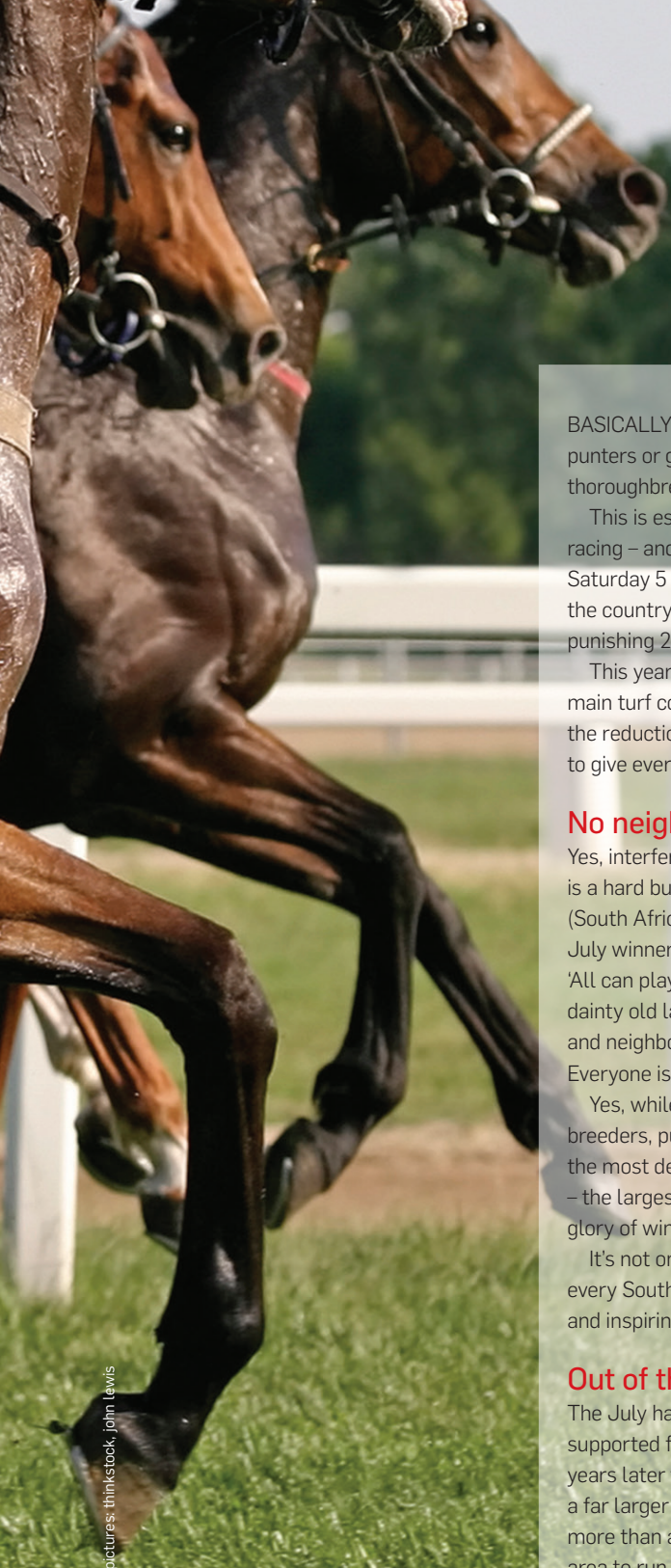




And they're off!

They say that behind every great stallion stands a great mare. Or something like that. **Gaynor Lawson** takes the bit between her teeth to find out what it takes to make an equine shine.



pictures: thinkstock, john lewis

BASICALLY, HORSE-RACING is all about sex. Not sex between the breeders, trainers, bookies, punters or glamorous fashionistas, mind (although it probably happens). It's about which thoroughbred stallion mates with which mare, and the quality of the offspring they produce.

This is especially relevant when the race in question is the hottest on the country's racing – and social – calendar. The 2014 R3.5-million Vodacom Durban July is being run on Saturday 5 July, at, as always, Greyville racecourse in Durban. It's an iconic race that sees the country's best horses take on the challenge of the pear-shaped course for a lung-punishing 2 200m.

This year, with the establishment of the new all-weather Polytrack on the inside of the main turf course, the width of the turf track has been reduced to about 19m, necessitating the reduction of the main race field from 20 to 16 horses (with four reserves 'on the bench'), to give every runner a fair and safe chance, and reduce the possibility of interference.

No neigh-bourly tea party

Yes, interference does happen, either accidentally or, very occasionally, deliberately. Racing is a hard business. To quote Mick Goss, owner and CEO of Summerhill Stud near Mooi River (South Africa's champion breeders for nine consecutive years, producing the second-most July winners of all time), writing about the July in the 2011-2012 Summerhill brochure: 'All can play, all can win. Victory goes to the hungry. Horseracing is not surrounded by dainty old ladies serving cucumber sandwiches to retired vicars. Nor is it contested by quiet and neighbourly countries like Sweden and Greenland... Racing is more like the Balkans. Everyone is at each other's throats, especially in the July.'

Yes, while racing might be 'the sport of kings', it inspires fierce rivalry between trainers, breeders, punters and jockeys. And there's something about the Durban July that makes it the most desired trophy, the one that everyone wants. Perhaps the size of the prize money – the largest in local racing – has something to do with it. But mainly it's for the prestige, the glory of winning this most sought-after race.

It's not only the equine fraternity that feels the buzz. It's the one horse race that almost every South African knows about, prompting countless light-hearted office sweepstakes and inspiring those who seldom think about racing to 'have a little flutter'.

Out of the gates

The July has a long history, dating back to the late 1800s. Racing in Natal was well supported from the earliest days of British control. Durban's first race meeting was a few years later than Pietermaritzburg's, probably because, at the time, Pietermaritzburg was a far larger town, the capital of Natal and the seat of government, while Durban was little more than a scruffy pioneer settlement and a military base. Plus there was no suitable area to run the horses until 1852, when a course was mapped out between Umgeni Road →



Only four horses have ever won the Durban July back-to-back: Campanajo (1897, 1898); Corriecrian (1907, 1908); Milesia Pride (1949, 1950) and El Picha (1999, 2000).

and a wetland, which crosses the present racecourse.

The first meeting was in January 1852, and a rough grandstand was erected to accommodate about 100 spectators. Most of the 7 000 white inhabitants of the town were there, while a diarist of the time wrote: 'Native supporters came from the Tugela in the north and Umzimkulu in the south and shouted themselves hoarse.' This inaugural race meeting was so successful that another was held in August the same year – the forerunner of the Durban Winter Handicap, first run in 1897, which became the Durban July.

The racetrack in those days was very basic, a far cry from the manicured turf of today. John Coleman, a visitor from

England, wrote a particularly scathing review of Durban's track in 1880: 'In some places it was little better than a bed of sand; being somewhat new, it had been the habitation of ant-bears and sundry holes had to be filled up, so that the sandy course puzzled some of the horses, which performed ludicrous gyrations.'

In 1963, tobacco company Rothmans acquired sponsorship rights, the classy, high-action racing scene being a perfect match for 'the greatest name in cigarettes'. The race was known as the Rothmans July Handicap until 1989, and then simply the Rothmans July.

But Big Brother put an end to this long-term relationship with the introduction of new anti-tobacco legislation that

prohibited any form of tobacco branding or advertising. After 38 years, the longest-running sponsorship of any local sporting event, Rothmans was out by 2000. There was no main sponsor until 2001, when Vodacom snapped up the sponsorship rights, and it remains firmly entrenched as the main sponsor.

Come see the fillies

The glamorous image of the Rothmans era has remained to this day. It's the one race day that sees leggy models dressed by the latest designers making the front pages of all the newspapers. More than 50 000 people flock to Greyville, some sipping champers in special enclosures or marquees, some slumming it in the stands. It's one big party, even for those →

who don't really know what racing is about. Who cares? It's about being there, being seen and being part of the in-crowd.

For those arranging things behind the scenes, it's not quite such a relaxed day. Gill Simpkins, public-relations manager for event organiser Gold Circle, explains that when the winner flies past the post, the running isn't over quite yet. 'After the race is over, an assistant of mine goes straight to the jockey room and gets the winning jockey's silks. These are taken directly to my office, where we have an artist who recreates the silks.

'Then, once the paint is dried – we've been known to use a hairdryer – it is framed. I take the frame and the winning owners to the Classic Room (where dignitaries and special Gold Circle guests sit on the day). Our chairman invites the winning owner to place his frame on the wall of fame, which is filled with winning jockey silks going back years and years.'

Odds are...

And do Gold Circle personnel have any insider tips for punters? Well, apparently they have their own method of determining a winner. Every year, they take 20 beans and plant them in a mixture of soil taken from the finish line and potting soil. By the time these beans are three weeks old, one can clearly judge which of the sprouts is the strongest contender. 'We've done this for years,' says Gold Circle events marketing manager Ken Tweddell. 'Almost every year we have one beanstalk growing way above the others.'

He adds that this year, they are all very much the same height, although there is a slight difference in the top three sprouts... So, which is your lucky bean? ■

