ROYAL GRABS THE ROYAL LODGE

Classy colt swoops late to take the prestigious Group 2

by JOHN SCANLON

ONE of the most dramatic finishes to a race in this Flat season, Royal Patronage finished with a rattle to land the Group 2 Royal Lodge Stakes at Newmarket on September 25.

The win confirmed Highclere Thoroughbred Racing’s Wootton Bassett colt as a genuine contender for next year’s Derby, and as the race is part of the Breeders’ Cup ‘Win and You’re In’ scheme, it also opened the door to the horse competing in the Breeders’ Cup Juvenile Turf at Del Mar in November.

Readers may recall that we celebrated the yard’s excellent record in the Royal Lodge Stakes in our September edition of the Klarion. Royal Patronage became our fourth winner of the race, joining the elite company of our other winners: Mister Baileys (1993), Jukebox Jury (2008) and Steeler (2012).

After following Native Trail home in a Sandown maiden in June, Royal Patronage earned the right to contest the Royal Lodge Stakes by slamming his field in an Epsom Novice Stakes at the end of July, before making all in the Group 3 Acomb Stakes at York’s Ebor meeting.

The rapidly improving colt faced six rivals at Newmarket. The Superlative Stakes (Group 2) runner-up, Masekela, and Godolphin’s Newmarket novice winner, Coroebus, shared favouritism, while Oneforthehugetter was runner-up in a Deauville Group 3 last time out. Seattle King followed Masekela home in the Denford Stakes at Newbury, while the Irish challengers, Howth and Unconquerable, are both Churchill colts who have already won over seven furlongs.

It was to prove a highly dramatic race. Taking a keen hold, Royal Patronage set off to make the pace under Jason Hart, racing against the far running rail. He was pursued by Coroebus, Seattle King and Masekela in the early stages.

AKING everyone by surprise, William Buick sent Coroebus into the lead with three furlongs to travel, and the Dubawi colt was soon three or four lengths clear of the field. Jason Hart was trying to settle Royal Patronage as Buick made his move; he didn’t panic as Coroebus went clear, waited until he had settled Royal Patronage and then gathered him up as they hit the rising ground. Royal Patronage began to close rapidly on Coroebus, and in the final half-furlong got up to defy the Godolphin colt by a neck.

In the aftermath of the race, many pundits were of the view that Coroebus had tied up in the closing stages, giving little credit to Royal Patronage and claiming Coroebus was ‘the best horse in the race.’ This was palpably unfair to Royal Patronage. Viewing the finish of the race again it is clear that in the last half-furlong only Royal Patronage, and to a lesser extent Unconquerable, are closing the gap on Coroebus. The joint favourite Masekela and the other runners are making no impression on him.

Jason Hart deserves the utmost credit for such a cool ride. ‘He over-raced in the first part of the race and really took off with me,’ a delighted Jason told the Klarion.

‘In hindsight, it probably helped me. This is a good horse and people keep underestimating him. When we met the rising ground he found an extra gear. He’s just a really good horse and when you ask him he finds plenty for pressure.’

Mark was delighted by the colt’s performance.

‘Jason said Royal Patronage was a bit free early on and he was trying to settle him,’ he said.

‘No sooner was he getting him under control than the race was on again. Royal Patronage has got a lot of speed and we almost supplemented him for the Champagne Stakes.’

‘He is out of a Dalakhani mare, so there is lots of stamina on the dam’s side. It is great that you have a horse you think will stay a mile and a half that has so much speed early on.’

Connections will now mull over a range of exciting options for Royal Patronage. Immediately, he could be targeted at the Group 1 Vertem Futurity Trophy at Doncaster, and should connections be tempted to look at the Breeders’ Cup Juvenile Turf, he has a guaranteed free place in the race, with a generous travel allowance of $40,000 thrown in.

The longer term, his run at Newmarket attracted some bold responses from the bookmakers, some quoting odds of just 12-1 for next year’s Derby.

Exciting times ahead, then, for a horse whose performance at Newmarket will have his owners dreaming of Classic success over the winter.