

THOSE GOLDEN MOMENTS

This year the Klarion is looking back at some of the horses and races that made the 2010s so special for Johnston Racing. This month we remember Eastern Aria, who showed great form in 2010, especially at Doncaster that September.

THE PARK HILL Stakes at Doncaster was established in 1839, as a race for three-year-old fillies. It is run over a distance of one mile, six furlongs and 115 yards. Given Group 2 status in 1971, it was downgraded to Group 3 in 1991, when opened up to fillies and mares aged four or over, but restored to Group 2 status in 2004.

The race was named after the Park Hill Estate in Firbeck, South Yorkshire, formerly owned by Anthony St Leger, the founder of Doncaster's most famous race, and the oldest classic, the St Leger Stakes.

Over the years, the Park Hill has been won by some high-class horses; a glance through the roll of winners reveals such names as Pretty Polly, May Hill,

Shoot A Line, Madame Dubois and Eva Luna. But perhaps the most notorious winner of all was Blink Bonny;

having won the Derby, in record time, and the Oaks in 1857, the filly finished only fourth in the St Leger.

She returned to the track the following day to run in the Park Hill Stakes. When she won by six lengths, in a time two seconds faster than that recorded by the St Leger winner, Imperieuse, the Doncaster crowd attacked the horse's connections, believing that the performance showed that the horse must have been 'pulled' in the Leger itself.

The 2010 renewal of the race, thankfully, did not attract such notoriety. The Johnston-trained filly Eastern Aria, running in the colours of Sheikh Hamdan bin Mohammed al Maktoum, after successive wins in Newmarket's Aphrodite Stakes and Goodwood's Lillie Langtry Stakes (Group 3) in July, was one of 12 fillies

to go to post for the race.

The opposition looked formidable: Rumoush, a half-sister to Mawatheeq and Ghanaati, had won the Listed Fielden Stakes at Newmarket before finishing fourth (placed third) behind Snow Fairy in the Oaks; and Meeznah finished second in the Epsom classic, before being disqualified. She subsequently had finished fourth in both the Irish and the Yorkshire Oaks. John Oxx's Roses for the Lady had finished second in the previous year's Irish Oaks, while Dyna Waltz had won the Lingfield Oaks Trial.

Frankie Dettori took the ride on Eastern Aria. Racing over the full Leger distance, the confirmed front-runner Roses for the Lady was sent to the head of affairs by Fran Berry. Dyna Waltz and Polly's Mark contested second place, while Frankie settled Eastern Aria in fourth, tracked by Rumoush.

The places at the head of the field remained the same until the runners entered the straight.

Travelling well, Eastern Aria was noted making good progress three furlongs out, and the Halling filly struck the front more than two furlongs from home. While Roses for the Lady dropped away tamely, Richard Hills produced Rumoush to challenge on Eastern Aria's outer.

The three-year-old may just have struck the front approaching the final furlong, but Eastern Aria ran on strongly, drawing away in the closing stages to score by a length from Rumoush, with the favourite Meeznah keeping on for third, beaten a further length and three-quarters.

Rather like Blink Bonny all those years ago, Eastern Aria's winning time for the Park Hill (3 minutes 2.00 seconds) was over a second quicker than the time achieved by Arctic Cosmos in winning the St Leger two days later.

Eastern Aria was a fantastic horse for the yard.

"She was a really lovely, tough filly," recalls Deirdre Johnston.

"She won twice at Glorious Goodwood, having won a handicap at three before running away with the Lillie Langtry Stakes the following year."

In all, the Halling filly won 10 of her 24 starts for the yard. Originally with Saeed bin Suroor, she was unraced as a juvenile, but joined the Kingsley Park

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team in time to win seven races as a juvenile. After a Listed win at Saint-Cloud, she travelled to Woodbine in Canada where she finished fourth in the prestigious E P Taylor Stakes. She really came alight as a four-year-old in the autumn, and her Doncaster success showcased her at her best.

In the aftermath of the Park Hill Stakes, a plan was hatched to send the impressive Halling filly to Australia to contest the Melbourne Cup, as part of the Godolphin assault on the race. Having travelled all the way to Melbourne, the filly missed the cut for the race but ran instead in Godolphin's colours in the Queen's Cup at Flemington. Ridden by Kerrin McEvoy, she finished seventh, beaten just two and a quarter lengths. ■

