

Annus Mirabilis

L'Ormarins Queens' Plate

KAREL MIEDEMA

The 159th renewal of the L'Ormarins Queen's Plate had all the makings of a showstopper.

Ten contestants, with combined earnings of over R36 million. Eight of them Millionaires in their own right, vying for the lion-share of the R1 million first prize.

Do It Again, voted Horse Of The Year, counting the L'Ormarins Queen's Plate and Durban July among his big scalps in 2019.

Rainbow Bridge, last season's Met winner and Durban July runner-up, keen to settle old scores with Do It Again.

Undercover Agent, a Gr1 winner originally intended to stand as a stallion last September, before his connections decided to give this son of Captain Al another bite at the big cherries in the hope of increasing his stud appeal.

Stable companions Soqrat and Hawwaam, rising stars, with their real level of ability still to be discovered. The question on everyone's lips: just how good are they?

New kids on the block, Vardy and One World. A month earlier they'd finished 1-2 in the Gr2 Green Point Stakes, leaving Do It Again and Rainbow Bridge in their dust. But that had been a false run race, with no early pace, where Vardy came from last to outspurt his opponents, One World only a length behind. Surely that confusing scenario would not repeat itself here?

Then Vardy's stable companion Twist Of Fate, with solid Gr1 place-form in 2019, and Pack Leader, who'd finished some way behind in the Green Point Stakes.

And finally Crown Towers, whose official rating put him some 30 points behind the best in the race – the reason why he was in the race, logically assumed, was to take the lead, ensure a good early gallop and a true run race for stable companion Do It Again. That's what pacemakers are supposed to do, before dropping out.

So these were the gladiators circling behind the starting stalls, itching to show who was the best miler in the land, shortly before 5pm on January 12th at Kenilworth.

And then it all went wrong.

Queen Elizabeth II, in a speech marking the 40th anniversary of her succession, said "1992 is not a year on which I shall look back with undiluted pleasure. In the words of one of my more sympathetic correspondents, it has turned out to be an annus horribilis."

Hers was a catalogue of unpleasant events which happened to the royal family that year. The events at the start of the Queen's Plate, named in her honour, were not less unpleasant.

The official report describes the detail.

“The start was substantially delayed due to TWIST OF FATE (A Domeyer) casting his left front shoe en route to the start, PACK LEADER (M Winnaar) casting his right front shoe on two separate occasions at the start, the bridle of DO IT AGAIN (R Fourie) breaking and having to be replaced at the start, the bridle on HAWWAAM (A Marcus) slipping and having to be refitted, and a bush fire in close proximity to Kenilworth Racecourse, which created concerns regarding visibility on the course.”

Bridle was given a new spelling on the tv-screen announcing the delay, as ‘bridal’ – a reference perhaps to Queen Elizabeth’ horrible year, which featured separations, divorces, and affairs?

The lengthy delay didn’t do any of the contenders much good, Soqrat sweating up uncharacteristically, and several others visibly unsettled.

When the starter finally let them go, some twenty minutes after the advertised race-time, the drama continued unabated.

Races are won and lost in the first 400m, when horses and jockeys have to show their intentions as to who’ll make the pace, and how fast or slow. It takes split-second thinking to mentally unravel what’s going on and decide on the best position. An uncooperative horse or uncertain rider will sure as oats make a mess of things.

That’s just what happened when expected pace setter Crown Towers failed to come to the party. Confusion reigned, as the expected good pace did not materialise. Rainbow Bridge found himself in the lead, an unaccustomed position for him. He was fighting for his head, as was Hawwaam, just behind. The jockey on Vardy abandoned a carefully hatched race-plan (with the trainer’s father, multiple champion jockey Basil Marcus), and landed at the back – just as he’d been in the Green Point Stakes ...

When a hard-ridden Crown Towers finally managed to get to the head of affairs, half of the race had been run, and the damage was done. The pace quickened, but this was another of those false races, where the sprint for home up the straight would decide the winner.

Vardy and One World got their race to size, and took care of things just as they had done in the Green Point Stakes, finishing 1-2 again, with Rainbow Bridge a nose back in third. All three had on previous occasions in false run races shown their ability to “turn it on”. Of the three Vardy was the most spectacular, a case of noblesse oblige perhaps, given that he’s by champion sprinter Var out of a mare by champion sprinter Jet Master (twice a Queen’s Plate winner).

Unexpected it all may have been, confounding the experts, together with all those to whom the intricacies and intrigue of pace-of-the-race is foreign.

But as a dramatic spectacle the L’Ormarins Queen’s Plate certainly delivered.

Annus Mirabilis then. Long may it continue.