

AINTREE COUNTDOWN THE SPRINTER SACRE STORY


Racing Journalist of the Year Lee Mottershead goes back to the beginning to find out all about jumping's latest star

WHEN it comes to matters of romance, thoroughbred stallions tend to be males of the love 'em and leave 'em variety. Without any prior need for courtship they find themselves presented with an alluring lady, they act on their carnal instinct and then walk away, another notch added to their bedpost. Not for a second do the consequences of their actions concern them. Given the story of Sprinter Sacre, that's just as well.

Were stallions in the least bit bothered about the products of their promiscuity the Sprinter Sacre saga could have turned into a grubby mess, ideal fodder for a four-legged version of The Jeremy Kyle Show. Sat on two seats, wide apart for safety reasons, would have been a stallion called Network and another called Dark Moondancer. In between the two, looking sheepish and shamed, would have sat a mare named Fatima III. Waiting in the wings, a camera focused on his cherubic features, would have been poor little Sprinter Sacre, just a few months old, his plight guaranteed to stimulate sounds of sympathy from the audience.

Those at the centre of the drama and those watching it being played out would have been united in their desire to know the answer to one question: who's the father?

Now we know the answer. We also know that Sprinter Sacre, imperious winner of the Racing Post Arkle and now bound for Aintree, is high on the list of the most exceptional novice chasers of the modern era. Yet the story that took him to superstardom has been far from simple. Jumping's new top-of-the-bill performer is a horse who was once ignored by his present connections and subsequently acquired as part of a job lot deal. Should his abundant promise be fulfilled, he could soon enough earn comparison with the finest two-mile chasers of all time. That, though, is his future. His past began in central France where a young sheep and cattle farmer decided that, like so many of his neighbours, he wanted to breed a racehorse.

Cercy La Tour, in the Burgundy region of the Nièvre, is famous in French racing as the home of the AQPS (Autre Que Pur-Sang) jumper. The tough, hardy animals, whose blood is a mixture of thoroughbred and non-thoroughbred, have a rich tradition in France, principally thanks to the exploits of Auteuil legend Al Capone II, a seven-time winner of the track's King George VI Chase equivalent race, the Prix la Haye Jouselin. Al Capone was bred in Cercy by Jacques Cypres, who also masterminded the mating that resulted in Cheltenham Gold Cup hero The Fellow. Two decades on from that conception, the Cypres family were responsible for the mare who brought us Sprinter Sacre.

Fatima was bred and owned by Jacques Cypres's father Bernard, who gave the mare to an elderly gentleman. The beneficiary of Bernard's kindness then decided to profit from the gift and sold the mare,



Monster

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Nico de Boinville,
Sprinter Sacre's
work-rider

albeit for not much, to another Cercy resident Christophe Masle, coincidentally a friend of the Cypres family. Masle, more accustomed to working with his 80 cows than his one broodmare, wanted to breed from Fatima and, keen to keep things local, opted to do business with the town's Haras National de Cercy La Tour. The problem facing Masle was that the stud had two suitable stallions, Network and Dark Moondancer. Choosing between them caused Masle no end of trouble.

Jacques Cypres's wife Andree says: "Christophe is a small man with a small voice. He was completely inexperienced at breeding racehorses and what has happened is just a fairytale for him.

"He had been planning to send Fatima to Dark Moondancer but when he got to the stud he changed his mind and went for Network instead. Network covered the mare but she

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then came in season again so it was assumed that she was barren. Christophe therefore decided it would be best to have her covered by Dark Moondancer and, this time, Fatima was found to be pregnant.

"She gave birth to Sprinter Sacre in April 2006 and in the August of that year Christophe entered them both in the combined mother and foal class at the Decizes AQPS Show that we have been organising for many years. The foal was listed as being by Dark Moondancer and that is what I had printed in the programme but then we got a letter from the stud to say the foal's blood matched not Dark Moondancer's but Network's.

"We realised Network had succeeded in getting Fatima in foal. It transpired that his semen lasted very long. And that's the beginning of the Sprinter Sacre story. Voilà!"

The story, however, was to take many more twists.

The Decizes sale, held within earshot of the Loire's rippling waters, has further cemented the Cypres family's place in French bloodstock industry. The likes of Sir Des Champs and Rubi Light had previously all appeared in one of their event's show classes, but in 2006 the bar was raised even higher.

Aside from Sprinter Sacre, future four-time Cheltenham Festival winner Quevega was also competing, both horses coming under the glare of two visiting Brits, trainer Nicky Henderson and bloodstock agent David Minton. One man would end up arranging the purchase of Sprinter Sacre, the other would become his trainer. That, though, was still some way off. Indeed, neither Henderson nor Minton have any recollection of their first encounter with a horse who would soon become an important part of their lives.

"We did buy a horse that day but I

of a horse



Sprinter Sacre pulls away from Cue Card as he heads for the winning line to record an impressive victory in the Racing Post Arkle

don't remember seeing Sprinter Sacre," admits Henderson. "All I know is that he and Quevega were there at the same show on the same day. Both were also there were to be sold, so I suppose we missed the opportunity."

The opportunity was to come knocking 17 months down the line. The first man to take it was leading French jumps owner Robert Fougadoire, who paid just €6,000 to acquire the foal who topped his Decizes class. In January 2008, Fougadoire gave Minton a chance to make amends for an earlier oversight.

"I have to say I can't remember the slightest thing about Sprinter Sacre from that day in Decizes," says Minton, who was having breakfast with owner Raymond Mould on the morning of Cheltenham's Festival Trials Day when informed that Fougadoire was keen to do business.

"Our French agent David Powell informed us that Mr Fougadoire was ill and wanted to sell all his young stock, which comprised of three-year-olds, two-year-olds and yearlings. The price for all 22 horses was €300,000. Raymond fancied having a go at that, so the following Tuesday the vet Buffy Shirley-Bevan and myself went across on the ferry from Portsmouth to Caen and then drove three-quarters of an hour to Haras de Huguenot, where all the horses were based. None of them stood out but they were a very good-looking bunch as a whole. There was only one we didn't want, so the deal was done."

'He was electric,' says De Boinville. 'He pinged five fences, jumping like an experienced chaser. Barry Geraghty looked at me and just said: 'Phwoar!''

Mould, however, had wanted the deal to yield further transactions. His plan had been to keep a handful of the horses and sell the rest. Unfortunately for Mould, the credit crash intervened. "We couldn't sell a store horse for love nor money," recalls Mould, while Minton vividly remembers his long-standing client's reaction. "He said: 'Sod it, let's race them.'"

SODDING it and racing them proved to be one of the best decisions Mould has ever made. Among the batch of 21 were not only Sprinter Sacre but this season's Cheltenham Grade 2 winner Batonnier, the classy Tour Des Champs, John Smith's Grand National candidate Viking Blond and Astracard, who in December won the Cheltenham handicap chase named in memory of Mould's late wife Jenny.

Carrying the colours of Mould's second wife, Caroline, Sprinter Sacre made his bumper debut at Ascot in February 2010, just four months after arriving at Henderson's yard. The Ascot race was won, as was another bumper two months later at Ayr. Asked to race over two and a half miles for the first and only time on his

hurdling debut the following November, the then four-year-old was beaten into second. Not long after the defeat, he had "muck pouring out of his nostrils".

Victories at Ascot and Ffos Las followed. Then sent to the Cheltenham Festival for the first time, and discarded by Barry Geraghty in favour of Spirit Son, he weakened to finish third in the Supreme Novices' Hurdle. In the moments that followed, Tony McCoy recommended a breathing operation. Henderson listened while telling more than one person that in 12 months time he expected to be standing in the place reserved for the winner of the Arkle.

"He was always a brilliant jumper – he's been on springs all his life," says Henderson, while the trainer's amateur Nico de Boinville, Sprinter Sacre's rider at home since day one, vividly remembers the horse's first session schooling over fences late last October.

"He was electric," says de Boinville. "He went out on his own and pinged five fences, one after the other, jumping like an experienced chaser. Barry Geraghty looked at me afterwards and just said: 'Phwoar!' "The word that comes to mind

when I think of him is freak. He's a pure monster of a horse and it's amazing how much he has strengthened up since he first came into the yard. He was a backward baby when he came to us but now he's totally different. I would say there's still a bit more to come as well."

As we have seen this season there is plenty there already. With Geraghty on duty at Cheltenham, De Boinville's housemate David Bass had the pleasure of being in the saddle for the horse's chasing debut at Doncaster, where immaculate jumping was the hallmark of a 24-length success. Eighteen days later, Sprinter Sacre kept Kempton buzzing on the day after Kauto Star's fifth King George triumph by thrashing Peddlers Cross with a display that had star quality stamped all over it, so much so that Henderson briefly contemplated making an entry for the Queen Mother Champion Chase. He decided against such a move and instead pressed on to the Arkle via Newbury's Game Spirit Chase, in which Sprinter Sacre won without coming off the bridle, prompting Geraghty to describe him as "a Ferrari without brakes".

"I thought he was stunning at Newbury and then at Cheltenham he was frightening," says Henderson. "Winning the Arkle was a relief really. Out of our whole team he had to be my best chance. Given the way he had been hyped up nothing other than an outstanding performance would have been good enough."

Would the performance have been good enough to stop stable companion Finian's Rainbow from winning the Champion Chase?

"There's no point in trying to guess and we won both races, so it worked out perfectly," says the trainer, who admits a clash between the two horses is more than possible next March.

"I'd rather have two runners in next year's Champion Chase than none," he says. "If they do meet in the Champion Chase, then so be it. Barry would have a dilemma on his hands. I wouldn't."

HENDERSON also expects further progress from an Aintree-bound six-year-old who could undergo another breathing operation before he starts his second season over fences. "His wind is always in the back of my mind and it's possible it might need redoing," says Henderson. "We often redo that sort of procedure at the beginning of the season. We'll have a look at him when he comes back and decide if we think a little more maintenance is necessary. Whether we do or we don't, he undoubtedly improved enormously from last season to this season and you would be disappointed if there wasn't more to come."

If there is, further Cheltenham Festival celebrations are surely inevitable. "He's an amazing horse with the most wonderful temperament," says Caroline Mould, whose post-Arkle delight was heightened by the arrival of a link to her horse's past.

"After he won at Newbury I said to Raymond how lovely it would be to know more about where he came from. Then, after the Arkle three diminutive Frenchmen pitched up. One of them turned out to be the breeder. I was really choked."

As was Christophe Masle. "He was ecstatic," says Raymond Mould. "He doesn't speak a word of English, so we didn't have much of a conversation but he was clearly over the moon."

He still is. Masle, the small man with the small voice, describes Sprinter Sacre as a horse with "beaucoup, beaucoup, beaucoup de qualite". Reflecting on his trip to Cheltenham, he adds: "The day of the Arkle was magnificent, incredible and amazing. It was my first time at Cheltenham and seeing him win gave me enormous joy."

Back home in the beating heart of France's AQPS country and reunited with his sheep and cows, Masle has once again been dabbling with the breeding of racehorses. "I hope that next year we will have another brother or sister for Sprinter Sacre," he reveals, explaining that on March 24 Fatima was once again covered by Network.

On this occasion, Dark Moondancer was nowhere to be seen.

SPRINTER SACRE'S BUILD-UP TO THE FESTIVAL – THREE WINS FROM THREE RUNS



NEWBURY, FEBRUARY 17 Won by six lengths



KEMPTON, DECEMBER 27 Won by 16 lengths



DONCASTER, DECEMBER 9 Won by 24 lengths