

Derby Magic

By Prakash Gosavi

Today when someone says Squanderer was the greatest horse among all Indian horses, I just smile. And there is a reason.

The first Derby is much like the first kiss. Both are unforgettable, and any number of experiences you may have later never measure up to the first—in terms of excitement, emotion and a heightened sense of ecstasy.

Ask any race lover since when he is racing, and you will rarely be told a date or a year, like 1989 or 1995. The answer will more likely be, "That was the year when Exhilaration won the Indian Derby," or "Hey, wait a minute, when did Elusive Pimpernel win the Derby? Was it 1994 or 1995?"

I am sure there must be a psychological reason why our memory cells are etched so deeply with our first Derby experience, and I have a feeling it may have to do with the magical spell that the McDowell Indian Derby at Mahalaxmi casts on you in your very first encounter. The electric atmosphere, the crowds, the fashion and glamour on display, and nature's most exquisite creation—the horses, all fuse together in a very subtle way to create what has come to be known as the "Derby Magic".

I fell for the Derby Magic in the February of 1977, long before Vijay Mallya's McDowell brand lent its name (and money!) to the country's top racing event. And now when I think of that experience, I feel I should have seen it coming.

Racing was not new to me; I was initiated into horses and betting five months earlier by a cousin who virtually dragged me to the racecourse on a day in September 1976, much against my wishes I may add, forcing me to skip the family lunch because he wanted to reach Mahalaxmi racecourse in time to back a horse called Noblesse Oblige. Interestingly, Noblesse Oblige was racing, not at Mahalaxmi, but at Pune where the racing season was on. Noblesse Oblige duly obliged, and that sight of him collecting a pile of money, needless to mention, radically changed the views about life and money of a impressionable young man who was about to get out of his teens.

As happens with any man who wanders to the racecourse by pure chance, I then suddenly started noticing the racing headlines in the Bombay newspapers. And in the first week of December of 1976 when the same Pune horses got ready to race at the Mahalaxmi track, I attended my first live racing at Mahalaxmi. The beginner's luck played its typical role and handed me a small fortune.

An old man sitting next to me in the stands gave me unsolicited advice when he came to know about me being a first-timer and a winner:

"Go home, kid, go home. And don't come back," he cautioned.

"But I have fallen in love with these horses," said I.

"Don't fool yourself," the anonymous well-wisher shot back, "You have fallen in love with the money. If you think you really love the horses, then come after two months to watch the Derby when you can see the best horses of India in action."

Derby. That was the word. I had heard it before but did not know what it meant except that Derby is some big horse race that everyone talked about at a particular time of the year. And that a horse who

wins it is crowned some sort of a champion. "Sure, I will try to follow your advice," I promised the old man.

College studies and a full time job with a bank ensured that I hardly had time or temptation to even think of breaking that promise. Then suddenly after a fortnight into the new year (1977), the word 'Derby' started popping up everywhere. Magazines and newspapers began carrying articles about the Derby; tipsters started discussing chances of probable runners, even some of the fellow-travelers on my daily 9.14 train started narrating tales of how they had "bumped" into so-and-so Bollywood star last year when they had been to the Derby. Most of the hype was centered around a horse named Squanderer, who they said had come from Bangalore, and had already won two races at the Mahalaxmi track making him the favourite for the plum event.

After all this build-up, I was surely not going to miss it. From all accounts it became clear the Derby was an event to see and be seen at, so I tried urging my friends to join me for the Derby. "You will see the best horses in the country there," I told them like the old man had told me, and when that did not seem to work, I added, "and you will also see the best chicks in town, and maybe some film stars too." That did the trick, and a gang of sixteen landed at the turnstiles of the Mahalaxmi racecourse on that first Sunday in February which, as I would learn later, was the day the Indian Derby was traditionally run every year.

A last-moment discovery at the members' entrance at racecourse put paid to our hopes of rubbing shoulders with the glitterati, the film stars and the best-chicks-in-town. While almost every gentleman who entered was dressed in a suit and a tie, we were told the minimum requirement was a full-sleeve shirt and a necktie, which we found "unacceptable"; the real reason was we did not have as much money to buy 16 neckties. So off we marched to the public entrance, bought tickets at Rs.10 per head, and filed in through a revolving gate.

I had never seen such huge crowds except at a cricket match at the Brabourne stadium—the massive stands with double deck were packed to capacity, crowd spilling onto the lawns. Old and young men, working ladies and housewives, the mill worker (mills had not made way for shopping malls yet) and the bank clerk—all had lost their individuality in a collective pool of humanity that swayed with every race, jumped and shouted themselves hoarse for the horse that would get them windfall profits if it won, and enjoyed every moment of it. Never before had I seen grown-ups doing things even children would think twice before doing at a carnival.

And by the time the Derby horses lined up opposite the members' lawn, I had lost all my companions to the crowd, but had secured a standing place at the railing from where the horses moved out of the paddock and came in after the race. I do not remember exactly, but I think it was a very small Derby field, maybe 5 or 6 runners only, Squanderer being one of them, and perhaps his reputation as a champion was responsible to scare away the rivals.

The starter flagged them off, and a huge, collective roar—something like 20,000 people exhaling air in sync with a snorting sound—went high into the skies. The whole atmosphere turned electric as the commentator narrated what 20,000 craning necks were trying to see in front of them or on closed-circuit television screens which beamed black & white images. Squanderer had it easy, as the experts had predicted.

When jockey Jagdish was returning to the thundering applause of the crowd, I saw what has now become the most unforgettable image of my racing life: A flamboyantly dressed man, in dark brown suit and sporting huge sunglasses, with great difficulty waded his way through the crowd that was eager to congratulate and shake hands with him, and then suddenly stopped only 20 feet from where I was standing. That was the first time I saw Ranjit Bhat, and to me he looked like an Indian version of Damon Runyan. If I have ever seen an expression of exaltation, it was on this man's face at that precise moment. Later, it emerged, he was waiting for his partner who too wore an immaculate suit and big sunglasses. He stepped onto the track with his partner who had looks of a film star. They led in the horse while the thunderous clapping and standing ovation continued. Surprisingly, a very ordinary looking man standing next to me, shouted "Congrats, Indru!", and Ranjit Bhat's partner (from Cole race book I later learnt his name was I S Mirchandani) actually smiled back at him and gave a knowing look before saying 'thank you.'

I couldn't contain my shock.

"Do you know him?" I asked the man.

"Yes, he is my boss," the man replied.

"Where do you work?" I quizzed again.

"Tata Steel," the man said.

Was he telling the truth?

Maybe. Maybe not.

I would never know.

For me, I had just witnessed my first Indian Derby in all its splendour and glory, and seen a horse like Squanderer winning it and being led in to the most thunderous applause I had ever heard. And this was, by itself, a memory to be cherished for a lifetime.

That's why, as I said in the beginning, today when someone says Squanderer was the greatest horse among all Indian horses, I just smile.

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