

## Top owners target Champions Day again with QEII runner-up - and buy Willie Mullins' rare two-year-old winner



Facteur Cheval has been second in the Queen Elizabeth II Stakes for the last two years

Credit: Edward Whitaker

The owners of **Facteur Cheval** believe there is "no question" their Group 1 winner has the ability to make another big impression when he attempts to make it third time lucky in the Queen Elizabeth II Stakes on British Champions Day in October.

Trained by Jerome Reynier, Facteur Cheval has unfinished business at Ascot, having twice lined up in the end-of-season Group 1, finishing behind runaway winner Big Rock in 2023 before chasing home leading miler Charyn last season.

In a wide-open mile division, his competition this year could include Irish 2,000 Guineas and St James's Palace Stakes winner Field Of Gold, who was found to be lame after finishing only fourth in the Sussex Stakes at Glorious Goodwood.

Facteur Cheval is on a redemption mission of his own after finishing sixth in the Prince of Wales's Stakes, after which Reynier was critical of Flavien Prat's decision to ride the six-year-old close to the pace on his first try at a mile and a quarter.

"When he got back to France following Royal Ascot he lost some weight and it took a lot out of him physically," said Barry Irwin, a former sports writer and founder of Team Valor International, which owns Facteur Cheval alongside Gary Barber and won the 2011 Kentucky Derby with Animal Kingdom. "I don't blame the travel aspect for that. I just think he was put at such a disadvantage in the race and was moved too early – the horse is so generous that he just overdid it."

"He was given some time off and has been gradually brought back by Jerome. We hoped to run him in the Prix du Moulin next week, but even though he's back to normal, he's not had enough work to make it, so we're focusing on the Queen Elizabeth II for the third time in a row and that will be it for this year. He's looking good again but just hasn't been able to have the requisite amount of work."

On the challenge facing him in the QEII, Irwin added: "It's a funny race because you never quite know what the ground is going to be like and there's always seemingly one emerging horse who you just can't contend with. He's capable though, there's no question about it."

Facteur Cheval won the 2024 Dubai Turf and returned to the Middle East this year for an ambitious three-race campaign. He finished third in the Al Maktoum Challenge when bidding to become the first horse to win a Group 1 on dirt and turf in the UAE before running in the Saudi Cup and finishing sixth in the Dubai Turf.



Barry Irwin: founder of major syndicate Team Valor International

Credit: Edward Whitaker

"After Ascot we'll figure out what we want to do," said Irwin. "I've kind of given up on the idea of trying him on the dirt again and I'd like to see if he can run another good race in the Dubai Turf. We went a little crazy this year and I think we'll wind up just pointing him at the Dubai Turf."

### **Team Valor also have purchased exciting juvenile trained by 'legend' Willie Mullins**

Team Valor International have 60 horses in training, spread evenly between Europe and the US, and this year will have their first trained by Willie Mullins after buying **Thread Of Gold**, a rare two-year-old winner for the yard at Curragh last week.

"We're happy to have a horse with him – obviously he's a legend," said Irwin. "He's probably another one who will be best at a mile and a furlong. A mile might wind up being too short and a mile and a quarter is always a question mark until you get there. He has an eclectic pedigree with a lot of stamina. He's out of a Hard Spun mare and we've won a few Graded races with a Hard Spun filly in the US, so that appealed to us."



Thread Of Gold ridden by Joe Sheridan winning The Coolmore Stud Little Big Bear Irish EBF Maiden

Credit: Caroline Norris  
([racingpost.com/photos](http://racingpost.com/photos))

The owners' European team has been boosted by the arrival of two horses from South Africa, with South African Oaks winner **Frances Ethel** joining William Haggas in May and **Quid Pro Quo**, a dual Grade 1 winner, arriving with Reynier on Monday.

On Quid Pro Quo, Irwin added: "She was supposed to come over a few months ago to give her plenty of time to acclimatise and get ready for Dubai. We're behind the eight ball to get her ready. We're aiming at the two races early in the season, the Cape Verde and the Balanchine, but if she's unable to make those we might look for a prep and try her in the Dubai Turf.

"She's gone from being light-framed and athletic to a bit of a powerhouse. We won the Dubai Turf with another filly from South Africa in Ipi Tombe. I'm not putting this filly in the same league, but she's pretty good and dominated her group in South Africa."