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GITANO HERNANDO RETURNS FROM LONG LAYOFF AS “CHEEKY” WINNER, WORLD CUP FAVORITE ASSERTS HIS CLASS LATE TO TAKE IRISH GROUP 3, KIEREN FALLON BRILLIANT IN THE DIAMOND STAKES FOR MARCO BOTTI, “WIN AND YOU’RE IN” HERO TO SKIP BREEDERS’ CUP FOR CHAMPION TILT



Failed Dubai World Cup favorite Gitano Hernando asserted himself late as the odds-on choice to cop the Group 3 Diamond Stakes at Dundalk by a neck under a brilliant ride by Kieren Fallon for trainer Marco Botti.

In the paddock before the race, Fallon told Botti and Team Valor International CEO Barry Irwin that he expected Gitano Hernando to be “ridden” by every one of the other 6 jockeys in the race, as there was no discernable pacesetter, the favorite was set to break on the fence and the only chance the opposition had was to box in the 4-year-old chestnut.



“Naturally we want to win,” said Fallon. “But we know he is not fully wound up and winning this race is not our major goal.”

Barry Irwin said to Botti “He is managing our expectations, preparing us for a possible defeat. He does seem a bit concerned.”

Botti was visiting Dundalk for only the first time, although he did have a filly place in a black-type stakes there last year. Irish born Fallon had ridden at Dundalk a few times, but had never won a race there.

Botti advised Fallon that Gitano Hernando was not the quickest leaving the gate and required a few strides to get into gear. He also said that Fallon might want to think about positioning himself closer to the pace, because it figured to be slower than normal.

When the gate opened, Gitano Hernando broke right on top. Fallon allowed him to get into gear, then gradually eased him back, as the entire field contracted and put the bookmaker’s 9 to 10 choice in the inevitable box everybody was expecting.

With the pace backed up in his face and him being boxed in, Fallon simply bided his time and waited for an opening. Fallon thought he saw a possible seam as Gitano Hernando turned into the stretch, but eventual second-place finisher Wade Giles was moved over to close the emerging gap by young South African reinsman Keegan Latham.

So Fallon spent his energy allowing his 16-hands 2-inch machine to rev himself up to cruising speed. When Gitano Hernando was ready and Fallon wanted to go outside on the narrow Dundalk strip, Latham once again took a shot at the public choice by moving his mount over to force Gitano Hernando even wider on the track.



Kieren Fallon was a very popular favorite with the crowd for his winning return to Irish racing.

But once Fallon found running room, he got into a good rhythm aboard the son of Hernando and rode in sync with him. Inside the final 75 yards, Gitano Hernando had built up a tremendous head of steam, which allowed him to reach and then go by the runner-up. Fallon—once he knew he had the race in the bag—eased back on the reins and did not allow his mount to waste any further energy and won gearing him down.

Winning margin was a neck, but it belied the superiority with which Gitano Hernando had dispatched his rivals in the Diamond Stakes, which carried the fillip of being a “Win and You’re In” Breeders’ Cup qualifier for the BC Marathon next month at Churchill Downs on the dirt.



Gitano Hernando—master of all he surveys.

Irwin said “Our goal was, first and foremost, to get the colt back into winning form. We achieved that. Ideally, we wanted him to win, but expend as little energy as possible so that we could bring him back 2 weeks later in the Champion Stakes at Newmarket. Kieren knew this and rode the colt accordingly. He didn’t change Gitano’s style, he only used him the minimum amount to insure victory and he took a hold late. It couldn’t have been a better prep.

“Now Marco will see how he comes back from this race. It is early, but I predict the question of where he makes his next start will depend on the state of the going in Newmarket, because the colt does not want really soft going.

“The long term goal, once again and for the foreseeable future, with Gitano Hernando is the Dubai World Cup and we don’t want to do anything to compromise that event from taking place, because the \$10-million purse is worth an entire year or two’s racing anywhere else.

“The Breeders’ Cup is not and has not been on our radar. Someday it might. He has now won a pair of these ‘Win and You’re In’ qualifiers, so the Breeders’ Cup must be a bit frustrated with our racing program for this colt. But we need to consider our partnership’s goals in planning his schedule.”



The nuts and bolts of the race are that Gitano Hernando was winning for the sixth time in his last 8 races, his only losses coming in the World Cup, where Fallon was unable to extricate the colt from a wicked box, and a year and a half ago when he missed by a head in his stakes debut, from which he returned with a swollen ankle from the brick-hard ground. Gitano Hernando now sports a record from 10 starts of 6 wins and a pair of seconds and has lost only once on an artificial surface, both at home and abroad, where he became a Grade 1 winner last fall in the Goodwood at Santa Anita’s Oak Tree meeting.

Gitano Hernando could return to grass for the Group 1 Champion Stakes.

Timeform reports that Gitano Hernando did not have to use anywhere near a normal effort in order to secure the Diamond Stakes, as his 113 effort was his softest rating in two years. "It was, as I said, an ideal prep," noted Irwin, "because he got the feeling of what competition is like again, but he didn't have to over exert himself to find it. Marco and Kieren performed magnificently."

Unbeknownst to the populace, Botti and Fallon went to heroic lengths to insure that Gitano Hernando was given his best chance.

Earlier in the late afternoon, on a day that play had to be suspended in the Ryder Cup, Fallon had ridden at Newmarket, which was a veritable bog. Fallon had lined up his favorite pilot to fly both himself and Botti to Ireland.

The prop plane actually took off on the soaked grass of Newmarket's famed Rowley course. As the field was drenched with water, the pilot had to use only a small amount of fuel so as not to weight down the plane. The pilot cranked up the engine and managed to get the plane airborne, after which he touched down at a proper airport in Cambridge in order to refuel.

Botti (right) said that the headwinds faced by the airplane were formidable and all three of the travelers knew they were higher odds to arrive on time than Gitano Hernando was to win the race. Fallon was required to arrive 30 minutes prior to the renewal of the Diamond Stakes.

"When we got to Ireland," Botti said, "Kieren had a driver pick us up. But Kieren, he knew we were late and that he was in jeopardy of missing the race, so he said to the driver 'Get in the back, I'm driving.' We got there with less than 5 minutes to spare. Very invigorating to say the least!"

Fallon may not have ridden the course in an earlier race, but the speed and agility he generated in his high speed journey from the airport to the track served to get him keyed up for the Group 3 on horseback.



The more than \$46,000 earned by Gitano Hernando allowed Team Valor International to sail past the \$2-million mark in earnings for 2010 and was victory number 42 for the stable this season. The Diamond was stakes victory number 11 for a Team Valor runner in 2010 and he became Graded stakes winner number 5 for the stable this season.

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