



# END OF THE RIDE

One of the legends of the turf is at the finishing line, having stamped himself as the undisputed people's champion

WORDS: GARY LEMKE

**T** rue soldiers die with their boots on and true champions get carried out of battle on their shields. Pocket Power is of that calibre. When the career of the most decorated racehorse South Africa has seen comes to an end at the 2011 J&B Met, everyone will know he fought to the very last stride.

Winning the L'Ormarins Queen's Plate to equal a world record set by the great American champion of the '60s, Kelso, was always going to be a near-impossible task. Pocket Power, the eight-year-old turf legend, plugged on resolutely for fourth spot earlier this month, unable to win the prestigious mile race at Kenilworth for a mind-boggling fifth time in succession.

Kelso picked up the Jockey Club Gold Cup from 1960-64, a world record for winning the same Group One race five years in a row. Pocket Power had won the Queen's Plate in 2007, 2008, 2009 and 2010. Previously, no other horse, including the brilliant Politician, had managed to claim that race more than twice.

Of course, Pocket Power also triumphed in three J&B Mets, all in successive years, and won the Durban July as he amassed stake earnings just shy of R10 million, the most by a thoroughbred on South African turf. Not bad for a horse that went under the hammer at the 2004 Cape Yearling Sales and sold for R190 000.

There had been hype and hope before the Queen's Plate. And there'd been pressure. Pocket Power has always had troublesome legs and feet and his longevity is testimony to the care, patience and training ability of Mike Bass. The veteran horseman had got the ageing champion into the best possible shape he could for his assault on history, but ultimately it was beyond the gelding.

When did jockey Bernard Fayd'herbe know the dream was over? 'About halfway down the [home] straight. He couldn't quicken with the others.' Had Pocket Power run badly? 'No, on the contrary. I was very happy with his performance. He did everything he could, but the finishing trademark kick wasn't there. And on the day the

winner [Mother Russia] was unbeatable. Perhaps the old Pocket would have got up for second,' the rider said.

There were emotional scenes before and after the race. 'Let's go to war,' said Pocket Power's charismatic majority owner, Marsh Shirliff, as he headed for the pre-race parade. He'd struck a wager on his equine son, but it was more the heart guiding him, understandably, given the bond he and the horse have enjoyed over the years. 'I was hopeful. It was asking a lot of him,' he said later.

'It's time ...' Bass' wife, Carol, said after the Queen's Plate, wiping the tears away. The decision was taken at Kenilworth that day to retire Pocket Power, after a career spanning 42 races, including 20 wins, the last achieved in his penultimate race, at his favourite course last November. That win had offered hope that the most unlikely scenario could yet unfold in early January. Pocket Power was not the same superb machine of previous years but he was unbeaten in 10 previous races over the Kenilworth 1 600m – the course and distance of the Queen's Plate.

On the day, the favourite Mother Russia was simply too good as she skipped away from the field, upping her value as a broodmare one day by a significant amount. Second was Tales Of Bravery, who Pocket Power had beaten over the course and distance in November, but who is an underrated sort, while third was the brute of a filly, the young three-year-old called Ebony Flyer, who tips the scales at a whopping 565kg (the heaviest in the field).

So much has been said and written about Pocket Power, who is to have his racecourse farewell in the 2011 J&B Met over 2 000m at Kenilworth on 29 January. In the hours after the Queen's Plate there was an outpouring of raw emotion, and understandably so. There was a split in consensus as to whether the legend should continue for another year, taking in the KwaZulu-Natal season and then returning for one more Cape winter. It was a solid enough argument, for in his last 10 races his finishes have been 1st, 1st, 3rd, 1st, 3rd, 3rd, 12th, 2nd, 1st, 4th. ►



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However, on the flip side is that his troublesome legs are now eight years old – 'that's the equivalent of a 45-year-old athlete,' said Carol – and he is undeniably not the same machine he once was. Yet, he still has that fighting spirit, a zest for his morning gallops, and continues to be the pride and joy of a sizeable army of fans.

'He's given us so much to be thankful for,' said Mike Bass. 'We will never, ever, be blessed with another horse like this in our lifetime,' said Bass' daughter, Candice Robinson, who is also the stable's assistant trainer. 'This horse has changed people's lives, including my own,' said part-owner Arthur Webber. 'Pocket can do no wrong, he's an all-time racing legend,' said Shirtliff. 'He's given me so many proud moments,' said Fayd'herbe, his regular jockey. 'He's my friend, I will be very sad when he retires to the farm,' said his groom, Boy Boy Jevu. 'Pocket and Bernie are synonymous with a great era in South African racing,' said Andrew Bon, a filmmaker, enthusiast and walking encyclopedia. And the list goes on.

Everyone has a story to tell about Pocket Power. He is the people's champion and the roar that greeted his explosive turn of foot down the home straight en route to winning the 2009 J&B Met remains one of the flesh-tingling moments in South African sport. 'I was watching from a box in the stands and when he hit the front in that race, the grandstand shook. There were 50 000 people shouting him home,' says Webber.

One of the oldest conundrums in sport is when to retire a champion. History is strewn with names of legends who stayed on too long. Great boxers, Formula One drivers, cyclists and tennis players have all struggled to accept the end of their era. At least golfers are able to wander off and compete with their own age group on the seniors tour. Other sport, horse racing included, has no place for sentiment, no respect for past achievements.

Pocket Power ran fourth in the Queen's Plate and the occasion was celebrated in the Mike Bass suite on the Kenilworth grandstand on the night. There was still hope that the upcoming J&B Met could have produced something special and even 48 hours after the race, the bookmakers eased the champion out in the betting to only 10-1 for the Met. They rated him fifth favourite, behind Mother Russia, which is the mark of respect accorded to him in the fraternity and the belief that, on his day, the eight-year-old could still teach the youngsters a lesson or two. However, despite waiting to make the announcement public, the

connections had come to terms that it was time to send Pocket Power into a deserved retirement. And Kenilworth, home to 15 of his victories, would be the right place to send him off, in front of a crowd expected to again reach 50 000.

Can he win the Met? Probably not, but this is Pocket Power. He's more than a racehorse, he's part of a family, he has his own Facebook page and there is even a book in the making.

There are many reasons Pocket Power was still able to mix it with the best, at a ripe age. One of them was the ongoing ability of Bass, the trainer, to get him into shape, while also keeping him relatively injury-free. Having been bought as a yearling, he was unraced as a two-year-old after damaging the back of his knee and Bass nursed the then youngster through the early troubles. He is also a gelding, which means he has no stud value.

Pocket Power, a moody, spirited, determined, headstrong individual – a Retief Goosen of the turf – looked unremarkable in his first three races which is probably why, when he won his fourth career start, in November 2005, he was a 14-1 outsider.

However, those who had first spotted him realised he was a one-off. 'I have never been so excited about a match than Pocket Power,' said his breeder, Dan de Wet of Zandvliet Stud. 'Jet Master [his sire] and Stormsvlei [his dam] were the perfect pairing and from day one I was convinced he would be special,' said De Wet. The renowned breeder used the same match to produce River Jetez, who Shirtliff also bought to race, and who won last year's J&B Met, but who is now overseas with Mike de Kock.

South Africa has been privileged to have a racehorse of the calibre of Pocket Power grace the local tracks and not join the overseas exodus. 'We thought about it,' admitted Shirtliff, 'but decided against sending him to Dubai [the modern Mecca of racing], because at that stage of his career the tracks would have been too severe on his legs.'

'I've had a great five and a half years, it's been a helluva journey and privilege,' said Bass. The ride has come to an end and when it does on Met day there won't be a dry eye in the house. But what is certain, is that the name Pocket Power will be remembered long after he has gone as one of the immortals of the South African track. ■

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