



JOHNSTON COMES OUT FIGHTING AS QATAR GOODWOOD FESTIVAL KICKS OFF

Mark Johnston, the Yorkshire-based Scot who makes Goodwood appear like his home track in July each year, got away to a cracking start at this year's Qatar-sponsored Festival.

Johnston saddled the first and third in the Matchbook Betting Exchange Handicap, with Fire Fighting, the 8/1 co-favourite and mount of Adam Kirby, beating runner-up Oasis Spirit by a neck, with the winner's stablemate, Stars Over The Sea, one and a half lengths further behind. Stars Over The Sea and fourth-placed Second Wave were also 8/1 co-favourites.

This was Johnston's 67th winner at the Qatar Goodwood Festival - putting him four behind the current leading trainer Sir Michael Stoute - and taking his overall winning tally at the track to 119. It was also his sixth victory in the race, his past victors including Yavana's Pace, who, remarkably, won a Group One contest at the age of ten.

Johnston bought Fire Fighting as a yearling for €70,000, but has twice tried to sell him since - at the end of last season and the one before. He said, tongue in cheek: "This horse is a bit special - we wanted him so much we took him to the sales and couldn't sell him. Thank goodness, because of what he has done since - it's wonderful.

"I think there are a lot of horses out there that could be like this. You have to wonder whether is he tough and that what makes him able to race a lot or is it the fact that he races a lot makes him tough.

"We gave him a couple of months off in the winter and his first run back was the first time that he has ever come back lame from a race. You have to remember that time off doesn't always do them good.

"He's obviously quite a character in his races and things have to go right for him. Adam has found a bit of the key to him and I think he rides the horse with a lot of confidence. He had this reputation of needing to be covered up and hitting the front late and Adam has torn that book up. He hit the front quite a long way out here and showed no sign of stopping.

"I was delighted with Stars Over The Sea. I was confident that he would run a good race but he gets a bit edgy and wears earplugs to the start. He is a very strong horse and Franny [Norton] said he was just doing a little bit too much.

"It's a great credit to him that he keeps on despite that - he would probably be better on his own and allowed to settle a bit, which he didn't get today. Even so, he stayed on all the way to the line."

KIRBY ON FIRE ABOARD FIGHTING

Adam Kirby gained his fourth Qatar Goodwood Festival success aboard the Mark Johnston-trained Fire Fighting (8/1 co favourite) in the Matchbook Betting Exchange Handicap.

Under a nice gallop set by stable-mate Stars Over The Sea, Kirby settled Fire Fighting in the midfield early on before stealthily making his challenge in the home straight.

The son of Soldier Of Fortune responded well to Kirby's urgings in the home straight and took up the lead over a furlong out.

Despite the late challenge of Oasis Fantasy, Kirby's mount found plenty under pressure to register a neck success.

Kirby said: "It was a typical Goodwood race with a lot of runners and you can get locked in down the inside. I did well to get a run through.

"Everyone would love to own this horse. He turns up on the big Saturdays and you will always get a good run for your money with him.

"Unfortunately, he keeps going up and up the handicap so it gets harder for him. But he has just dropped down now to a sensible mark and it made it easier for him today.

"It's going to be a long week but it is nice to get off to a good start. It's nice to get a winner for Mr Johnston and Alan Spence - hopefully, we can keep it all going."

Kirby was also successful in this race last year aboard Mount Logan and he commented: "I won this race last year - the rest of the week didn't go quite so well - but we are off to a good start and hopefully it carries on.

"Mr Johnston is fantastic with what he does. This old horse has been knocking at the door all year and he never gets much leeway off the handicapper because he is so consistent.

"He's a fantastic horse and he tries his heart out. What a lovely horse to ride and own - he should hopefully keep everyone happy."

Kirby added: "The pace of the race suited him and the ground was right for him - it was his day."

2:00 Matchbook Betting Exchange Handicap - RESULT

1) FIRE FIGHTING (Alan Spence) Mark Johnston 5-9-05 Adam Kirby 8/1 Co Fav

2) Oasis Fantasy (Windflower Overseas Holdings & John Dunlop OBE) Ed Dunlop 5-9-01 Silvestre De Sousa 12/1

3) Stars Over The Sea (Roger Brookhouse) Mark Johnston 5-8-10 Franny Norton 8/1 Co Fav

4) Second Wave (Godolphin) Charlie Appleby 4-9-09 James Doyle 8/1 co Fav

17 ran

Time: 2m 03.60s

Distances: nk, 1½, ½

Tote Win £8.00 Places £1.90, £2.50, £2.70, £2.30; Exacta £114.70

Breeder: P Bellaiche

Breeding: 5 b g Soldier Of Fortune (IRE) - Savoie (FR) (Anabaa (USA))

Mark Johnston - 119 Goodwood Wins (67 at Qatar Goodwood Festival)

Adam Kirby - 30 Goodwood wins (4 at Qatar Goodwood Festival)