

ROYAL CALCUT



TA TURF CLUB'S

ON THE MAGICAL LURE OF THE TURFS, horses and races of
India's **ROYAL CALCUTTA TURF CLUB, KOLKATA**

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HORSES & RACES



Jockey Shrikant
focuses on the
race ahead

The regal Member's Stand and the First Enclosure, from the paddock

1961: PRIOR TO THE QUEEN ELIZABETH II CUP, an old Parsi hotelier, Adeshir Billimoria, visits Queen Victoria's statue every evening, garlands it and asks for her blessing to win the race, as her great-granddaughter will be personally presenting the trophy, at the Royal Calcutta Turf Club (RCTC). Thus, with supposed regal blessings, his horse Pa Bear wins it. Queen Elizabeth II hands over the coveted trophy to the Billimoria couple, making them celebrities overnight. The trophy is still manufactured by the Queen's jewellers and is consigned to the RCTC from England.

2017: Joydeep Dutttagupta's wife visits a temple at sunrise for their beloved thoroughbred Sana's success at the Calcutta Oaks race. Earlier that year, Sana won the Calcutta Monsoon Derby and the Calcutta 1000 Guineas.

On the first floor balcony of the clubhouse at the Royal Calcutta Turf Club, Joydeep keeps his fingers crossed in quiet anticipation while he wines and dines on a scrumptious menu with his family and his syndicate of horse-owners. They enjoy the crisp winter afternoon, the verdant race track and the Kolkata skyline dominated by the regal Victoria Memorial. They wait for three-year old Sana's race and avail the personalised betting service on one's behalf while relaxing.

Joydeep has been riding horses since his childhood. For him, this 'Sport of Kings' is entertainment beyond compare. The elegance of the ultimate athlete at full gallop is poetry in motion. The vibrant silks of the jockeys, pulsating races, throbbing crowds and tradition-steeped racing



Joydeep Dattagupta, a regular at the stables and races despite a hectic corporate life

ceremonies make the live race an engaging experience for the punter and the spectator seeking an electric atmosphere. A spectator feels committed to watching a horse flash past the finish post even when the bet is a modest INR100 per race. The most common are "win" bets (for a horse to win) and "place" bets (for podium fin-

ishers). He cautions newcomers 'to not exceed their budget and to not vary the betting amount'.

Watching the races from the owners' room is cancer survivor Gautam Sengupta, who has owned stallions for over 40 years. Following his mother's passion for racing, Gautam started playing truant at the age of 15 to watch the game with the railbirds. Wheel-chair-bound Gautam attended races while he was paralysed for two years. Nothing can keep the likes of him away from the RCTC.





With modernised interiors and well-preserved exteriors, RCTC's package deal of intoxicating ambience and entertainment is almost unrivalled in Kolkata. Although races are held around the year, the best time is mid-November to mid-February. The Queen Elizabeth II Cup, Calcutta Derby Stakes, Calcutta 1000 and 2000 Guineas, and Calcutta Oaks are some of the major races that draw throngs of Kolkatans. Average attendance on a normal day is around 6,000. During important races like Derby Day and

New Year's Day, it swells to 25,000. The New Year's Day races is Kolkata's biggest annual socio-cum-sporting event. It is a heady mix of fun, food and fashion competing for honours among the thoroughbreds on the turf, all of whom celebrate a common birthday on January 1st. The stake money varies widely and goes up to INR400,000 in Kolkata. However, the Indian Derby in Mumbai can rise to INR20 million for the winner. Founded by the British in February 1847, the Calcutta Racecourse and Turf Club is the second-oldest in

India. By 1889, the Calcutta Turf Club was the supreme authority for rules for all 52 racecourses in the Asian subcontinent. The prize money for the first year of The Calcutta Turf Club Derby Sweep (1867) was a whopping INR35,000. Between 1929 and 1934, the pool would swell to over a million Sterling Pounds. Britain's King George V, on his second visit to Calcutta (1912), granted the then CTC its Royal status.

The racecourse infrastructure is better than most in India, as the original track has never been fiddled with.

Proud syce
Jeetendra leads
champions Sana
and Dasharath
Singh to receive
the prize



Ever ready to talk
about horses -
Bharath Singh



Racing is possible on the monsoon track, built in the 1900s, even after seven inches of rain. The 2,800-meter circuit is one of the longer courses in India. The main races are between 1,000 meters to a mile. A very select breed runs over the longer trips of the Classics. Sired by the highest level of thoroughbreds, Yana and Multidimensional, Sana is one of 500 RCTC racehorses. The stallion's bloodline traces back to three founding stallions – the Byerley Turk, the Godolphin Barb and the Darley Arabian, brought by the British. Pedigree charts recorded over 300 years show the lineage that brands the exclusivity of the horses and the sport. These horses are born to race and do so even when they are at the farms, as a pastime. On this race day, syce Jeetendra takes Sana through her daily routine of eating oats and bran, and getting massaged. He brings her to the saddling enclosure near the old banyan tree and leads her around the paddock with her competitors. One particular horse feels jittery and

has to be coaxed onto the track. Like examinees, the horses are varyingly wired on D-day. Some are nervous, some over-confident. Then, jockey Dasharath Singh, sporting the silks of Joydeep's syndicate, rides Sana to the starting gate. Her trainer, Kolkata-based Bharath Singh has already discussed strategies with the rider.

Bharath considers training to be a paying hobby and refrains from betting. He says horses and racing run in his Rajput blood. His father Jagdish Singh Chauhan was India's top jockey from 1943 to 1987. Bharath aspired to be a jockey, but grew too tall, so switched to training instead. He apprenticed under the inimitable Indian trainer Rashid Byramji in 1982. To be a good trainer, one has to connect with the trainee, and Bharath's love is amply reciprocated by his equines. One of the best horses he trained was Bold Gesture. A decade after retiring Bold Gesture to a coffee estate, Bharath visited him, and the horse responded to his command of 'Up, Baba, up!'

Bharath selected Sana for her owners from the Usha Stud Farm. He also chooses horses from annual auction sales at important venues. The owners then buy them individually or in a syndicate. The cost ranges from INR500,000 to a million. All horses reach Bharath between January and March. After intensive training, they begin racing by the third week of November. The stewards then decide the categories under which the horses will race.

Cyrus Madan, a steward of RCTC, has never owned a horse, honouring a promise to his father. He has been commentating since 1978. Initially, while in Mumbai, Cyrus published and edited the weekly 'Turfite', the only publication on racing in India at the time. He was appointed to the Board of Stewards, and was the chairman of the club over 2007-2011. A veritable encyclopaedia on racing, Cyrus started visiting the racecourse at the age of 7. His neighbour was India's top trainer Mac Galstan. Little Cyrus would of-

Non-members in the First Enclosure outnumber members in the Members' Stand



ten accompany him to the stables. He would listen intently to Mac's discussions on racing with one of his owners. Afterwards, Cyrus would innocently discuss this at the tennis club. Cyrus' reporting became a source of tips for punters at the club. It took a while for Mac to realise where the leak was, after which no racing was discussed in Cyrus' presence. In betting, tips are a double-edged sword, as due to them, many a fortune is won or lost.

People, wary about losing money to betting, forget that financial markets have equally sad stories of losses. There's a huge stigma attached to racing, as it's the only legalised form of gambling in India. Due to this, some regulars still avoid admitting that they frequent the track. It is, however, the most well-governed and supervised sport in India; from breeding in stud farms of international standards to the foals being given 5-star treatment with a dietician, 24-hour vets and spacious

stables. They are groomed from birth to become athletes and champions. Drug testing is extremely strict. These measures lend credibility to the sport.

Cyrus feels the quality of the commercially-driven current owners are different from those in the past who were thrilled by horses and the game. Once the commercial venture fails, the former exits promptly.

Today, all clubs are affected by the new national sales tax that adds 28% on sales, resulting in the halving of revenue due to lower demand. The younger generation is losing interest due to other entertainment options and excessive racing around the country with inter-venue betting.

Meanwhile, the Calcutta Oaks race has started. The scoreboards list the odds for each horse. Sana, the clear favourite, is keeping the punters guessing by settling into third place among seven horses, allowing Friendship to take the lead, followed by Implicit Trust. The

four majestic grandstands, built in the early 1900s, are buzzing with aspiration. Stylishly-clad ladies and gentlemen clasp their hands in excitement or are taking photos on their mobile phones. Sana keeps a steady pace and the adrenaline pumping, till heads turn home and Dasharath Singh releases the brakes. Implicit Trust overtakes Friendship. Sana, in a breathtaking move, overtakes both and nudges to victory.

Amid cheering, syce Jeetendra and Dasharath turn Sana back to the paddock where her owners and trainer await. Her coat glistens in the setting sun. Sana is charged up knowing she has won the race. Socialite Sunita Kumar, in a saree with horses embroidered on its border, presents the trophy to the syndicate. It is time for Sana to rest in her stable, after Joydeep and his partners reward her with carrots. She has to now get ready for The Calcutta Derby 2018 where the winner will earn INR9.6 million. ●