

# RACING'S BARD

Derby Festival meets Henry Birtles, horseracing's unofficial poet, as modest as they come, despite having moved some of the most prominent owners and trainers to tears with his verse

How many times, since the Back Page became as big a concern to the majority of readers as the front, can a poet claim to have stolen the lead story of the sports section in a major national broadsheet; not many one can safely assume, if any at all. On April 5th this year, it happened when Dubai's principle daily, Gulf News, headlined - "Ode to Dubai World Cup", with a sub-heading that read "Englishman Birtles pays tribute to World's Richest Race".

It wasn't a quiet time for sport either. Indeed the lead story left the Cricket World Cup, then in its group stages and Liverpool's march towards yet another European Champions League Final, fighting it out for a slice of the remaining pie. Why the lead story though? Self effacing Henry Birtles, the poet in question, was himself at a loss to explain, believing that Dubai's immense passion for their premier sporting event had a great deal to do with it. There is also a real pride in the fact that the region sent out the three founding fathers of the thoroughbred racehorse as we know it; a fact which forms the basis for his poem, "The Day After".

And the reason for this sudden elevation beyond "occasionally boring people after dinner who are bored of each other" as he puts it, can be pinpointed to a highly acclaimed performance at National Hunt's biggest stage, the Cheltenham Festival, in March. News of the Racing Poet's moving tribute to Best Mate (commissioned by Lord Vestey, as a present for his sister-in-law and Best Mate's trainer Henrietta Knight) on Gold Cup day, had travelled further than Birtles had first thought. The Daily Telegraph's Marcus Armitage had gone so far as to describe the recital as the non-racing highlight of the Festival. So when Gulf News set the challenge of a Dubai World Cup poem with a deadline of three days, he went to work; that is, not before finalising the race's international TV deals as part of his day job, which he had brokered on behalf of the Dubai Racing Club, as consultant to leading



production company, Sunset + Vine (also producer of today's Derby coverage for the BBC). Since then, and on the back of what he describes as a spell of "micro publicity", the commissions have started to roll in, including the Derby Poem, which precedes this article.

Birtles, aka the Racing Poet, isn't so much keen on the sport as he is fanatical and unashamedly passionate about it. That it comes across so well in poetry is a measure of the man's heartfelt enthusiasm – but he is as self-disparaging as they come. "I would hate to insult the great poets and prefer to describe what I write as rhymes. There's nothing that clever about them, but I think they reflect what racing fans feel about this sport and the memories they have of some of the great horses and races that we've been privileged to witness." Where he insists "Don't give up the day job" should be the title of this article, like it or not, he does bring to mind Edith Sitwell ("My poems are hymns of praise to the glory of life"). As if the poems themselves aren't evidence enough of his ability, great friend Elizabeth Hurley is hosting a pre-Derby party exclusively for him, to be attended by Racing and London's glitterati, where the Derby Poem will be heard in public for the first time; it is also rumoured that Epsom have commissioned the inimitable and esteemed Shakesperian actor Brian Blessed to recite



his work 'The Derby' to an audience of 130,000 race-goers, as the runners head to post for the race itself.

Just how does poetry fit into Birtles' life? "I wasn't interested at school, in fact I still know very little about it," he says, despite carrying a copy of his favourite childhood poem "The Destruction of Senacarib" in his wallet, "I suppose I just wear my heart on my sleeve and when something gets me it often translates onto the page; with racing, it's purely a matter of greatness."

Last year, armed with a handful of Desert Orchid poems left "to flog", Birtles approached Cheltenham racecourse managing director Edward Gillespie with the idea of an on-track recital; being a man famous in the business for giving the race-goer added value, Gillespie set him up in one of the racecourse's restaurants. On an upturned bookie's box one minute and invited into the Royal box the next, it proved a hit.

1989 saw him first pick up the pen in earnest with his earliest work "Phar Lap", a tribute to Australia's greatest horse. The ink started to flow, but it still remains very much a hobby, something to fill the time on planes and trains. With plenty of poems and a couple of acclaimed rhyming Best Man speeches behind him, notably for childhood friends and former retobates Henry Dent-Brocklehurst and Ed Farquhar, his work goes some way to confound a propensity to play down a genuine ability.

Asked whether he could lend his pen prowess to other sports, Birtles answers "...perhaps I could try my hand at it". But he is

keen to move away from the subject of poetry, a sideline, and talk about his "day job". With eleven years in the Television business behind him and with the backing of Sunset + Vine, Racing's

"First Poet" established HBA (Henry Birtles Associates) in November 2006. "The aim is to represent a handful of sports that need to establish a genuine or stronger world-wide TV network foothold." He feels very strongly about the sport he loves and who gets to see it through the world's most powerful medium. "There are racing federations out there who think their event holds a bigger sway with programming executives than it actually does; for example most of the decision makers, the people I sit down with, recognise the Arc de Triomphe merely as a Paris landmark and not one of the great events in the sporting calendar. Equally, these federations seem to be satisfied that television

coverage of their showcase event on a world-wide network of racing dedicated cable channels equals a global audience. It is easy to fall back on such a claim, but the reality is very different and sponsors in this day and age have wised up." Domestically Racing Channels serve their purpose and are vital; for international events they do provide additional betting revenue, but they do not deliver audience figures. He goes on, "Racing is a massive industry, but for TV it is a second tier sport. Beyond countries like the UK, Ireland, Australia, South Africa, Japan and Hong Kong, it doesn't feature. The sport's administrators need to be realistic; there's no reason why the sport cannot challenge for a higher spot in its 'division'; at the moment it falls short. On handling the distribution of the Dubai World Cup, Birtles is proud that the world's richest race is one of the few exceptions to this rule. "The Dubai World Cup has what I would describe as proper distribution, with major global coverage on major and internationally recognized networks. The fact that many of the other principal events are not achieving in this respect needs to be addressed. But racing is a sport that also needs enthusiasm to sell it; knowledge, an understanding of its real position, contacts and an understanding of the TV landscape to get it the placement it deserves; it needs to be packaged right. We are looking at the fastest and most powerful athletes on the planet, but I know what racing is up against. Football annexes 75 per cent of TV coverage and

revenue; a further 15 per cent goes to the likes of Formula One, Golf, Boxing, Cricket, Rugby, Tennis etc. The remainder, racing included, have to fight for their share of 10 per cent. Some of these great and historical

events deserve more than being just a filler that gets four minutes airtime outside its constituency, before the producer cuts to a dog race. These are events that should get a 30 minute slot at least on a top cable channel like the ESPN's of this world and if they're lucky, a terrestrial". Coverage with a social angle, with everything that makes a race day a memorable experience, brought to you by a poet, no less.

...and if you want to commission a poem as an alternative way of commemorating your racehorse, visit [www.racingpoems.co.uk](http://www.racingpoems.co.uk) and give Henry an excuse to avoid more gardening on the weekend.

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