

Those Golden Moments



Quick Ransom (right) wins the Ebor under Dean McKeown

ONE OF the horses who did most to propel Mark Johnston into the higher echelons of the British training ranks was Stuart Morrison's Quick Ransom, writes **JOHN SCANLON.**

A 6,000gns purchase, he progressed, over time, into a smart staying handicapper. His win in the 1992 renewal of the Tote Ebor Handicap marked his arrival in the big time.

By the winner of the Grade 1 Arkansas Derby, Hostage, out of the Run The Gantlet mare, Run Amber Run, Quick Ransom ran nine times as a two-year-old without winning. The decision to persevere with him in training was, therefore, unusual.

"It wasn't something we did even then," recalled Mark, "but we were convinced he was a good horse. The following year, he started to come good and he won in the January of his three-year-old career."

In a dozen runs at three, Quick Ransom added a second win in an Ayr handicap over 10 furlongs before stepping up to a mile and a half. In a precursor of what was to come at four, he stepped up to a mile and three-quarters on his final start at Southwell, finishing a distant third. That winter, Mark recalls beginning to harbour high hopes for the horse.

"I remember saying to a group of people one day, as the horse came back from the gallops: 'There's the Ebor winner'. That was about six months before he won it!"

Quick Ransom began his four-year-old season off a mark of 70. On his seasonal debut, he landed a Haydock handicap over a mile and a half. After narrow defeats at Newmarket and Lingfield, and now rated 75, he just lost out by a short head to Castoret in Epsom's Northern Dancer Handicap. Stepped up in trip, he then finished seventh in Witness Box's Northumberland Plate before narrowly failing to peg back Matador in Haydock's Old Newton Cup.

August 19, 1992: Quick Ransom lands the Ebor

This was excellent handicap form and it was no surprise when he justified favouritism next time out at York, in a Class 4 mile and a half handicap.

That success earned him a run in the Tote Gold Trophy at Glorious Goodwood. On good to firm ground, and in a fast-run race, regular pilot Dean McKeown sent Quick Ransom into the lead fully three furlongs from home. It was to be the horses who had been held up early on who were to win the day, however, and in a frantic finish Quick Ransom finished fifth, beaten three lengths by Spinning I.

Finishing second and third that day were Castoret and Brier Creek, both of whom were to reoppose Stuart Morrison's gelding in the Ebor.

Three weeks later, Quick Ransom lined up for the Ebor, racing off a mark of 81 and facing a field of 21 other runners. Favourite was Guy Harwood's

Storm Crossing at 7/1, while Maktoum al Maktoum's Hawait al Barr and Brier Creek both started at 8/1. Castoret was rated a 10/1 shot while Quick Ransom returned at 16/1, understandable given that his Goodwood conquerors, Castoret and Brier Creek, were set to compete with him on identical terms.

Mark recalls that winning the Ebor meant everything to jockey Dean McKeown.

"He was obsessed by the idea of winning the Ebor Handicap," Mark told us. Much discussion surrounded how the race should be tackled.

"We had discussed the race well in advance and the plan was very much to be out there," Mark recalls.

"Prior to then, Quick Ransom had always been considered a come-from-behind horse, but we agreed that in the Ebor he would need to be up with the pace."

Sure enough, McKeown had Quick Ransom smartly away from stall 1, and he was soon tracking the early leader Hawait al Barr. In such a competitive event, this plan had the benefit of ensuring that the gelding avoided the scrimmaging for position in behind.

In this race, the tactic proved invaluable as James Lambie, writing in the *Sporting Life* noted: "From start to finish, the race took on the appearance of a destruction Derby as jockeys jostled for position and horses got checked or carved up left, right and centre."

McKeown asked Quick Ransom for his effort with three furlongs to run, and the gelding hit the front a quarter of a mile from home. Shooting two lengths clear of his field, Quick Ransom kept responding gamely to the frantic urgings of his jockey as the field generally, and Brier Creek in par-

The origins of Europe's most valuable handicap

WITH the Ebor meeting now one of the highlights of the British racing calendar, it's hard to imagine that the race came into existence in an attempt to reverse the marked decline in popularity of York races in general and its August meeting in particular.

The 1842 meeting was regarded by many as particularly dreary, and so the new Clerk of the Course, John Orton, was entrusted with the challenge of turning fortunes around.

The Great Ebor Handicap, then run over two miles, was one of 12 new races he devised for the 1843 meeting.

Fortunately, Orton believed in high-quality racing, and he also understood that this required substantial investment in

terms of prize-money. The first running of the race was worth 200 sovereigns, added to 20 sovereign stakes.

The inaugural event, which took place on August 24, was blessed with fine weather and the race attracted the largest crowd to York racecourse in 10 years.

The winner was a four-year-old, Pagan, owned by Col. Cradock of Hartforth, near Ripon.

By common consent, however, the best horse in the race had been topweight Alice Hawthorn. This racemare, trained at Ashgill in Middleham by John Osborne, won more than 50 races in her career including the Chester, Goodwood, Doncaster and Richmond Cups, and was one of three racemares in the 1830s and

1840s accorded the nickname of 'Queen of the Turf'.

Save for wartime interruptions, the race has been run ever year since, though the distance was reduced to one mile six furlongs. The name was changed to 'the Ebor Handicap' in 1910. Last year the race, Europe's richest handicap, had added prize-money of £250,000 and was worth £155,000 to the winner. The York executive have recently announced that this year's Betfred Ebor Handicap will have added prize-money of £265,000, part of a prize-money package which will see 2014's York prize-money exceed £6 million for the first time.

Interestingly, the race is mentioned in Edwardian literature in Baroness Orczy's

"The Old Man in the Corner", a series of short detective stories published in 1908. Orczy, the creator of the Scarlet Pimpernel, Sir Percy Blakeney, tells of a gentleman, Lord Arthur Skelmerton, betting heavily on his horse, Peppercorn, in the Great Ebor Handicap.

Alas, for him, the fictional race was won by King Cole! Like the fictional Skelmerton, there was to be no happy ending for Orton. The architect of the Ebor was despised by the powerful Lord George Bentinck, and it is thought that he told the Race Committee that he would not set foot on the Knavesmire while Orton was in charge. Orton was duly dismissed, and reportedly drank himself to death within weeks.

ticular, began to reel him in.

But at the line, Quick Ransom had held on to score in a finish which saw two lengths separate the first seven horses home!

"It was probably my favourite moment at York," commented Mark.

"To be honest, I couldn't really understand all the fuss about the Ebor at that time, but what made it so special was the reaction of other people."

In particular, Mark recalls the reaction of people such as Walter Bentley, Dean McKeown and Tony Farmer, saying: "Walter Bentley, the former jockey, hugged me and said it was just like the good old days; Dean McKeown was ecstatic to have won the race, and Tony Farmer was in tears."

Tony, a proud Yorkshireman from Hull, was one of Mark's owners but not directly involved with Quick Ransom.

"Tony came up to me and grabbed me by the lapels, and through the tears was saying 'What do you think about Ebor and Derbies now?'"

The reaction of the Yorkshire crowd was fantastic too.

Quick Ransom reappeared at Ascot the following month for the Krug Trophy Handicap. Reverting to hold-up tactics, he pounced late and wide to land the spoils by a head from Richard Hannon's Lift and Load. Tried in the Cesarewitch that Autumn, and carrying a penalty, he was ridden to get the trip but couldn't close in the final stages and finished in mid-division.

In expectation that his value would be at its maximum to the jumping fraternity, his astute owner Stuart Morrison sent Quick Ransom to the sales that autumn, having set a reserve of 70,000gns. The bidding reached only 61,000gns, and the gelding's subsequent exploits at Kingsley House will form the subject of a future Golden Moment! ■

