

# Steve Taylor



A look at the figures and the story behind the trainers in top gear

If we Brits feel aggrieved by the foreign invaders that have harvested our best sprints over the last decade then spare a thought for our French cousins.

Since 1972 they have managed to keep the Prix de l'Abbaye at home on only seven occasions – and that includes a dead-heat.

And next Sunday they will do well to repel the “rosbifs” and in particular Robert Cowell, who has amassed one of the best teams of older sprinters in the country and will go to Longchamp double-handed.

Cowell has carved a strong position in the niche market of top-class 5f sprinters and has gone close to some big prizes this season with Spirit Quartz. He was beaten a length and a quarter by the flying Australian mare Ortensia in the Group 2 King George Stakes at Goodwood and was collared by a neck by the same mare in the Group 1 Nunthorpe at York in August.

The Abbaye is the logical target and his much-travelled stablemate Monsieur Joe will go there as his wingman having already won twice in France this year.

Both horses represent a trainer who is already having his best ever season if overseas

success is taken into account. Cowell, 43, is just one behind his previous home total of 21 achieved in 2010 but is ahead of that if the three successes of Monsieur Joe – one in Dubai – are taken into account.

In fact, with any normal luck, Cowell would have had two home winners in the last week and a half, R Woody flying home after a troubled run at Leicester last week while Kingsgate Native would surely have won a Group 3 at Newbury on September 22 with any sort of run up the rails.

There's no question that Cowell is top-heavy with sprinters and it is doubtful if any other trainer with a sub-25 team has ever managed to have six sprinters aged three or older rated above 100.

The centurions are, in descending order, Spirit Quartz (117), Kingsgate Native (110), Monsieur Joe (110), Prohibit (108), Lui Rey (102) and Jwala (102).

Cowell, who trains outside the bustle of Newmarket at Six Mile Bottom, acknowledges the increase in calibre.

“We've upped the bar considerably this season which stems from my wife telling me that I wasn't improving and needed to get better quality horses.

“I began speaking to owners and agents and letting people know we could do the job and to trust us.

“We were churning out winners steadily in handicap company and the first 100-plus sprinter we had was Binou, who was fatally injured in 2009, and his owners then allowed me to buy Prohibit, who won last year's King's Stand at Royal Ascot.

“I think we have carried that forward this season and we do

seem to click with sprinters. You can go to the well more often.”

Statistics for 2012 confirm that with 15 winners coming over 5f and 6f. Over the last five years 64 of his 81 winners have come in sprints.

“You can run more often in sprints and there is still very little margin so providing your horse has the ability their turn will come. You only need a couple in the field to run below form or get a bump and you're in.

“Also, a good sprinter is much more accessible to buy than a middle-distance horse when you have to take on the jumping boys which puts prices through the roof.

“Spirit Quartz came through a call from the Italian agent Federico Barbarini, who said that the horse was on the market, and a stalwart owner of mine, Tom Morley, stumped up the money which wasn't a huge amount considering what he'd done.

“He'd raced over a mile in Italy and didn't know what his job was. We got him back and bulked him up. I give them plenty of feed and I think we train more to an American style. They get plenty of work to go with the feed but once they're fit they race. Between races there is very little action and they get turned out. Once we identify the next race we work back from that – but the crucial thing is that there's plenty of playtime for them.

“When they do work it's on a seven-and-a-half-furlong Polytrack. I'll only venture into Newmarket with the odd horse for a change.

“Although the good sprinters never work together you have to find out on the gallop whether you've got a sprinter or a horse that wants further and giving them time helps,



Spirit Quartz (far side) finishing a fine second to Ortensia at Glorious Goodwood

too. Once they are mature they tell you what they are.

“Monsieur Joe came to us when Walter Swinburn retired and he's been super for us this year, running 12 times, winning three races and being placed three times in Dubai. He's won twice in France and finished a short-head second over there.

With so many sprinters there are bound to be clashes, such as Longchamp on Sunday.

“We keep them apart as much as possible but it is often unavoidable, such as the Abbaye.

“Frankie Dettori will ride Spirit Quartz and Olivier Peslier will stay on Monsieur Joe. Spirit Quartz has to be the more fancied runner purely on ratings and his form is solid. He'll go on any ground that comes along and the track should be ideal but he'll have to be drawn well somewhere near the rail – that's crucial.

“At least with Monsieur Joe in the field we have two chances to get a good stall. He

shouldn't get to within two or three lengths of Spirit Quartz – but we know there's no margin for error at Longchamp and he is battle-hardened and absolutely nothing bothers him.

“Spirit Quartz looks wonderful. He's been in superb condition since the Nunthorpe and the weight has stayed on him. This season has been all about letting the horse mature and progress physically and he's over 40 kilos heavier than when I bought him – he's huge. I expect him to hit the headlines next season but he goes to Longchamp extremely well.”

The yard isn't all about two horses. “I did chuck a few things at the telly when Kingsgate Native was beaten at Newbury last weekend but things happen in sprints and he got caught on the rail. He'll go to Ascot on Saturday for a 5f Listed race which I'm just favouring over a Group 3 over 6f.

“Lui Rey has come back

well from his Yarmouth win and might go for a Listed race over 5½f at Chantilly the Monday after the Abbaye. After that he heads for the sales.”

With an eye to the future, Cowell has already started to replenish stocks for 2013.

“We've been looking abroad and have already picked up several for next season.

“We bought another one from Italy, a five-year-old called Girost, that hasn't arrived yet but is rated 10-4. He could be a good handicapper over here.

“The three-year-old Jwala is going to make a big impact next season.

“As for the rest of this season I've got quite a few coming out who should do well and I'd keep an eye on another ex-Italian, Pandar, who could run at Ascot this week.

“There's also a nice ex-French filly, Golconde, who's waiting for a mark and is ready to run. They all seem to be sparking at the moment.”