

Back on track

By John Scanlon

THERE WAS something of a minor miracle at the King Abdulaziz racetrack at Riyadh in Saudi Arabia on February 25.

For the Red Sea Turf Handicap marked the return to the racecourse after 618 days of the yard's Gold Cup hero, Subjectivist, after suffering an injury it was feared would end his career.

After winning the 2021 renewal of the Royal Ascot highlight in scintillating style it emerged Subjectivist had sustained an injury to his superficial flexor tendon. Crudely put, tendons are responsible for connecting and transferring the force from muscles to bones; such injuries can be, and often are, career-ending.

But after 20 long months of rest and rehabilitation, the Gold Cup winner was ready to take his place in the field for the £2 million handicap on the Saudi Cup card, looking to defy a lengthy lay-off and to concede weight to a dozen talented rivals.

To fully appreciate the significance of this comeback, it's necessary to look back at what Subjectivist had achieved by that June day in 2021. As a potentially top-class stayer, Dr Jim Walker's Teofilo colt lifted the Listed Glasgow Stakes at Hamilton Park and the Group 3 March Stakes at Goodwood en route to a tilt at the St Leger. Things didn't go his way at Doncaster, but he bounced back to land his first Group 1 win in the Prix Royal-

Oak at Parislongchamp the following month, making all the running to hold the favourite, Valia, by two lengths.

With the following year's Gold Cup then the overriding goal, Subjectivist was sent to Meydan the following March to contest the Dubai Gold Cup, a Group 2 event over a distance of two miles. In a remarkable display, he took up the running five furlongs from home and simply powered clear under Joe Fanning, slamming a field of 10 older rivals by almost six lengths.

At Ascot, Subjectivist took on the mighty Stradivarius, who was seeking his fourth win in the event. On no fewer than six occasions, horses trained by Johnston Racing had finished runner-up to Stradivarius in Group 1 or Group 2 events, so connections were in no doubt as to the magnitude of the task facing the horse.

CONFIDENCE was initially high after the Dubai win, but preparations for the event didn't go smoothly. Subjectivist suffered a scare just after the Dubai race, then had a fall on the road in Middleham just a few days before the Gold Cup itself. On the day, however, given a hugely positive and confident ride from Joe Fanning, Subjectivist was a most convincing winner, with murmurings about Frankie Dettori's ride on Stradivarius doing little to subtract from

Subjectivist's obvious superiority on the day.

In the wake of the Ascot race, it seemed there had been a seismic change at the top of the stayers' rankings. The Young Pretender, in Subjectivist, had wrested the crown from the King, Stradivarius.

And then came the injury, with the realisation that, in all probability, Subjectivist would never be able to race again.

Thankfully, owner Jim Walker had the patience to allow Mark, Charlie and the veterinary team at Kingsley Park as much time as needed for the horse to make a full recovery, if indeed that were possible.

In the run-up to the Saudi Arabia race, Charlie Johnston described in some detail what the horse has experienced in the 20 months since he was last seen on a racecourse.

'It's been a very long road to get here,' he said.

'Horses like Subjectivist don't come round very often, and to lose him to injury was a huge blow to the yard. The first 14 months after the injury largely involved water therapy, with a programme including swimming, spells on the water walker and intense water therapy, and he also enjoyed a summer out at grass.

'To be honest, it felt like we were treading on eggshells for most of the time. Then, around April last year, we made a plan to target this race. Preparations had gone well and we took him to Newcastle racecourse for a work out a few weeks ago.'

Subjectivist wins the Prix Royal Oak in 2020 under Joe Fanning



Subjectivist and Joe Fanning win the Gold Cup in 2021

Asked to summarise the horse's chances in his comeback race, Charlie said: 'We wouldn't be here if we didn't think he was ready. He's full of himself and it's great to see him back in this environment. It's just a case of how close can we get him back to his best level after a serious tendon injury.'

IN the event, Subjectivist's obvious exuberance and excitement at being back in a competitive environment got the better of him, with the worst possible draw adding to the difficulty of his task in the valuable 15-furlong race. Subjectivist was away quickly under Joe Fanning and crossed the racetrack to head into the lead from the outset, but it was clear early on that he was racing too keenly, and although he led into the final straight, he tired in the closing stages and fell out of contention.

Jockey Joe Fanning summed up the race experience, saying: 'I felt he was keen enough.

'He has been off for a while and, in the end, he just got tired. As long as he's okay afterwards, I'm sure he'll be back.'

As to the future, much will depend on how Subjectivist comes out of the race and travels home. As ever, connections will make decisions based on what is in the best interests of the horse and his owner.

Mark said: 'First indications are all

good post-race, but we are very conscious of the fact that the problems were not noted until 11 days after the Gold Cup and yet the damage was almost certainly done in that race.

'His return from Saudi has been delayed and so we are loathe to make

comment at this stage on his well-being or his plans.'

In the meantime, let's congratulate Charlie, Mark, vet John Martin and all the staff who have contributed to the magnificent achievement of getting the star stayer back on track! ■



Subjectivist, right, with paddock companion Fire Fighting at Kingsley Park last summer

