

## **Paul Hensey Gimcrack dinner speech Tuesday 14th of December 2021**

My Lord President, My Lords, Ladies and Gentlemen,

It is a privilege to address you here tonight on behalf Sheikh Joaan Al Thani and Al Shaqab Racing and it is a very special honour to be here on the occasion of the 250<sup>th</sup> Gimcrack dinner. It is always a pleasure to come to York which is one of my favourite racecourses and to meet with some of my long-standing friends on the committee and on the management team here. York is always a very welcoming racecourse to visit and the excellent facilities on course following the recent development works ensure a great experience for all.

The reason I am in this privileged position tonight is because on 20<sup>th</sup> of August 2021 Al Shaqab's Lusail won the Group 2 Al Basti EquiWorld Gimcrack stakes. This was one of the highlights of a very good season for the Al Shaqab juveniles and it was a great achievement to win this prestigious race carrying a 3lb penalty for his win in the July stakes. The Gimcrack was Lusail's second time to win at York having previously beaten subsequent Grade 1 winner Albahar in his maiden here in May. Lusail's victory was very significant for Al Shaqab not just because it was his second Group 2 victory but also because he is by Mehmas the European leading second season sire who raced in the Al Shaqab colours and now stands in partnership with Tally Ho Stud in Ireland.

There are many people that I would like to thank tonight on behalf of Sheikh Joaan for their contribution to Lusail's success, the O'Callaghan family from Tally Ho Stud who bred and consigned him, Charlie Gordon-Watson who bought him for Al Shaqab at Tattersalls, our UK racing manager Alison Begley, Richard Hannon and his team who have trained him so well, Pat Dobbs who gave him a marvelous ride in the Gimcrack and his lad Anatoliy Shapkin who has looked after Lusail since he arrived at Richard's. I would also like to thank William Derby and everybody at York racecourse for all their help on the day and a very special thank you to Dubai based Al Basti Equiworld for their sponsorship of the Gimcrack Stakes.

I am often asked about the origin of Al Shaqab racing. Qatar is the home of Al Shaqab racing and Sheikh Joaan is a senior member of the Qatari royal family, his father Sheikh Hamad was the former Amir of Qatar and Sheikh Joaan's brother Sheikh Tamin is the current Amir of Qatar. It has been a very busy time in Qatar as preparations have progressed to host the FIFA world cup there next year. There has been a huge investment in stadiums and infrastructure in the

country in advance of the world cup and with all the spectacular facilities now in place I have no doubt that it will be a wonderful event for participants and spectators alike. Some of the stadiums will actually have their capacity reduced and others will be completely dismantled and re-erected in disadvantaged countries after the world cup. Interestingly the stadium for the opening ceremony and for the world cup final is called the Lusail stadium so I hope that that is a good omen for the year ahead.

Qatar is fast becoming one of the worlds leading sporting hubs with many international sporting events being held there and Sheikh Joaan as president of the Qatar Olympic committee and as a board member of the supreme committee responsible for the delivery of the FIFA world cup is heavily involved in the promotion of sport in the country.

Horse Racing and Equestrian sport is growing in Qatar too with a number of high-profile international show jumping and dressage competitions being held there each year. There are now two racecourses in Qatar, Al Rayyan and Al Uqda both under the control of the Qatar Racing and Equestrian Club. The QREC organizes 70 race meetings for Thoroughbred and Arabian horses between October and April each year. The highlight of the season is the Amir sword meeting that is held in mid-February, this meeting always attracts international runners as there is over \$4 million dollars in prize money on offer and generous travel incentives available for horses and for connections too.

Being the 250<sup>th</sup> speaker at this event is a great honour but it brings its disadvantages too as it very difficult to find a subject to talk about that has not been covered already! I note from my research on this task that prize money has been the most common theme since the mid-1850s so I will go easy on that subject tonight.

One thing that my predecessors did not have an opportunity to talk about was Covid 19 and how our sport and industry coped with this global pandemic. I must say that I was very proud of how we all got through this challenging time and pulled together for the greater good of the industry.

When lockdown kicked in in March 2020 the future looked bleak for the racing and bloodstock worlds. But the resilience of horse people in a time of crisis is not to be underestimated.

Mares foaled and were covered again under strict protocols where all documentation was emailed in advance of covering and drivers and travelling

grooms did not leave their vehicles as the mares were only allowed to be handled by the stallion farms staff. The sales companies managed to inspect and select horses for their various sales and all sales went ahead even if they moved country or were in unfamiliar calendar positions. Some sales went online, and others were held with limited attendance. The sales companies in some instances even chartered flights to bring buyers to and from their sales.

Racing was completely shut down initially and then came back behind closed doors with just essential people on site. International participation was greatly restricted but with the creation of bubbles and new business's starting up to accommodate runners from abroad we started to see overseas participation again. Prize money was cut in most countries in anticipation of falling betting revenues but that has now almost been restored to pre pandemic levels as betting revenues have come back strongly. In France, France-Galop actually implemented a retrospective prize money increase for 2020 based on better than expected betting figures.

It is a great testament to the Doctors, the Vets, all the various industry bodies that came together to convince Governments that we could keep going through this crisis in a safe and responsible manner. It is an even greater testament to all the participants in our sport and industry that we delivered on our promise and kept the wheels turning without any major outbreaks or incidents.

On the subject of change I was delighted to read that the media company behind the smash hit Formula One documentary "Drive to Survive", and others with similar ambitions, are in advanced talks about a horse racing version of the series based on British racing. Drive to Survive has been credited with providing a huge boost in the popularity of formula one with ESPN's television audience for the sport almost doubling since 2019. It has brought the sport to a whole new audience and a similar series for horseracing could do the same thing.

At a time when traditional media coverage is under pressure this initiative could open new doors for the sport and attract long lasting knowledgeable fans who would go racing and perhaps own horses in time to come. I would urge all industry groups to put personal interests aside and to pull together as we did during the pandemic to make this happen.

Racing faces challenges too and although I intend this to be very positive address it would be remiss of me not to briefly mention concerns that I have for the sport and the industry,

As mentioned earlier prize money has been covered many times before and it seems unfair to raise it at this dinner as York is one of the racecourses that really makes an effort in this regard. It was good to read the announcement of increased prizemoney at Jockey Club racecourses yesterday, but Brittan is slipping behind the rest of the world and unless this issue is addressed soon it will start to affect the quality of racing here.

Brexit has caused problems for the movement of horses in and out of the country. There are veterinary and financial difficulties to be solved. It is good to see the recent progress being made and also to see senior EU politicians getting involved. But the importance of maintaining as near frictionless borders as possible is crucial for trade and for international competition.

Public perception of the sport is an ongoing challenge too. Racing has a habit of shooting itself in the foot. The sport needs to be more proactive in this regard, there are many positive stories to tell and sometimes we are slow to blow our own trumpet. It is also important to let the non-racing community know about all the good things happening in our great sport.

Finally, I look forward to seeing the Al Shaqab colours in action on British racetracks again next year. Richard Hannon tells me that Lusail is in great order and all roads now lead to the 2000 Guineas in May. Hopefully he and some of the other Al Shaqab horses can feature on the Knavesmire at some stage in 2022 too.

I thank you again for the opportunity to address you on this historic occasion and would now like you to raise your glasses as I propose a toast to the health of British Racing and to Lusail, winner of the 2021 Al Basti Equiworld Dubai Gimcrack Stakes.