

Here's to the Champions

The Queen's Plate 2020

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In 1996, in a famous case, *Swart v Shaw*, a race horse owner and a racing school met in court. The race horse owner wanted compensation for his race horse which had suffered grievous injury during its training programme at a racing school. After hearing both arguments, the court ruled against the horse's owner. Why? Because it was agreed that as horse racing is such an extreme sport, a high level of risk is inherent, and the owner effectively accepts this inherent risk when he enters his horse into the training programme.

Needless to say, the health and safety standards of training centres in South Africa have greatly improved in the last two decades and anyone who has visited a training centre will know that the horses are generally well-cared for and reside in almost idyllic surroundings. The point of bringing up *Swart v Shaw* is to try to highlight how rigorous horseracing, and horse race training is, and by extension what kind of feat you are really witnessing when you attend an event such as the L'Ormarins Queens Plate. I imagine a lot of people attending the 159th running this year viewed the event predominantly as a big party - a blue and white extravaganza, a highlight of the Cape Town social calendar - and it is that, but it's also so much more. Those horses on the track, running in front of the ladies in their fashionable dresses and the men in their suits and sunglasses, are athletes, elite athletes. Not every horse can be admitted to a training programme to become a race horse, and not every horse that completes that training can race at an event like the L'Ormarins Queens Plate.

Race horses usually come from a long heritage of race horses. But Champion racehorses do not necessarily produce champion race horses. Often the line stops. On occasion the line continues, but in another form. For example, it may skip a generation or else continue only down the female line - much like human talents. Breeding a race horse is an art form. The horse that won the L'Ormarins Queens Plate this year, Vardy, did not come from particularly impressive parents in that they were not necessarily champions themselves. His mother, Cupid, however was the daughter of champion broodmare sire, Jet Master. The day Vardy's grandfather, Jet Master, died was a grey day in the horseracing world. During his career, Jet Master won a huge total of 17 races, and was considered one of the finest sprinter-milers in the country. One of Jet Masters' other descendants is Pocket Power who won the Durban July, four J&B Mets and an incredible five Queens Plates - four of them consecutively, he is the only horse in history to have achieved this.

So with this pedigree it's no wonder Vardy was considered 'interesting' by bookkeepers, but favourite to win? Maybe not... He was up against some tough contenders including a multiple July winner, a Met winner and a former Queens Plate winner. So in a nutshell, Vardy was a horse with 'potential' but not a favourite; a strong contender, but not considered as strong as his opponents; a horse with a history of greatness, but that had yet to achieve greatness himself.... But wasn't that exactly the same position the Springboks were in when they entered the Rugby World Cup? If the past year has taught us anything as a nation it is to never overlook the underdogs and never to underestimate the power of determination. Much like in Vardy's race there were at least four teams considered better than South Africa when we entered that tournament. The one thing we had more of though, was heart. Renowned

American horseman, Bill Dorrance once said “When the horse understands what you want, he will do that, right up to the limit of his physical capacity... and sometimes well beyond it”. That is what happened on 11 January 2020, that is what we, as the crowd were witnessing, whether we were aware of it at the time or not. Vardy had been training for that moment since 2015, just as long as the Springboks had been training for the next World Cup tournament, and like our bokke, when it came to the final moment, he exceeded his own previous capacity and came out a champion. It was very fitting that his victory was witnessed by the likes of Faf de Klerk and Steven Kitshoff who were also attending the races that day.

I do not want to detract anything from the event itself. I have been attending horseracing events regularly for the last 15 years and I firmly believe that there is nothing on the South African racing calendar quite like the L’Ormarins Queens Plate. It is a beautiful event, well run and massive amounts of fun. You have only to look at the hundreds of pictures that get taken there to realise what I am talking about. If there is still anyone in Cape Town who has not attended the Queens Plate, you are missing out. I do however want us to take this opportunity to remember the horses. Whilst we as attendees maybe spent a few hours preparing for the day, many of those horses have spent their whole lives preparing for it. As I pointed out in the beginning, the road to becoming a racehorse, never mind a champion racehorse, is not an easy on. For them to have even made it to the starting line, is an achievement. They are just as excited/nervous as any of us would be before a big final. So next year, while you are sitting in the beautifully decorated tent, or suite, or on the grandstand, sipping champagne and posing for photographs and laughing with your friends, I hope that you spare a moment to raises your glasses to the horses. At the end of the day, the event is a celebration of their achievements. This is their World Cup – and I, personally, salute their victories.