

PATHWAY TO STARDOM
CHAPTER 17: The Prelude to the Arc 1993

Urban Sea opened her 1993 campaign with a comfortable Group 3 success in the Prix Exbury at Saint-Cloud on the 20th of March.



Prix Exbury, Group 3

She then won the Prix des Fonds Europeens de l'Elevage, a listed race at Lion d'Angers.



from left to right, Clement Lesbordes, Urban Sea,
Cash Asmussen and Jean Lesbordes

He was also in the saddle when Urban Sea won the Group 3 Prix Gontaut-Biron at the big Deauville meeting in August.



Prix Gontaud Biron : in the foreground : Cash Asmussen, Christopher Tsui, Ling Tsui, David Tsui and Yasuo Hattori, Vice Chairman of Seiko and Epson Corporation.

'Cash' reported that she was perfectly entitled to take her chance in the Prix de l'Arc de Triomphe. After all, he should know, having won the Arc on Suave Dancer just two years before. We were thrilled to get such an opinion from such a famous jockey and assumed that he would want to ride her in the great race at Longchamp on the first Sunday in October. At that time 'Cash' Asmussen dominated the flat jockeys' ratings to the extent that Michael Schumacher was to do in Formula One motor racing. He was the supremo and the horses he rode performed like Ferraris. If 'Cash' chose to ride Urban Sea in the Prix de l'Arc de Triomphe, the great prize was as good as won!



Michael Schumacher with his Ferrari

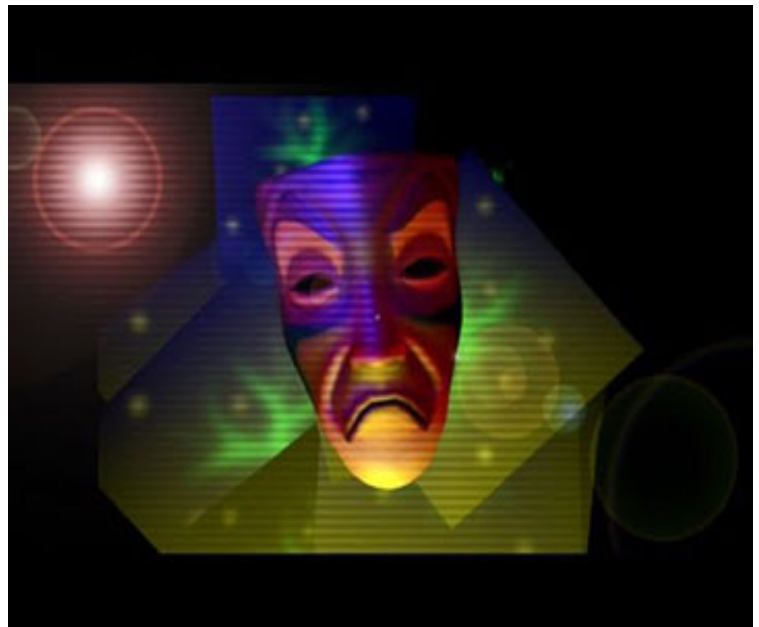


Cash Asmussen with Urban Sea

As for M. Lesbordes, he was not bothered by a jockey's views. He knew already that he had the Arc winner in his care.



French stance of confidence once they have a beliefbelief



His Magic Mirror may have told him a secret

In September 1993, Daniel Wildenstein, an old friend, invited me to have lunch with him in his 'Hotel Particulier' on the rue du Colisee, within walking distance of my office. A world famous art dealer, Daniel Wildenstein was also one of the most successful owners and breeders on the European horse racing scene. I could scarcely wait to consult him on Urban Sea's chances in the Prix de l'Arc de Triomphe.



M. Daniel Wildenstein (1917-2001)

To my surprise, the great race was furthest from my friend's mind. Instead he told me that many years before, he had received a letter from the then PRC Chairman, Mao Zedong, asking him to advise the Chinese government on the best way to create a museum of fine art similar to the Pushkin Museum of Fine Arts in Moscow. At the time, Daniel Wildenstein considered himself too young and inexperienced to undertake such an assignment.



Pushkin Museum in Moscow

Moreover, he had been very wary of dealing with Communists. However, all these years later he was ready to revisit the issue. I was to be his 'bridge' between east and west.



Am I the rainbow bridge between dreams and reality?

Eventually I could contain myself no longer. "What do you think of Urban Sea's chances in the Prix de l'Arc de Triomphe?" There, I had got it off my chest!

The great man thought for what seemed an eternity before responding. "The Arc, Ling, is as much fantasy as reality. It is the stuff of dreams; dreams often beyond the reach of a man with 200 horses in training at the same time. Out of the whole lot of them, the chances are that not one is even worth entering for the great race, much less running in it".



Beyond fantasy dream



Fantasy horses dream

And as for winning it with a filly. . .

After another lengthy pause, Daniel smilingly conceded that he had been lucky enough to win the 1974 Prix de l'Arc de triomphe with his fabulous filly Allez France. And, true, he had won it again nine years later with All Along, also a filly. Since then no filly had succeeded. I realized he was telling me all of this because he did not want me – an old and valued friend – to experience the heartbreak of probable failure when I had convinced myself that there were many chances that my filly would win.



Is the female gender disregarded in the chauvinist thoroughbred milieu?



Dream filly

Our family was aghast when 'our' jockey announced that he would ride Hernando in the Prix de l'Arc de Triomphe. We did not immediately understand that Asmussen was contracted to ride for Greek shipping tycoon Stavros Niarchos, one of the most powerful owners in France. Hernando was one of a long string of Niarchos horses trained by Francois Boutin. He had already won the Prix Lupin, the Prix du Jockey-Club and finished a close second to Epsom Derby winner Commander In Chief in the Irish Derby. That was all rock solid Group 1 form. Urban Sea had yet to win a Group 1.



Stavros Niarchos (1909-1996)



Stavros Niarchos - 194 ft 9

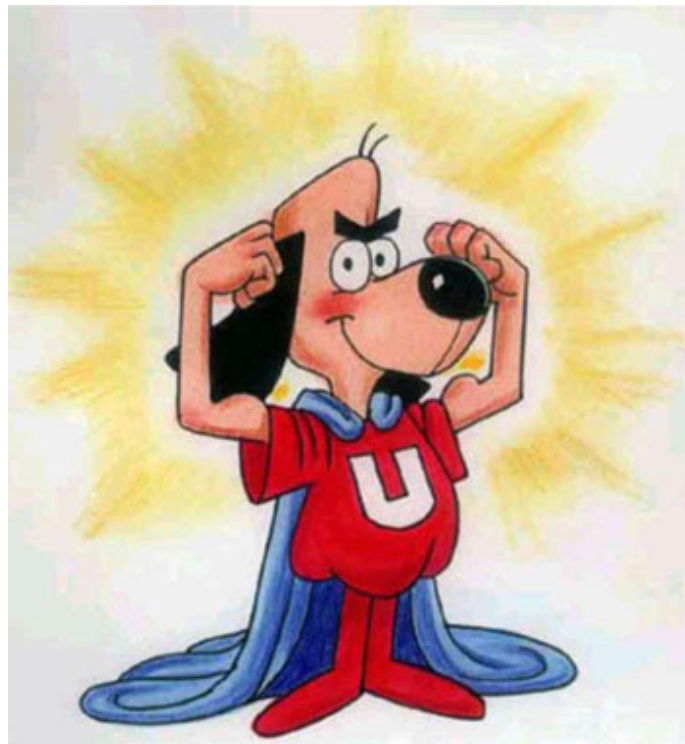
M. Lesbordes' initial reaction was to summon Eric Legrix, his former big-race rider, to fly back from Hong Kong. After all, Eric had ridden Boyatino in 1988 when M. Lesbordes' provincial no-hoper had become the longest-priced horse ever to reach a place in Europe's all-aged championship

race. However, before he could do so, M. Lesbordes happened to meet France's most celebrated former jockey, Yves Saint Martin.



Yves Saint Martin and David Tsui

Yves persuaded M. Lesbordes to give the mount to his son, also Eric, who had been riding with some success in California. Eric Saint-Martin had always been in his famous father's shadow, from which he struggled to emerge. Perhaps it was M. Lesbordes' identification of another 'underdog' fighting for recognition that prompted him to agree.



underdog

That was just a week before the race, for which M. Lesbordes was urgently praying for rain, believing that soft ground at Longchamp would give Urban Sea an added advantage over her rivals. While Urban Sea had won on all types of going, her trainer was convinced that her ability to get through soft ground would give her that crucial advantage over her rivals. We all began to offer prayers for rain in Paris. It did not come.



prayer for rain statue 1899-
Champaign, Illinois



we were all praying for rain but rain did not come
although the sky was cloudy

My husband went out instead and bought a most complicated model remote control toy car in kit form. "Whatever for?", I asked to which my husband replied "because I can build it with Christopher during the nights when we cannot get to sleep on account of the tension over Urban Sea and the Prix de l'Arc de Triomphe!" Surely enough, they completed building it within two (sleepless) nights.



remote control car



Christopher with remote control car

Actually, all of us were in the grip of insomnia as the great day drew nearer. I went out on the balcony, gazing at the sky, searching for rainclouds when M. Lesbordes telephoned at midnight on the eve of the Arc to say that victory depended not on the jockey but much more on a deluge between then and race time. Saturday night remained dry. As no-one likes the rain in beautiful Paris especially poets throughout the centuries (since a rainy day made them feel melancholy and nostalgia), I thought of Paul Verlaine's poem * "il pleure dans mon cœur comme il pleut sur la ville". However for me it would be the opposite; if it were to rain in Paris, it would sing in my heart

like the rain on the town.



Il pleure dans mon cœur comme il pleut sur la ville

* M. Lesbordes = Monsieur Lesbordes in French

Monsieur = Mister

* Tears are shed in my heart like the rain on the town