

QUEENSLAND'S DERBY HOPES REST ON CALOUNDR TRAINER AND 'THE BOSS'

RODNEY JACKSON is looking to stamp his name on more than business success in this Saturday's Group 1 AJC Derby. The enigmatic Cairns businessman has his hopes pinned on a pedigree page, Caloundra trainer GREG KENNEDY and a gutsy Grand Lodge gelding with a unique Japanese name.

I caught up with Rodney earlier today.

It's raining. The sort of rain that pounds on a roof, runs steadily down a windscreen and obscures a skyline. Rodney glances at it; frowns in spite of himself. Alongside him, trainer Greg Kennedy, a stranger to both the town he now finds himself in, and his plush surroundings, chews absently on a fingernail.

The two have just left the AJC Derby barrier draw at Doyles Restaurant in Sydney. The dark Queensland grey they represent drew 6 of the 12-strong field. "They fed us like kings," Rodney said of the lavish luncheon. "You know, it's better than the Slipper," he adds "You're just stuck outside at Martin Place for that one." His eyes flick back to the water that pours down the window. "Hmm, hope we have better conditions by the weekend," he adds. "What do you reckon Greg?"

"She'll be right," is the response.

A relative newcomer to racehorse ownership, Rodney (and indeed his trainer) - are facing what most owners only ever dream of - a G1 runner. His horse is the sole Queensland representative in Saturday's field and the 3yo carries the additional anomaly of a very non-Queensland name: TAISHO.

Attracted to both the colt's page and his looks when he first saw him 2 years ago, Rodney relied on Greg's nod of approval and the necessary "Yep, he'll grow into a nice horse" before securing the final bid of \$31,000 at the 2003 Magic Millions Winter Yearling sale (the colt having failed to meet his reserve at the Melbourne Premier some months earlier). The purchase expanded Rodney's (then) thoroughbred holdings to a total of just three.

The naming of the Jackson horses is shared between Rodney and his Japanese wife, Yae. Taisho means "the boss" or "leader" in Japanese. His name also defines an era in Japanese history. Of note, one of Grand Lodge's best horses - Shogun Lodge (who ran second in the 2000 AJC Derby) is named in a similar tradition to Taisho - 'Shogun' also being an era in Japanese history. Strong-willed and independent, 'Taisho' was deemed 'perfect' for the colt who always pinned his ears back and swished his tail in irritation at strangers who entered the stables, yet also allowed the Jackson children to pat him and pull on his mane at

will.

Taisho (Grand Lodge/ Out with the Old) is the second foal of an unplaced Star Way mare. His third dam, Belle Cherie, won over 1854m and is the dam of the champion Beau Zam whose 5 Group 1 wins also included the AJC Derby. It's a stayer's pedigree so, unusually perhaps, Taisho had quite an intensive 2yo preparation. Rodney shrugs when I query the strategy. "I wasn't the trainer - I merely give the horses to [Greg] and let him do his job. My job is just to pay the bills!"

It's a partnership that has certainly paid dividends. Rodney and his wife, Yae, now have 12 horses with Greg (6 in work) including the top priced Honours List/Cinnamon Splendor colt (\$110,000) who was purchased at this year's Magic Millions Premier Sale.

Taisho remains the favourite however given he was the first to carry the Jackson's distinctive red and white silks (modelled on the Japanese flag) to victory.

"Six months ago I told Greg I don't care what you have to do but [Taisho's] now three and if I can get him to the Derby I will be the happiest man alive."

The results so far have pleased all concerned. The gelding has only been out of the prize money once in his last 12 starts and he has been in the winner's circle on 4 of those occasions (losing an additional win on protest), winning over distances spanning 1400m to 2106m.

There will be those that will argue that the odds are against a gelding who has done much of his racing in non-metropolitan fields being able to make much of an impact on horses the calibre of Outback Prince, Jymcarew, Xcellent and Eremein; spend half an hour with Rodney and you'll realize that Saturday's race is as much about the experience itself as it is about having a horse to contest it.

"I was a bit worried he wouldn't get a run," Rodney admits "but when I paid the nomination fee the other day the racing manager at the AJC reckoned we'd be fine. We were ecstatic after that!"

Taisho arrived in Sydney this morning, Ron Quinton generously providing a box and facilities at his stables.

"He travelled perfectly - went for a walk when he got here and is eating fine," Rodney says. "Isn't that right Greg?"

Greg looks mildly pained by the attention. A focused and quiet man, he is someone who, whilst indulging his owners with time, still prefers the company of his horses. Today his voice is also tinged with a level of distractedness that one

doesn't often hear from him.

"No, I'm not nervous" he says in a tone that causes me to raise an eyebrow. "I'm not!" he repeats. "I just want to concentrate and get things done." He waves a hand at the surroundings. "These lunch things are not my cup of tea - I'd rather be with the horse and take him for a walk or a swim."

I switch the focus to his equine charge and his expression softens. "The weather isn't helping at the moment but he's three and I'm not at all worried about him getting the journey. A lot of others still have to prove that. He will race wherever he is comfortable and where he sits in the field will depend on the pace. I'll just tell the jockey to put him to sleep somewhere."

A trainer whose best horse to date is the listed winner Stanzaic ("one of only two I had in work at the time"), Greg has risen rapidly - yet in his typically understated way - quietly through the trainer ranks in Queensland, boasting current stats (since January 1) of 11 winners from 27 starters which even he admits (with some prompting) "is a fairly good strike rate".

He looks at his watch - then back at the rain. His attention is elsewhere. He wants to get back to his horse.

"So, Saturday?" I ask.

"Anything that happens now is a bonus" Rodney says. He smiles broadly. "I think big not small!"

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