

March 5, 2009

## RUSSIAN SAGE DEADHEATS IN SECOND WITH JAY PEG IN DUTY FREE PREP, TEAM VALOR COLT GIVES 5.5 POUNDS TO 1 ¼-LENGTH JEBEL HATTA HERO, CHAMPION EARNS HIS WAY INTO THE \$5-MILLION WORLD CUP NIGHT RUN



Russian Sage had more difficulty getting into the Grade 2 Jebel Hatta than running well in the World Cup night prep, but everything worked out well in the end for the owners of the South African Champion thanks to Mike de Kock, who not only trained him to make some progress, but convinced the Emirates Racing Association to increase from 12 to 16 the number of runners allowed in the \$250,000 prep for the \$5-million Dubai Duty Free.

The Team Valor International colorbearer shared highweight of 131 pounds with fellow South African Jay Peg, who won the \$5-million Grade 1 Duty Free last year in course record time. At the finish of the Jebel Hatta, Russian Sage and Jay Peg finished on even terms. Slightly more than a length in front of the invaders came the winner and favorite Balius, who was in receipt of 5.5 pounds from both Russian Sage and Jay Peg. Handicappers differ on their opinions as the relative impact weight has on a racehorse, but a majority would agree that 5.5 pounds is worth more than a 1 ¼ lengths.



The challenge yesterday was for Russian Sage to raise his lowly handicap mark of 108 to at least 115 in order to garner an invitation to the March 28 renewal of the Duty Free. Barry Irwin was presented with various options, but stuck to running in the Jebel Hatta because of the timing. "I gambled that he was good enough to improve enough to up his rating with just one more race," he said. "I also figured that if we couldn't bring the colt up to the Duty Free the right way, there was no sense in running in the Duty Free. The point of the Duty Free is not to be in it, but to perform well in it. We gambled and it worked."

Jay Peg, with whom Russian Sage finished in a dead heat under equal weights, had a handicap mark of 120. Balius had a handicap rating of 118 pounds and he received 5.5 pounds from Russian Sage. This should mean that Russian Sage is worth every ounce of 119 on the handicap scale. *Timeform* upped The Russian from 119 to 124, which is 2 pounds better than Balius (who equaled his best mark) and 1 pound inferior to Jay Peg's mark in winning last year's Duty Free! Russian Sage is now one of the highest-rated middle distance grass runners in the world based on the Jebel Hatta result.

Invitations will be tendered Monday for the World Cup evening races and Team Valor International is confident their steed will find his way into the starting line up for a race won in 2003 with its Ipi Tombe, when Mike de Kock trained her to score a resounding triumph.

As for the race itself (this is still horse racing and not politics, right?), Russian Sage broke smartly, rated kindly for the first 100 meters as the field waited for a leader, then fell right in behind Jay Peg, who tried to make all under Weichong Marwing.

The two Cape of Good Hope Derby winners from Cape Town ran one two the entire race up to the final 100 meters, at which point favored Balius past them both and won by slightly more than a length. Jay Peg never left the rail. Russian Sage made a determined bid to reach even terms with Jay Peg, looked like he would get gobbled up, but dug down deep to finish on even terms with him.

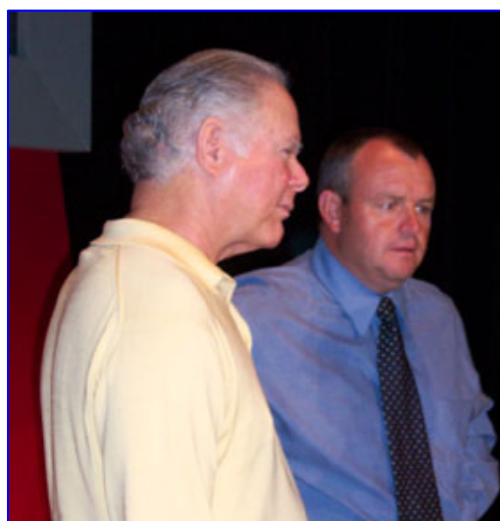
Imbongi, a brilliant Miler who had beaten Russian Sage in the Guineas held in Durban last season and was rated at 113 going into the fray for trainer Mike de Kock, closed fast late and was just behind Russian Sage and Jay Peg. He was in receipt of 2.2 pounds from Russian Sage and Jay Peg

Japanese Derby heroine Vodka finished fifth, beaten three-quarters of a length. The Champion Filly had nowhere to go on the rail behind Jay Peg and when room finally materialized at the very end, she was unable to muster a rally along the inside.

Final time of 1:48 4/5 was the fastest renewal in the last three years.



*Gary Barber is enjoying his latest Grade 1 winner with Team Valor and looking forward to \$5-million stakes.*



*Barry Irwin and Mike de Kock in action.*

Barry Irwin said “The best thing about today’s race is that Russian Sage was not fully wound up and figures to improve on World Cup night, which is Mike de Kock’s modus operandi. Russian Sage was a late arrival in the desert and a late arrival in England before that, both through no fault of his own. His departure from South Africa was delayed by a bureaucratic snafu and his exportation from England was delayed when the chartered aircraft experienced mechanical problems.

“Mike’s horses always continue to improve throughout the Dubai Winter Carnival. That is his hallmark. To Mike, it is all about what a horse does on the night of the World Cup, not leading up to it. So with dramatic improvement by Russian Sage from the first to the second race, one is left to wonder what the colt is capable of producing in the Duty Free.”

*Racing Post* in England now has Russian Sage and Jay Peg co-ranked on top of its worldwide listing of 4-year-olds and up for 2009, on a mark of 122.

A remarkably consistent racehorse, Russian Sage has finished first or second in 8 of his last 9 starts, his lone unplaced finish coming when he was seventh in the Grade 1 Durban July, shortly after a blacksmith shaved his front feet down the soles and lowered his heels, making him foot sore.

The Russian Sage ownership group includes three partners with South African affiliations in Larry Nestadt, chairman of the National Racing Authority (The Jockey Club), his longtime friend Gary Barber, the South African native who has become a leading motion picture producer in Hollywood (“Seabiscuit”) and Johann and Gaynor Rupert, owners and breeders operating as Drakenstein Stud in South Africa, where they stand former leading Florida sire Trippi.