

The Gatekeeper's Ascot glory

By John Scanlon

THE GATEKEEPER gave the yard a huge, high-profile success on British Champions Day at Ascot and his owners a prize of more than £100,000 when recording a pillar-to-post success in the valuable Balmoral Handicap.

The four-year-old Excelebration gelding, owned by Middleham Park Racing XIV, had already won three races this term. Absent from the track for 625 days, The Gatekeeper bounced back to land a Newcastle handicap over seven furlongs at the beginning of March. He added to that success with a win at Newmarket over the same distance in May, and was awarded the race at Goodwood when finishing a narrow second to the subsequently disqualified Thunder

Ball at Goodwood in late August.

At Ascot, 20 horses went to post for the Balmoral Handicap over a straight mile, the final race on the British Champions Day card on October 21. As so often happens with this meeting, the ground was very much on the soft side. Joe Fanning took the ride on The Gatekeeper, who was drawn towards the far side of the track. In a competitive-looking

event, Awaal headed the market while The Gatekeeper started at odds of 25/1. Sent to the front from the outset, The

Gatekeeper made the running against the far rail. The vast majority of the field chose to race towards that far side, while five horses remained closer to the stands. Travelling strongly, The Gatekeeper was initially pursued by Ropey Guest and Vetiver, while Al Mubhir led those horses racing on the stands' side.

Ropey Guest made some progress to dispute the lead around halfway, and may just have headed The Gatekeeper for a few strides. However, by the time the leaders reached the two-furlong marker, The Gatekeeper had reasserted control and with a furlong to

race he had established a clear lead of three lengths.

Keeping on well in the closing stages, The Gatekeeper came home a length clear of Ropey Guest, with Docklands staying on well for third, beaten a further three-quarters of a length.

'We knew he would like the ground,' said Mark Johnston after the race.

'I don't know that it is key to him, but we knew he would handle it.' Explaining the race tactics, Mark pointed out there had been a pattern to the day's racing.

'I couldn't help but note that front-runners had done particularly well today so Mike Prince (of Middleham Park) said to Joe 'jump and bowl along', which is what our horses tend to do anyway.'

Winning jockey Joe was delighted by The Gatekeeper's performance.

'He's had a tough year but keeps running on well and he loves that ground,' he said.

'He was travelling all the way with me and I was never in any danger.'

MIDDLEHAM Park Racing were overjoyed with the horse's success. Not only did the win give them their 98th win of the year, it also netted them a first prize of £103,080! Reportedly, connections are considering a tilt at next year's Lincoln Handicap with the horse.

The Gatekeeper is out of the lightly raced Montjeu mare, Cherry Creek, and is thus a half-brother to the prolific winner in France and Italy, Time Shanakill (by Lord Shanakill) and to Dr Jim Walker's three-year-old Teofilo filly, Montevideo. ■

