

ARIMA RACE CLUB
RACE DAY REVIEW
DAY 1 SATURDAY 1ST JANUARY 2011

'Alex', 'Appeal' ring in New Year in style

SWEET ALEX and Oriental Appeal scored upset victories as the gates opened on the 2011 Season with the two spotlight races at Santa Rosa Park, Arima. The back-to-back \$150,000 events highlighted a ten-race First Citizens Bank-sponsored New Year's Day card. The West Indian-bred horses which officially turned three years old on the day took centre stage first in the sixth event just after 2.30 p.m. The First Citizens First Classic was billed as a clash between juvenile champions Oriental Appeal and Lawbreaker. And it turned into another triumph for "girl power" as the former prevailed by just over length in a good time of 1:12.44 seconds. Although both horses entered the 1,200-metre contest unbeaten and Oriental Appeal was well backed at 4/1, it was still considered a major stunner as Lawbreaker had run a full three seconds faster last time out on December 4 when he had won the St James Stakes and Oriental Appeal had taken the St Ann's Stakes.

While he was trotting up by over ten lengths against his fellow colts and geldings in the 'St James', Oriental Appeal did not look nearly as impressive as she made hard work of beating her fellow fillies in the 'St Ann's.' But that could have been because the daughter of Saint Appeal had been out of action for three months, and this time she looked a lot more like the horse which came close to the 1,000-metre track record when she had prevailed by almost 11 lengths on debut in the Nursery Stakes. Although the two had battled at the head of the field for most of the way, Oriental Appeal was always in front and odds-on favourite Lawbreaker, who had won his previous two career starts by a combined 19 ¼ lengths, was unable to pass in the closing stages and went down by 1 ¼ lengths. The light-weighted B's Passion finished 1 ½ lengths back in third and the locally-bred filly was the only non-Jamaican "on the board" as 'St James' third Loan Shark was another 1 ½ lengths adrift in fourth. Frankenstein, another Jamaica, and Tyler's Gold, daughter of the great Sian's Gold who had finished third on debut in the 'St Ann's', completed the order of finish, respectively.

It is the second year in succession that the female had upset the male in the first meeting between the winners of the St Ann's Stakes and St James Stakes. Last year's clash had, in fact, been in the Royal Colours Classic when Grand Riviere shocked Treasure Hunt in her first race of the season in March. Treasure Hunt had earlier cruised to victory in the First Classic and his trainer Douglas Bennett has now won the first big race of the season in consecutive years. Owner Fredericks Stud Farm Limited, whose boss Andrew Fredericks, had bred fourth-race winner Team Connection, picked up the \$90,000 winners' cheque and Oriental Appeal has now won \$240,000 from just three starts. Brian Harding had previously been the only rider for both Oriental Appeal and Lawbreaker and although he chose wrong, the veteran was still the most successful rider of the day.

Harding bounced back from his disappointment immediately and landed the First Citizens Sian's Gold Sprint with Sweet Alex. It is very difficult to imagine the country's quickest horse being an outsider in a 1,100-metre event, but Sweet Alex had flopped in his only previous attempt on the turf in this very race last year and was doubted by punters. The American-bred son of Personal First had the last laugh and proved that he is as fast as ever at age seven by making all the running to prevail at odds of 8/1. Bristling, who failed to live up to lofty expectation last season because of injury, closed well on his turf debut to finish just a length behind the winner as champion trainer John O'Brien saddled the first two in the Grade II affair. Sikhara, who had won four times and finished second once in her five previous career starts, finished only a head behind in her first start in over four months, while rank outsider The Welsh Wizard rounded out the top four.

Filcher, who finished third in the Stewards Cup last time out at the end of November, could only place sixth in the defense of his title, while De Jewel, runner-up by a whisker in last year's edition, ended up tenth of the 11 runners. Big City Diva was sent off as the favourite on her grass debut and third career outing, but the Stewards Cup runner-up did not enjoy the soft turf and ended up eighth after an alert beginning. Sweet Alex's victory enabled O'Brien to break away from a three-way tie with Maniram Maharaj and Grant Lourenco - who scored a hat-trick - and the pilot has now saddled four winners in the event, which used to be known as the Queen's Plate. Sweet Alex had also won this race two years ago when it was switched to the main course and is only the third double winner of the event. The O'Brien-trained Chanticleer ('98 and '99) and the Lourenco-trained Twice Infallible ('05 and '06) are the others, but they did it in back-to-back years.

It was the ninth victory from 24 starts for Sweet Alex and the \$90,000 he earned for the Estate of Roland Khan pushed his career earnings to less than a \$1,000 away from \$550,000. After a successful season in Canada, Patrick Husbands and Chantal Sutherland decided to show off some of the skills in T&T and the local fans did not leave Santa Rosa Park disappointed. Husbands, the seven-time champ at Woodbine Race Course, almost got up with Bristling in the 'Sian's Gold', but he had already been successful twice. After the Barbadian failed to "hit board" astride favourite Sonata's Melody in the opener, he quickly made amends by booting home Personal Exchange in the second - the First Citizens St Lucia Starter Allowance. It was the third victory in the last four starts for Charles James' American-bred roan colt, who is now unbeaten from three starts over two turns. 2009 Carib Brewery Guineas winner Santa Rosa Boy finished second, but Caribbean Champion Stakes runner-up Sound Of Thunder could only place sixth of eighth as the favourite in the 1,600-metre contest on the lawn. Husbands returned right after with the very speedy Ksar Ghilane and the pair completely dominated the First Citizens Trustee Services, and finishing two lengths ahead at the end of the 1,200-metre contest.

This was an historic event as the Rating System was used for the very first time and only horses rated between 69 and 48 competed. There was one other and Unbridleme prevailed by four lengths in the eighth race – the 1,350-metre First Citizens Brokerage & Advisory Services Handicap for horses rated 52-31. Sutherland, who hails from Winnipeg, Canada, and is one of the top female riders in the world, guided Santa Rosa Classic runner-up Will Power to an impressive 3 ¾-length triumph in the First Citizens

Bank \$25,000 Optional Claimer over a distance of 1,200 metres.

But Harding, who has entered his 30th year in the saddle, was the leading rider and in addition to booting home Sweet Alex and Unbridleme, he scored in the curtain event with Classic Material. This daughter of Western Envoy just held on by a neck to deny the rapidly-closing debutant Black Bart over 1,100 metres in the First Asset Management for West Indian-bred three-year-old maidens. Classic Material is the half-sister of Mister Kingston and like the fourth-placed finisher in the '09 Stewards Cup she is bred and owned by Gerry Harding.

Her handler O'Brien completely dominated the trainers as he also saddled Personal Exchange, Sweet Alex and Will Power to begin the season with a bang.

Racing takes a short break and will resume next week Saturday (January 15).