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THE EUROPEAN VIEW ~ By Klaus Koch

The Elitlopp – The Place To Be The Last Sunday In May



Photo by Monica Thors

Klaus Koch

There are a few racing events throughout the world which, no matter what, always attract enormous crowds. The Melbourne Cup in Australia is one, the Little Brown Jug in Delaware, Ohio is another. The question is, do any of these races present a better ambience than the Elitlopp in Stockholm, Sweden?

This is the story of the Elitlopp's history, how the field is created and the enormous work behind the scenes to present such a spectacular day of racing.

In 1952 Solvalla Racetrack in Stockholm, the capital of Sweden, was celebrating its 25th anniversary. It was decided to arrange an international race to honour the day, July 31. This invitational race was supposed to be a one-time event. However, the success of the race, called something like Solvalla 25th Anniversary Invitational Trot, made the board reconsider and a year later it returned, now called Solvalla's Internationella Elitlopp. It has returned ever since then and is now known as simply the Elitlopp.

For the first edition in 1952 the only international guest was the German

champion Permit, who won the race for Walter Heitmann. In the coming years the race secretary of Solvalla started looking for horses in other European countries and soon France was represented every year. Italy too had good trotters as did Germany. Denmark, Norway and Holland had a few good horses, but there were years between the participation of horses from these countries.

At the end of the 1960s North American horses were brought over for the first time, and in 1969 the Elitlopp was won by Fresh Yankee with Joe O'Brien driving. Four years earlier German top trainer Johannes Frömring had won the race for American interests with Elma. Later Mack Lobell won a spectacular edition of the race in 1988 and in 1992 the Canadian trotter Billyjojimbob won in impressive fashion. So far, the last North American owned winner has been Moni Maker in 1998, but Mr Muscleman came very close in 2007 in an exciting finish against the French l'Amiral Mauzun.

The work with an Elitlopp begins just days after the previous year's edition has been performed. Hotels have to be booked, but nowadays everybody in

Stockholm knows that the last Sunday of May is Elitlopp Day. Therefore, it was astonishing that the Stockholm Marathon has been moved from July to that particular day this year. (The Marathon people seemed to think that the Elitlopp would be on May 24 and not the 31st. A telephone call would have prevented the clash. However, I do not think that the impact will be of any significance.)

Engaging horses is one of the longer term functions of the Elitlopp. However, the Elitlopp field has to present horses with fresh racing form, so there is no way to invite horses in the fall. What we do is look for interesting and suitable horses, and with horses from overseas we make an early approach in order to check the interest and to make it possible for the connections to plan. Normally Australasian horses are signed up during February (after the Inter Dominion Championships) and North American horses in March-April. European horses will wait until the middle of May, but we

have a wish list with the most interesting horses like the Prix d'Amerique winner.

This year the winner of the world's biggest race for older trotters, the Prix d'Amerique at Vincennes racetrack in Paris, was confirmed to go for the Elitlopp. Meaulnes du Corta was being prepared to contest the Elitlopp but he recently was injured during a stay in the paddock and for the next few month racing is out of the question. That, of course, came as a big shock for all European racing fans as the horse would have been a headliner in this year's edition.

From time to time we bring up trotters from downunder. Pride of Petite (1996), Special Force (1999) and Lyell Creek (2001) have represented New Zealand and this year Sundons Gift will be the first horse ever to represent Australia in the Elitlopp (see this month's Downunder Column on page 18 for more on Sundons Gift). The gelding arrived in Stockholm on April 11 and has settled in well.

The Elitlopp is a race over a mile with eliminations (two each with eight trotters) and a final to which the four first finishers qualify. For Australasian and French trotters the mile is very uncommon, as a matter of fact, Sundons Gift had never raced a mile in his life before going to Sweden! Downunder the common race distances are a mile and three-quarters and two miles. The Frenchmen organize three mile races within the year, but the short distance to Italy (where most of the races are at the mile distance) makes it possible for French trotters to race miles frequently. In the Scandinavian countries 20 to 25 per cent of the races are miles. A mile and a quarter is the most frequent race distance here, but we also race 10 per cent of our races over two miles.

Actually, I do not consider the lack of mile race experience a problem. We have seen it so many times before, that strength is the most powerful weapon in order to win the Elitlopp. Many people seem to believe that gate speed is the most important thing. I would say it does help, but it is never necessary. Swedish trotter Utah Bulwark never won a mile before winning the 1986 Elitlopp. Another Swede, From Above (2003) was not a sprinter, but ate up Meadowlands-



In 1992 Billyjojimbob became the first, and only, Canadian bred to capture the Elitlopp for owner Lori Ferguson, trainer Mike Wade and driver Murray Brethour.

winner Victory Tilly and Scarlet Knight in the home stretch.

Prior to this year's Elitlopp a lot of North American horses have been mentioned as possible contenders: Arch Madness, Armbro Chronicle, Before He Cheats, Buck I St Pat, Corleone Kosmos, Enough Talk, Knight Of Intrigue, Likeabatoutahell, Lucky Jim, Misterizi... with most of the focus on Enough Talk, the fastest trotter ever who finished third in last year's Elitlopp. His trainer and owner Peter Kleinhans is preparing the gelded son of Enjoy Lavec to go for revenge.

Arch Madness has been aimed for the event for a long time, but trainer Trond Smedshammer does not think that

he can get him into proper form in due time. If other North American horses follow Enough Talk (which I deeply hope) it will be decided very soon.

This was all this time. Please do not hesitate to comment my articles. My e-mail address is ontrack@telia.com and as usual I would be more than happy to get reactions from the North American harness racing fans. 🐾

Till next time,
Klaus Koch

Klaus Koch is one of Scandinavia's leading racing administrators and is perhaps best known for his former role as director of racing at Solvalla Racetrack.