



THE RACING AGE

Psychic Flame outsmarts Estonia in Derby

BY USMAN RANGILA

It was the first Sunday of February and Derby time in Mumbai. The palpable excitement in the air surrounding the vicinity of Mahalaxmi racecourse was sort of a reminder about the running of the biggest racing event in the country. The lingering suspense, about who would wear this year's Derby crown, was expectedly there at Mahalaxmi. Suspense also because there was a certain lack of class in the field of seventeen that was vying for an inscription in the roll of honour of the winners of this blue riband of the Indian racing calendar. And this despite the presence of the Indian Oaks winner Estonia, the Pune Derby winner Artois

and Simply Supreme in the fray.

Rarely does one find an Indian Derby favourite go out at 5 to 1 in the betting ring. And when the turf accountants quote not one but three horses at this price, it is not to be construed as a lucrative offer. The bookmakers are in fact making a statement that the outcome is wide open and you can have your pick. Those who picked the Kolkata Derby winner Psychic Flame got lucky in the end.

Simply Supreme, as is his wont, took charge as the starter flagged off the richest race in the country with Aguilas joining him to try and upset his rhythm. The property of Dr M.A.M. Ramaswamy regained his supremacy after

a bit of haggling and was in command till the last curve of the mile-and-a-half journey. Round the final corner, Artois came into the picture but only briefly and was soon overtaken by owner-mate Estonia. Before Malesh Narredu could place himself in the comfort zone and relish the sniff of an impending victory, Pesi Shroff brought Psychic Flame into contention. Both Estonia and Psychic Flame fought a stirring duel in the final stretch and it was the latter who managed to dig into her reserves to repel the local favourite's challenge. The impressive but late flourish of Sprungli could only deprive Allies Serenade the third slot. The horses returned to the paddock but the race was not over as yet.

Hoping to turn the tables on his adversary, Malesh took the battle from the racetracks to the stewards' room where it was evident that he was virtually asking for a big favour from the jury. The two fillies had rolled on to each other under pressure but since Malesh didn't have to stop riding both during and after this incident happened, the stewards rightly overruled the objection.

There were several milestones reached when the stewards' allowed the daughter of Razeen out of Eminence to keep the race: The fair sex completely overshadowed the colts and geldings in the Derby and continued their domination in the Indian classics; Mr Deepak Khaitan led in his first Indian Derby winner nine years after the legendary Elusive Pimpernel carried his famed colours to victory; Pesi Shroff set a new record with his eight Indian Derby win; Darius Byramji saddled his first legitimate Indian Derby winner (he first entered the record books in 1999 when Supervite was awarded the race subsequent to the disqualification of Saddle Up for breach of drug medication). The Derby triumph was an icing on the cake for the Mehra sisters, Ameeta and Devika, also joint owners of Psychic Flame, as the winners: Star of Windsor at Bangalore, Own Vision at Hyderabad, and Psychic Flame at both Kolkata and Mumbai were all bred at Usha Stud Farms. Indeed the two

stallions Razeen and Steinbeck could not have paid a better tribute to the late Major Pradeep Mehra, the founder of the Usha Stud Farms.

The Mahalaxmi lawns sported a barren look as compared to the earlier years when race-goers had to literally manoeuvre their way to the bookies ring from both the members' and the first enclosure. Yet the competitive edge in the 'house-full' card made up for this shortfall.

Frenchman Samuel Fargeat exhibited a good judgement of pace as he steered the Subhag Singh-trained mare Fiddle Faddle to a pillar-to-post victory in the curtain raiser. Later, Sarosh Mody's War Zone had no difficulty in tackling the Class II opposition in the K.T. Sampat Trophy. Edelweiss from Mansoor Shah's yard then sprang a big surprise by winning her maiden race at the age of five.

If one had to choose the best run race of the day then the Red Rufus Trophy would qualify for it hands down. A close finish saw Dare To Dream spare a short-head to his nearest rival Netstar. The rest of the runners were not very far off and it was a near blanket finish for this race. Secret Warrior obliged in the Breeders' Produce Stakes but the Sorab Jilla trainee had to ward off the niggling threat posed by Lilac Queen right from the word go.

Early Bird's victory in the Kejriwal Trophy was nothing less than a Derby win for lady trainer Arti Doctor whose

agonising wait for a winner came to an end. Her decision to discontinue the use of blinkers and also a change in the running tactics paid off as Early Bird unleashed a sparkling run to overwhelm Money Star and favourite Donegal Bay.

Jockey Bajrang Singh, who was declared to ride Frantic, was rendered indisposed after his triumph on Dare To Dream and couldn't fulfil his further riding engagements. That may've well come as a blessing in disguise for the Shiraz Sunderji candidate who showed the way to the field in the R.N. Kanga Gold Trophy and fought a grim battle with Aerospace in the home stretch. Aerospace had the upper hand briefly but both Frantic and C. Ruzaan showed tremendous resolve and stole the race from right under Aerospace's nose at the wire.

Malesh rode with sheer determination astride Venus Arising in the Indictment Trophy and succeeded in halting the victory march of Ocean of Fantasy, who was being hailed as a winner long way from home. Malesh could not have found a better way to vent his frustrations of having lost an Indian classic. The dicky-legged Charging Rhino ran true to form and earned an overdue bracket at the cost of Blue Devil and Montana. The Niall McCullagh-ridden Blue Devil charted an erratic course and ran all over the place in the final run-in but for which the result would've definitely been different.



UB Group CEO Ashok Kapoor (centre) presents the McDowell Indian Derby Trophy to Deepak Khaitan (left) and Amita Mehra after their ward Psychic Flame won the event at the Mahalaxmi Race Course on Sunday. A photograph by Rahul Surve