



Revived Rhododendron holds off Lightning Spear to snatch Lockinge

Rhododendron wins Lockinge by a short head for O'Brien . Trainer recalls that winner once 'bled the worst you've seen'

Chris Cook at Newbury

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As Rhododendron stood in the winner's enclosure, her flanks heaving after battling to a short-head success in the Lockinge, Aidan O'Brien reflected on how her career nearly came to a sanguinary end at Chantilly last summer.

"It was the most unbelievable thing of all," the trainer said as he recalled the sheer quantity of blood that came out of her nose mid-race and caused Ryan Moore to pull her up.

"She bled the worst you've ever seen. I've never ever seen anything to bleed as bad. She exploded and she sprayed blood over all the jockeys and all the horses, it was the most incredible thing."

O'Brien added he had no doubt at the time that Rhododendron's career was finished, which is hardly surprising, since he makes the incident sound like the last reel of a horror movie. "She got very faint in herself. It was very rare that you'd see a horse ever come back from that. But they took great care of her in France."

Rhododendron recovered to have a much better experience of French racing when she bagged a valuable prize in the autumn but her performance here counts as a career best. Having only won races confined to females, she beat 13 male rivals here and had all but one of them comfortably held at the line.

The exception was Lightning Spear, who emerged from the pack to challenge the filly, the pair of them engaging in a back-and-forth tussle through the final 300 yards. It looked very much as though Lightning Spear was going past as he reached the line but he needed the post to be another five yards down the track.

It was a familiar outcome for those who have backed Lightning Spear in top-class races, this being his 14th attempt in a Group One and the closest he has come to winning one. David Simcock, who has trained him for the last couple of years, was in visible agony over the outcome.

“That’s taken the wind out of me slightly,” he said, opting for understatement. “Very proud of the horse and Oisín [Murphy] has given him a fantastic ride because he counted to five before he went, he went the same time as the filly and fair play to her.”

Where is the Group One that this horse can win, he was asked by a journalist with an apparent cruel streak. “If somebody could tell me, I’d be so happy,” Simcock replied.

Addeybb and Limato were disappointing in eighth and 10th places and there is a distinct possibility that both were disadvantaged by racing on the stands side, while most straight-course races at this two-day fixture suggested the centre of the course was the place to be. But Addeybb’s connections blamed the ground and will look for days when firm does not feature in the going description.

O’Brien, meanwhile, said he had walked the track and felt the best of the ground was on the stands side, leaving him doubting the chance of Rhododendron from stall two. She is now likely to go for the Queen Anne at Royal Ascot, for which bookmakers have her as favourite at a top price of 5-1.

Newbury officials were feeling under pressure through the afternoon, lest there should be a repeat of the fighting that so marred fixtures at Goodwood and Ascot on the previous two Saturdays, but, 30 minutes after racing had finished, no such incidents had been reported by the many visible security staff around the site. Police were also present inside the grounds, which had not been true at Ascot or Goodwood.

It may have helped that the crowd, at just over 10,000, was slightly down compared with previous years, the result of a clash with the royal wedding, which was shown on big screens, and the FA Cup final, which was not. The course was also trialling a new rule that no one could be served more than four pints at any bar at any one time.

“The more you can do to give people an environment that’s nice to be in and you’re spotting those early signs [of trouble brewing], that’s really important,” said Harriet Collins, Newbury’s head of communications.

The sport’s rulers have their fingers crossed for similarly uneventful Saturdays to come.

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