

*From the Saratoga Special's Brandon Valvo:*

## **SMART N FANCY STAKES RECAP: AUSSIE-BRED OLEKSANDRA ROLLS HOME IN TURF SPRINT**



Photo: Elsa Lorieul/NYRA

Before the seventh running of the Smart N Fancy Stakes Saturday at Saratoga Race Course, **Oleksandra** surprised her connections. Typically tricky to handle and impatient with race-day proceedings, the 5-year-old mare walked calmly in the paddock. Neck up, head raised, eyes wide and cotton-stuffed ears pricked, Oleksandra appeared poised and composed. Her presence delighted groom Cesar Alvarez, whose face lit up in a grin as he walked her around the saddling ring.

Trained by the California-based Neil Drysdale, Oleksandra relocated to New York with Alvarez in April. They got some help from Nick Esler, a New York-based horseman who rode the Australian-bred mare in the mornings as she prepped for optional-claiming wins at Belmont Park in May and June, and a Grade 2 placing at Woodbine in July.

"I've been getting on her most of the spring," Esler said. "When she came, she was just on the go mentally and the more racing she's had over here, the better she's got. Cesar has done a great job with her here, schooling her a

couple of times each time before she runs. He's really worked hard with this filly to get her to relax."

The work put in by the team paid off as Oleksandra stormed home a convincing winner of the \$100,000 turf sprint by a length. As Alvarez walked Oleksandra back to the barn, Esler reflected on her development.



"I was a little worried today that she was so good in the paddock, but I think she's just maturing mentally, and she just has oodles and oodles of talent," he said. "She can be a little bit tricky and she can be a little tricky in the morning to gallop. You have to let her do her thing how she wants to do it and leave her alone. She's all business. At the end of the day, she's all racehorse.

"Nothing terrible, she just wants to get on with it," he continued.

"She doesn't want to stand around too much. She's all business. You just have to keep out of her way and

let her do her thing. Segundo Ramos steps in and rides her when I'm out of town and does an excellent job because she needs a quiet rider and he gets on with her really well."

Oleksandra's relaxed manner in the paddock translated to the track as she broke slowly from the gate, hesitating for a half-step under Joel Rosario before getting into stride last in a field of seven. Even-money favorite Morticia was restless before the start, shuffling her feet and tossing her head in the gate before breaking on top. The public choice was quickly confronted by Too Much Tip, who raced up the inside to challenge. Broadway Run joined the fray, racing just off Morticia's flank through a quarter-mile in :21.37.

Although he watched from 6 lengths behind against the hedge, Rosario, who rode Oleksandra in her two Belmont wins, liked his spot entering the turn.

"That's what you want to do," he said. "You want to be covered up and follow somebody and then you go from there. I was happy because I knew she was going to put in a nice run at the end."

The order remained unchanged around the turn and Too Much Tip led into the stretch as Morticia drifted out slightly. In hand, Oleksandra advanced to within 1 1/2 lengths of the lead past a :43.29 half-mile, but stared at the tails of Miss Gossip, Morticia, Too Much Tip and Fire Key in the stretch.

Rosario remained cool behind the wall, and waited for a seam. One opened as Morticia drifted to the center of the course, leaving a gap between herself and Fire Key wide enough for a Saratoga trolley to drive through. Rosario seized the opportunity, stirred his mount, smacked her once right-handed and showed her the whip.

Oleksandra accelerated through the opening, ran away from her rivals and stopped the clock in 1:00.40 for 5 1/2 furlongs. Miss Gossip finished second at 33-1 and Ruby Notion closed on the far outside to take third at 12-1.

"That was a fast race today and she's definitely improving," Rosario said. "I just thought she was moving really nice for me over the ground. I just thought I would let her go and see what happens and then she did it.

That's the way you want to ride her.

You have to just get along with her. I rode her three times and she's given me three winners, so I'm very happy with that."

The winner represents owner **Team Valor International**, on all sides. Her sire Animal Kingdom won the Kentucky Derby and Dubai World Cup for the partnership while her dam Alexandra Rose won the Group 2 Golden Slipper in Australia and the Grade 3 Monrovia in California in the green and red silks. Oleksandra (who still sported her International Racehorse Transport halter in the paddock) shipped to North America after three close finishes Down Under in 2017. She won her American debut going down the hill at Santa Anita last October.

The Smart N Fancy was her first stakes win after finishing third in the Grade 2 Royal North at Woodbine last time. Her record improved to 5-for-11 with \$241,953 earned.

"It's fantastic. To be around horses like this, that's what the game is all about," Esler said. "It's exciting and it's great for Team Valor to have a nice winner here like that. It's good all around."