

Ascot Racecourse Media Release

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All the news from the International Challengers Press Morning in Newmarket

Ascot and World Horse Racing staged the annual International Challengers Press Morning in Newmarket this morning, Thursday, June 13, where connections of overseas challengers plus those of other leading hopes gave their thoughts ahead of Royal Ascot (Tuesday, June 18 to Saturday, June 22).

Frankie Dettori is the most successful current jockey at Royal Ascot with 60 winners and he reflected on how special the Royal Meeting is to him. He said: "I'm really looking forward to the meeting. Me and John (Gosden) have gathered a pretty decent team and I've got some nice outside rides too. I broke my shoulder two years ago yesterday and missed the Royal Meeting so you are careful in the build-up to Royal Ascot. Sitting here and looking at my rides, they all look great and I'm looking forward to the week. You go there with good horses and tremendous expectations, but every race has 20 to 30 runners and everybody is there to win. It is not easy, every winner has been fought hard for and you need a bit of luck, but I'm very pleased with my rides. Last year I thought Cracksman was a penalty kick, but he got beaten."

The Italian jockey has an enviable book of rides, which are headed by the John Gosden-trained **Stradivarius**, who bids to retain his crown in the G1 Gold Cup (2m 4f, Thursday, June 20). The five-year-old son of Sea The Stars is unbeaten in his last six starts and captured the Weatherbys Hamilton Stayers' £1-million Bonus last season following victories in the G2 Yorkshire Cup, Gold Cup, the G1 Qatar Goodwood Cup and G1 Weatherbys Hamilton Lonsdale Cup Stakes. The superstar stayer culminated last season with a gutsy success in the G2 QIPCO Long Distance Cup at Ascot and made a fine return to action when accounting for the Aidan O'Brien-trained **Southern France** in the G2 Yorkshire Cup on the Knavesmire on May 17.

"Stradivarius is doing well", said Dettori. "He is very fresh and has become the people's favourite horse he was unbeaten last year and won the Gold Cup. He has to try and defend his Gold Cup title. The great thing about him is that he wears his heart on his sleeve and he will not go down without a fight. People appreciate that and the public love him like we all do at Clarehaven. There is young talent coming through and new horses come along every year. They will want to have a shot at the title, but we'll see what happens. Competition is good and if they come into the ring, they know they will have a fight with us.

"Stradivarius' main priority is to try and win a second Gold Cup. Obviously, the £1-million stayers' bonus we will think about if we get to the last leg and the hope is still alive. However, the dream is to win the Gold Cup again. Her Majesty The Queen only comes down to present the trophy on two occasions, the Gold Cup and the Diamond Jubilee. It is an honour to receive the trophy from her. The Gold Cup is a fantastic race with a rich history and being ladies' day adds to the occasion so it is a special day."

Dettori partners the exciting **Too Darn Hot**, also trained by Gosden, in the G1 St James's Palace Stakes (1m round, Tuesday, June 18). The son of Frankel was crowned Europe's Champion Two-Year-Old last term, having won all four of his starts, which culminated with G1 success in the Dewhurst Stakes at Newmarket. The Lord Lloyd-Webber-owned colt has this year endured an injury troubled preparation before finishing a creditable length second in the G2 Dante Stakes over an extended 10 furlongs at York on May 16. Dropped back to a mile just nine days later for the G1 Irish 2000 Guineas at the Curragh, Too Darn Hot chased home the

Charlie Hills-trained **Phoenix Of Spain** and the pair are set to renew their rivalry in the mile contest on the opening day of Royal Ascot.

The Italian rider continued: “Too Darn Hot has had a very unfortunate time. We had to rush to get him onto a racecourse. We tried the Dante where he obviously didn’t stay combined with perhaps a lack of fitness. Then we tried the Irish 2,000 Guineas, when he wasn’t last and finished a good second. I just feel like I haven’t got him where I wanted him to be. Hopefully at Ascot on Tuesday, you see the old Too Darn Hot. I feel he has got more to give and you haven’t seen the real him yet this season. He looks well and came out of the Irish 2,000 Guineas well. He is an amazing horse to ride in the mornings – I sit on him once in a while. **King Of Comedy** also runs in the St James’s Palace Stakes and he is an improving horse and is entitled to be in the race – I will be riding Too Darn Hot.”

Connections of American sprinter **Imprimis** have secured the services of Dettori for the £500,000 G1 King’s Stand Stakes (5f, Tuesday, June 18). Discussing the American sprinter’s chances, he continued: “Imprimis is probably the best American turf sprinter. The King’s Stand looks a very good race this year with Blue Point and Battaash. American sprinters have done well in the past, his form is very good and Joe (Orseno, the trainer) seems very happy with him. It is another tough race, but hopefully he runs well.”

Dettori has also picked up the ride on the Sir Michael Stoute-trained **Crystal Ocean**. Connections have decided to target the G1 Prince Of Wales’s Stakes (Wednesday, June 19, 1m 2f) in what looks one of the races of the week, featuring **Sea Of Class**, **Magical**, **Masar**, and **Deirdre**.

“The Prince Of Wales’s Stakes looks to be the best race of the meeting if everyone turns up”, said Dettori. “I am very pleased to pick up the ride on Crystal Ocean who is such a versatile horse. He loves Ascot, and is two from two this year. I am unlikely to ride any horses for Wesley Ward this year.”

Newmarket-based trainer John Gosden, who has 47 Royal Ascot winners to his name, is set to send a typically strong squad to Royal Ascot.

He said today: “We have been happy enough overall coming into Royal Ascot and Frankie has been training them which makes life easier for me!

“The rain coming has been a bit of a surprise which has caused us to change some of our plans and preparation, but the good news is that Ascot week isn’t this week as it would have a little wet to say the least.

“Stradivarius obviously wouldn’t want it too soft as he is at his best on top of the ground. He worked very nicely on the Limekilns on Monday morning before they shut it and I have been very happy with his preparation.

“Too Darn Hot has probably been the worst managed horse this year, by me and the manager. He missed the Guineas which was tragedy because that would have been a perfect race. He then had to walk for two weeks before going for the Dante, when he was quite frankly about 80 per cent fit. Frankie was trying to settle him further back and ignored the pacemakers and consequently got there to be second.

“Then, as we seemed to be missing the Classics, we went over to Ireland nine days’ later. Due to the rules, he had to have a flu vaccination – he was perfectly eligible to race in the UK but not in Ireland as they changed the rules so had to have a flu vaccination on the Saturday after the Dante before the Irish 2,000 Guineas the following Saturday. He ran really well in Ireland and finished second, but we all ask horses to do impossible things and I think it would have

been much better if we had targeted the Irish Guineas from the outset. From the horse's point of view, that has not been very clever.

“Having said that, Too Darn Hot is coming into the St James's Palace Stakes in good form and I hope that he can put in a quality performance as he certainly has not had the opportunity to do that so far this season with his more than interrupted preparation through the spring.

“I think I am the happiest I have been with him so far this season. Last year went so smoothly it was almost ridiculous, a maiden followed by a G3, a G2 and a G1. This year has been quite the opposite. The good news is that we are only halfway through the season so there is still a lot to look forward to.

“Mehdaayih will not run in the Ribblesdale Stakes. We are waiting with her as she got knocked about lots in the Oaks and it is too soon. We have got **Shambolic** and couple of other fillies in there who could run.

“**Twist 'N' Shake** will go in the Coronation Stakes. She is quite tiny, and I wouldn't want her to carry a lot of weight in the Sandringham

“It was always the plan to go for the King Edward VII Stakes with **Private Secretary**. **Humanitarian** had a warm-up in the Derby, when he learned a lot about racing, and will probably go there as well.

“We are only running one two-year-old this year as most of our horses are quite late-developing. **Light Angel** won at Newbury and is a tiny Dark Angel horse but should run a nice race in the Coventry Stakes.

“I am looking forward to running **Corelli** in the Duke Of Edinburgh but in the handicaps, you have got to get the run of the race and anyone who thinks they have a banker is over-optimistic.”

Last year saw Sir Michael Stoute become the most successful trainer ever at Royal Ascot, when Poet's Word gave him his 76th victory at the Royal Meeting in the Prince of Wales's Stakes. Stoute enjoyed a further three victories at Royal Ascot 2018, with his record there now standing at 79 winners.

Stoute said today: “Last year was thrilling and went really well. The previous year we thought we might get one as we went there with about five favourites which was an anti-climax, so it was a great thrill when Poet's Word won the Prince of Wales's last year.

“Crystal Ocean will go on the Prince of Wales's Stakes. He has to go for G1 races now and he has won plenty of G2 and G3 races. He has run creditably in G1 race and has decent 10-furlong form. It is a very tough race, but he goes there in great form. Frankie Dettori rides him and sat on him yesterday morning.

“**Mustashry** runs in the Queen Anne. I was thrilled with him in the Lockinge and his preparations have gone fine. He is impervious to ground conditions which is very handy, and we are hopeful.

“It will be a big step up for **Jubiloso** in the Coronation Stakes as she has only won a maiden and a novice race. But she has been very impressive and is progressive. She is a classy filly.

“Whether she is good enough to take on the fillies in the Coronation Stakes, we will find out. It may be a bit soon for her, but we have to give it a go.

“**Dream Of Dreams** is a solid Group-race performer. He didn’t pick one up last year when he got beat in a few photos. I have been very pleased with his two runs this year and he goes for the Diamond Jubilee Stakes. I also think **Rawdaa**, who Frankie rides, goes there with a big chance in the Duke of Cambridge Stakes.”

Newmarket trainer William Haggas has saddled eight winners at Royal Ascot and he will look to add to that tally with stable star **Sea Of Class**, who is set to make her seasonal reappearance in the £750,000 10-furlong G1 Prince Of Wales’s Stakes (Wednesday, June 19).

The four-year-old daughter of Sea The Stars has won four of her six career starts, which included G1 success in both the Irish Oaks at the Curragh in July, 2018 and the G1 Yorkshire Oaks on the Knavesmire in August, 2018. Haggas’ charge was denied by a short-neck on her final start last term by Gosden’s Enable in the G1 Qatar Prix de l’Arc de Triomphe at Longchamp in October.

Discussing her return to action, Haggas said: “Sea Of Class finished this morning and hopefully every is OK between now and Wednesday. James Doyle will ride Masar if he runs in the race, but according to James, no decision has been made yet. Hopefully, he is available, but if not I’ve got my ideas on some jockeys who could ride as does the owner Mrs. Tsui who has had jockeys ringing her up, so we will cross that bridge when we come to it.”

Other notable contenders amongst Haggas’ raiding party include QIPCO 2,000 Guineas third **Skardu**, who finished fourth in the Irish equivalent on his latest start. The three-year-old son of Shamardal is set to tackle his Irish 2,000 Guineas conqueror **Phoenix Of Spain** in the mile G1 James’s Palace Stakes (Tuesday, June 18).

“Skardu is very well”, said Haggas. “He ran well at Newmarket, but not so well in Ireland. I think that was a messy race, certainly the first two furlongs. I think a round track will suit him. I don’t think the English or Irish Guineas form is magnificent stuff. It is worth a shot and anything could happen. We’ll need a nice toe and a good draw. If they go a decent gallop, he could go well.

“We have a lot of horses for Her Majesty The Queen and **Seniority**, who did not enjoy Dubai, ran well at Epsom and Ryan Moore appeared keen to ride him in the Royal Hunt Cup. **Magnetic Charm** goes for the Coronation Stakes. I’ve had no luck for her at Royal Ascot yet, but to try and win a race there would be big stuff for us and we try hard to go so.

“**Frankellina** could run in the Ribblesdale and I would like to have a go in that race, but that will be the owner’s decision. I don’t think Maqsad will make the Coronation Stakes, but **Pablo Escobarr** runs in the King Edward VII Stakes – he is a nice horse. He was second to Anthony Van Dyck at Lingfield – hopefully he can run well.”

As ever, there is a wealth of international flavour to the racing at Royal Ascot with Japanese, Australian, Singapore, American and New Zealand-trained horses all set to run at the meeting. Japanese interest comes from the classy **Deirdre** who represents trainer Mitsuru Hashida and is an intended runner in the £750,000 G1 Prince of Wales’s Stakes (10f, Wednesday, June 19).

The five-year-old daughter of Harbinger’s career highlight came when capturing the G1 Shuka Sho over 10 furlongs at Kyoto in October, 2017. Deirdre has raced four times outside of Japan, which included a second and fourth-placed efforts in the 2018 & 2019 G1 Dubai Turf at Meydan. The Toji Morita-owned mare a never nearer sixth on her latest in the G1 The FWD QEII Cup at Sha Tin on April 28. She is partnered for a second time by legendary Japanese rider Yutaka Take.

Seiko Hashida, assistant trainer and translator for his father Mitsuru, said: “It is good to be here. We come from Japan and have been to Dubai and Hong Kong with Deirdre before coming to Newmarket. The people have been very kind to us and the horse has settled in very well at Abington Place, where Jane Chapple-Hyam has been very good to us.

“Deirdre has a mixed pedigree. She is by a European horse, Harbinger, while her dam Reizend is by Special Week, who represents a fusion of Sunday Silence and the great Japanese broodmare Soninke.

“We would like to see a comfortable surface for Deirdre, not too heavy and not too firm.

“We are always fortunate to be supported by passionate Japanese horseracing fans. We hope the people at home don’t drink too much sake and are still awake to watch her run!

“It is our first time going for a European race and finding out how good we are. We understand the quality of horses will be taking on like Masar, Magical and Sea Of Class, but we are looking forward to it.”

Joe Orseno is relishing the opportunity to saddle **Imprimis**, the mount of Dettori, in the £500,000 G1 King’s Stand Stakes (5f, Tuesday, June 18).

The prolific five-year-old has won seven of his nine starts, all of which have come on turf. The Broken Vow gelding is unbeaten this season and captured the extended five-furlong Shakertown Stakes at Keeneland on April 6 on his latest start. Imprimis defeated last season’s Diamond Jubilee third Bound For Nowhere, trained by Wesley Ward and another intended runner at the Royal Meeting, on that occasion.

Orseno, who trains at Gulfstream Park, Florida, where he has around 35 horses, commented: “The Shakertown was a massy race as Imprimis stumbled out of the stalls, but the rider managed to remain on board and he won well in the end. He beat a pretty good horse in Bound For Nowhere and our horse just exploded in the closing stages. It was an easy choice to run in the King’s Stand as I just think the shorter trip will suit. He has never run straight and I think if he is going to be all out, then five furlongs is going to be a better trip for him. The owners (Breeze Easy LLC) of Imprimis had Shang Shang Shang, who won the Norfolk Stakes for Wesley Ward last year. They had such a marvellous time here and they thought that if Imprimis was good enough, then it was worth coming here. He won nicely at Gulfstream first time out this term and then we went to the Shakertown which was a bit ambitious. But he did it well that day and since that race, he has been a different horse. We’ve given him plenty of time off and we’re looking forward to it.

“Imprimis has run over a firm surface and handled it well and has also run on heavy going in a race at Pimlico on Preakness Day and he handled that well. He handles just about any surface, but I would probably prefer good ground. I’m not real familiar with Battaash and Blue Point. I have watched videos of them and it’s a tough race with good competition, but Imprimis is in form and doing well. He is coming here 100%, he’ll run his race and hopefully he shows up – we respect the opposition.

“Imprimis handled the preparation well. He welcomed the chillier weather here compared to Florida. He is staying at Manton which is very quiet and he has blossomed there. It has been great to train him here and people have bent over backwards to help us. To win at Royal Ascot would be at the top of the podium in terms of my career.”

Australian speedball **Houtzen** is the latest from Down Under to contest one of the G1 sprints at Royal Ascot, with her likely port of call being the £500,000 G1 King’s Stand Stakes (5f, Tuesday, June 18) instead of the £600,000 G1 Diamond Jubilee Stakes (6f, Saturday,

June 22). A dual G3-winning sprinter in Australia, Houtzen's last victory came in the P J Bell Stakes at Randwick in April, 2018.

The daughter of I Am Invincible Spirit met trouble in running on her latest start in G1 company when sixth (beaten 1.75 lengths) in the Manikato Stakes at Moonee Valley on October 26. Trained by Toby Edmonds, the five-year-old sprinter was 10th on her latest start in a G3 event at Gold Coast on her latest start on January 10.

Now owned by Aquis Farm, Houtzen was meant to be named by her original owners after former Victoria's Secret model Doutzen Kroes, but predictive text on iPhone led to the horse being called Houtzen by mistake.

Edmonds explained: "After finalising a syndicate, we named the horse 10 days out from a barrier trial. A text message came through saying 'Houtzen' so I put that on the naming form and we were given the name. I told the syndicate that they had got the name they liked, but I didn't hear from them for 15 minutes as they were looking through the text messages. Houtzen was meant to be named after a very stunning Victoria's Secret model called Doutzen Kroes, but this filly is also quite stunning!"

"It has been a great experience coming over here. Everyone has been fantastic to us and I need to thank Chris Stickels for letting us gallop at Ascot. We are the only Australian representative and that is probably because the Everest now exists. We just thought we would come here and chance our arm. We're coming up against great horses in Blue Point and Battaash. It is a big field and it is going to be very competitive. Houtzen is very sharp so we're hopeful. We took her to Ascot and she got up there nicely. The ground was beautiful and she broke well. We also took her to Newmarket and she did well there. It is good to be here and great to get her seasoned for a big race like this.

"Kerrin McEvoy will ride Houtzen. He is a world-renowned rider and we've got a good rapport with him, whilst he has experience of Royal Ascot. We'll see where we draw Sunday before talking tactics. She is pretty quick and we'll look to pick them off late. I wouldn't want too much rain and it will be great if the ground is good. To have a winner at Royal Ascot would be a dream come true to come internationally and perform at this level."

New Zealand representation comes from **Enzo's Lad** who is set to become just the second New Zealand-trained horse to run at Royal Ascot, following Seachange, who was 12th in the 2008 G1 Diamond Jubilee Stakes. Enzo's Lad is set to compete in the same race on June 22, along with the G1 King's Stand Stakes on June 18.

A seven-time winner in New Zealand, the Testa Rossa gelding's most notable successes have come with back-to-back victories in the G1 JR & N Berkett Telegraph Stakes over six furlongs at Trentham. Trained by Michael Pitman and his son Matthew, the six-year-old was last of nine on his latest appearance in the six-furlong G1 Chairman's Sprint Prize at Sha Tin, Hong Kong, on April 28.

Michael Pitman drew emotional scenes at this morning's press conference when discussing his past. He was severely injured in a car accident that saw him hospitalised for six months and left him with a prosthetic leg after his left leg was amputated below the knee. Michael along with his wife Diane sadly lost their youngest son Jonny, 28, to suicide in November 2013, whilst Michael was diagnosed with bowel cancer in May 2018, but was given the all clear earlier this month.

Reflecting on his life Pitman said: "I'm a survivor. It's been well documented that 12 months ago I was diagnosed with bowel cancer. Like all fellas, I ignored the signs I should've taken notice of and I wouldn't have wanted to leave it any later that's for sure. When they put the x-

ray on me, they said I had quite a decent lump. I had an operation on October 8 which lasted nearly eight hours and which took 18 inches off my bowel and I'm free of cancer now. When I first started training, I had nothing and within three or four months of training I was hit by a car. I was in hospital for 26 consecutive weeks and I now have an artificial leg and a steel rod. I am the guy that hates going through airports because I'm the bloke who stands there and gets frisked! I've had the best life don't you worry about that. There is such a thing as ying and yang and I've probably had more ying. I have had a lot of big winners with loyal owners who have been with me through it all.

"To be at Royal Ascot is just fantastic. I was asked recently whether having a horse at Royal Ascot was on my bucket list, but so was going to the moon! I thought this was unachievable, so to be here is something extra special I can tell you that.

"Enzo's Lad went to Hong Kong and he didn't fire. He is no good right-handed and probably prefers real, hard tricks. I was told by people such as Nick Smith and Adrian Beaumont that we could go to Royal Ascot. It was pointed out that Blue Point was also last in Hong Kong and won the King's Stand the season after, so I hope history repeats itself!

"Enzo's Lad is a great horse. He is a real cool dude. I know trainers get affectionate about their horses, but everyone loves riding him. He has been working down the Al-Bahathri track like an old campaigner.

"It might be a shock to some people, but I'm going to let young David Egan ride him at Ascot on Tuesday. We've had a lot of success by putting young and ambitious people on our horses. I could've shopped round and got a rider with more experience, but we're all for giving young people a chance. They have to start somewhere; he has a good reputation in the area and we're delighted that he will partner the horse. Jane Chapple-Hyam has also been great and she has been a pleasure to deal with.

"I might be back at Royal Ascot next year with a horse called Sensei. He was called after my son Jonny who was very good at martial arts and judo and, hopefully, I'll be back with him in 12 months' time."

Lim's Cruiser is trained in Singapore by Stephen Gray and he is set to tackle the £600,000 G1 Diamond Jubilee Stakes (6f, Saturday, June 22). One of the best sprinters in his homeland, the Casino Prince gelding recorded back-to-back victories in the Lion City Cup (6f) at Kranji in 2017 & 2018.

Lim's Cruiser started out in Australia, but in his only start overseas since moving to Gray, he finished seventh in the G1 Longines Hong Kong Sprint at Sha Tin in December. The sprinter warmed up for Royal Ascot with a second-placed finish in the local G1 Lion City Cup (6f) at Kranji on May 25. Lim's Cruiser is set to be ridden for the first time since 2017 by Vlad Duric, a dual champion jockey in Singapore, who will be making his UK debut at Royal Ascot.

Gray, a fellow Kiwi and close friend of Enzo Lad's joint-trainer Michael Pitman, said: "I've known Michael and his wife Diane for a very long time. He came to stay with me during his treatment and I think Michael is an inspiration to people with what they have been through."

Analysing the hopes of Lim 's Cruiser next week, Gray reported: "Lim's Cruiser is a lovely horse and has been our champion sprinter the last two years. We were a little bit deflated when he got beat last time, but sometimes these things happen. He has come over here really good. Lim's Cruiser is a big boy who gets a bit fired up. You either take the option of coming over here earlier or doing what we have done and basically come over for the race with a fit horse.

“Vlad Duric is a champion rider in Singapore. He rang the owner Mr Lim if he could ride the horse and I agreed it was a good idea. We have been personal friends for a long time. Lim’s Cruiser has to be ridden in a certain way and it’s great to have someone on board who knows the horse.

“You can be daunted about bringing a horse over here, but it’s not hard at all. It is all about having the right horse. It’s very hard to win even for the British horses, but if you’ve got the will to have a go, you have to have a go. We might leave him here after Royal Ascot as there are a couple of options for him. There are not a lot of races for him in Singapore, so we’ll see how he comes out of Royal Ascot and maybe run somewhere else in Britain. But it is a dream to have a runner here and it’s a dream to represent Singapore and your family.”

Latest Going News

Chris Stickels, Clerk of the Course at Ascot, gave an update on the ground ahead of next week’s Royal Meeting.

He said: “A bit of natural rainfall has been welcome. We had a dry summer last year and a dry spring so far this year. To get natural rainfall is ideal this far out. I wouldn’t want this sort of rain next week, but it has taken one decision away from me for the moment.

“The track has taken the rain very well. We have had about 80mm in the last week and 13mm since when I left yesterday. It is highly likely that I will be changing the ground to soft when I walk it this afternoon.

“The rain band is due to disappear after Saturday. There is every possibility of good ground for the start of the meeting given the dry forecast for Sunday, Monday and Tuesday.

“I would much rather have the rain this week rather than next week. It makes things slightly easier and I think from midweek onwards, there is every chance of faster ground given the weather conditions for next week.”

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