**THE CHANGING OF THE GUARD**

**JERSEY RACING - END OF SEASON REPORT**

**By Mark Johnson**

At the end of the 2017 local season, which concluded at a windswept and rain-lashed Les Landes Racecourse in St Ouen on Sunday, Channel Islands Horse Racing had a brand new Champion Trainer and a brand new Champion Jockey to salute.

 Christa Gilbert, based at Holly Farm in St Helier, took her first Trainers Championship with a total of 14 winners during the season (including a double on the closing day) leaving her three victories clear of thirteen-times Champion Aly Malzard.

 Without doubt the highlight of the season for the Gilbert yard was the third consecutive win in the Jersey Derby for stable star Aussie Lyrics (the first horse to achieve that feat in 32 years) but, in terms of the Championship, it was the sheer consistency and strike-rate of the stable’s runners during the entire season which secured the Championship.

 Mrs Gilbert and her team only sent out 36 runners during the entire campaign meaning their horses won at a staggering 38.9% strike-rate. It also meant during the season any punters who blindly had a £1 win bet at SP on all of the Gilbert runners walked away with a tidy profit of £20.46 at close of play.

 On Sunday the Christa Gilbert double was brought up by CHAPEAU BLEU in the 7 furlong Plantagenot Handicap, beating Order Of Service by 1¼ lengths, and BROWN VELVET who beat First Cat 1½ lengths in the 1m½f Prince Of Wales Handicap. Both were ridden to victory by jockey Alice Mills.

 Going into the final race of the day - and therefore the 45th and final race of the season - the Jockeys Championship, the Owners Championship and the title of Champion Racehorse of the Year were still all up for grabs.

 Victory for Alice Mills on the Gilbert-trained 11/8 favourite Aussie Lyrics would have won her the Jockeys Championship but any other result meant the title went to Paddy Aspell. Aussie Lyrics could only finish third, 12¼ lengths behind the winner BOWL IMPERIOR, so it was Paddy Aspell (who finished runner-up in the finale on Ocean Crystal) who secured his first Channel Islands Jockeys Championship.

 Both Aspell and Mills tied on 13 winners apiece but the Championship rules deemed that second placed “count-back” was used and so Aspell with ten runner-up finishes pipped Mills with just four. These two riders completely dominated the season as their accumulative total of twenty-six victories gave them effectively wins in 57.8% of the races run all season.

 Based up in Catterick, North Yorkshire, Paddy Aspell had last ridden in Jersey about ten years ago but 2017 was the first time he had come over for all of the season’s race meetings. In winning his first Champion Jockey title Aspell was ending the four-year Championship run of Mattie Batchelor who endured a disappointing Channel Islands season which netted him just three winners but a frustrating thirteen runner-up finishes.

 Paddy, the brother of dual Aintree Grand National winning rider Leighton Aspell, himself enjoyed a great season in the jump races at Les Landes. Of the nine Hurdle races run at the venue this year he rode the winner of the first six of them - the most significant success coming aboard the Karl Kukk-trained Steely in the Channel Islands Champion Hurdle in July.

 The new Champion Jockey may have gone winless on the closing day of the season but it was a memorable day for amateur rider Freddie Tett who rode his first ever treble. The enthusiastic London-based estate agent, whose three winners secured him third place in the Jockeys Championship with a total of five victories, completed his treble aboard a trio of Aly Malzard saddled runners.

 The most significant winner of the three was the aforementioned BOWL IMPERIOR in the concluding William Hill Handicap over 1m6f. Victory for BOWL IMPERIOR not only secured him the title of Champion Racehorse of the Year but also won his owner Geoff Somers the Owners’ Title.

 BOWL IMPERIOR - a five year-old chestnut son of the Breeders’ Cup Classic winner in America, Raven’s Pass, - was winning for the fourth time in 2017. Stamina and versatility are his fortes and having won a 1¾m flat Handicap on Jersey Derby Day in July he went on the win the season’s longest race - a 2½m Handicap Hurdle on Ladies Day - followed by a 2¼m Handicap Hurdle at the Clarendon meeting and then this flat race, again over 1¾m, to end his campaign.

 The Champion Racehorse Championship is decided on a Grand Prix-style points system (9 for first, 3 for second & 1 for third) and Bowl Imperior netted 42 points some nine clear of Derby winner Aussie Lyrics and Clarendon winner Black Night.

 Geoff Somers became Champion Owner thanks not only to the win of Bowl Imperior but also of FLUTTERBEE earlier in the afternoon’s feature race - the 1¼m Patrons 2017 Jersey Warwick Vase. Mr Somers’ blue & white quartered colours were carried to a 1¼ length win by FLUTTERBEE from Black Night.

 Jersey Race Club President Tony Taylor has not enjoyed the best of seasons as an owner but he finally had a winner when BEYOND MEASURE took the opening Green Island Restaurant Conditions Hurdle by 1½ lengths from Grey Gem.

BEYOND MEASURE, the 4/1 outsider of the three runners, was only running for the second time in Jersey but she had recently undergone an operation to help her breathing.

 After racing Tony Taylor, in his capacity as President of the JRC, thanked local racegoers, owners, trainers and officials for supporting “a very enjoyable and successful” season for the JRC. Although unable to announce final totals for the season at that point, he confirmed that several meetings during the season had seen “substantially increased crowds” in particular the two August fixtures - Ladies Day and Clarendon Day.

 Mr Taylor also announced that by the start of the 2018 season (on Easter Monday, 2nd April) there will be a new permanent Integrity Tower built, on top of the existing bank/viewing area, replacing the various scaffolding towers which have been in use for nearly forty years.

 The new Integrity Tower (housing the camera patrol, commentator, medical officer, placing judges and stewards) will be the first major development at Les Landes Racecourse for several years and could, in time, pave the way for the broadcasting of local racing, to wider audiences, off island.

**THE 2017 CHANNEL ISLANDS RACING SEASON**

**ROLL OF HONOUR**

WINNERS & runners-up

CHAMPION HORSE

1st BOWL IMPERIOR owner Geoff Somers, trainer Aly Malzard - 42 points

2nd= Black Night owner Anne Moon, trainer James Moon - 33 points

2nd= Brown Velvet owner La Vallette Ltd, trainer Christa Gilbert - 33 points

CHAMPION JOCKEY

1st PADDY ASPELL - 13 winners & 10 seconds

2nd Alice Mills - 13 winners & 4 seconds (Champion Lady Rider)

CHAMPION TRAINER

1st CHRISTA GILBERT - 14 winners

2nd Aly Malzard - 11 winners

CHAMPION OWNER

1st GEOFF SOMERS - £13,450 in win & place prize money

2nd Anne Moon - £11,920

CHAMPION HURDLE

1st STEELY - rider Paddy Aspell, trainer Karl Kukk

2nd Fourni - rider Mattie Batchelor, trainer Aly Malzard

JERSEY DERBY

1st AUSSIE LYRICS rider Alice Mills, trainer Christa Gilbert

2nd Black Night - rider Philip Prince, trainer James Moon

CLARENDON HANDICAP

1st BLACK NIGHT rider Philip Prince, trainer James Moon

2nd Aussie Lyrics rider Alice Mills, trainer Christa Gilbert