

March 29, 2009

GITANO HERNANDO RECORDS VERY STYLISH WIN IN TEAM VALOR DEBUT, RED COLT ROARS HOME TO 2 ½-LENGTH WIN AT DONCASTER IN ENGLAND, BOTTI IS OOZING WITH CONFIDENCE ON ROAD TO THE BELMONT STAKES



Gitano Hernando made a sterling impression in his Team Valor International debut at Doncaster Racecourse on Sunday in the northern part of England, storming home down the stretch to register a resounding 2 ½-length score in a Class 3 Handicap over 1 ¼ miles on firm turf. The win marks a successful initial step on the colt's path towards the Grade 1, \$1,000,000 Belmont Stakes on June 6. The son of Hernando was acquired by Team Valor earlier in the year.

The red colt broke like a rocket from the far outside slot, but reinsman John Egan immediately opted to wrangle Gitano back to sit third to last in the 9-horse field in the early going. With approximately 4 furlongs remaining, Egan allowed Gitano to gradually advance past the rivals. With a quarter of a mile to go, Egan finally sat down on Gitano, asking for him for his best and he responded willingly and with a strong burst of energy which thrust him past the stingy leader Tepmokea.

The official margin of victory was 2 ½ lengths and it was better than 6 lengths back to the race favorite, Orbitor, who checked in third. The strung-out field covered 36 ¼-lengths from tip to tail, which is indicative of a strong performance by the top three finishers, particularly Gitano Hernando.

"I did not want to hit the front too soon," explained Egan. "Never for one step did I doubt that I was sitting on the winner. He ranged up to the leader on his own accord and while the leader tried to fight back for a few strides, I was certain I always had his measure. I schooled our colt a little and let him look the other horse in the eye and when I switched the whip to my left hand, he provided me with the strong acceleration I was hoping for. He quickened really, really well. I like him very much and expect him to do good things. The trip is not an issue."

Trainer Marco Botti was enthusiastic. "I was very confident in our colt going into the race, but it was tempered when I spoke to the trainers of the horses who finished second and third, as they were extremely high on their runners. So it is good to know that the company was pretty well regarded. The ground may have been a little firm for Gitano today, but he is a class horse and was simply a superior animal.

"This is an ideal race, which I expect to move him up drastically. I think Gitano is a really, really good horse and he is a true stayer. He should be sharper next time. Today he may have looked a bit like a one-paced horse, but I can assure you he has the unique ability to quicken over a long distance.

"He did break sharp, but Johnny did what I asked him to do, which was to get him to relax early. We knew the pace up front would be strong, and it most definitely was. What we learned today is that he is straight forward in that he will listen to whatever the rider asks him to do. That is a very important trait to possess, especially when we plan on running him at such long distances. If we want him close, he will lay close. If we want him settled behind horses, he can do that too. To know that a horse will do that and still provide a strong kick down the lane inspires a lot of confidence. Today was perfect, perfect," Botti smiled.



Sunday's race was a Class 3 and it should be noted that the Kentucky Derby Challenge Stakes was a Class 2, so the difference in the competition was nominal. In fact, as Botti said, the trainers of the two horses who finished directly behind Gitano Hernando held their entrants in very high regard and it has since been reported by a very reliable source that Godolphin principal Sheik Mohammed Bin Rashid Al Maktoum has expressed interest in the second-place finisher, Tepmokea, and the negotiations are currently, "well in excess of a million US dollars."

"This was a pretty tough race," Botti acknowledged. "This was no, as you in America like to say, "cake walk." There were some well respected and promising colts in the race and Gitano handled them with relative ease. This was a good barometer for us to gauge where our colt is at this point in time and suffice it to say that we are sitting pretty. We have reason to be extremely encouraged."

Racing Post had this to say of the performance: "Gitano Hernando, who landed an all-weather maiden impressively in November, was given a patient ride in this and seemed to have a lot to do turning in, but he stayed on strongly towards the middle of the course before edging left under pressure. He was nicely on top in the end and one would imagine he has more to offer."

Timeform said "Gitano Hernando looks a handicapper to follow as he works his way up to 12f+, progressive through 4 starts so far and winning here with more in hand than the bare margin suggests, breezing up to the clear leader and well on top once finally organised (hung left); he'd raced on polytrack/going softer than good previously. He is already useful and capable of better still."

Gitano Hernando earned a robust 99 Racing Post Rating for the effort, which is just 3 points shy of the 102 rating granted to the Kentucky Derby Challenge winner two weeks prior. He was given a 99 rating by *Timeform*, up 9 points from his topper. My Memoirs, who ran A. P. Indy to three-quarters of a length when second in the 1992 Belmont, ran a 92 at Doncaster a week earlier in his debut at 3, came back three weeks later to run a 99 and won the Dee Stakes with a 108.