

# Winning Takes Talent, To Repeat Takes Character

## The 2020 Queen's Plate

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There is an overabundance of perennial racing nuances, like “good horses find you” and “every horse has a story”.

The 2020 Queen's Plate was an unequivocal paragon of these dictums with twists and turns that approximated the contents of a Dick Francis novel.

My annual furlough to the two-day festival via the concluding day of cricket at Newlands was over before I scarcely had time to reflect in the haze, starting at Newlands, streaming through Stellenbosch and hurtling into Kenilworth on Friday and Saturday.

The Barmy Army were in full chorale from lunch on Tuesday, and that expediently set the acceleration level of my pulse after that.

The worst place to be on the planet is an opening batsman or last man standing against a team that is on a high with the foreign faction ballooning in optimism.

Being amidst them is another story altogether. Newlands brings out thousands of tourists each year that incorporate the cricket with the Queen's Plate.

The melodrama and a pang of the displeasure of losing the cricket test inside the last ten overs hardly had time to regulate before I was in front of the white entrance gates of Kenilworth working my approach into the Garden Party area.

You categorically comprehend you're on the most picturesque racecourse in the world. The tableau curtain of the mountain over this course is impressed in mind eternally.

The diligence in the exquisite details by the meticulous team of L'Ormarins was putting the finishing touches into place for what was a fabulous first day of high-quality thoroughbred racing. As ever, Gaynor Rupert and Katherine Gray were casting determinative glances from the parade ring when I greeted them and endorsing final improvements.

Drakenstein begins with the project management of the next carnival soon after the last race ends and fundamentally, every single design that captures your perception as you walk in signifies the meticulousness of their planning.

From lavender and white flowers on the blue and white garden table to the baldachin canopies that provided a reprieve to racegoers, the hallmark was strikingly resemblant in a style that is both subtle sophistication and prepossessing.

Dressed in a paisley blue and white waistcoat that responsively extended to cope with my Christmas wholesome exuberance and the Panama hat I cherish from Goodwood, I always perceive experiences like this as a real privilege.

If you live your life with the philosophy that whatever festivity you're frequenting may be your ultimate, you tend to absorb your atmosphere, apprise the resplendence and pattern a sculpture of detail into your memory banks that will last forever.

Fabulous tales of times such as this will proclaim to generations ahead.  
“I was there when Vardy romped home in the 2020 Queen’s Plate.”

The foremost person you see on course inevitably is (according to racing shibboleth) the most critical part of your day. Chase Liebenberg in immaculate apparel greeted me, we sat and conversed about the card and fashion when Fiona Ramsden joined us with chic sophistication and her remarkable planning all jotted down like a war general’s battlefield observances.

Glen Puller’s assistant and Glen Kotzen were next to materialise, and they seesawed beneficial repartee about their showdown in the first race, a juvenile plate.

A friend from Social media collared me walking out to the Garden Party and was staggeringly exuberant about her first racing experience at Kenilworth. Selfies, pictures in the Q and on the winners’ dais followed before we sought sanctum in the tent for lunch and sparkling wine courtesy of L’Ormarins.

I guaranteed the winner of the first race, took R50 reverse exactas on the Kotzen and Puller horses for Heather Hook now swiftly into the exhilaration of watching the colours and heartening them on into a great result for her first bet.

The pink checks finished first, and the Chigor checks second, landing her R200 profit for the day. Winning selfies followed en masse.

You could not conceive a more remarkable start.

Brett Crawford Racing had generously invited us to their suite, and Heather took in what a thoroughly different version of racing was like in the private boxes.

Robyn Louw, my congenial host for the two days, instantaneously made friends with Heather and I was unfettered to run around, say hello to friends and run through the card.

Heather reflected how composed the number ten filly (Principessa) was in the parade past the stands and Glen Hatt magically appeared next to me along with the ever-cool Brett as Principessa cantered down before she came flying home from the rear of the field.

Black type plan had come together deservedly. Brett always says “I wouldn’t be racing her if I didn’t think she had a chance.”

The performance of the day was undoubtedly in colours that have illustrious appeal to accustomed racegoers, the chocolate body with a white v bib and brown and white spotted cap.

Graham and Rhona Beck dominated the Queen’s Plate with Free My Heart, and Celtic Sea recapitulates the success for the next generation with his son Anthony.

She is a decidedly remarkable bay with great balance, a cavernous girth and fabulous presence.

Striding around the parade ring, Sean Tarry had her fit; her coat stippled in the sizzling sun.

Clouds Unfold appeared to be her only threat in the Drakenstein silks. She looked prone and stronger for her run that produced her back from a hip injury. You never really have credence that an athlete has fully recovered and will willingly run through pain barriers when they can not speak, but she assuredly looked like she’d run a very progressive race.

Gavin Lerena had won a previous race on the card for the Harold Crawford - Michelle Rix Yard contradicting the Racecourse murmur of doubt about his strike rate outside of Johannesburg.

He produced Celtic Sea at the two-furlong mark, and she detonated clear into an authoritative lead with Clouds Unfold leaving the remainder of the field comfortably behind her when running on resolutely.

The cherry on top was bumping into former champion jockey Tony McCoy and we exchanged the banter we had eighteen months previously about him being the third most famous "AP" equine athlete on the planet behind A.P Indy and American Pharoah.

On the eve of Wolf Power's victory, I rehearsed the race over and over in my mind and this year was no different. The disparity being, I saw scenarios that diverged and though firmly in the camp of Hawwaam, I had more than a healthy respect for Vardy. Robyn Louw cautioned me as long as my ears were open that she thought he was something special and my pocket only listened to the place talk. It was a fitful sleep, just like the night 37 years before it.

There are rules for the general racing public that pay off if you care to follow them:  
Sean Tarry will win a sales race or two  
Mike de Kock will win a Group Race  
Justin Snaith will win a race or two for Drakenstein early and be dangerous in the stayer's races  
Brett Crawford will always be competitive in all races  
Captain Al will sire big race winners  
Jet Master will dominate as a broodmare sire  
The Foster's, Drakenstein, van Niekerk, Mauritzfontein, Kantor, Beck, Shadwell, Plattner and Maine Chance colours will be at the forefront of the battle.

The Paddock Stakes is one of the most esteemed fillies weight for age races in South Africa. If ever we could name a race after the most exceptional trainer of all, the Terrence Millard Paddock Stakes should be precisely that. After his recent passing, my memory reverted to Tecla Bluff, Luticia and up The Creek during my student years.

Attention to detail from the Drakenstein team was highly evident with the lead horse being cheered on by the grandstand every time he ambled by and the rider encouraging them in unison

Front and Centre well fancied by Brett Crawford and with Anton Marcus up was very short in the betting. I looked on from the parade ring as Craig Kieswetter was telling Michael Holding that he was still too quick to face.

My eye could not help but catch on the looks of a chestnut with her sheepskin headband. Queen Supreme looked like the thoroughbred version of Chrissie Evert. Dainty, sweet looking with that headband, nasal strips and her ears splayed a little when walking past me.

Andrew Bon collared me for a brusque interview about the algorithm Neil Marx, and I run for clients when I felt like my brain transition to a status I reserved for hot dates ten years ago. Stagefright and jitters overshadowed the boundless passion I usually portray. Fortunately, I managed to relay a cohesive few sentences together, albeit without exuberant enthusiasm and scuttled off the safety of the suites.

Up the elevators and back into the Crawford Racing box, my eyes were on two horses. When Snapscan set a blistering pace, Callan Murray sat composed waiting to besiege on Queen Supreme, going through the two hundred, he sailed away, and nothing looked like catching her.

Mauritzfontein and associates investment in this imported Irish filly by Exceed and Excel out of the Gone West mare Call Later will continue to pay bounteously ahead both on the racecourse and breeding paddocks. She looks extraordinary.

Bridget Stidolph the top Zimbabwean trainer and a genial friend went down to the parade ring for the big race with me. I don't normally perspire, but the tension and expectations in my head may have led her to think I had run my race before the start. The immense pressure had begun to build, and I kept studying the saddling boxes to look at Hawwaam. Lester Piggot and his son in law William Haggas we glimpsed in the wait.

Like Wolf Power, Hawwaam emerged from the shadows and looked the impeccable paradigm of the consummate racehorse I had long expected to see. He has a breathtaking presence and was beautifully turned out by the de Kock yard. Anton Marcus could incontestably have been awarded the prize for the best-dressed man on course, resplendent in spotless breeches (Ridgemont aside), shining boots and the unmistakable blue and white epaulettes of Shadwell and Sheikh Hamdan bin Rashid Al Maktoum.

I thought One World looked the jewel for the best turned out horse on parade, and then took numerous glances at Vardy before trying to see Hawwaam canter to the start. Bridget will take the fall for missing this trying to canter to the pickets in heels.

The heat, delay and tension reduced me to a ball of sweat. I was all nerves and pacing the length of the Vasco's box. In the time behind the pens, I had downed two icy beers and wiped my brow many times. I could not conceive what things were like for trainers, jockeys and horses with the commotion and tumult, but I certainly felt the consequences. I was apprehensive about the holdup affecting Hawwaam bearing in mind the heartbreaking scratchings before the SA Derby and Vodacom July. The entire field stirred up though without exception, and suddenly the course was engulfed in a cloud of smoke from a bushfire nearby.

Kenilworth felt like the inside of a pressure cooker.

In the chaos with everything floundering, I deemed odds appreciated toward a horse in a little orbit between a jockey and a handler some way from the bustle.

The yellow colours with blue epaulettes and a blue cap belonged to Vardy.

Trainer Adam Marcus may be youthful at 30 to be training and contending in group-level races, but he unquestionably has the pedigree for the rigorous demands of his vocation. Adam's father is Basil a retired international champion jockey, his uncle Anton a champion jockey and girlfriend Lucinda the genealogy of Woodruff, Millard and Rixon excellence.

Vardy wasn't the most uncomplicated acquisition, especially when Lucinda (an independent assistant trainer to her father Geoff) had shortlisted it on her procuring list at the sale.

As aforementioned, famous thoroughbred anecdotes always have winners and losers, but my judgement would see the outcome as a dead-heat.

Adam acquired the Var colt for R350,000 when their quantum may have seen him forfeited at R400,000.

With suggestive and indefatigable inveiglement, Adam impelled Bernard Kantor into taking a percentage with the Tawny Syndicate constituents Greg Blank, Darryl Yutar and Jimmy Sarkis.

Vardy's sire Var is well renowned for his refulgent colt Variety Club, winner of the Queen's Plate and Group One races in Dubai and Hong Kong. Vardy's dam Cupid is the own sister to the super-colossal Jet Master mare Ebony Flyer, the three-time Gr1 winner of the Fillies Guineas, Majorca and SA Fillies Sprint as well as a 3rd placing in the Queen's Plate itself. Those that acknowledge her catalogue of breathing issues and the interference in

augmenting her aberrant tally of group race victories will subscribe to the notion she would have won countless more.

Cupid's half-sister Captain's Lover like Ebony Flyer was raced by Barry Irwin's Team Valor successfully as the Equus Champion three-year-old miler in 2008 triumphing in the Fillies Guineas like her sibling, the Prix du Pin a Group Three race in France and a race in the United States.

Cupid mated to Captain AI produced the three-part sister to Captain's Lover in Eros's Girl, the Listed East Cape Oaks winner.

Badger Land had undeniably inculcated a line of stamina into this lineage that when incorporated with speed lines, generates top-class classic horses.

Darryl Yutar reflected what might not have been in the twilight of this victory. The syndicate could not get a cover for Cupid and had begged stallion managers for a mating. A call from Pippa Mickleburgh proved to be life-changing. When Cupid was tested in foal to Var, the magic wand had twirled and unravelled the beginning of this remarkable story.

Adam has substantial reverence for his uncle Anton, but they're both appreciative that on the racecourse, they're no longer family at race time when they're in confronting camps. When Vardy made his racecourse debut, he'd been a laidback gelding that showed (and continues to show) little on the training track to inspire confidence in his ability against other horses.

The deafening whispers around the course had been about the appearance of a youngster that was setting the track alight at Woodhill Racing Estate.

Duc D'Orange was rumoured to be unbeatable and started well in the red under Bernard Fayd'Herbe.

Vardy started at 11/1 and won in a cogent manner when produced outside the pace by Aldo Domeyer over the 6-furlong trip by a handy two and a quarter lengths from Uncle Anton on Northern Spy.

There was gratifying hope to embolden Adam and the ownership in the lazy gelding that produced his best when brought to the course. He had enough potential to race at progressive levels upward.

It takes a predominant young three-year-old to step up in class to handicap company against older horses. The commission that faced Vardy in his second start was a Merit Rated 80 handicap.

Craig Zackey superseded the Hong Kong-bound Aldo Domeyer, and life would abruptly be inestimably better for the Johannesburg based jockey when he cantered to the seven-furlong start at Kenilworth. There was confidence albeit quiet against a good handicapper colt in Meraki and the Nick Jonsson owned Rip It Up.

Craig Zackey pressed the button for the first time in a race, and the result was instant, Vardy's impressive turn of foot was instantaneous. He started drawing attention, not least from the handicapper when winning by an easy one and a quarter length margin.

Adam was sufficiently confident enough to step Vardy up to a mile despite an eight-pound penalty. He received four pounds from the highly-rated Trippi colt Charles from the Brett Crawford yard but would jump from the prime barrier one. This time the public had confidence that he would follow up and he started a strong odds on favourite.

Charles prevailed by a third of a length, but there was enough assurance from this start to consider racing in feature company.

Adam had pencilled in the CTS Non-Black Type mile against top-class opposition as the stakes were highly attractive. One World ridden by Uncle Anton had won five races in a row before his third in the Guineas with Twist of Fate finishing ahead of him also in the race as serious opposition. It would be a tough ask in this deep end but Vardy running on into third banked his biggest cheque till this point, banking R750,000. A sound beating by One World and Twist of Fate was not all it appeared to be on paper. Adam noticed slight heat in the knee after this race. He hadn't shown any indications of lameness before this, but treatment and care would certainly account for his improvement forward.

On further inspection, a slight knee chip was the cause of mild discomfort and retrospectively. He was sound enough to plan a less strenuous campaign and Durban ruled out.

Surgery lay ahead after the Winter Classic. In the meantime, getting him sound and fit was the main task ahead.

The temptation of the July as a three-year-old would be a brazen choice taken unsuccessfully by Marinaresco in his three-year-old campaign.

Freshened up for two months, Vardy rebounded in a higher handicap race against an acclimated field that encompassed the likes of Majestic Mozart a very smart Dynasty colt who had attracted large offers from overseas and was receiving eight pounds from Vardy for a two and three quarter length beating from him in the CTS race.

This race was primarily a preparation for bigger races ahead, so seeing Vardy get into a close battle and come out on top was particularly pleasing for Adam especially not being fully fit.

The Winter Series loomed ahead, and Adam knew that it would be a defining season for his rising star.

The Winter Series in seasons past has seen the emergence of top three-year-olds homed in the cold Cape Winter to strengthen up. Names like Trademark, Pocket Power, Rainbow Bridge, Marinaresco, Act of War, Power King, Variety Club and Winter Solstice are on this Honours Board. Four July winners as older horses and winners of eight Queen's Plates between them, the route is proven.

Seven horses would line up for the Guineas, and once again One World took his place as an odds on favourite over his optimum trip.

Majestic Mozart renewed his rivalry too. Uncle Anton had been a real thorn in the side, but he was all out to fight back and perhaps keep the race after A. Marcus had lodged an objection.

In an amusing recitation in the race aftermath, a furious jockey Marcus faced his nephew trainer Adam in the boardroom.

The stipendiary steward in charge asked, "Could you give us your version of the event Mr Marcus?"

Both Anton and Adam exchanged bemused glances at each other, which brought out the revised question "Mr A. Marcus, could you give us your version of the event?"

Once again, the family members gathered raised eyebrows, and finally, the stipe tendered the question "Would you like to give us your version of events Trainer Marcus?"

Uncle Anton managed to put on the most excellent defence in his history of a jockey, and One World retained his place as the winner of the Winter Guineas in racing history. Vardy had got stronger and wiser with experience and was furnishing into a top-quality racehorse.

The second leg of the Winter Series is the Classic, and this time Vardy would top the boards over One World. The extension of a furlong would significantly test the stamina of both horses. One World did see the trip out on his pure class, but he had no answer to Vardy's

turn of foot, and the tables had finally overturned. Vardy ran away in the closing stages to be eased up two and a quarter lengths margin with the third horse eight lengths behind him.

The sweetness of victory post-race did not overshadow the worry of surgery and recovery hung over Adam's head like the sword of Damocles.

In addition to the knee chip, a slight chip in his right front fetlock detected in X-Rays. It had not caused any signs of unsoundness and discomfort but would surgery would prevent further problems ahead.

Vardy successfully underwent surgery and Adam's extreme patience on the road back to recovery would be well rewarded in time. Vardy's temperament precluded him from being alone in a small paddock for a month. A month box rest prescribed followed by two months walking in hand and then very gradual introduction back into work, trotting, hacking and cantering.

"If it were easy, everyone would do it. It's the hard that makes it great." ~ A League of Their Own.

Very few horses fully recover after knee surgery. Adam carefully managed Vardy over the seven months between races. His mission would be the Green Point Stakes a terrific opening race to the Cape Summer Season. The hard part got Adam up early in the morning, and his mind focused on the return of his budding champion. He would be fit enough to run a progressive race and come on many lengths in the month after that for the Queen's Plate.

What transpired in the Green Point Stakes made the racing world sit up and take notice. One World his bitter rival opposed him and appeared to be near peak fitness after two professional victories in the Matchem Stakes and the Cape Mile. Undercover Agent, Rainbow Bridge and July winner Do It Again three of the first four past the post in a shorthead affair of 2018 were also in the field with varying levels of fitness. Class horses run fresh.

One World in the lead looked set to shrug off a determined challenge from the Champions Stakes winner Rainbow Bridge and win before Vardy exploded past him in a few strides to win by a widening length.

Now for the big Group One Queen's Plate.

Jockey Craig Zackey walked out of the weighing room toward Adam and the connections under the shade of the trees in the parade ring. It was a scorching hot afternoon, and he glimpsed Vardy circling in a relaxed manner which instantly provided a sense of relief to his nerves. Basil Marcus well accustomed to feature race day tension and excitement went through the race plan giving precise instructions based on his judgement of how the race would unfold. Vardy looked salient with a marble coat, and when the bell rung to mount, Craig focused on Vardy's assurance, easing him past the grandstand noise. Vardy played his part behaving impeccably, totally focussed on his race ahead.

They turned to canter to the post and with noise levels rising Vardy started showing how well and fresh he was. For the first time in his life, Vardy took hold of the bit which surprised Craig but gave him increased confidence. The lazy boy had matured and seemed primed for whatever lay ahead.

The less written about the start would be mollification to all concerned. An unprecedented succession of events transpired in filibustering the race that would keep the stipendiary stewards assiduous for a prolonged night of testimonials ahead.

Vardy was not unchallenged during the Magnus Opus of the start. With the surrounding horses playing up and stressed, his agitation began to build, Craig dismounted to lead him around and calm him down. The ramification multiplied with horses, jockeys, farriers, horse whisperer, the starter and handlers under extreme strain.

Fate would once again play a part when a starter's assistant came to the rescue. They led him away from the pack, walked around in small circles with Craig and the handler either side assuring him, and Vardy was lulled back into composure.

In a few moments that seemed like an eternity for Craig, this precautionary measure prevented their story from being one of hard luck and adversity.

With all the equipment adjusted and replaced the field began entering the pens, Vardy drawn five with his expected opponent Uncle Anton again on the odds on favourite, the Mike de Kock trained Hawwaam drawn one. Craig expected Crown Towers to break on his outside and go to the front with the jostle for position early with some scrimmaging as horses in front slowed up.

Mike Tyson once said, "Everyone has a plan until they get punched in the mouth."

After the gates sprung, many of the jockeys felt that punch. The plan had gone awry. Crown Towers did not go sprinting off to set the pace; Pack Leader shot out inside Vardy with the medley starting to change in quick succession. Rainbow Bridge went forward on his outside, Hawwaam surged forward inside, One World on Craig's immediate inside went ahead and then eased as things slowed down. The three usual suspects were in a bunch as Twist of Fate settled behind Undercover Agent who raced in snatches through the muddling pace. Crown Towers sauntered out very wide up to pace it with Rainbow Bridge with Hawwaam fighting for his head and looking unsettled on the rail. The field had bunched up, and tactics played right into the hands of Vardy. Craig relaxed him one wide alongside Do It Again at the back of the pack with only Soqrat behind him and off the bit.

Craig was confident as they turned for home, he had a clear run up the outside rail as the grandstand loomed to his right. The noise of the crowd was a concern after Vardy hung inward at his last start. Adam chastised by the stipendiary board after the Green Point Stakes had changed Vardy's bit to correct this.

Crown Towers ahead of him was beginning to labour and fall back while he was passing horses off the bridle with ease waiting to pounce. Craig knew he had the horse under him, Rainbow Bridge on his inside was in sight, and they were closing the gap. Vardy responded instantly to Craig when asked to close the reach and the race appeared to play out in slow motion. Vardy's ears flattened, and he surged past Rainbow Bridge a length in front with the 200m post flying past him. Craig stuck to the task of keeping him straight, keeping the dangers on his inside at bay and punching him out to the winning post. Twenty metres before the line Vardy knew he was the victor, his ears pricked up and the line flashed by them. Craig felt the adrenalin surge as victory was no longer in doubt, the throttle eased, and he raised his right arm, saluting the blue and white beclouded grandstand cementing their names in history.

Vardy, a bay gelding by Var out of the Jet Master mare Cupid, won the 2020 L'Ormarin's Queen's Plate trained by Adam Marcus for Messrs Bernard Kantor, Greg Blank, Jimmy Sarkis and Darryl Yutar.