

The Vodacom Durban July Handicap - South Africa's premier racing extravaganza

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Way before dawn, horses stomp impatiently at the cold winter air, keenly aware of a palpable pre-race tension that alerts them that another important race day is about to dawn. Grooms filled with an eager apprehension stir early, although they will probably vow they never slept at all, and set about the all important preparations for race day. Curry combs scuff at fine thoroughbred coats with a strong, yet tender, touch that conveys an eager urging for the performance of a lifetime. Finely tuned and muscular flanks gleam in the first rays of sunrise. Hoof picks glint in the growing light, and everyone is alert to possible interference while they trim tails, plait manes and gently exercise the horses under their care. All the while grooms whisper quiet encouragement and the horses nuzzle back promises of doing the very best they can. Breeders, trainers and horse owners also have a poor night's sleep on pre-race nerves, and wake, often unable to face breakfast at the thought of the R3 million stake. They too are up early, overseeing preparations, pacing nervously and generally getting in the way and adding to the growing tensions around track.

Bookies and totes, too, are up early with eager and ever-hopeful expectancy of a great and profitable day on the track – and the jockeys ... they're also awake early and running through their own idiosyncratic and peculiar good luck rituals, similar to saying “rabbit's foot” aloud three times, while ever careful of remaining within the prescribed weight limits and still stay cool, calm and collected enough to encourage their mount through a calculated and winning performance. The tension and excitement on the track is palpable and much is at stake – not only R3 million in prize money, but the instant fame and recognition that comes with winning a premier race for breeder, trainer, owner and jockey. Almost every South African is keenly aware that South Africa's premier race day has dawned, with individuals betting on likely winners or outside hopefuls, or simply choosing their race day favourite to back, even if they do not bother to bet. And while they probably won't admit it, even the fashion fundis are up at what most would consider unfashionably early for a Saturday morning in order to prepare for the day. Race History The equivalent of the British Royal Ascot on the South Africa racing calendar, the Durban July began in 1897 with a field of seven horses, with Campanajo emerging as the winning horse. Campanajo returned to win the race again the following year, setting the record of being the first horse to win the Durban July back to back – something that has only been equalled by three other horses, namely Corriecrian in 1907 and 1908, Milesia Pride in 1949 and 1950 and El Picha in 1999 and 2000. Pamphlet also made history by winning in 1918 and making a comeback to win the race a second time in 1920, the only horse in the history of the race to do so. From humble beginnings the one-mile race soon grew in popularity to the extent that businesses around the country closed at noon on race day to accommodate all those who wanted to share in the fun and excitement generated by the event; and the prestige that followed the winners encouraged growth and interest in the event, especially when the legendary Colorado King, winner of the 1963 handicap, went on to win the 1964 Hollywood Gold Cup and set a new world record over nine furlongs in the American Handicap held at the Hollywood Park Racetrack. Other Durban July Handicap winners to achieve international renown include Ipi Tombe, the first Zimbabwean-bred horse to win this premier race in South Africa in 2002 and go on to win the Churchill Downs in Louisville, Kentucky in the US. The race attracted sponsorship for the first time in 1963, with what was for that time a massive stake of R30 000, and became known as the Rothman's Durban July. The large stake attracted keen interest and the event quickly grew into a major sporting event that soon became the mainstay of South African horseracing folklore. P. Murray became one of South Africa's most renowned horse trainers in the early stages of the Durban July Handicap, winning the race for four consecutive years with Sir Caulin in 1910, Nobleman in 1911, Lombard in 1912 and Caged Bird in 1913. Terrance Millard is the only trainer to come close to equalling this record with six wins to his name, three of them consecutive with Royal Chalice in 1988, Right Prerogative in 1989 and Illustrador in 1990. Other horses trained by Millard, Tecla Bluff, Devon Air and Occult, won the 1983, 1984 and 1986 Handicaps respectively. Sydney Laird, however, holds the record as the trainer with the most Durban July Handicap wins, with Kerason in 1961, the famous Colorado King in 1963, Java Head in 1966, a tie for first place with Sea Cottage (tied with Jollify) in 1967, Mazarin in 1971, Yataghan in 1973 and Politician in 1978. Jockeying for top rider honours are Harold “Tiger” Wright with four wins in total; on Silver Phantom in 1942, Brookhill in 1947, Milesia Pride in 1949 and Presto's Crown in 1955. Wright's record was equalled by the popular Anton Marcus who galloped first over the finish line in 1993 on Dancing Duel, and won again on El Picha in 2000, on Dunford in 2005 and raced to victory last year in the 2007 Vodacom Durban July Handicap on Hunting Tower. Other jockeys worth a mention are Bertie Hayden who won on Mazarin in 1971, Yataghan in 1973, and Politician in 1978, and Felix Coetzee who rode Devon Air to victory in 1984, followed by Royal Chalice in 1988 and Illustrador in 1990. The Durban July is run on turf and is open to thoroughbred horses of all ages and has been traditionally held at Durban's Greyville race course on the first Saturday in July. Although the original race was over a distance of one mile, and has been modified several times until 1970 when the final distance of 2.2 km became the standard length and is still run today. The Races on Race Day The Durban July attracts a strong field of horses for the right-handed course, where luck of the draw on starting position can have a huge effect on performance, with high draws being of extreme disadvantage to horse and rider. The Vodacom Durban July Handicap is the main race on a packed and competitive 12 card race day, with the first race commencing at 11.35 am and the last four races taking place under floodlights and ending around 8 pm. The gun for the Vodacom Durban July Handicap goes off at 4.20 pm with the winners bursting out the stalls for the 2.2 km, or 11 furlong, race into South Africa horseracing history, with the jockey's ability to read the conditions of the turf and know the strengths and weaknesses of his mount often dictating the outcome on the day. Other races on the day include the 1.6 km Garden Province Stakes, 3 km Gold Vase, the 1.4 km Golden Horseshoe, the 1.4 km Golden Slipper, the 2.2 km Sugarmill and the 1.9 km Darley Arabian. To win requires a well trained horse in peak condition, a competent jockey in control of his mount, riding a race determined by turf and weather conditions, coupled with a fierce will to win and fearless approach to

the task at hand and hoof. Fashion on Race Day In poetic contrast to the fierce physical competition of the races, and getting the heart pounding in excitement in an altogether different way, is the graceful fashion side of the Vodacom Durban July, which blossomed in popularity as the race became synonymous not only with high quality racing but high fashion, fine dining and elegance. The Durban July is also one of South Africa's top social events and attracts more than 56 000 people to the day's event from 9.30 am through to 9 pm. Fashion scouting will start when the gates open at 9.30 am on 5 July, 30 minutes earlier than at previous race meets. The panel of fashion magazine editors and high-end designers will be on the lookout for winners in the following categories: Avante Garde, where weird and wonderful rules the day; Classic race wear for men; Classic race wear for women; and the most striking couple. Join the rest of South Africa and shake your head at the fashions that don't appeal to your tastes, cheer on our favourite horses as they cross the finish line, whether first or last, and celebrate life and living with a day on the race course with friends. It's a sure thing that if you're not there you can't even rank as an also ran! Greyville Racecourse Durban's Greyville Racecourse is one of the most picturesque horse racing tracks in South Africa. The turf course can accommodate night racing and hosts the Vodacom Durban July and a number of other Grade One races in the winter season, including the Gold Cup.