

## Dubai World Cup 2004

By Katrina Partridge

Imagine if you will a giant sand box.

Add an oil reserve or three, some construction Heavy Weights, and a centre for commercial excellence that is on the fast track to becoming the envy of the Western world.

Your players in this sand box will be some of the world's richest men. They won't buy air tickets. They'll own the planes. They will garner some of the world's most expensive thoroughbred breeding stock and endless acres of rich Kentucky and Irish land to graze them on. The sheer size and opulence of their local palaces will hint of fairytales of old. In a search for perfection their landmark city will embrace ground breaking architectural designs and thousands of truck loads of imported peat moss.

Peat moss, you ask?

Why of course. You'll need a base for the man made manicured lawns and golf links that will fast consume the desert sand.

Oh and then there's that small detail of the World's richest horse race that will be hosted here.

US\$6 million in prize money to be precise.

Welcome to Dubai.

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The casual visitor to this town could be forgiven for thinking they had blinked and missed the urban mirage as, as suddenly as it appears, it vanishes in the rear vision mirror and it's once again just you and a bitumen road cutting through endless kilometers of dirt and sand.

By 9am the surrounding fog suddenly evaporates and with one breath the race track at Nad Al Sheba is revealed in all its picturesque glory. The new grandstand, erected in less than 12 months I am reliably informed, towers above us but even with my limited appreciation of pure Maths I would say that any crowd estimate of 50,000 would be wildly over the mark.

The global media have been invited to do more than report on the racing. They play an integral role in Dubai's elaborate marketing plan. When the oil leases (and/or the reserves) expire, this Arab State is reliant on a solid commercial base to safe guard its inestimable wealth. Everything is therefore directed at achieving that end. Don't get me wrong. There are some renowned thoroughbred players in town. And they have been given more than date palms and desert springs to admire. There is some serious black type and prize money in the offing. 9 weeks, US\$21M, and the crowning jewel at the end of it - the US\$6M World Cup. It's no wonder then that the word "champion" collars many of the international equine visitors.

But don't get blinded by the dollar signs and miss the point.

To the Dubai government this is about raising a country's profile, not about writing prize money cheques.

## **Race Day**

Thanks to the generosity of another expatriate Australian – renowned race commentator Terry Spargo – I am granted what the 499 other journalists in the press room – and indeed any other die hard race fan – would give their right leg for – an exclusive "access all areas" pass. I self-consciously exchange my green badge for this (suitably colored) gold one and face my first challenge – garnering sufficient courage to confront the security guards at the paddock entrance.

In the pre-race scrum of photographers, owners, trainers and various sycophants my nerves are unfounded and I slip through unnoticed.

The broadcast box to which I head is a hive of activity. The front glass window has been removed to assist with the commentator's view so all that stands between me and the winning post is the large Royal posse, their extensive entourage and the chaos which currently defines the paddock.

The Stand in front of me overflows with the crisp white dishdasha of the Sheikhs and Saudis. There are no women amongst the royal crowd (a situation no doubt secretly coveted by many race addicted husbands in the West). Not all men in this country choose or are awarded this luxury however – many families complete with female members sit on colorful picnic blankets arranged across any spare stretch of concrete in the public area, many poring intently over their race books and Pick Seven forms. In a country where betting is illegal my only hope at tasting punting victory is in this local "Pick Seven" competition – a lucky-draw of sorts that allows you to nominate the first winner of every race. Those who correctly choose all seven winners share a cash prize. The Club uses the exercise more as a novel way of tallying the crowd ("you just have to add 15% to get a reasonable idea of numbers" explains Martin Talty, Manager of the Emirates Racing Association's International Department) given the lack of turnstiles and no entry fee.

In the Millennium Grandstand to my right, all array of accents converge as the upper crust of racing followers from around the world queue importantly and hustle for the best seats. Meanwhile, across at the International Village the haute couture strut their stuff in the Al Maha & Saks Fifth Avenue Fashions on the Field. The summer lilt of chiffon and the ever present hat feathers flutter as the approaching dusk coaxes a light breeze.

"AND IT'S FRANKIE! AND THE HOPES OF GODOLPHIN SURGES TO THE FRONT IN THE GODOLPHIN MILE!"

Down in the paddock, H.H.Sh. Ahmed Bin Rashid al Maktoum (eldest son of the Crown Prince of Dubai) and Frankie Dettori dash towards one another and embrace like delighted school children. Rashid accepts the trophy on behalf of his father. The young Maktoum, a profitable owner and terrifyingly wealthy in his own right is, like his esteemed father, also a

champion endurance rider. In his early 20's, and unmarried, he supports an enthusiastic female fan club that rivals that of his UK equivalent, Prince William.

I'm in need of the Ladies Room. Turning left as I believe I should once I exit the Official area I stumble upon a darkened room filled with a swathe of black uniformed men, all number of weapons lying on tables. It is hard to tell who is more surprised by the encounter. I am cursed harshly in Arabic as I beat a hasty retreat.

"Oh them? That's just the SAS" I'm informed upon my return. "It's sort of reassuring to know they are there really."

Demonstrating the difference in commentary styles, Terry's voice as he calls each race is richly resonant, building to dramatic tones, and incorporating a series of well honed images for the at-home viewers. In contrast, the French commentator in front of us is in the midst of an orgasmic verbal frenzy. I consider reminding him to breathe. But it is a celebration of a French victory – Polish Summer - in the first on the turf for the night. The patriotic hysteria is excused.

"I thought Gary Stevens was never going to pop the question," Terry says of the winning rider after the race.

The Brits in the room laugh at the Australian turn of phrase.

As the evening progresses the number of people actually watching the races from the International Village remains questionable as strobe lights play through one section of marques. The aptly named Bubble Lounge overflows with socialites. Quite a few revelers sway wildly as they seek an equilibrium currently being challenged by gravity versus the effects of alcoholic excess and a warm afternoon beneath a desert sun.

My search for this elusive bathroom continues. The golden card around my neck shows me entry to an upper floor Racing Committee Suite. I inch along the wall trying to avoid the casual glances of the 6ft glamour's who tower over me in their 7 inch strappy sandals. I am wearing Armani but compared to these women I may as well be invisible in a 'No-Name' track-suit.

When I return, the French commentator has discarded his suit coat and tie, his animated gestures threatening to topple the TV screen. Sunglasses perch atop his head despite the fact that it has been dark for well over an hour.

Like curiously animated hospital patients wired to ICU machines, the race callers remain restrained to their territory by a plethora of wires and cords – the nursing staff the technical crew who sit silently at the rear waiting to respond to a terminal beep. Both callers know the horses by sight so only rarely do eyes dart back to their well thumbed books to double check detail, voices never pausing as they do so. I'm intrigued. Have I finally met the species of man who can admirably conquer two tasks at once?

On the way to the start of the Dubai Golden Shaheen, the race favorite and America's hero - Cajun Beat – receives a kick from another horse. There are a few anxious moments until he is given the 'all clear' from the vet. Meanwhile the recalcitrant South African – Conroy - "is

still doing everything in his power to defy them" as Terry reports a second willful buck that almost unseats the winner of the last race - Hall of Fame rider (and Hollywood movie star courtesy of his recent role in 'Seabiscuit')- Gary Stevens.

The Americans might well secure the red, white, and blue trifecta as Conroy's antics suggest anything but a start from the willful 6 year old. But at the final moment the chestnut ducks into his stall and as if on cue the starter automatically releases the gate.

Terry's call at the 100 meter mark "AND IT'S THE AMERICANS - 1...2...3" holds, in retrospect, a curious irony. It isn't to be. Who's to say that with another 1/100<sup>th</sup> of a second at the barrier, this horse who is about to disrupt the all American triumph as he has done the peace and quiet at the starting gate, may just not have been in the call at all.

It's all part of the unique story that defines racing.

Despite the head to head dual of the Americans Medaglia d'Oro and Pleasantly Perfect in the World Cup – a race taken out by the latter as a well deserving and delighted Mandella ends his World Cup hex - it is the result of the sixth race which adds the historical touch to the evening.

As they thunder to the finish in the Dubai Duty Free the crowd surges to its feet, their voices blurring in one aching gasp. It is the German horse in his 20<sup>th</sup> consecutive Group start that shoots up alongside another with royal connections – the South African Right Approach (bred by none other than Her Majesty the Queen).

Terry's voice is hoarse with the drama: "RIGHT APPROACH!! ... PAOLINI LUNGES!! ... OH!!!!... A *THRILLER* IN THE DUBAI DUTY FREE!!!"

The Judge calls for the developed print.

It is a long four minutes. Which become five.

Then seven.

The owners mill in adrenalin wired circles down in the paddock. The wife of one poses next to the trophy for a photo. Perhaps in case they're not taking it home. The huge in-field screens keep replaying the final nail biting moments and each time an anticipatory groan goes up from the crowd.

The PA crackles to life. But it's just flirting with us.

We all sit down again.

The jockeys finally dismount but seem uncertain as to their next move despite needing to weigh in and prepare for the final race. The strapper of one of the horses hesitates between a beaming smile and another glance at the screen. She traces an absent hand down her charge's nose. Tractors move out onto the dirt to grade it, the hum of their engines insistent in the strained silence. The two horses, sides heaving and necks dark with sweat, continue

to circle. Dance music pounds from the International Village as a stray whoop from a drunken reveler is heard.

"COME ON damn it!" Terry mutters to himself.

The PA finally crackles to life.

Terry pauses for effect as he relays the information to the crowd whose gut wrenching roar seals the result. A delighted strapper throws her arms first around her horse and then around an owner whose hat falls off and is trampled in the kafuffle.

It's the first dead heat in the history of the event; another story for the glittering vault of the Dubai World Cup Carnival.

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