

CAT COMES FIRST IN EASTER “EYE-LIGHT” JERSEY RACING - EASTER MEETING - REPORT

By Mark Johnson

It was a popular, one-eyed, veteran who stole the show at Les Landes on Easter Monday when taking the big race on the opening day of the 2017 Channel Islands racing season.

Ten year-old FIRST CAT (who has no right eye) had not won a race since August 2015 but under Philip Prince he challenged on the outside of his rivals, in order to see them with his good left eye in the driving finish, and got up to beat UK-trained raider National Service and top local sprinter Country Blue in an exciting three-way finish to the Millbrook Easter Feature Handicap over 7 furlongs. At the line there was just a length and a head splitting the trio.

This was an eighth career success for the Karl Kukk-trained First Cat with all but one of his wins coming on Jersey. He runs in the colours of longtime local racing supporter Bunny Roberts and connections had kept the faith with First Cat, despite his long losing run, due to the fact he had run-up a solid, yet frustrating, series of second-placed finishes last season. Some local punters also kept the faith with him backing him down to 15/2 from as big as 12/1 in the last few minutes before the race.

UK-based trainer Mick Appleby has his team in tremendous form at present and he won with both his runners on the card - Rainbow Lad and City Ground - ridden by leading amateur rider Serena Brotherton.

Recent Southwell all weather winner RAINBOW LAD looks a progressive four-year-old and he completely dominated the Jersey Bookmakers Handicap, over 1½ miles, winning effortlessly by 10 lengths from Spring Dixie despite carrying top weight. On the evidence of this performance he could easily become a leading candidate for the Jersey Derby, on 23rd July, if connections want to qualify him for that most prestigious race of the Channel Islands' season - he would need to run once more in the Channel Islands before that race to be qualified.

It was a much closer call for CITY GROUND in the 1¼ mile The Trump (Not Him) Holdings Limited Handicap in which he fought out the finish with another UK-trained runner Alcatraz. It was a case of “heads up, heads down” as they raced to the line locked together and it was only by a short head that City Ground got the nod.

Like big race winner First Cat, City Ground is a ten-year-old and he was winning for the eleventh time in his 56 race career - an impressive strike-rate for any horse. This was his second win, in just three starts, on

Jersey.

It was a frustrating and bruising day for four-time, and reigning, Channel Islands Champion Jockey Mattie Batchelor. Frustrating in that he finished second twice during the afternoon including aboard Alcatraz in the close finish with City Ground and bruising due to a heavy fall he took in the opening hurdle race from Fourni.

Fourni was disputing the lead, at the penultimate flight in the season's opening race - the President's Handicap Hurdle over 2 miles - when taking a nasty fall (she got up, and cantered away, unscathed) leaving UK-trained LITTLE LOTTE to record her first ever win on her twenty-first career start. Trained by Tom Gretton, Little Lotte was ridden to victory by Paddy Aspell who was paying his first visit back to Les Landes, "In about ten years, they didn't have this weighing room the last time I was here" he confessed after the race.

The final race on the card, the Bloodstock Advisory Services Handicap, over the extended mile resulted in a clear-cut seven length victory for the Christa Gilbert-trained LUCIFERS SHADOW ridden by Alice Mills.

The grey eight-year-old, who reportedly had some training issues through last year and was therefore well handicapped for the start of this new season, simply glided through the race and was unchallenged to beat UK-trained raider Granny Anne. He has now won seven times, all but one of those victories coming at Les Landes.

One of the best Easter Mondays weather-wise on Jersey in recent years, plus a strong card boosted by a plenty of UK-trained runners, resulted in the biggest Opening Day crowd for many years at Les Landes. Jersey Race Club officials will be hopeful this strong start continues though the rest of the 2017 racing season.

The next meeting at Les Landes is on Sunday 14th May, when the feature race will be the Jersey Guineas, however racegoers in the Channel Islands have their one-and-only chance this year to go racing on Guernsey before that - when the Guernsey Race Club stage their annual fixture at L'Ancrese Common on Monday 1st May.