

Horse of The Year California Chrome and jockey Victor Espinoza after winning the Kentucky Derby.  
Photo: Reed Palmer / Churchill Downs Inc.



# Dubai World Cup 2015

## THE DIRT IS BACK, AND SO ARE THE AMERICANS

For years, when it was staged over a dirt track at Nad Al Sheba, the Dubai World Cup (G1) was mainly dominated by North American horses. Not only the World Cup, the top sprint, the Golden Shaheen (G1), also fell to many a US shipper. American trainers were of course very interested in this new hunting ground, albeit at the time offering just one raceday to shoot for. When Cigar won the inaugural World Cup in 1996, he was the first of seven stars and stripes World Cup winners over the 14-year period of racing at Nad Al Sheba. Then racing in Dubai moved to the new Meydan Racecourse, where an artificial main track was laid down, and things changed.



*By Geir Stabell*

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From 2010 up to this 2014, the Dubai World Cup was staged on Tapeta, a surface favouring turf runners over those more used to the dirt. American horsemen and women more or less lost interest. Sure, some of them they tried, and Kentucky Derby winner Animal Kingdom succeeded in a sub-standard renewal two years ago. He had shown good form over an artificial surface back home. The smart US turf runner Gio Ponti also did reasonably well on the Tapeta, finishing fourth and fifth in consecutive editions of the valuable race. Traditional dirt performers, however, were spinning and fading at Meydan. Californian superstar Game On Dude finished second last, as did Fly Down, and America's best filly Royal Delta came home third last when she tried.

In the wake of such disappointing returns, Stateside entries to World Cup night dried up. When African Story won last year, giving Godolphin their sixth World Cup success, he had not a single US runner behind him. Only one American trained horse lined up for the Golden Shaheen, Seth Benzel's Zee Bros who, given a 33-1 quote by the bookmakers, finished sixth as Hong Kong invaders Sterling City and Rich Tapestry fought out the finish. These were new times, that's for sure. North American visitors won eight of the fourteen editions of this dash staged at Nad Al Sheba. The Tapeta track was nice and fair, and popular with many, but it sure changed the make and shape of these big races. What was worse, the World Cup itself was definitely in decline. Winners like African Story, Gloria de Campeao and Monterosso don't exactly match







up to the Cigars, Dubai Millennials and Curlins of this world.

This year the contest is back on dirt, and we will see a strong edition of the \$10 million contest, perhaps one of the most competitive and exciting ones in the history of the race. The main reason for this is the surface. At the end of last season, work began at Meydan – the Tapeta was to be replaced by a dirt track. In other words, the decision was made to return to what had worked so well for so many years. Just like they had done at Santa Anita in California, like they were doing at Del Mar, and at Keeneland in Kentucky. Artificial tracks had been introduced rather swiftly, and they these days they are replaced swiftly.

With valuable dirt racing comes high class dirt performers. On March 28 we will be seeing quite a few of those in action at Meydan. Top class horses from the US will again be arriving in search of the big pot in the desert. Now, this reference to 'the race in the desert' may no longer be so valid. It may have seemed that way 19 years ago, when it all began, but Dubai looks rather different these days. The City of Gold has grown immensely. As has racing in Dubai. From one day of international competition back when Allen Paulson's win machine Cigar defeated Burt Bacharach's Soul Of The Matter in '96, Dubai now has a well established

international racing carnival, stretching from early January to World Cup night in the spring. This year, the carnival attracted as many as 30 Group One winners. Though North American teams will not be represented until we get to the big day.

Then, the heavyweights should be touching down at Dubai International Airport.

California Chrome, the 'dream horse' bred from a cheap mare by a couple of friends not at all expecting to take on the world when they raised the colt, has the highest profile. Last year's Kentucky Derby (G1) winner was voted US Horse Of The Year and Three-Year-Old Male of The Year. He had to settle for third behind Bayern and Toast Of New York in the Breeders' Cup Classic (G1), but California Chrome was North American racing's number one star last year. He began his climb to fame in low-key races for statebreds in California, racing over quick dirt tracks, and he rounded his classic campaign off by winning the Hollywood Derby (G1) on turf just four weeks after having lost the Breeders' Cup Classic by a little more than a neck. Make no mistake about it, he was in as tough a race as you will ever see that day, and lost nothing in defeat. His good second to Shared Belief at Santa Anita in February showed that he had retained all his ability.



Not many horses can go through the Triple Crown Series and still do well in the autumn. This is what sets California Chrome apart from so many before him. He won the Kentucky Derby (G1) at Churchill Downs and Preakness Stakes (G1) at Pimlico, and he finished a good fourth in the Belmont Stakes (G1), when he picked up a hoof injury. He was given a break after these three tests, which come within the space of five weeks, and the chosen come-back race was the Philadelphia Derby (G2). 'Chrome' was a bit rusty though, and a compromising inside trip didn't help. Bayern, who had bypassed all three Triple Crown races and was on the upgrade, led all the way for an easy win, while California Chrome only managed sixth place.

It was easy to conclude that he had seen enough racing for one season, that he was simply a tired horse in need of a longer vacation to recharge his batteries. His trainer Art Sherman knew otherwise. He set about preparing the colt for the Classic – undoubtedly a wise move. But for Bayern's fresh legs and affinity for the speed-favouring track, and Toast Of New York's incredible grit, California Chrome would have completed the Kentucky Derby / Breeders' Cup Classic double. A double only one horse has managed, Unbridled back in 1990. Can California Chrome strike back, and win the 2015 Dubai World Cup? Of course he

can. He is so experienced, and so adaptable, something his record confirms. He has won eight races to date, over five different tracks – so why should he not be effective around Meydan's new dirt oval? Why not indeed. His second to Shared Belief in the San Antonio (G2) at Santa Anita in February was a fine reappearance run.

### TOAST OF NEW YORK

Toast Of New York has already enjoyed success in Dubai, as he was an easy winner of last year's UAE Derby (G2). He did not beat much on the day, but he looked seriously smart doing it, making his connections map out an ambitious plan for the rest of the year. He is trained by Jamie Osborne in Lambourn, England but all of his three subsequent races were in the USA. He ran below par, and found to be under a bit of a cloud, in the Belmont Derby (G1) on turf in New York in July, only to bounce back with strong efforts in the latter half of the season. Toast Of New York met Shared Belief, widely acknowledged as the best runner in the US at the time, when going for the Pacific Classic (G1) at Del Mar in California. The race was run over an artificial track and, since he had performed so well over the Tapeta, the surface was not a problem. Shared Belief was. He produced his career best to beat Toast Of New York by almost three lengths. It was a solid run and Osborne decided to go for the Breeders' Cup Classic (G1) at Santa Anita in November. The big colt ran the race of his life at the Breeders' Cup. After a tremendous battle he lost by only a nose to Bayern. California Chrome was a close third and Shared Belief (who suffered a troubled run) was back in fourth.

### CATERING FOR MOST DIVISIONS

Dubai World Cup night is a lot more than the World Cup itself. The card offers top class racing in a variety of divisions, all for serious money, both on the dirt track and the turf course. The only thing missing is a contest restricted to fillies and mares, though the girls have traditionally done well in both of the main turf events, the Dubai Sheema Classic (G1) over 2400 metres and the Dubai Turf (G1) over 1800 metres, a race formerly known as the Dubai Duty Free and won by the fair sex three times. South Africa's champion Ipi Tombe took the 'Duty Free' in 2003, twelve months after the French-trained filly Terre A Terre had succeeded, and Godolphin's mare Sajjhaa landed the spoils two years ago. Last year the 'Sheema' was won by Japan's leading lady Gentildonna, as she emulated the likes of Lord Andrew Lloyd-Webber's Dar Re Mi (who beat the Japanese filly Buena Vista in 2010) and Sun Classique (2008), another South African success story managed by Mike de Kock. Interestingly, fillies and mares get a 2kg (4.4lb) sex weight allowance in the Sheema Classic, as opposed to 1.5kg (3.3lb) in the Prix de l'Arc de Triomphe (G1) in France and 3lb in the King George VI & Queen Elizabeth Stakes (G1) in England, both run over roughly the same distance as the Sheema. So if you have a smart middle distance filly, sending her to this race makes a lot of sense.

As these lines are written, Harp Star, ranked almost on a par with the incredible Gentildonna in Japan, is being prepared for a crack at the boys in this year's renewal. A four-year-old daughter of the highly successful Deep Impact, Harp Star has done so before – and with success. She beat one of the best males around when getting the better of Gold Ship in the Sapporo Kinen (G2) last August, a race that set her up for a trip to Paris for the 'Arc', where she came from way back to stay on for a respectable sixth place. Harp Star had previously won the Japanese 1,000 Guineas (G1) and



finished second in the Japanese Oaks (G1), and she is a talented filly combining speed with stamina. She ended last year by running fifth in the Japan Cup (G1) and opened this year's campaign by filling the same place in the Kyoto Kinen (G2) in February. With a relatively low mileage on the clock, Harp Star may improve further this season.

She might have to, if she is to get closer to the Japan Cup (G1) winner Epiphaneia, who is also on target for the Sheema Classic. Officially, and somewhat controversially, ranked as the world's second best thoroughbred in 2014, he will be getting plenty of attention at Meydan.

Epiphaneia probably is the one to beat – though it is worth noting that his effortless win in the Japan Cup (G1) came over soft ground, conditions that suited him and worked against most of his rivals. He may have been a bit flattered by the four-length margin as he came home well clear of Just A Way, Spielberg and Gentildonna. The roles were reversed when Gentildonna and Epiphaneia met again in the Arima Kinen (G1) a month later. This time she was the winner, with Epiphaneia back in fifth place. Epiphaneia has been a game and consistent performer over the past two years. He won the Japanese St Leger (G1) as a three-year-old, when he was also runner-up in the Japanese Derby (G1), half a length behind multiple the hot favourite Kizuna – who later on beat the English Derby winner Ruler Of The World in the Prix Niel (G2) and finished fourth to Treve in the Prix de l'Arc de Triomphe (G1) in Paris. Epiphaneia has the necessary class and his form lines are quite solid. But how will he act if the Meydan turf is firm on the big day?

## RUNNING UP A SEQUENCE

The Sheema Classic also gets Main Sequence, the top turf runner in the USA and a rare such challenger from across the Atlantic. The Sheema has attracted runners from the States before but mainly longshots. In Main Sequence, we are dealing with a 'yank' that might challenge Epiphaneia for favouritism. How much of a yank he is may be debatable, since he is sporting the silks of the Greek Niarchos family and his trainer is a man from Cambridge, England, more famous for its university and boat race crews than racing folk. Anyway, Main Sequence, who was second to Camelot the Derby (G1) at Epsom as a three-year-old, was bred in Kentucky and it was when he returned to America that he really blossomed. He notched up four Grade One wins on the trot last year, winning prestigious events at Monmouth Park, Saratoga, Belmont Park and Santa Anita, where he beat top Euro shippers in the Breeders' Cup Turf (G1). Main Sequence came with a strong run to collar Flintshire, who was second to Treve in the 'Arc' on his previous run and he won the Hong Kong Vase (G1) on his next outing. Main Sequence beat the Frenchman by half a length, looking value for a bit more as he passed the winning post. This six-year-old gelding must have a big chance at Meydan. He was an impressive winner of the Mac Diarmida Handicap (G2) at Gulfstream Park on February 21, when he overcame a slow pace to quicken past last year's winner Twilight Eclipse close home. He's ready.

Turf runners not caring for the stamina test of the Sheema Classic have a better option in the Dubai Turf (G1), staged over 1800 metres and won in such style by Just A Way a year ago. The Japanese trained colt absolutely humiliated his rivals, winning by 6 ¼ lengths from Mike de Kock's Daily News 2000 (G1) and Jebel



Hatta (G1) winner Vercingetorix. The English trained filly Dank, who had won two the Beverly D Stakes (G1) and Breeders' Cup Filly & Mare Turf (G1) in America the year before, finished third ahead of Mshawish, a colt who prepared for the big day by winning the Zabeel Mile (G2) and is now one of the most talented turf milers in the USA. The final edition of this race going off under the Duty Free banner was a high class renewal, and Just A Way earned an official rating of 130, making him the highest rated horse in the world last year.

Vercingetorix, who was second to the impressive Just A Way last year, will be trying to go one better this time. Judged on his seasonal debut, this imposing six-year-old entire, trained by Mike de Kock, must have a good chance of doing just that. He could not match strides with Japan's world champion but still ran a great race, beating the likes of Dank and Tokai Halo in the process. Vercingetorix had won the Jebel Hatta (G1) on Super Saturday and a month after World Cup night he ran an excellent race at Sha Tin in Hong Kong, where he was third behind Designs On Rome and Military Attack in the Queen Elizabeth II Challenge Cup (G1). His father, the German champion Silvano, won the Queen Elizabeth back in 2001, having run third to Stay Gold in the Dubai Sheema Classic (G1) on his previous outing.



Main Sequence winning the Mac Diarmida at Gulfstream Park, gaining his fifth consecutive success and maintaining his unbeaten record in North America. Photo credit Leslie Martin.



Vercingetorix was given a long break after his trip to Hong Kong last April, and he returned with a stylish win in the Al Rashidiya (G2) over 1800 metres at Meydan on January 29. Godolphin's classy four-year-old True Story, who had looked so good winning the Singpiel Stakes (LR) three weeks prior, was favourite – but he had no chance against Vercingetorix. The South African was much the best on the day. He quickened right away to beat True Story quite easily by 2 lengths. The ex-French Mr Pommeroy was third, 2 ½ lengths further back. This performance was every bit as good as his best in 2014, indicating that Vercingetorix will be hard to beat this term. He appears to be improving with age. He proved in Hong Kong that he is effective over 2000 metres, which was also the trip he tackled when winning the Daily News 2000 (G1) at Greyville in 2013, but the 1800-metres distance of the Dubai Turf is absolutely ideal.

Mike de Kock's Dubai Turf favourite may have most to fear from a runner returning to Dubai after successful spell in Florida, namely the Todd Pletcher trained Mshawish. This handsome five-year-old was racing at Meydan last year, when he made his mark in this division by beating Trade Storm to win the Zabeel Mile (G3) and running a good race to take fourth in the Duty Free. So he is a familiar face, but what may not be so well known amongst local

racing fans is that he has looked better than ever this winter, when showing excellent form on the lawn at Gulfstream Park. Mshawish took some time to acclimatise in the USA but he has definitely turned a corner in that respect, and his last two races were impressive.

His Globeform 117 is not higher than what he achieved in Dubai, but the way he has won in Florida indicates that he is capable of much better these days. He bossed his rivals to win the Ft. Lauderdale Stakes (G2) in January, when beating Grand Tito by a neck, and he overcame serious traffic problems to take the Gulfstream Park Turf Handicap (G1) in February. The latter contest, run over the same distance as the Dubai Turf, had drawn a strong field and the betting showed that people had most faith in Mshawish. He experienced a terrible race, pulling hard for his head in a slowly-run affair and getting blocked on the inside coming down the home stretch. Things did not look good, until very late in the show, when a small gap opened up – and Mshawish shot through it to get up for a narrow win. He beat Slumber by a nose. This narrow margin flattered the runner-up, that's for sure. Mshawish was much the best on the day. Expect him to go close as he returns to Meydan. His sire, Medaglia d'Oro, ran second to Pleasantly Perfect in the 2004 Dubai World Cup.





Team Valor's filly Euro Charline winning the Beverly D Stakes at Arlington Park. Photo: Four Footed Fotos

The afore mentioned Harp Star, whose most likely target is the Sheema Classic, might be rerouted to the Dubai Turf, and another interesting lady in the mix for this \$6-million contest is Euro Charline, representing Team Valor International. This smallish, but very powerful daughter of Myboycharlie won the Beverly D Stakes (G1) at Arlington Park outside Chicago last August, after which she was set to join Team Valor's North American team. A set-back meant a change of plan, as it ruled her out of the Breeders' Cup picture. It was decided to send her back to her original trainer, Newmarket based Marco Botti, a young Italian who has quickly made his mark on the international scene with horses like Dandino, Joshua Tree and Tac de Boistron.

### THE GODOLPHIN MILE

As mentioned, Variety Club and Soft Falling Rain made a nice exacta for South African breeding in the 2014 Godolphin Mile (G2), a race that now returns to dirt and is likely to get live participation from North America. The race sponsors, or 'the boys in blue' as we like to call them, have won this event no fewer than seven times, with their principal trainer Saeed bin Suroor having saddled the winner nine times, most recently African Story in 2013. Twelve months later African Story won the World Cup itself, illustrating what a tough race the Godolphin Mile can be. The double was achieved over the Tapeta track though, and things may develop a bit differently from now on. Not to say that the quality will drop. On the contrary, if the Godolphin Mile regularly gets serious milers from the US, well then the quality will improve – and the race soon get Group One status.

A locally trained Godolphin Mile challenger to take seriously is Satish Seemar's Surfer, who opened his 2015 campaign with a rock solid win in the Al Maktoum Challenge Round I (G2) over this mile trip in January. Surfer and his regular rider Richard Mullen came home as rather easy winners that day, a little over two lengths in

front of the French import Frankyfourfingers. Mullen was pushing all the way to the line but only because Surfer idled in front, clearly thinking 'what more is needed, I'm too good here'. Too good he was, and sticking to a mile seems to be the obvious route to take with this gelded son of Distorted Humor. Frankyfourfingers reversed the form when they stepped up in distance in the second round of the Al Maktoum Series. Surfer, who was unplaced in last year's World Cup, likes mile races better.

Seemar also has a live contender for the Golden Shaheen (G1), as his 2013 winner of the big sprint, veteran speedball Reynalldothewizard, bounced back to form at Meydan on January 15, when he reappeared to win the Dubawi Stakes, a Listed event over the same 6-furlong trip as the Golden Shaheen. An ex-American runner now aged nine, Reynalldothewizard was by far the best that day, coasting home almost four lengths in front of the race favourite, Muarrab, who had won his four previous races. Older horses often run big on their comeback, only to fade a bit on subsequent outings, but the way 'Reynadlo' took this event suggested that he is back to his best, and he followed up by beating Krypton Factor in the Al Shindagha Sprint (G3) four weeks later: Krypton Factor won the 2011 edition of the Golden Shaheen.

Reynalldothewizard was below par in 2014, when he failed to win in three attempts (though he did manage fourth in the Shaheen). His 2013 form was excellent. The imposing son of champion US sprinter Speightstown won all of his three races that season, capping it off with a win over Balmont Mast and Krypton Factor in the Golden Shaheen. Horses have often come back to run well a second time in this sprint, and Caller One won it back-to-back in 2001-2002.

Dubai World Cup night also presents a golden opportunity for the classic generation, as \$2 million is on offer in the UAE Derby (G2),



Reynaldthewizard and Richard Mullen winning the 2013 Golden Shaheen. Photo: Andrew Watkins





staged over 1900 metres on the dirt track. This Derby was used as a stepping stone to the Kentucky Derby (G1) in earlier years, as Godolphin winners China Visit, Express Tour, Essence Of Dubai and Regal Ransom all went from Derby success at Nad Al Sheba to defeat at Churchill Downs. The 2000 winner China Visit fared the best in Louisville, checking in sixth behind Fusaichi Pegasus in the 'Run for The Roses'.

The best horse to have come out of the UAE Derby to date, and that by some margin, is Street Cry, who lost by a whisker to his stable companion Express Tour in the 2001 edition of this classic. Street Cry went on to win the World Cup a year later, and he also captured a high profile race in the US, outclassing his rivals in the Stephen Foster Handicap (G1) at Churchill Downs before injury ended his career. He was every bit as successful as a stallion, most notably as the sire of the outstanding filly Zenyatta and Kentucky Derby winner Street Sense. Sadly, Street Cry died last autumn.

Likely Derby contenders this year are the Hard Spun colt Maftool, representing Godolphin, and Mubtaahij, a son of Dubawi trained by Mike de Kock. The latter came out well on top when these colts met for the first time, in the UAE 2,000 Guineas Trial, but Maftool hit back in the 2,000 Guineas (G3), where he managed to beat Mubtaahij by a head. The pair drew over ten lengths clear of the rest that day, and it will be interesting to see whether they are so superior when stretching out to 1900 metres in the Derby, where we may also see a filly or two in the mix. Local Time, a comfortable winner of the UAE 1,000 Guineas (LR) for Godolphin, has been nominated to the \$2 million classic. As a daughter of the versatile stallion Invincible Spirit out of the 10-furlong Listed winner Marie de Medici, Local Time might just relish a test of stamina.

Turf sprinters shooting for glory on World Cup night have the Al Quoz Sprint (G2) to go for. Introduced in 2009, this race has already put South African racing in the headlines on three occasions. JJ the Jetplane won it twice, in 2009 and 2011, while Shea Shea clocked a sharp 56.4 seconds over the 1000 metres trip to win in 2013. He was third last term, when the race went to Amber Sky, an Australian bred representing Hong Kong. Australia got their proper winner of the Al Quoz in 2012, when Ortensia beat Sole Power, a top sprinter from Ireland, who may be back for a fifth (!) crack at the race this time. Another interesting name to note is that of Hamdan Al Maktoum's English trained colt Muthmir – arguably the fastest improving sprinter in Europe last year. His trainer William Haggas has mentioned Meydan as a possible starting point for this impressive Portland Handicap winner this year.

Completing the World Cup menu are the relatively new staying contest, the Dubai Gold Cup (G2) over 3,200 metres on the turf course, and the traditional Kahayla Classic (G1), a \$250,000 event for Purebred Arabians, staged over the same 2,000 metres as the World Cup. Ireland's Certerach got the better of Godolphin's 2013 winner Cavalryman in last year's Gold Cup. Godolphin enjoyed success also in 2012, when Opinion Poll beat Joshua Tree. The Kahayla Classic has seen some durable champions at the podium over the years. The incredible filly Alanudd, bred in the USA, won the race three years on the bounce from 1997 to 1999. Six years later, the French bred colt Madjani kicked off his sequence of three straight wins in the race often referred to as the "Arabian's World Cup". As always, the Kahayla Classic will be the first race on the night, setting the scene for some seriously good contests. On turf and dirt.