

# A Thousand Paces

## The L'Ormarins Queens' Plate

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***Mille passus***" - a thousand paces.

29 BC, Julius Caesar's son in law Marcus Vipsanius Agrippa, in measuring the Roman Empire gave us the mile. There have been, and still are, lots of "miles". From the Greek Mile of some 600 Grecian feet, through the Chinese Mile (apparently 150 zhangs, 1500 Chinese feet or 500m), the Dutch Mile (5600 els), and a multitude of other miles to the long Croatian Mile which is 1/10 an arc on the equator at 11.13 km. And many more miles besides.

But we can thank the Romans for driving on the left, and a Mile made up of 1000 paces. The Romans kept left to have their right sword arm free and this convention swept the world. Eventually (some say) the Americans switched over to keep right just to annoy the British, but it's more likely that big teams of horses began to haul huge loads and sitting on the rear left horse gave your right arm control over that team. Then keeping right made sense to deal with oncoming traffic. That or Napoleon was a lefty.

The "pace" in the thousand paces is the distance between the footfall of the same foot as they marched along. Agrippa's foot was 29.6 centimetres and so he decreed that five of those made a pace. That's a big foot for a Roman, about a UK size 11.5, so maybe he may have exaggerated like Trump's big hands. The Roman mile was about 1480m as we would measure now. The whole thing was a bit vague and finally, in the 16th Century, the British Parliament decided it was 5280 feet, or 1609m. That's another long story, but we may as well just agree that this is how "classic" things begin.

"Classic" implies style and tradition. It has class built-in. That is part of the reason why the L'Ormarins Queen's Plate has class because this horse race is actually all about class. Neither a flat out wailing sprint nor a monotonous plodding marathon, but a brilliantly sustained gallop, as fast as you can and as far as you can before the lights go out.

On average a racehorse can run 200m in about 12 seconds and sustaining that for 5 furlongs gives you a respectable 1000m sprint around 60 seconds. Now if you take really good horses, you can keep going at that sprint pace and do a mile in about 96 seconds. Beyond that, beyond a mile, the pace begins to slow and furlongs cannot be belted out quicker than 12 seconds or you stop to a walk before the end.

The wonderful thing about the Queen's Plate is that it is a 1000 paces, that magical "Goldie Locks" trip which is neither too far, nor too short, but just right. How do we know that it is perfect? Take a look at the horses that the Queen's Plate includes in the role of honour and particularly horses who appear more than once. It is commonly accepted that there are three types of "milers".

1. There is the sprinter/miler who can win a mile although they are probably at their limit to get there. Perhaps a good example may be the great Jet Master who beat Classic Flag over the mile but couldn't over the 1800 and then later performed an extremely rare double of the Cape Flying 1000m and 3 weeks later the Queen's Plate as a 5yo.

2. The other miler/stayer can just win the mile but is desperate to go further. Perhaps L'Ormarins Queen's Plate winner and current champion Do It Again is a good example, with his Queen's Plate splitting two Vodacom July's showing a preference for a mile plus. The king, Pocket Power, with a record in the Queen's Plate which may well never be repeated as he won aged 4,5,6 and 7 years old, also managed 3 Mets and a July among his 20 wins. As an exception, Pocket Power was so dominant from and including the mile, it's impossible to say he was desperate to go further and we just acknowledge that he could.
3. Then the mile specialists. Legal Eagle jumps to mind with 3 incredible Queen's Plates. Winter Solstice another. A proper analysis would probably find great horses who did win further but who many always believed to be real Milers. Names like Free My Heart, Flaming Rock and Wolf Power, legendary milers representing the best of the Queen's Plate.

The L'Ormarins Queen's Plate is the first open Grade 1 championship event of the year. The blue and white invitation is so popular that it's marked on racing calendars around the world now. Hats off, or is it Hats on, to L'Ormarins to use the momentum of a great South African standard, and enhance it further to build a two-day festival which is now the primary racing choice not only as a social event but also as a choice for the racing purist. Soon, who will be left who doesn't view the L'Ormarins Queen's Plate as the defining South African event: the race everyone wants to win, the race that marks the champion?

Set at weight-for-age, there is no age or sex discrimination and we get to compare the champions of the generations. It is very difficult for horses over a mile and further to win repeatedly and it's a sign of all sorts of greatness. Once we are fiddling with weights in feature handicaps, especially over ground and where horses could be handicapped well or poorly with a sort of random luck, it's impossible to trust those results as a true sign of the class we have come to expect in the L'Ormarins Queen's Plate.

L'Ormarins would have to have been thrilled to see the depth in their 2020 Queen's Plate this year as each runner brought some special talent to the race, strengthened even more by the fact that none of the previous season's winning stars had been exported from South Africa. So with Met winners, July winners, Guineas winners, 2yo, 3yo and 4yo champions galore, the whole country buzzed with anticipation to see the somewhat enigmatic Hawwaam devastate one of the most capable fields.

It's the trainers' job to be horrified at any hiccups that may happen to their charge as the race approaches. So to fry their minds smoke billowed across the southern side of Kenilworth and every piece of kit that could possibly fall off a horse all chose the same moment, 5 minutes before the start, to break or get lost. For the rest of us, we got to see who can take the rough with the smooth.

It's hard to tell if Vardy is a mile specialist, or whether it's the limit of his range or the beginning of it, but those yellow colours set sail from last and whistled past a name-brand field of note. Vardy's previous start had the look of something special, and his performance in the 159th L'Ormarins Queen's Plate left nothing to the imagination, it was all there to see. He ignored the troubles at the start, he ignored the scrimmaging in the race, and when he switched wide to have a clear run after having given the field a head start, he showed magnificent acceleration to hold off his honourable adversary, the other Cape 4yo, One World. It would be remiss not to mention the outstanding performance from L'Ormarins Queen's Plate winner's trainer, Adam Marcus, who must be this season's notable emerging young trainer.

With top trainers, of top horses, ridden by top jockeys, and a few hurdles to keep them honest, another L'Ormarins Queen's Plate posts a mile marker in the history of South African racing. L'Ormarins makes every effort to take care to keep all the many elements in proportion. As admirable as the human components are, they complement the equine component so that they do not overwhelm the sport that is happening outside. That balance ensures that guests never forget that are at the races, and you get a festival of racing that gives an honest measure of the South African bred equine. And a race that gives you everything you may want, in a thousand paces.