

ELARQAM AND THE 2,000 GUINEAS

By
James
Willoughby



ANY time a stable has a Classic contender in its midst, an extra frisson of anticipation accompanies the arrival of spring. This year, both the colt Elarqam and the filly Threading are genuine contenders from Kingsley Park for their respective Guineas at Newmarket.

This article puts the focus on Elarqam, the unbeaten son of Frankel and the stable's beloved Attraction. His Group 3 Tattersalls Stakes win last September was memorable, and much anticipation surrounds his reappearance.

One of the most debated points about the Guineas concerns a prep run. But, in terms of statistical modelling of the winner, there is no debate at all. A fundamental rule governs the numbers: *'If a horse is good enough, it will almost surely be fit enough.'*

An estimated 99% of all horses defeated in the Guineas come up short because they lack ability. By contrast, it is much harder to find superior runners beaten through lack of fitness.

Since 2000, horses making their seasonal reappearance in

the 2,000 Guineas have won 12 times (from 135 having their first run of the season), while those having had a prep race won six times (from 170). These bare facts seem to suggest that going to Newmarket fresh confers an advantage, though this is not a safe way to reach a conclusion.

Nowadays, the best horses tend to reside in stables where a prep race is not considered important. In other words, horses with better form tend to be sent for the Guineas without a prior run, and the cause of their success is better form, not being fresh.

So, while we cannot use these numbers to say a prep race is a disadvantage, logic dictates that a prior outing before Newmarket is just not necessary. Any run comes with the chance of injury, plus there is subjective evidence across global racing in general that a horse running a huge figure in a trial can actually damage its chance in the big race.

Mark Johnston's two Guineas winners went to Newmarket without a prep race.

In 1993, Mister Baileys had won the Group 3 Vintage Stakes at Goodwood and the Group 2 Royal Lodge at Ascot.

Ten years later, the brilliant Attraction had won all five races in a juvenile campaign cut short by injury after a five-length win in the Group 2 Cherry Hinton Stakes at Newmarket.

Attraction entered her three-year-old season in 2004 with an official rating of 119 and ended it on the same figure, adding the Irish 1,000 Guineas, the Coronation Stakes and the Sun Chariot Stakes to her list of Group 1 triumphs.

Had she been a human athlete, huge doubt would have surrounded her prospects of winning a big race like the Guineas with no recent competition to put an edge on her, but this is at least one aspect in which human and equine athletes seems to differ.

In the recent Winter

Olympics in South Korea, many successful athletes stressed the importance of entering major championships at a peak of physical condition. Perhaps this is just as much a mental consideration as a physical one for the human, however, for it does not seem particularly problematic for horses to overcome a layoff. Horses may be more natural athletes than humans, and their lives do not contain so many obvious stress factors, but the idea that winning gives them confidence is dubious – more likely, it merely appeals to us humans that this is the case because this is how we relate to victory after a run of defeats.

There seems no doubt that the best horses need to be invested in the psychology of competition to reach an elite level, but the way they relate to a race is surely different to humans. No horse enters the 2,000 Guineas fearful that it needs a run, in the same way a human athlete might approach an Olympics or World Championships. In humans, self-doubt tends to affect performance. In horses, this is unlikely to be the same factor.

When a statistician builds a model of some aspect of the world, the ambition is to determine how the levels of some outcome variable, such as 'wins' or 'loses' are dependent on various factors related to it. Each of these factors receives a weighting, or coefficient, selected so that their combination best explains the outcome in each example already known.

This is an extremely useful framework to keep in mind for many problems. In the case of explaining the 2,000 Guineas results, the weighting on 'Class' would be so large compared to the weighting on 'Fitness' that the latter would be drowned out in evaluating the likeliest outcome for a horse. Different levels of fitness exist in 2,000 Guineas candidates, and fitness can affect a horse's performance at the margin, but the correlation between fitness and success is far less than that between class and success; history suggests even small variations in class are more important than large variations in fitness.

Opportunities

The best horse can still get beaten in the Guineas. Dubawi was the best horse in the 2005 renewal, for instance, but finished only fifth in what was his first run of the season. It seems very unlikely lack of fitness was his undoing as a Godolphin runner, however. Instead, he seemed to hang on the fast ground, but other factors could have counted. Who knows?

A common mistake we tend to make in assessing horses is to isolate a single factor for blame. How many times are horses written off as being unsuited to soft ground, for instance, only to prove that they handle it later? In the interim, the false belief only restricts opportunities.

Statisticians call this tendency 'over fitting'. It is always tempting to fit a model so tightly to past data that it seems to have magical, predictive powers. But the future is usually less predictable than the past makes it seem.

The majority of so-called trends analysis is just overfitting. In the case of the Guineas, it seemed the case for decades that a prep race was necessary, only because the vast majority of classier candidates happened to have one, but the last 20 years or so has given the lie to this presumption.

IT's my view that there is a special case in which going straight to the Guineas is particularly sensible. And it applies to Elarqam. When the likelihood exists that a horse's best distance will be in excess of a mile, a prep race is a waste of a run. Most trial races are run at less than a strong pace early, so a horse who likely needs a good test at the distance either has to be ridden forcefully, or else the risk of racing off the bridle is increased.

A strongly-run race at Newmarket is just the ticket for Elarqam. After all, he's going to be suited by at least a mile and a quarter. What's the point of a falsely-run prep race for the Guineas? He'll be fit enough, if he is good enough. Better to save that effort for longer distances further down the road. ■

Year	Winner	Trainer	Prep race	Race RPR	Best 3YO RPR
1994	Mister Baileys	Mark Johnston	NO	122	122
2000	King's Best	Sir Michael Stoute	YES	131	131
2001	Golan	Sir Michael Stoute	NO	122	122
2002	Rock of Gibraltar	Aidan O'Brien	NO	123	131
2003	Refuse To Bend	Dermot Weld	YES	118	123
2004	Haafhd	Barry Hills	YES	127	127
2005	Footstepsinthesand	Aidan O'Brien	NO	118	118
2006	George Washington	Aidan O'Brien	NO	127	130
2007	Cockney Rebel	Geoff Huffer	NO	123	123
2008	Henrythenavigator	Aidan O'Brien	NO	123	128
2009	Sea The Stars	John Oxx	NO	124	138
2010	Makfi	Mikel Delzangles	YES	123	128
2011	Frankel	Sir Henry Cecil	YES	133	139
2012	Camelot	Aidan O'Brien	NO	121	126
2013	Dawn Approach	Jim Bolger	NO	127	128
2014	Night Of Thunder	Richard Hannonr Jr	YES	124	124
2015	Gleneagles	Aidan O'Brien	NO	124	124
2016	Galileo Gold	Hugo Palmer	NO	121	123
2017	Churchill	Aidan O'Brien	NO	122	125

Did they have a prep race? The list of recent 2,000 Guineas winners

GRÄFF CAPITAL MANAGEMENT

NEW:

Triple A-rated partner bank with state guarantee



ORIENTAL FOX

Queen Alexandra Stakes winner in 2015 & 2017

We understand the racehorse community's investment needs

Specialists in asset management for private individuals

Gräff Capital Management AG
Fraumünsterstrasse 13
8001 Zurich
Switzerland

Tel: +41 (0)44 215 30 00
Fax: +41 (0)44 215 30 01
E: info@graffcapital.ch
www.graffcapital.ch