

TDN & A

Nick Smith, the Head of Communications and International Racing at Ascot Racecourse in the UK, is preparing to embark on a three week international tour to promote Ascot Racecourse--specifically Royal Ascot, the G1 Betfair King George, and QIPCO British Champions Day--to horsemen worldwide. Smith will be in the U.S. from today through Feb. 11, and the TDN sat down with him to find out what his plans are and what Ascot has to offer.

TDN: Can you describe the purpose of your visit to America, and what you hope to achieve?

NS: I travel to the States at least twice a year, and from time to time to Canada (Woodbine), to promote Ascot's race program to horsemen there. The purpose is to raise awareness of the Royal Meeting in June, principally, as well as the [G1] Betfair King George in July. Also there's the jockeys' competition here in August, the Dubai Duty Free Shergar Cup, and we've often had American and Canadian riders here for that. Last year Chantal Sutherland and Emma Jayne Wilson rode in the first ever girls international team with Hayley Turner.

They were both brilliant, as was the charming Aaron Gryder, in the men's international team. The press loved them.

TDN: What does your agenda look like, and who do you intend to meet with?

NS: It's a heavy and intense schedule. I will be in the U.S. from Feb. 1 to 11, starting off at the Fair Grounds, on to Gulfstream, and then to Santa Anita. After that I go to Tokyo, Hokkaido, Melbourne and Sydney, then home after three weeks on the road and goodness knows how many miles. I do a round-the-world tour at about this time every year, then I go to Dubai in March for the World Cup meeting, and Singapore in May for their international races. It's a worldwide campaign--we look to get the best in the world, from all corners of the world, to Royal Ascot.

In terms of who I specifically intend to meet, there are some people I know well who I see every year, such as Kenny McPeck, Ken Ramsey and Wesley Ward. They have a very international outlook. There are others who I have met several times and who have dipped their toe in the water already. Todd Pletcher would be the highest profile amongst them.



Nick Smith

I have an excellent advisor in the U.S. in HRTV's Stephen Nagler, and he and the International Racing Bureau are contracted to Ascot to set up meetings, and put me in front of owners and trainers who have expressed an interest, either at dinner or at the track, whatever suits them.

I also want to discuss the Shergar Cup with Gary Stevens and Rosie Napravnik. I spoke to Rosie about being on this year's girls' team at the Woodbine Mile in September and want to follow that up. She is a star.

TDN: Are there any specific American horses you are targeting to attend this year's Royal Ascot meeting?

NS: Obviously number one on anyone's list would be Animal Kingdom. I spoke to Barry Irwin briefly in Melbourne in November, and Graham Motion has been making encouraging noises. It's early days, but I'll be following that up. He could run in the Queen Anne over a mile or the Prince of Wales's S. over 10 furlongs.



Animal Kingdom

Adam Coglianese Photo

Wise Dan would be on anyone's list, of course, but at this stage, and quite understandably, connections are less keen to travel. He's the best miler in the world now--quite something for an American turf horse. On top of that there are the turf sprinters who don't have a huge amount of opportunity in the U.S. at the highest level, especially in the summer. Mizdirection would obviously be the number one pick at this stage. Really though it's a bit like betting--Stephen and I have to pick horses that we think might come through and make Royal Ascot horses, and then approach connections.

TDN: Have you been pleased with the level of American participation at Royal Ascot in recent years? Why should Americans be encouraged to ship their horses overseas for the meeting?

NS: I am pleased simply because we have had two 2-year-old winners trained by Wesley and both he and Kenny McPeck have been second in massive races--Wesley with Cannonball in 2009 [second in the G1 Golden Jubilee] and Ken with Hard Buck [second in the 2004 G1 King George]. We have had several American runners in between and since, but sadly when Todd came with some good chances including Breeders' Cup winner More Than Real in 2011, the ground just went against them all. It's quite rare to have soft ground at Royal Ascot, and they were unlucky. The filly was owned by Bobby Flay, who was realistic throughout and took the bad luck really well. I hope and think he will come back with another one. I'm sure Ken Ramsey, who has hit the board, will get his elusive Royal Ascot win too. I've got to know him well and it would give me so much pleasure to see him up on the winners' podium.

People come from all around the world for very different reasons. For some it is the prestige of winning on the ultimate global stage. For some, certainly in the U.S. in sprinting terms, the prize money comes into play. That would be less relevant for horses coming over from Asia, where the prize money is astronomical. For them it is prestige and, crucially, breeding value. You make into a super-stallion by winning at Royal Ascot. That'll be high in the minds of Team Valor I would imagine, but sadly for us irrelevant to the connections of Wise Dan.

TDN: Considering past performances of American horses at Ascot, what type of horse is best suited to the course?

NS: Ascot is a pretty demanding track, so whatever distance you are looking at, your horse has got to get it. That's why the Queen Anne would be really live for Animal Kingdom, because it is a very searching mile. He would be fine at 10 furlongs too, of course. I would say sprinter/milers in the U.S. are ideally suited to the six furlongs of the G1 Diamond Jubilee S., which Black Caviar won last year. I really wanted to get The Factor last year. He would have been ideal. George Bolton was pretty keen, but Bob Baffert probably less so, but after Dubai it was academic anyway.

That was a real shame, as he would have given Black Caviar something to think about under the circumstances, I'm sure. Precocious, early season quick-to-hand 2-year-olds may have an advantage over many of ours, who are really just starting out in June. Of course, there are also different medication restrictions in place in the UK, so anyone planning to come over needs to be on top of those, and we can help them with the details on that.

TDN: How has the level of international participation at Royal Ascot changed in recent years, and why is it important for Royal Ascot to have strong international participation?

NS: Perhaps the best illustration of this is the fact that over 50 horses from outside Europe have contested the two Group 1 sprints since the Australian game changer Choisir won both of them in 2003. Including Choisir, five Australian sprinters have won and two horses from Hong Kong, latterly Little Bridge in last year's G1 King's Stand S.

Royal Ascot is Europe's defining race meeting. It is our flat racing Olympics in many ways, and it is key to our brand that the best horses in the world run at Royal Ascot, in the King George or on QIPCO British Champions Day. Some 10 years ago, our board had the foresight to embark on this project at a time when the idea of horses travelling across continents in any significant numbers was ambitious to say the least.



Ascot Racecourse
Racing Post Photo

Following the publication of the World Thoroughbred Rankings this month, it is interesting to note that the best four horses in the world ran with us in 2012-- Frankel (who won five times at Ascot, a third of his career), Cirrus des Aigles from France, Black Caviar from Australia and Excelebration from Ireland. After the recalibration exercise, eight of the 13 horses to achieve a 135+ rating since ratings began in 1977 had won at Ascot. So we have always been about the best--the elite.

TDN: What incentives are there for people to travel their horses overseas to participate at Royal Ascot, both monetary and non-monetary?

NS: We would generally pay at least half the costs of the venture for Group 1 winners, or horses rated 115+ who are proven at the top table. However, in the U.S. we use a lot more discretion as there are so few opportunities for sprinters to get a 115 rating. If we think we have the right horse--like Cannonball--we'll do the deal. I don't like to get too tied down with specific rules in this respect. In addition, simply, connections will have the time of their lives. There's nothing like an owners' experience as our guest at Royal Ascot. We invite them into the Royal Enclosure, give them a great lunch, great viewing, whatever they want really, within reason. We have been very flexible on numbers. Owners are the lifeblood of this game and if they have the courage to take their horses overseas, they have the right to be looked after well at the racecourse.

TDN: How has the Global Sprint Challenge contributed to international participation at Royal Ascot? Do you think more programs like this for other divisions should be instated?

NS: It has been fantastic for us. As I have mentioned, we have had over 50 runners from outside Europe in the sprints. It's far from the be all and end all or reason for coming, but the Challenge is a great mechanism for linking together the 10 premier sprints in the world, and marketing them together. There's a \$1-million bonus for winning three races in three different countries, too. Black Caviar and Lord Kanaloa from Japan won two last year, and it is far from impossible to land that pot. I think other categories would be more challenging. Sprinters are more robust, it seems, and tend to race on for longer. There are no plans for any other categories. The Asian Mile Challenge struggled even within a region and the World Series never really caught on. That was a shame, as there was a lot of money invested and perhaps it was before its time.

TDN: Tell us a bit about the experience of having Black Caviar at Royal Ascot last year. Have you ever seen a buildup and atmosphere that compared to that day? Do you think her performance has encouraged or deterred Australians from shipping to Royal Ascot?

NS: I have never seen anything like it here or overseas, to be honest. I think she was probably the most high-profile horse that has travelled outside her region in recent years, although Deep Impact at the Arc probably runs it close.

The funniest thing was that I remember Pete Moody coming with Magnus a few years ago, the year that Gai Waterhouse and Lee Freedman, who are racing royalty in Australia, had runners. No one wanted to talk to Pete, who was just up and coming at the time. Last year he was beating press off with a baseball bat. They had to hire an agent to look after media arrangements over here, and getting to Black Caviar was like trying to storm an Embassy.

I don't think there has ever been a more excited and nervous build up to a raceday here than there was for Black Caviar. In the end it was a slightly odd climax, but she won. As I said at the time, don't judge her until you see how good Moonlight Cloud is next time out, and she won a Group 1 in Deauville by daylight. Black Caviar, not at her best, beat the best sprinter in Europe. She, like Frankel on Champions Day, did it in adversity and that is the sign of a true world champion.

As for encouraging other Aussies or otherwise, I would say it's par. She didn't have the easiest preparation and had problems in the race, but she has always been fragile. That's her, not the race. They've won so many times that I'm sure they'll keep coming back. This year though, the top horse from that region coming to Royal Ascot is the New Zealand-trained Ocean Park, who won the [G1] Cox Plate and is on track for the [G1] Prince of Wales's S., all being well in Dubai. That'll be really exciting, especially if Animal Kingdom and Camelot line up.

TDN: With thrilling performances from Black Caviar and Frankel last year, as well as a victory for international superstar So You Think and a win for the Queen in her Diamond Jubilee year, last year's meeting was filled with great moments that no doubt helped increase attendance and draw international attention. Do you expect to be able to match that success this year?

NS: It's hard to imagine that two horses as good and as high profile as Frankel and Black Caviar will be seen together at a race meeting for a long time, and you're right in that we seemed to live a bit of a charmed life last year with a winner for the Queen and so many other highlights--Little Bridge, too. But Royal Ascot and racing were going the right way before they came along. The Racing For Change initiative has been a great success here, as indeed has the QIPCO British Champions Series, and we'll use those memories to promote the sport and keep trying to get the best horses to run here. Not every year is vintage in that respect. It can't be or there would be no such thing as vintage. But signs are encouraging that we'll see some big names here again in June. Animal Kingdom would be massive--a Kentucky Derby winner at Royal Ascot. Who needs Frankel and Black Caviar!



Black Caviar at Royal Ascot
Racing Post Photo

TDN: How does Royal Ascot raise the profile of horse racing in the mainstream media?

NS: As a definitive social and fashion event in the UK, it gets a lot of media attention. Photos of hats probably outnumber photos of horses three to one during the week, but we're very relaxed and in fact proud of that. We produce style guides, working with fashion PR experts, and we promote the week pretty hard in fashion circles these days. We have to be very careful though not to overstep the mark. Royal Ascot is not about placing celebrities with no interest in racing all over the place, for example. We are custodians of a very special historical institution, and whilst we have a modern and very much customer-facing focus, we are proud of our roots, proud that Royal Ascot is a formal and Royal occasion, and we make no apology for setting exacting standards.

TDN: What sets Royal Ascot apart from the world's best international meetings?

NS: With its mix of racing at the very highest level and a credible fashion element, Royal Ascot is unique. Perhaps the four days of the Melbourne Cup Carnival in Australia comes closest to the "event" feel amongst the major international race meetings. The Breeders' Cup is definitely going the right way in that respect, especially when it is at Santa Anita, which, as someone who has been to 10 renewals all over the country, I would say is its natural home. It will never be as formal as the big weeks at Ascot or in



Fashion at Royal Ascot
Racing Post Photo

Melbourne and, importantly, nor should it be. The worst thing anyone running a big international meeting should do is imitate and assume that the things that work for one audience or culture will automatically transfer to another. Difference and diversity is always worth celebrating. We are very lucky to work in a truly global sport.

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