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RUSSIAN SAGE IS SWITCHED TO \$5-MILLION, 12-FURLONG SHEEMA CLASSIC, IRWIN CALLS AUDIBLE WHEN EAGLE MOUNTAIN DEFECTS FROM SOD RACE, SAYS “DIFFERENCE BETWEEN SHEEMA AND DUTY FREE IS NIGHT AND DAY”

Even though a decision was made last week to run Russian Sage in the 9-furlong Dubai Duty Free, Team Valor International owner Barry Irwin could not reconcile the decision and kept regretting it over the last several days. When Mike de Kock removed probable favorite Eagle Mountain because of an injury, Irwin really started questioning the sanity of running against the top middle-distance performers in the world in the hottest race on the World Cup card in the Duty Free, instead of taking the path of least resistance in the Sheema Classic.



“The difference between these races is like running in the Arc de Triomphe versus a Listed race,” he said. “Of course I am exaggerating, but I do so to emphasize my point. The Duty Free is packed with so many good ones that Mike de Kock correctly stated that any one of a dozen horses could win it and it would not be an upset. There are only a few horses of exceptional merit in the Sheema, which only rarely is a difficult race to win and hardly ever is as quality-laden in numbers as the Duty Free.”

The hesitation up until now has been that Russian Sage has never been asked to run 12 furlongs. In his only race at 11 furlongs in the Grade 1 Durban July, he finished seventh. Although not beaten very far, the Jallad colt never really looked like getting involved in the finish.

Russian Sage had a legitimate excuse for his weak effort in the Durban July, because a week before the race he became lame when a blacksmith shaved off too much hoof. It took several months for the colt’s feet to be brought back in line.

Last season, South African horses won the Duty Free and the Sheema, when Jay Peg took the 9-furlong Duty Free and Mike de Kock (below) sent out Sun Classique to take the 12-furlong Sheema.



“I was struck with the difference between the races, the competition and the animals themselves. Jay Peg was the superior racehorse, yet was life and death to get up on the line in a high-quality field, whereas Sun Classique was a good winner over less than stellar opposition,” Irwin said.

“This year there is an even greater disparity between the number of high-class runners in the Duty Free when compared with the Sheema.”

The rub, of course, is that since Russian Sage has never traveled beyond 11 furlongs, he would be making his 12-furlong debut in a Grade 1 race of international significance.

Irwin said “If one compares the race record of Russian Sage with that of Sun Classique, it strikes me that they are pretty much identical, as both started out in Cape Town, went to Durban in the fall at 3 and then came to Dubai.

“They ran in pretty much the same types of races within their respective gender divisions. They ran fairly similar races in the 11-furlong Grade 1 Durban July. The only main difference between their race records in South Africa was that the filly won going 11 furlongs. Russian Sage won the male equivalent, but the race was reduced a furlong from 11 to 10 last year. He acted as though another furlong would not have inconvenienced him.”

Each runner’s first attempt at 12 furlongs in their prep races also was identical in Dubai, as both ran 8 furlongs the first time and then 9. *Timeform* rated the three races last year in Dubai for Sun Classique as 121, 116 and 122. Russian Sage ran 119-plus and followed it up with a 124. “If Russian Sage runs back to his last race, it could be good enough to win the Sheema,” Irwin said. “If he improves, he would be difficult to peg back.”

Mike de Kock is happy to run the colt in the Sheema, because he reckons Russian Sage will be fitter for the race than his dead-heat second with Jay Peg in the Grade 2 Jebel Hatta last time and inclusion of Russian Sage in the cast gives him a double-barreled chance at a winner, as he also will send out the sharp filly Front House.



When analyzing the options beforehand, Irwin consulted with the colt’s former trainer in South Africa, Justin Snaith, who agreed that the best chance for the colt to win a race on World Cup night would come in the Sheema.

“It’s a gamble, but I think a very good one,” Snaith said. “The way the course plays at Nad al Sheba, I don’t know if it suits Russian Sage going 1800 meters. The run in is very long and demanding. He has a high cruising speed that should be ideal for the 2400 meters.

“We trained his dam, you know, and she got every step of 2000 meters for us. She won 5 races and 2 of them were over 2000 meters. I always thought she would have gotten farther, too. Mike Sharkey (farm manager of Highlands Stud), who bred him, says he comes from a staying family and on paper should see out the 2400 meters.

“His two best races last year came over 10 furlongs and he was certainly not stopping in either of those races. He relaxes and settles well, so this should help him see out the distance as well.”

Bernard Fayd’Herbe has been selected to pilot the Jallad colt. The leading South African jockey from Cape Town has ridden the colt and, according to Snaith, has been aboard Russian Sage many times during morning training.

“In using Bernard, we are giving up something in experience over the layout,” admitted Irwin, ‘but we feel his familiarity with the colt will more than even that out. Bernard is a tip-top rider. Last year, Anton Marcus won on Jay Peg with as brilliant a ride as anybody can remember. Bernard can do the same thing. He is a thinking man’s rider. Also, I really think there is something to these South African riders having a better feel for their own horses. We all feel very comfortable with Bernard in the saddle.”



Bernard Fayd’Herbe has gained international fame as the regular rider for Pocket Power, the Jet Master gelding that is working on a third-consecutive Horse of the Year title in South Africa.

Russian Sage is owned by Team Valor International, Hollywood motion picture producer Gary Barber and South African Jockey Club Chairman Larry Nestadt. He was the Champion Colt at 3 last season in South Africa, where he won the Grade 1 Cape of Good Hope Derby.