

March 1, 2008

**STRATOS TRIUMPHS IN GRADE 1 EMPRESS CLUB STAKES IN SOUTH AFRICA, OWNER, JOCKEY, SIRE WIN TURFFONTEIN FIXTURE SECOND YEAR IN A ROW, TRAINER MIKE AZZIE, JOCKEY WEICHONG MARWING NAIL DE KOCK ON WIRE**

Stratos responded to late urgings from Champion jockey Weichong Marwing to surge in the shadow of the wire and claim the Grade 1 Empress Club Stakes on Saturday at Turffontein for third-generation trainer Mike Azzie.

It was déjà vu all over again, as Team Valor International, Weichong Marwing and sire Jet Master joined together for a second consecutive year to nail down the Empress Club, named for the great racemare owner by Laurie Jaffe.

Adding to surreal nature of the day, Team Valor International's mare She's on Fire ran fourth for the second year in a row for veteran trainer Ormond Ferraris.

The only difference this year was that Mike de Kock, who saddled TVI's Little Miss Magic last year, this time around was on the other end of the stick, as his gallant 3-year-old filly Rat Burana just failed to last in the dying yards.

It must seem like déjà vu to Mike de Kock, however, as this was the second time in the 2007-2008 South African racing season that a Team Valor runner got its nose in front at the finishing post over one trained by de Kock, whose other star 3-year-old filly Gilded Minaret was beaten at Kenilworth on December 1 for the Cape Fillies Guineas by pro tem 3-year-old filly Champion Captain's Lover.

Robin Bruss of Northfields Bloodstock, who was the agent for Team Valor in acquiring Stratos when she was an early 3-year-old, represented TVI at the race, leading in the mare with his wife Jane. He filed a report as follows:

From a perfect day without a breath of wind and a firm track, a big black cloud descended upon Turffontein, as the owners, trainers and horses began to appear in the parade ring, accompanied by a flashes if lightning as if to foreswear something ominous. Owner scurried for the covered hut in the centre, jockeys went scurrying back to the weighing room and horses, fully saddled and ready, were returned to the saddling boxes. It was not the few drops of rain, but the jagged bolts of lightning that raced across the sky accompanied by booming thunder that signaled the need for us to retreat.



Weichong Marwing wins his 2nd consecutive Grade 1 Empress Club Stakes for Team Valor.

And so the start was delayed. Once the fillies and mares cantered down, there was a scurry to get the race underway. Weichong Marwing had sized up de Kock's game plan, as the ex-stable rider figured that last year's Champion 2-year-old Rat Burana would break quickly and head towards the lead and that Stratos ought to settle on her tail, preferably covered up in third place.



Trainer Mike Azzie collects the winning Team Valor filly Stratos.

Grade 1-winning Jet Master mare Soft Landing took up the running, with the Rat Burana second and Stratos third. The game plan was in motion.

Swinging for home, Soft Landing held a 4-length lead, but was the first to weaken, as both Rat Burana and Stratos edged up to arrest her lead. De Kock's other Grade 1 winner and last year's Champion Filly Bold Ellinore loomed up in the wings, ready to spring at the leaders, with Team Valor's other entry She's On Fire, making ground from the rear.

The Rat and Stratos joined issue and for a moment or two, it looked like Stratos was starting to hang and her head tilted to one side, almost as if she was gritting her teeth. And the thought crossed my mind "is her joint going to hold up." But in fact, she was being leant on by Rat Burana, in a tactical move of intimidation, which Kevin Shea knows only too well, has helped the De Kock stable many a time.

But the experience Weichong seemed to hold his mare in rhythm for a stride or two and then in one final surge, he picked her up and lunged forward to claim victory, in what looked to be a masterful, thoroughly professional move which elevates a great jockey from a good one. Your mare was home.

Michael Azzie was overjoyed, full of praise for you Barry and thankful to Weichong.

Jaffe had presented the beautiful perpetual Empress Club trophy last year, but this time around the all-time great owner was home nursing an injury. Jaffe bred and owns a share with Team Valor in the promising 2-year-old Western Winter colt Greenwich Park, which topped last year's National Yearling Sale and is now training with Geoff Woodruff.

“We cannot thank Mike Azzie and Weichong Marwing enough for sticking with this mare,” said Barry Irwin, principal of Team Valor International. “Stratos has had her leg problems of late and the trainer has done a magnificent job keeping her going at such a high level.

“Weichong has always ridden Stratos with a bit of ingenuity and his timing was nothing if not superb. We are indebted to him for this sensational bit of reinsmanship.”



American-bound Empress Club trophy.



Perpetual trophy is Team Valor's once again.

Irwin said that Team Valor had planned to retire the mare after she won a Grade 1 race, but based on post-race comments from the jockey, he may reconsider the plans.

Stratos is scheduled to join the budding broodmare band now being assembled by Team Valor in South Africa. “We will have an announcement regarding our breeding plans following the National Yearling Sale when I visit South Africa,” said Irwin.

In winning the 1-million Rand Empress Club, Stratos joined Ipi Tombe, Irridescence, Little Miss Magic, Captain’s Lover and Carnadore as South African horses to win a Grade 1 race for Team Valor. All but Carnadore have been fillies and all but Ipi Tombe won for the stable in South Africa.

Stratos becomes the second Grade 1 winner and third Grade 1 horse for Team Valor sired by leading South African sire Jet Master. Irwin admits to having a special feeling for that 8-time Grade 1 winner. “I have a painting of him in my living room that I bought at an auction in Cape Town a few years ago,” he said. “We were on him early, we have some youngsters by him on the way up and we plan to breed to him next season as well.” Little Miss Magic and She’s on Fire also are by Jet Master.

Ormond Ferraris obviously knew what he was doing sending She's on Fire into the Grade 1 Empress Club for a second year in a row and, by all accounts, she was closing best in the end. She seems to want more ground and a Graded win surely me be around the corner for this daughter of leading sire Jet Master. She was beaten 1 ½ lengths after breaking from a wide draw that was the undoing of well-regarded Royal Fantasy.

Stratos opened at odds of 7 to 2 and drifted to 9 to 2, while Rat Burana opened at 4 to 1 and went off as the 2 to 1 favorite. She's on Fire opened at 20 to 1 and drifted to 33 to 1.

From 12 starts for Team Valor, Stratos has 6 wins. Her overall record is 7 wins in 18 starts and her earnings exceed 1.1-million Rand.



Team Valor's She's On Fire closed fastest of all to claim 4th place.

---

TEAM  VALOR