

McDowell & RWITC Present The Greatest Horserace

By Mahendra Mallya

The countdown has begun for the greatest horserace at the iconic Mahalaxmi racecourse, Mumbai. The traditional first Sunday of February is the Derby day. The McDowell Derby, now re-titled “McDowell Signature Premier Indian Derby (Grade 1)” is the only race that brings out the deepest passion among the followers of the game and it is also the only race that a majority of ‘non-racing’ populace would relate to. This is after all, the ultimate test of speed, stamina, temperament, fitness, grit and acumen. All these have to be exhibited and executed in one go, in perfect sync, collectively and within a journey over a mile-and-half or 2400 meters, with a par timing of 2 minutes and 30 seconds. This ridiculously short time of about 150 seconds, is the all important two and half minutes in the life of top-notch thoroughbreds. Given the scheduled starting time say, 5 pm on the day, the contenders are top class horses as they circle behind the gates. At 5:02:30 one of them is a Champion horse, a legend on the scroll amongst the best in the business!

The Indian Derby dates back to 1943. A filly aptly named ‘Princess Beautiful’ won the inaugural Indian Derby, setting off a trend that was truly princely as also beautiful. That was seventy years ago and the Derby has only grown in stature, value and following. The then RWITC committee saw the potential of tremendous growth in the sport, resulting in the sponsorship angel coming into racing as well.

The year 1985 brought in a significant turnabout as Dr Vijay Mallya stepped in as sponsor with his company McDowell, renaming the Indian Derby - McDowell Indian Derby. He scripted a newer and bolder periphery taking the thrill of racing across hitherto unexplored ambit. The gaiety and regalia that he infused that year provided a new spectrum that attracted the masses. The McDowell Indian Derby soon became a ‘city event’ and non-regulars outnumbered the connoisseurs of racing by far on the D Day. The more than healthy number of spectators only on the Derby Day, bears testimony to this fact. The crowds are drawn to the Classics each year, but the McDowell Indian Derby Classic, has its own attendance in gigantic numbers, towering over all other races and that’s a delight to any sports body and the sponsor alike.

What then, draws the massive crowd to the Mahalaxmi racecourse the way it does? And as mentioned earlier, the number of non-regulars is far larger than the impressive numbers of the ‘old faithful.’ It’s the aura of a humungous achievement that people come to witness - a firsthand view of a Star in the making. This is the main objective!

Then you have the wonderfully packaged promotional activities that commence long before the D day. The marketing think-tanks ensure something innovative each year, some that catch on, like the theme – Playground of the Bold and the Beautiful.

Preparing for the Derby is another fine lead-up that the McDowell unit and the hosts RWITC put together for the media to place it before the masses. The ‘Breakfast with the Champions’ is an activity that has had a phenomenal impact on the media. A close look at the Derby contenders going on their final fast gallop, days before the Derby, gives the media a great chance to see the aspirants in full flow getting fine-tuned for the biggest race of the land. Live commentary for the morning track work and vivid explanation on the time clocked by the horses all add up to tingle the quest to know the potential champions’ final conditioning. That creates the desired euphoria close to the Derby date and knowing the contenders this closely always helps build a rapport with one’s favourite horse.

The other innovative implementation in recent times is the “Post Position Draw”. This crucial racing procedure that allocates the gate number randomly to the runners, was tweaked slightly so as to maintain the decorum of the draw, yet add an element of a personal touch of the connections to their representative’s fortunes. This also provides an opportunity for the media present to record the pre-race optimism amongst the participants and also address questions to the Club and Sponsors about the various pieces of information that can be revealed in the media. The event unfolds to a highly enjoyable entertainment with the right ‘spirit’ and palate tingling chow that goes with it. All compressed into a lovely evening on the Thursday before the race. Watch out for another interesting twist in the offing this year for the same ‘draw’ procedure.

One huge reason to attend for those who are not familiar with the Derby, is that the day inspires people to dress at their best! There are fewer places around where one can express oneself in terms of fashion taste and also keep a hand on the pulse of the changing trends. The ladies are natural at this and turn out looking stunning – dainty, petite and full of poise. With the designer outfits and elegantly matched accessories one can’t fail to notice the ‘oomph factor’ on Derby day. It is one of the rare opportunities to sport a fancy hat in Mumbai after all! The motorcades of impressive cars that stream through the traffic replicate a swanky-car procession, chauffeur-driven and polished spotlessly to sparkle. The men too, give the ladies a run for their money, in terms of their fashion statements. Tucked into well-cut designer suits and dressed to the boot. It’s the day to run a brush over the “Derby Hat” and be seen mingling with the city’s who’s-who that brings out the best in the citizens to complement the unmatched big occasion at the Mahalaxmi racecourse.

Finally, the clock ticks to starting time. The electric atmosphere is to be felt. The expansive lawns are huge in space alright, but at that moment, the sprawling lawns of the RWITC are comparable to the incredible compartment of a local train at peak hour. The Grand Stands are filled beyond capacity. Not a blade of grass is visible from the top view. It’s a photographer’s worst nightmare to capture a piece of action from a vantage angle.

The starting point of the Derby is right across the Stands and the sea of humanity is notoriously vocal, as the horses walk into their allotted stalls. The decibels soar to deafening levels as the gates open with a bang and the now famous ‘Derby Roar’ sets the pulse ticking at feverish pitch. The entire crowd cry themselves hoarse in unison drowning the commentator’s high pitch bellow into the microphone saying “they are off and racing...” The rant continues, mellowed somewhat for about two minutes and picks up again as the horses turn for home. The final 400 meters in the homestretch is an experience of a lifetime. The horses are at their fastest, trying to outrun one another, thudding their hooves upon the turf, gathering momentum with every stride, the jockeys in perfect sync with their equine partners nursing them to progress at full flight. The opportunity to witness dreams being created in those dying moments is awe-inspiring. The Champion is just coming to the fore. Champion is the right word too, as it implies no specific gender.

The high-speed scramble to the winning post is a lively charge. The extremely stimulated crowd that has been screaming their cheer, has at last spotted the new equine star in that one magic moment! Personal fancies are forgotten, and the new ‘A’ class Champion is hailed with the three ‘A’s - awe, admiration and affection.

The winning horse is accorded a mounted reception with bands playing and the unique rose garland to follow, a la Run for the Roses! The presentation too is exceptional as was evident last year, when Dr

Vijay Mallya and the RWITC Chairman Vivek Jain drove to the podium in a top-end Rolls Royce, lending the ceremony a spectacular 'drive.' And finally the winner's traditional parade in the paddock amidst thunderous applause of genuine appreciation.

That marks the unexaggerated account on the flow of events on the McDowell Signature Premier Indian Derby day. This makes the most fashionable and action-filled day that the city of Mumbai awaits eagerly each year. The anxious question of "what are you doing on New Year's eve" changes in four weeks to "what are you wearing for the Derby". The fashion gurus work overtime. They churn out several options to strike off the 'same look' syndrome. For those who matter, what-you-wore-last-year matters.' Hat to boot' suggestions from the fashion industry are specially created and the search engines for relevant information are flooded with the browsers' hits.

The action-packed day is slated for the 5th of February. Fortunately, the sprawling lawns of the RWITC can accommodate tens of thousands so one doesn't really have to book tickets in advance as there is no "houseful" board to disappoint. However, can't say the same about the vantage seats. Nevertheless, the huge number of television monitors and giant screens placed all around the racecourse will ensure one doesn't miss the racing action. The idea is to soak-in the atmosphere and revel in one of India's most spectacular sports action in Mumbai – The Greatest horserace of the year! Pssst... What are YOU wearing for the Derby?