly in 20th Century racing - and the only horse, to date, to win four of the five English 'Classics' – the 1000 Guineas; the 2000 Guineas; The Oaks; and the the St Leger – as well as finishing 4th in The Derby just 10 days after bruising a hoof!

So – how do I tie all of the above into a "piece about the 'L'Ormarins Queen's Plate Racing Festival' ..." ... and make it a little bit more than just simply quoting facts and figures? Well, that, I think, is where it starts to get 'interesting'!

- In 1969 – as an eighteen-year-old teenager, I had already been well and truly bitten by the Thoroughbred bug and was an avid researcher of pedigrees going back to any dusty, tattered, bookworm-ridden tomes that I could lay my hands on, to broaden my knowledge – and, it was in that same year that I bred my very first foal (who, coincidentally, had 35 lines of ST SIMON (SCEPTRE's grandsire) in her pedigree – which (considering he had only been dead for 61 years) seemed (at the time) to me, to be extraordinary!

- That same year - in 1969 – a colt was foaled at Alex Robertson's famed Vlakfontein Stud (then being run on the magnificent Grootfontein Farm (south of Colesberg in the 'Great Karroo') which Alex had bought from James Bailey (the son of diamond tycoon Sir Abe Bailey who had formerly owned the farm - and where the great stallion JUBIE (whose 3rd dam was the aforementioned SCEPTRE!) had formerly stood.

- This particular colt, foaled at Vlakfontein in 1969, was to be named YATAGHAN, who, as a 3-year-old, in 1973, won the Queen's Plate – before going on to win the July and the Metropolitan and become one of the best South African horses of the decade. It was a further 39 years before another 3-year-old was to win the Queen's Plate – that being GIMMETHEGREENLIGHT.

YATAGHAN's dam, the illustrious race and broodmare SUN LASS produced no less than five individual Stakes Winners – and, as a granddaughter of JUBIE, she, herself, carried the line of SCEPTRE through to her Queen's Plate winning son YATAGHAN!

My first visit to Vlakfontein/Grootfontein was in 1971 – just after YATAGHAN had been sold at the the 1971 Yearling Sales (then held at Milner Park) – and, as I had driven up from the Cape with one of my mares for a covering by one of the Vlakfontein stallions, I stayed over with Alex and his wife Joey in their magnificent home on Grootfontein (and which, at the time of the 1925 Royal Visit to South Africa, had hosted the then Prince of Wales (later Edward V111)).

That evening Alex walked me round the paddocks introducing me to the truly superb collection of mares that he had – AVE MARIA, TALLULAH, VIOLETTA, TETRINA, TARMMA, and, of course the aforementioned SUN LASS among others ... the names were all recognizable to any student of fine South African bloodstock and, to put it mildly, I was 'in awe' of this superb broodmare band! Alex loved his fillies and very seldom sold them as yearlings – preferring to race them with a couple of his friends so that they could return to the paddocks as broodmares -and the 20-odd mares that he ran were a 'mouthwatering' collection of broodmares by anybody's standards!

So – 49 years ago, I have already tied the great filly SCEPTRE after whom the Cartier Sceptre Stakes is named, to a winner of the Queen's Plate through one of her descendants YATAGHAN – but the story certainly doesn't end there!

At this point is is probably a good time to mention that Alex Robertson was the son of Allan Robertson (after whom the Allan Robertson Championship at Scottsville is named). Allan Robertson was one of the world's foremost authorities – on bloodstock and pedigrees, and was internationally recognized and respected as such – doing much to improve the quality of bloodstock imported to South Africa – probably more than almost anybody else of his time.

After bathing and changing after the long drive and the walk around the paddocks, I joined Alex in his study before dinner, and was immediately fascinated – and not a little surprised - to see, on his desk, a mounted horse's ear! Curiosity and an enquiring mind have always

been part-and-parcel of my personality – and my first question to Alex was “*What on earth is that!*” - and was ‘blown away’ to hear Alex’s reply “*It’s SCEPTRE’s ear!*”

Alex, a tremendous raconteur, then went on to tell me the story of ‘the ear’!

When SCEPTRE died in 1926 - the pre-eminent veterinarian in England at the time, Professor Brayley Reynolds was present, and, as they sometimes did in those days - he took a ‘memento’ (often it was a hoof to be mounted - like that of the great Eclipse now in the Jockey Club’s HQ in England) - but, in Brayley Reynolds case - he took one of SCEPTRE’s ears - and had it mounted so as to be a pipe stand! This is not something I personally would ever do - but that was a different age then - and is not something one can undo!

Anyhow - Brayley Reynolds was a great friend of Alex’s father - and in due course he ended up giving the SCEPTRE’s ear pipe-stand to him – and, by the time I saw it, some 45 years had passed since the great mare’s death, and the ‘memento’ was now on Alex’s desk.

Tragically - Alex’s only son died a few years later - and his daughters weren’t interested in continuing the stud, but, when their father retired - one of them did keep the farm.

For over 30 years I wondered “*whatever happened to SCEPTRE’s ear??*” - just hoping it hadn’t been discarded, or lost, or whatever ... after all, despite being a little ‘weird’ , it is a very important part of racing/bloodstock history and memorabilia.

So, seven years ago, long after Alex had passed on, I contacted one of Alex’s daughters (who I had met on the farm about 40 years earlier!) - and asked her “*what happened to SCEPTRE’s ear?*” - and she got back to me with the news “*It is still on Daddy’s desk in his study! Adding Would you like it?*” so, a year or two later, I met with her and took possession of this strange piece of bloodstock history – and SCEPTRE’s ear now stands on *my* desk!

To further link the importance of the name behind the ‘L’Ormarins Queen’s Plate Racing Festival’s’ principal race – The L’Ormarins Queen’s Plate’ with that of SCEPTRE’s namesake, the under-card’s Cartier Sceptre Stakes – it is worth noting that the top four horse in the 2020 running, and 159th renewal of the race – DO IT AGAIN, RAINBOW BRIDGE, SOQRAT (AUS), and HAWWAAM all have SCEPTRE’s blood flowing through their veins!

Further - in the past fifty years only nine horses have won the Queen’s Plate on more than one occasion – those being: CHICHESTER [1970 & 1971]; SLEDGEHAMMER (NZ) [1975 & 1976]; POLITICIAN [1978 & 1979]; WOLF POWER [1983 & 1984]; JET MASTER [1999 & 2000]; FREE MY HEART [2000 & 2002]; WINTER SOLSTICE [2005 & 2006]; POCKET POWER [2006, 2007, 2009 & 2010]; LEGAL EAGAL [2016, 2017 & 2018] - and all, bar CHICHESTER, have a line of SCEPTRE in their pedigrees!

So, it seems to be absolutely fitting that on the first day of The L’Ormarins Queen’s Plate Racing Festival, the principal race of the day is the Cartier Sceptre Stakes – named after the superb SCEPTRE who is an officially designated ‘*Reine de Course*’ (Queen of the Turf) and whose blood flows through the veins of the vast percentage of the world’s top modern Thoroughbreds!

‘The Sport of Kings’!? I think not here, in the Cape, at Kenilworth, on the second weekend of January 2020, it seems more appropriate to refer to it as “The Sport of Queens”!