



Field of dreams

Since inception in 1996, Sheikh Mohammed had a vision to bring top international flat horse racing to the UAE – now firmly established, the Dubai World Cup is galloping to a more prestigious future than ever, as Rob Furber explains

In the glamorous, global world of Flat racing, the Dubai World Cup now takes high rank among the sport's most iconic races. Heading into its 27th year, it sits alongside Australia's Melbourne Cup, Tokyo's Japan Cup, and Paris's Prix de L'Arc de Triomphe as one of the year's landmark middle-distance and staying prizes. Taking place on March 25, it will be the

Above: The Dubai World Cup winner lands \$12m, with Sheikh Mohammed's Godolphin Stable horses winning five of the last ten meetings, including back-to-back victories for Thunder Snow

centrepiece of a 9-race card, officially the richest day's racing in the world, offering a staggering \$30.5 million in prize money, and the glittering culmination of the ever-expanding Dubai World Cup Festival, now in its 20th year and which gets underway on Friday January 6.

The Dubai World Cup was the brainchild of the ruler of Dubai, Sheikh Mohammed bin Rashid Al Maktoum. Think big, dream bigger is an ideology on which the modern metropolis of Dubai has evolved, and the mindset of Sheikh Mohammed when he conceived of the world's richest horse race which took place for

the first time back in 1996 at the Nad Al Sheba racecourse.

That first running was handily won by the legendary, US-trained racehorse Cigar, unbeaten in 14 races and the world's highest earning racehorse at the time, providing the ideal launchpad for the race and putting Dubai firmly on the global Flat racing map.

Sheikh Mohammed is not a man to rest on his laurels. 'If you build it, they will come' is an often misquoted line from the movie *Field Of Dreams*, but couldn't be more apt in describing his visionary quest to increase the lustre of the Dubai World Cup yet further.

The prestige of the great race was elevated on completion of the spectacular, state-of-the-art Meydan racecourse which cost in the region of \$1.25bn to build and has hosted the great race since 2010. With 80,000 racegoers packed into the iconic, crescent-shaped Grandstand on Dubai World Cup night, there are few finer sights in Flat racing.

Last year (2022) witnessed a special win for the Bob Baffert-trained Country Grammar, ridden by Frankie Dettori. For Dettori it was a record-equalling fourth win in the great race on the American-trained five-year-old. He is now tied with American jockey great Jerry Bailey, another Hall of Famer with 4 Dubai World Cup wins. For Baffert, it was also a fourth win, those victories spanning a quarter of a century, dating back to 1998 when Silver Charm landed Baffert his first success in the race.

A distance of 2,000 metres on the left-handed dirt track of Meydan is a unique

and demanding test of the Thoroughbred, a stellar cast of international equine stars lining up in the race each year. It attracts some of the best middle-distance horses in the world, challengers arriving from the US, Japan, and Europe, with the home team from the UAE led by the powerful Godolphin operation, which has won three of the last four runnings.

The roll call of past winners includes Dubai Millennium, considered the best racehorse to come under the care of Godolphin by Sheikh Mohammed, and an appropriate winner of the race in 2000 in course record time; previous Kentucky Derby winner Animal Kingdom in 2013; and Thunder Snow, the only horse in history to win the Dubai World Cup twice, in 2018 and 2019.

It's a night when the horse racing glitterati descend on Dubai



Right: Sheikh Mohammed Bin Rashid Al Maktoum at the Dubai World Cup Below: The Meydan Racecourse was the world's first 5-star trackside hotel with high-end international restaurants, a theatre, the Meydan Museum and a Gallery

and this ever-expanding jewel in the eastern Arabian Peninsula shines at its brightest. The ambience of Dubai World Cup night is unashamedly opulent, the course home to the palatial five-star hotel, The Meydan, where VIPs from the racing world stay

during World Cup night. Bringing some Royal Ascot glitz to the occasion there is a Style Stakes for the best-dressed racegoers including prizes for Best Dressed Lady, Best Dressed Couple, most Creative Hat and Creative Outfit. The

climax of Dubai World Cup night sees a spectacular firework display and music concert, Becky Hill, Rudimental and Sigala headlining in 2022, with J.Lo and Janet Jackson performing in previous years.

Looking ahead to the 2023 running, one horse to keep an eye on is shock 80-1 Kentucky Derby winner Rich Strike. Trained by Eric Reed in the US, his stated aim is the Dubai World Cup with Meydan's Tapeta surface sure to suit him. Bob Baffert's Taiba, third behind Flightline in last year's Breeders' Cup Classic, and Hot Rod Charlie, second behind Country Grammar last year, look like two other possible strong contenders coming from the US. Don't bet against a strong home defence and Saeed bin Suroor and Godolphin notching what would be a record-breaking 10th winner of the great race.

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