

Being Loud

The LQP Festival 2020

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“State your name and occupation,” I challenged the charming young man who joined our circle at a recent social event. It was delivered with a smile, so that he understood I meant no ill, but also firm enough eye contact to indicate I was serious. It was the end of a long afternoon and I lacked the fortitude required for the amusing, but time-consuming to and fro required to ferret out who he was, what he does and why he does it. You know, the stuff that makes the world go round and defines our reason for getting up in the morning. I am all for the niceties that oil the wheels of civil society, but people have a penchant of dressing things up as something they are not. Some call this marketing, I call it something less flattering. Life is short and my time precious, so I want to make sure I am investing it wisely.

That conversation sprang unexpectedly to mind as I approached the gates of Kenilworth Racecourse on Friday, 10 January to be met by a blue and white sign emblazoned with the words, ‘Welcome To L’Ormarins Queen’s Plate Racing Festival.’ It was a sight to warm this little black heart indeed and at that moment I fell in love with the Queen’s Plate all over again.

L’Ormarins first sponsored the Queen’s Plate, South Africa’s premier w.f.a. mile, in 2006. From the outset, there was a strong and specific vision to create a day that not only provided a great racing experience, but did so in a way that respected and honoured all the best traditions of the sport. They have stuck to it faithfully ever since, which is perhaps what makes it so compelling.

It’s that whole ‘If you build it, he will come’ ethos from Field of Dreams. Except instead of trying to recall the ghost of a father, the L’Ormarins team have been trying to care-take the spirit of racing.

My very first Queen’s Plate with L’Ormarins as host was in 2011 and it is fun to revisit my report of that year’s event. Drakenstein Stud Farm’s newly arrived Horse Chestnut was brought out to parade before the crowds. Much like this year, it was the most perfect Cape summer’s day and optimism ran high with reports of progress on our export protocols. Tilting at a world-record 5th consecutive title, Pocket Power cast a long shadow on parade, but with the likes of Mother Russia, Tales Of Bravery, Ebony Flyer and Past Master in his wake, the crowd knew they were in for a spectacle for the ages.

In the end, it proved an honest and noble result. Mother Russia was a worthy winner, popular for triumphing over the boys, but given the strength and class of the field, no runner was disgraced.

Of course, there was an amazing undercard, as well as amazing food, entertainment and, the ingredient that makes it so magic, amazing company for the day and we lingered long into the balmy night, talking and drinking and generally creating the sort of ties that bind. It was an amazing day’s racing, but it was also just an amazing day.

A lot has happened in the intervening decade. Racing, both local and international, has been subjected to a series of challenges, which have been met with varying degrees of success. In their quest, not necessarily to reinvent themselves, but certainly to offer something sincere and fresh and interesting every year, the L'Ormarins team has been courageous enough to try new things. On the occasions where these did not work out as hoped, rather than become discouraged, they proved humble enough to take lessons from every renewal, upping the ante and implementing those going forward.

That unfailing commitment has proved that racing is not about the money - we have bigger cards and larger cheques scattered across our programme. No. What the LQP has done is to create a shared centre of excellence, where the spirit of the sport and celebrating all that makes it special are always firmly centre stage.

In the spirit of the Field of Dreams' mantra that 'If you build it, he will come', L'Ormarins recognised the vital importance of investing in the sport when things were at their most challenging and they have been breath-taking in their commitment and generosity. It may have been years in the making, but the racing folk do come. A few years ago I got to touch greatness when I met Lester Piggott and joked that I'd not be washing that hand ever again and this year it was Sir Tony McCoy. Which is less about name dropping and more to illustrate the amazing people our sport produces. And that creates magic. And magic is transformative. And then the crowds follow - perhaps not quite even realising why - because everyone wants to be transformed. And there is no place quite like it than the racetrack.

Perhaps that is why I found the 2020 version so special, because it produced all that and more.

In addition to great, competitive racing, this year's LQP threw up an unexpected new friend in the form of blogger Heather Hook (do check her out) and despite her initial intention to spend just 'a few hours', she ended up staying for the day and subjecting herself to my bottomless well of horse racing talks and left me with the feeling I'd made a new friend.

Saturday was the 'serious' racing and, as always, our horses and jockeys delivered in spades. The stellar field raised expectations for another epic battle and of course, threw the rule book into oblivion with first a fire, several lost shoes and then a broken bridle, necessitating conspiracy theories galore as the race was delayed nearly half an hour. Of course, Vardy, young up and coming trainer Adam Marcus and young, up and coming jockey, Craig Zackey, not only silenced the critics, but provided a bit of a racing fairy tale at a time when those are in such short demand.

For my part, I tried to be as still as I could and simply take it all in. It was a day to be marvelled at and recounted at leisure and enjoyed again in the re-telling.

Perhaps what summed it up best was that the 2020 L'Ormarins Queen's Plate was held under the first full moon of the New Year. Known as the 'wolf moon', which (for those who are into such things), it also produced a penumbral lunar eclipse at the same time.

Although there doesn't seem to be a definitive reason for why January's first full moon should be known as the wolf moon, one web search for wolves and howling offered that wolves howl to communicate over long distances and that it is a way of saying 'here I am' to the rest of the pack.

Given the difficulties racing finds itself in, the fact that someone is still out there, determinedly doing the hard yards and serving as an example for others to follow, the LQP acts as an annual reminder of all that was and is and will continue to be good about the sport and our community, if only we are brave enough to give it a go.

Karen Walrond is credited with saying 'Be loud about the things that are important to you'. Mrs Rupert and the L'Ormarins team are owed a debt of thanks for keeping sight of the spirit of racing, when the rest of us haven't been able.