

OPINIONS

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Lady's Secret deserves better

NEW YORK – The Oak Tree Racing Association's announcement last week that it is renaming the Lady's Secret Stakes the Zenyatta was not only a premature and disrespectful decision but also an improper attempt to influence the Horse of the Year voting.

"We feel strongly that Zenyatta should be Horse of the Year," said Sherwood Chillingsworth, Oak Tree's executive vice president, in an over-the-top press release that began, "In the wake of what many consider to be the most dramatic performance in Breeders' Cup history..."

Public reaction to the announcement has been overwhelmingly negative. Steve Haskin of *The Blood-Horse* magazine sharply criticized the decision the day it was announced, writing that "Zenyatta is one of the great fillies of all time and should have a race named after her, but not two and a half weeks after the Breeders' Cup and not at the expense of Lady's Secret." Over



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90 percent of the more than 100 Internet commenters who responded agreed, many of them citing their admiration and support for Zenyatta but their dismay at such a hasty and political gesture.

There are two issues here: whether it was proper to kick the memory of Lady's Secret to the curb, and whether it is proper for race-track operators to speak publicly in support of candidates in Eclipse Award races and use their power to name stakes races in an attempt to further those candidacies.

Oak Tree's announcement, just 24 days after Zenyatta's final race, was a break with its past practice in naming races. It has yet to name a race after Azeri, who won the 2002 Breeders' Cup Distaff at Arlington en route to becoming the last female to be named the Horse of the Year. It took Oak Tree seven years to name a race after the previous filly to be so honored: Lady's Secret was Horse of the Year in 1986, and Oak Tree first ran a Lady's Secret Stakes in 1993.

For those who have forgotten, and will no longer be reminded of it, Lady's Secret was one of the greatest racemares of the 20th century, known then and now as the Iron Lady of the sport for both her gray coat and her

remarkable durability. At a time when champions made more than five starts a year, the Oklahoma-bred daughter of Secretariat won 25 of 45 starts at 10 tracks over four seasons, winning 11 Grade 1 races, including the 1986 Whitney. She raced 21 times in New York and 15 times in California, winning every major race for older females on both coasts and facing males seven times.

Lady's Secret, who died in 2002, deserves better than being abandoned just so Oak Tree can try to tilt an election by saying it considers Zenyatta more important than a horse who actually won the Horse of the Year title. Oak Tree could have either created a new race named the Zenyatta or proposed renaming any of a number of existing events at Santa Anita, including the Grade 1 Santa Maria or Santa Margarita. It certainly could have waited six weeks, until this year's Eclipse balloting was over, to address the issue at all.

You don't see executives at Oaklawn, Fair Grounds, Churchill Downs, Pimlico, Belmont, Monmouth, or Saratoga issuing announcements they "feel strongly" Rachel Alexandra should be Horse of the Year because she ran

at their tracks this year.

Euroears makes promising return

The holiday weekend stakes racing began on a heartening note when Euroears won the Thanksgiving Day Handicap at the Fair Grounds. It was his first stakes victory since winning the 2008 Duncan Kenner on the Louisiana Derby undercard, a performance that had made him look like a potential champion sprinter.

After that race, where Euroears toyed with a sharp field of graded-stakes winners while running his record to 6 for 6 and earning a Beyer Speed Figure of 110, everything went wrong for 1 1/2 years, including two leg surgeries and three lengthy defeats. He got back into the winner's circle in an allowance race at Hoosier Park last month, and his victory Thursday was another step in the right direction. A tepid 5-2 morning-line favorite, he was bet down to 4-5 and scored by 1 1/2 lengths.

It was another step forward, but it's still too soon to say whether he'll ever get back to where he was in early 2008. Finding that out will be one of the first interesting things about the 2010 racing season.

Heartland transplant now has French accent

By Alan Shuback

She is racing's American in Paris. Or, to be more specific, racing's American in Maisons-Laffitte, the training center west of Paris where she maintains a string of American- and British-owned horses, the only Yankee – male or female – currently training in France.

Wisconsin native Gina Rarick has cracked the rarified world of French racing with a handful of victories this year, and on the ultra-competitive Parisian circuit, no less. But don't look for her name in the bloodlines of the great American racing families like the Vanderbilts, the Hunts, or the Strawbridges that have prospered in France at one time or another during the last century. Rarick is a self-made horsewoman from the environs of Marshfield, Wis., a region better known for milk cows than Thoroughbred racehorses.

"I was raised on a dairy farm," she said, and you can believe her. She has the well-muscled hands of a milkmaid, well suited to riding horses, something she didn't take up until she was 34 and had already been living in France for three years.

Racing was off the radar for a woman who studied journalism at the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee. But neither the Badger State nor the Milwaukee Journal held much promise for a young newspaper reporter, and wanderlust soon set in.

Seeking something more challenging over the rainbow, Rarick successfully applied in 1994 for a position as a correspondent for the International Herald Tribune, the English-language daily published in Paris for American tourists and expatriates.

She was assigned to the Tribune's racing

desk, a beat that introduced her to the delights of France's major racecourses – Longchamp, Chantilly and Deauville – as well as Royal Ascot and Nad Al Sheba. Rarick was soon hooked on the game and decided to supplement her meager reporter's salary by riding work in the morning for an assortment of trainers.

As a writer she was eligible to compete in an annual race at Maisons-Laffitte restricted to journalist riders in 2001. Her instinctive competitiveness kicked in, providing her with a memorable victory in her first ride at the tender age of 38.

"The race was supposed to be fixed, but I didn't know it," she recalls. "I went all out and went past the guy who was supposed to win. It became a big joke for everyone whenever we met in the press room after that."

Her appetite duly whetted, Rarick became a permit-holder in 2002, allowing her to train as an amateur. Six years later she passed the grueling test on the "code des courses," or French rules of racing, and received a license to train professionally. On Sept. 1, 2008, she began her new life as a public trainer at Maisons-Laffitte.

Her first runner was Pixie's Blue. A 4-year-old son of Hawk Wing purchased by British owner Ian Kellitt at Tattersalls for \$8,200, he finished 10th in a one-mile Chantilly allowance for women professional riders, but improved dramatically two weeks later, landing a Maisons-Laffitte claimer named the Prix Cardmania by three lengths at 56-1, earning \$9,500 in the process.

Rarick hit a purple patch in September when she sent out three winners in a row on the Parisian circuit. Her Danetime filly

Turfani got the ball rolling at Chantilly with a victory in the Prix du Pain de Sucre, a 1 1/4-mile handicap. Two days later, the stouthearted Hard Way duly obliged in a 1 15/16-mile handicap at Craon. On Sept. 25, Maisons-Laffitte was the site of Skid Solo's win in the Prix du Castillon, a six-furlong handicap.

"It was a week of celebrations," said Rarick, who uses top riders like Olivier Peslier, Gerald Mosse, and Thierry Thulliez. "We drank a lot of champagne."

Operating as high as the quinte handicap level, or just below listed stakes competition, Rarick now has 11 horses in training, most of them bought at Tattersalls for prices ranging between \$1,500 and \$10,000. Email Exit, a 2-year-old Titus Livius colt bought for \$7,200, is a full brother to Italian listed winner Kathy Livius. Rarick's yearling Enrique colt El Camino Real is a half-brother to a pair of multiple winners in England. All of her horses are available for sale or lease, and none of them race on drugs.

An avowed opponent of raceday medication, Rarick writes on her website, www.gallopfrance.com, "Closing the Pandora's Box of pharmaceuticals in the United States will not be easy. The partial steroid ban that most U.S. jurisdictions have enacted over the last two years is a step in the right direction, but there is a long way to go, although I keep hoping for a change. I hope that one day I get lucky enough to have a horse good enough to bring to the Breeders' Cup, and that by then no one will have to face the choice of running on Lasix."

Refreshing words from a French-based trainer raised on the clean air and water of central Wisconsin.



SCOOPYDGA

Gina Rarick poses with Turfani in the winner's enclosure at Chantilly.