

Final Leg of the Global Sprint Challenge an Asian showdown !

The inaugural 6-leg Global Sprint Challenge comes to a close on Sunday with the running of the Group 1 Sprinters Stakes at the Nakayama racecourse in Tokyo, and the organizers will be very happy with the field assembled. Not only have all three placegetters from last year nominated for the race, but the champion Hong Kong sprinter **Silent Witness** has also arrived in Japan for the race. In essence, the race will be a clash of Japan's top sprinters vs. Hong Kong's best two sprinters – a race to determine the champion Asian sprinter of the season.

The Sprinters Stakes will see the return to the racetrack of **Cape of Good Hope**, the inaugural winner of the Global Sprint Challenge. **Cape of Good Hope** has not raced since ensuring victory in the series, when successful in the Group 1 Golden Jubilee Stakes at York racecourse in the UK back on the 18th June. In an amazing effort by the horse and his connections, **Cape of Good Hope** will be making his first and only appearance in the Series in his home region – Asia. All his points earned so far in the series have been earned in the “away” jurisdictions of Australia/New Zealand and Europe/United Arab Emirates.

Cape of Good Hope has raced once in Japan in the past – in the Sprinters Stakes last year. In that race, on a heavy track, **Cape of Good Hope** put in a very good run for 3rd. The two Japanese horses that beat him last year – **Calston Light O** and **Durandal** will be appearing once again this year, but **Cape of Good Hope** will be paid a lot more respect by his Japanese rivals, and by Japanese punters, as he has put together a very impressive record this year – a record that he did not have at this stage last year.

Heading the locals is **Durandal**, the champion sprinter of Japan in both 2003 and 2004. The powerful finisher would be a short favorite for this race if things had gone smoothly in the lead-up, but in this race he will be racing for the first time this year! After an impressive finish in this race last year behind **Calston Light O**, where he beat home **Cape of Good Hope**, **Durandal** contested the Group 1 Hong Kong International Mile last December. Unhappy on the track which had been generously watered, he finished a respectable 5th. The original plan for this year was to run him in the Group 1 Yasuda Kinen (1600m) where he would have clashed with **Silent Witness**, but unfortunately he suffered a hoof injury during his preparation and was sent for a spell.

He came back into work this year 10 days earlier than he did last year, and trainer Masahiro Sakaguchi and his staff appear happy that he is progressing well towards the race on Sunday. However, Japanese fans will be a little concerned about the long lay-off, as there have been very few horses in Japanese racing history to come back and win a Group 1 after such a long break.

Calston Light O won this race impressively last year, and although failing in the Group 1 Hong Kong Sprint in December last year, he came back well in the Spring with two very promising efforts – a 2nd in the Group 3 Hankyu Stakes, followed by a gallant 4th in the Group 1 Takamatsunomiya Kinen, both over 1200m. Although being possibly the fastest horse on the planet in earlier years, he is now a 7yo. His lead-up for this race was once again the Group 3 Ibis Summer Dash, a race which he won in 2002 in 53.7 seconds (smashing the Japanese record for 1000m), and then again in 2004 in 53.9 seconds, but this year he could only manage 4th place behind **T M Churasan** (who lines up in the same race on Sunday) in that race, even though he was sent out an odds-on favorite. It appears that age may have eventually got the best of this wonderful performer, but he will give his all on Sunday and if he does get back to near his best, he will be leading the field into the straight.

The horse who most expect to trouble these three placegetters from last year is of course, **Silent Witness**. The champion sprinter of Hong Kong, and the highest rated sprinter in the world is making his second trip to Japan this year. In recent years foreign invaders have struggled to make an impact in Japanese races, and for that reason, **Silent Witness** was not very highly regarded by Japanese punters when he made his first visit to Japan back in June for the Group 1 Yasuda Kinen, sent off as only the 5th favorite. However, although **Silent Witness**'s 3rd placing in that race was his worst ever result, and his second defeat in a row (after an amazing run of 17 consecutive wins), Japanese fans were deeply impressed by his gallant effort.

Even though it was his first run anti-clockwise, and notwithstanding that he lost 22 kgs in bodyweight between his last Hong Kong run and the Yasuda Kinen, **Silent Witness** stuck to his guns the length of the long Tokyo racecourse straight, and was only beaten by a neck and a head. The winner of that race **Asakusa Den'en** had won the lead-up Group 2 Keio Hai Spring Cup in brilliant fashion, and the second placegetter **Sweep Tosho** later franked the form by going on to beat the top Japanese males (including last year's Japanese Horse of the Year **Zenno Rob Roy**) in the Group 1 Takarazuka Kinen. Due to these reasons, the performance of **Silent Witness** was rated very highly by Japanese fans, and with a return to a shorter, clockwise course this time, together with the concern over **Durandal**'s long absence from the racetrack,

it is possible that **Silent Witness** will be the first foreign-trained horse in several years to start favorite in a Japanese race.

Although all eyes will be on the clash of **Silent Witness** and **Cape of Good Hope** with **Durandal**, there is a great deal of depth to the field with many of the Japanese sprinters having very realistic place, and outside winning chances. Heading the support cast is the winner of the Spring sprinting championship, the Group 1 Takamatsunomiya Kinen (1200m), **Admire Max**.

Admire Max finally broke through for a well deserved Group 1 win in the Takamatsunomiya Kinen after winning 2 Group 3 races, and being placed in 6 other Group races throughout his career. To be ridden by champion jockey Yutaka Take (who is riding in the best form of his life after breaking his own record for number of winners on a weekend with 12 winner last week!), **Admire Max** will certainly be given a chance by Japanese punters, but this may well be the toughest field he has ever faced.

She is Tosho is another horse likely to be given a rough chance by Japanese racing fans. She holds the fastest winning 1200m time of all horses nominated, running 1:06.7 to win the TV Aichi Open in track record time at Chukyo racecourse in Nagoya two starts back. That time is only 0.2 seconds outside the Japanese record set by Japanese champion sprinter **Agnes World** back in 1999. She finished 7th in this race last year, but has even better form going in to the race this year and it would not surprise to see her finish in the top 5.

Silky Lagoon finished 5th in this race last year, and she finished second behind **She is Tosho** in quick time two starts back. She has a good record at this track, and should be given an outside chance.

Precious Cafe is another very talented horse who was the favorite, and put in a huge effort to finish 3rd in the Takamatsunomiya Kinen this Spring behind **Admire Max**, after missing the start. He has been disappointing in his two runs since then, but he has apparently been producing on the training track in preparation for this, and on pure ability he is a definite place chance even here.

I' ll Love Again is possibly the best performed 3yo sprinting colt in Japan, and he will appreciate the 2kg weight relief he receives from the older horses. The only 3yo filly in the field – **T M Churasan** was victorious in the Group 3 Ibis Summer Dash over 1000m last start, beating **Calston Light O**, but she is expected to struggle in this very high class field.

Of the others, six of the starters, including four of the top 5 finishers in the 5th leg of the Global Sprint Challenge, the Group 3 Centaur Stakes will line up again here in the Sprinters Stakes. The winner **Golden Cast** made it consecutive Centaur Stakes wins with a very gutsy performance, but as was the case when finishing 11th last year in this race, he tends to struggle against true Group 1 performers.

Maruka Kiseki was possibly the run of the race in the Centaur Stakes, beaten just over a length by the winner, making up significant ground over the later stages on a track that was clearly favoring leaders. He had been in brilliant form before that, and must have some kind of chance here.

Keeneland Swan was a little disappointing in the Centaur Stakes, but as evidenced by his 2nd in the Group 1 Takamatsunomiya Kinen in March, he can sometimes put in a very good run unexpectedly. **Gallant Arrow** could not get to the lead in the Centaur Stakes, but while there is no doubt he would have finished closer if he had led last time, it is difficult to imagine him leading this Sunday's crack field of sprinters.

Tamamo Hot Play and **Cosmo Lovesick** are the other entries who contested the Centaur Stakes, but this race is a lot harder.

Golden Rodrigo and **Rikiai Taikan** are the remaining two entries and while both horses have surprised in big races in the past, this field does look a little too classy for them this time.