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Monday, May 27, 2019

Dijon cuts the mustard in the Elitlopp

The French trotter pulled off a massive surprise – and survived a judges' inquiry – Sunday on a rain-soaked card at Solvalla.

by Thomas Hedlund



Gerard Forni

Dijon and driver Romain Derieux leaving the winner's circle after posting an upset in the Elitlopp.



Gerard Forni

Dijon (5, Romain Derieux) held off Aubrion du Gers in the Elitlopp final.

EUROPEAN REPORT



with **THOMAS HEDLUND**

French trotter Dijon posted a huge upset in Sunday's rain-soaked Elitloppet at Solvalla, yet the stunning victory was somewhat anti-climactic given what happened before the final and during the stretch when the judges took a hard look at whether the trotter started pacing just before the wire. Ultimately, the results stood, but more on that in a second.

In the first of two eliminations, Ready Express (Ready Cash) started from post seven and driver Björn Goop didn't leave anything to chance with trainer Timo Nurmos' trotter. Ready Express took the first turn three wide, but when the field got close to the first stretch, Goop put his horse in front, ahead of earlier leader Makethemark. Once leading the pack, Ready Express controlled the field and won in 1:53.

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The winning connections in the Elitlopp winner's circle.

Makethemark, Looking Superb and Next Direction finished behind the superior winner and all qualified for the final.

French-bred Aubrion du Gers (Memphis du Rib) and driver Jos Verbeeck easily kept their opponents on the outside from post one in the second elimination and when Propulsion seemed to have one of his less impressive days at the track, Aubrion du Gers sprinted to the safe win in 1:53 ahead of Propulsion, Dijon and Milliondollarrhyme.

But the big drama started to happen directly after the first elimination. Readly Express' caretaker Inga Perk took the reins from Goop in the winner's circle and it was obvious that Readly Express had suffered an injury. In the post parade for the Elitloppet final, it was even more obvious that something wasn't right with one of the biggest Swedish hopes in Sweden's biggest race.

The veterinarian ordered Goop to let Readly Express make another test start in front of judges and it didn't look good at all. The decision, made with Goop, was inevitable. Readly Express was scratched out of the final in what was billed before the weekend as his final career start.

The emotions were all over the place among the spectators at Solvalla when Goop let Readly Express wave his goodbye in front of the crowd. Many tears fell and Readly Express left the track to the sound of enormous cheering. He won his last race, but it wasn't the race his connections hoped to win.

"I'm really sad, but I'm pretty sure that I took the right decision to not letting him start in the final. Readly Express is a champion and he should end his career like a champion, with a win," Goop said in a national television interview.

The Elitloppet final now placed Aubrion du Gers (post one) in the favorite position for Verbeeck.

When Readly Express was scratched, quick-starting trotter Dijon (Ganymede) moved to the number four spot behind the gate and his driver Romain Derieux wasn't shy when the car left the field of seven horses. Dijon flew to the front, while Next Direction was parked outside with Propulsion in his back. Aubrion du Gers and Verbeeck was stuck in the pocket, but when Örjan Kihlström made his move with Propulsion after a quarter of a mile, Verbeeck also made a move, a more desperate one that lifted Aubrion du Gers behind Propulsion. That move made Next Direction go three wide and the Finnish horse got third- instead of second-over.



Gerard Forni

Readly Express won the first Elitlopp heat and then was forced to scratch out of the final due to injury.

Dijon looked sharp in front, while Propulsion had problems following in the last turn, at the same point when Aubrion du Gers attacked three wide and the leader, Dijon, was first to hit the wire for Derieux.

But the drama wasn't over. The judges at Solvalla had to look closely at the home stretch video to make sure that Dijon's gait didn't slip into the pace during the last 50 meters of the race. The judges took their time to study Dijon's last moves. And they also had to look at an incident with Aubrion du Gers, where he appeared to interfere with Next Direction after 500 meters of the final.

Eventually, the speaker announced the official result of Elitloppet 2019 and the French fans cheered when Dijon won and Aubrion du Gers finished second.

The mile time of 1:53.1 was enough to earn the Elitloppet on the sloppy track this time and Derieux was obviously a happy trainer and driver when he at last reached the winner's circle.

"It's the first time we tried this particular race and who could imagine that we would be as successful like this? It's a really big thing to be in the Elitlopp and to win it is just amazing," said Derieux.

HARNES RACING UPDATE

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Editor: Dave Briggs

Production: Brian Fuller

Graphic Design, Ads & Placement: Lisa Bihuniak

Advertising Sales: Wilma Van Vaerenbergh | [contact for ad sales/questions](mailto:contactforadsales@harnessracingupdate.com)

Results & Stats Editor: Lisa Duong

Founder: Bill Finley

Contributors: Claus Andersen, Garnet Barnsdale, Tim Bojarski, Jerry Connors, Frank Cotolo, The Curmudgeon, Paul Delean, Bill Finley, Joe FitzGerald, Dean Gillette, Ron Gurfein, Thomas Hedlund, Bill Heller, Bob Heyden, Dean Hoffman, Victoria Howard, Melissa Keith, Dave Landry, Lauren Lee, Dave Little, Chris Lomon, David Mattia, Trey Nosrac, Tom Pedulla, Andrea Pietrzak, James Platz, Bob Roberts, Sandra Snyder, Brett Sturman, Dean Towers, Jay Wolf

Get in touch with HRU

PO Box 230 | Millwood, NY | 10546 | Telephone: (226) 374-9999

Editor/News Stories: editor@harnessracingupdate.com

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Gerard Forni

Aetos Kronos (Johan Untersteiner) winning the Hakan Wallner Memorial for trainer Jerry Riordan.

Petri Salmela's Makethemark ended up third in his first attempt in the Elitloppet after a trip behind the leader.

Riordan trainee wins Breeders Course final

The \$209,000 Hakan Wallner Memorial / Breeders Course final for 3-year-olds was a thrilling story at Solvalla. Three big names fought and battled for the win, when a fourth horse showed up from out of nowhere and won in mile rate of 1:55.3 over 1.3 miles.

Jerry Riordan-trained Aetos Kronos (Bold Eagle) and driver Johan Untersteiner waited deep down in the field while Upset Face and Axl Rose were in war regarding front position pretty much the whole race. Upset Face defended himself strongly when Alessandro Gocciadoro put hard pressure on the leader and behind the two favorites, Gocciadoro's Acciaio got a perfect trip for Örjan Kihlström.

In the last turn, Aetos Kronos attacked and Untersteiner made the victory pretty safe in world record time of 1:55.3 (over 1.3 miles on a five-eighths mile track).

"Our luck was that Upset Face and Axl Rose would both fight for the lead and that's how it ended. This horse has a heart of gold," said Untersteiner.

Missle Hill in Fyraåringseliten

American-bred Missle Hill (Muscle Hill) made his second start in Europe in the \$105,000 Fyraåringseliten for 4-year-olds and the Daniel Redén-trained trotter opened quickly from post one. But Örjan Kihlström decided to give the lead over to Evaluate and Stefan Melander.

Missle Hill got his chance to challenge Evaluate in the beginning of the home stretch and Örjan Kihlström had plenty of power to use in his horse. Missle Hill ran past the leader in nice gait and won in 1:54.1.

"Daniel has talked about this horse in good terms and it will be very interesting to follow his career here in Sweden," said Kihlström.

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Despite an imperfect year, Elitlopp was still in the pink

by Dave Briggs

The weather didn't cooperate and the result wasn't what anyone could have reasonably expected, but the takeaway from Solvalla Racetrack was that even on one of its imperfect days, the Elitloppet is still as magical a harness racing experience as one can find.

As the locals tell it, the last Sunday in May in Stockholm is usually a sun-kissed affair – as if the heavens conspire annually to smile upon it. Not so this year, with a persistent drizzle that occasionally hardened and blew sideways and periodically gave way to enough sun to dry the heavily-banked five-eighths-mile oval just enough to save the trotters from sloshing their way to the wire all afternoon.

While the attendance was surely down from a typical year when walking just from mid-stretch to the stable area can take 10 minutes or more, those that did come brought their usual passion:

It was most notable in the traditional rhythmic clapping at the start of races and the touching ovation given to Swedish champion Readly Express – the winner of the first heat – after he was forced to scratch out of the Elitlopp final following a gimpy post parade. After the scratch was announced, and before Readly Express exited the track for what is believed to be the last time, driver Bjorn Goop steered the trotter toward the horse-loving fans in salute to their heart-felt ovation. It was one of those catch-in-your-throat moments that makes the Elitlopp the Elitlopp – weather be damned.

Yes, Propulsion wasn't Propulsion and failed in his fourth straight attempt to win the Elitlopp.

Yes, second heat winner Aubrion du Gers couldn't close the deal either, even after Readly Express dropped out.

Yes, driver Romain Derieux wasn't the one expected to be spraying champagne in celebration after he steered Dijon to



Dave Briggs

Despite mostly poor weather, there was still a strong crowd at Solvalla for Sunday's Elitlopp.

a monumental upset and survived a judges inquiry into whether the French trotter paced in deep stretch.

But the rest was truly in the pink.

Through a tarmac sea of umbrellas splashed with Elitlopp hot pink accents most notable in the luminescent straw fedoras given out as a freebie by the V75 betting people ATG – think Hambletonian freebie ball caps on shrooms – the Elitlopp drivers and trainers started the afternoon by, fittingly, walking the pink carpet. Oddly, they entered to the dark guitar strains of Metallica's *Enter Sandman* as they marched through an adoring crowd and onto a giant, pink, open-sided tractor trailer that slowly paraded the waving-and-grinning Elitlopp trainers and drivers past fans



Dave Briggs

The drums were somewhat muted on the day, but the pink fedoras were prevalent.



Dave Briggs

Elitlopp drivers and trainers saluted the crowd at the beginning of the card from the pink tractor trailer.

on the way to the stable area. En route, the connections of this year's Swedish trotting royalty were serenaded first by a Swedish cover of Kool and the Gang's hit *Celebration*, followed by *Stockholm i mitt hjärta* (Stockholm in My Heart), sung in Swedish by Lasse Berghagen.

As usual, the fans – some of whom camped outside the track gates early in the morning to get a prime spot – were on rooftops and balconies, and in the three main grandstand buildings, beer gardens, burger pits and party tents.

As usual, there were drum-bangers, cowbell-shakers and flag-wavers; though all three were muted somewhat by the day's drizzle downer that likely also allowed the infield pond to escape its usual invasion of drunken divers evading security.

As usual, the giant wooden horse stood sentry in the first turn, the press center was overflowing with more journalists and photographers than you'll likely see anywhere else in the sport and each race was thankfully free of any of that soul-killing North American drag nonsense – post times carefully choreographed by the judges' stand that rose and fell from the infield on cue all day like a flying saucer.

It all added up to a uniquely Solvalla, uniquely Stockholm and uniquely Swedish experience; one that makes for tremendous nourishment for the harness racing soul.

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Lauren Tucker / World Wide Racing Photos

Shartin N (Tim Tetrick) was sharp in Philadelphia on Sunday afternoon.

Shartin N sensational in Betsy Ross at Harrah's Philly

Guardian Angel AS wins Maxie Lee, Courtly Choice take Commodore Barry and Captain Crunch leads PASS tests.

by James Witherite / Harrah's Philadelphia racing media

As she so often is, Shartin N (\$4.40) was simply sensational on Sunday afternoon (May 26), duelling down a determined Caviart Ally to capture the \$100,000 Betsy Ross Invitational for pacing mares at Harrah's Philadelphia, one of three co-featured events on a blockbuster card.

Unlike her previous five wins this season, achieving the lead was no easy task for the 6-year-old Tintin In America—Bagdarin mare. Shartin N and Tim Tetrick left strongly from post seven, but was met immediately by resistance from Caviart Ally (Andy McCarthy). As soon as Shartin N accelerated to try to clear midway on the first turn, Caviart Ally countered and forced her rival into the pocket shortly after a gruelling :25.2 first quarter.

"I didn't know about the :25.2 quarter, and it put Timmy in a tough spot, so he had to force the issue," said trainer Jim King Jr. "I wouldn't like to see that trip two weeks in a row, but obviously she can do it."

After pulling the pace back through a :30 second split, Caviart Ally faced a second challenge from Shartin N, who pulled the pocket just in front of Apple Bottom Jeans (Corey Callahan) with three-eighths to go and worked to within a neck past three-quarters in 1:21.3.

While Shartin N headed Caviart Ally nearing the home turn, she was far from home free. Caviart Ally fought tooth and nail to offer sustained resistance, and Apple Bottom Jeans lifted off cover in upper stretch. Still, Shartin N resolutely held her ground to prevail by a neck in 1:49.2, her fastest win of the season.

"Once she was head and head turning for home, I was pretty confident," said King, who campaigns Shartin N for Richard Poillucci, JoAnn Looney-King, and Tim Tetrick LLC. "She's just overcome everything that's been thrown at her."

Shartin N will now be pointed to the Roses Are Red at Woodbine Mohawk Park.

"I had a good barrier draw and I wanted to make the most of it," said McCarthy of his tactics with runner-up Caviart Ally. "We had to go way too much for the first quarter, but Shartin was just too good. I was driving to beat her, but she was just too good. We had to go a big first quarter and a big third quarter. She was tired at the top of the stretch, but she dug in. I was really proud of her effort today."

Apple Bottom Jeans stayed on for third, while Tequila Monday (Brian Sears) stalked evenly to finish fourth.

In addition to her victories in the 2018 and 2019 editions of the Betsy Ross and her 2018 Breeders Crown triumph, Shartin N has won 22 other times since arriving in North America at the beginning of 2018.

Guardian Angel AS coasts in Maxie Lee

Tetrick came right back to take the \$100,000 Maxie Lee Invitational Trot with Guardian Angel AS (\$5.80), brushing the 5-year-old Archangel—Provide As horse to the fore early and coasting to a 1:51 win, the 18th of his career.

After clearing 2015 Hambletonian winner Pinkman (Dexter Dunn) with a circuit to go, Guardian Angel As controlled a :55.1 half before shrugging off a first-over challenge from Trolley (Marcus Miller) up the far side. Turning for home, Guardian Angel As extended his lead over the pocket-sitting Pinkman to two lengths before cruising clear to a 2-3/4 length victory. Pinkman held second by a neck over the late-closing Fiftydallarbill (David Miller), who circled three-wide on the final turn.

Anette Lorentzon trains Guardian Angel AS for ACL Stuteri AB and Kjell Johansson.

Courtly Choice stalks, surges in Commodore Barry

In just the third start of his 4-year-old season, 2018 Little Brown Jug and Meadowlands Pace winner Courtly Choice (\$5.80) proved capable from off the pace, surging from third-over for a going-away 1:49.1 score in the \$100,000 Commodore Barry Invitational Pace and eclipsing the \$1

million mark in career earnings.

The son of Art Major—Lady Ashlee Ann settled just worse than midfield while Pacing Major N (Jordan Stratton), Tiger Thompson N (Dexter Dunn) and The Wall (Jim Pantaleano) threw down in a :25.2 first quarter. Tiger Thompson N, widest of the three on the first turn, cleared with a lap to go and continued to a :53.1 half while David Miller angled Courtly Choice third-over behind The Wall – who moved back out from third – and Rodeo Rock (McCarthy).

The outer tier proved the place to be, as The Wall pushed clear of Tiger Thompson N easily before three-quarters in 1:20.2, but Rodeo Rock continued on in the breeze to offer immediate pressure. Off the home turn, Miller angled Courtly Choice three-wide off live flow, and the pair struck the front in the final sixteenth before drawing two lengths clear. Rodeo Rock finished second while The Wall took third.

Blake MacIntosh trains 14-time winner Courtly Choice, for the Hutt Racing Stable, Mac and Heim Stables, Danielle Plouffe and Touchstone Farms Inc.

Captain Crunch leads Pennsylvania Sire Stakes splits

Nancy Johansson trainee Captain Crunch (\$2.10), easily one of the top sophomore pacers in North America, was never in doubt in the third of three \$57,218 Pennsylvania Sire Stakes divisions for 3-year-old pacing colts and geldings, coasting to a 1:49.2 win in line to Scott Zeron. The son of Captaintreachorous—Sweet Paprika caught a breather when rival Proof (David Miller) broke in the early stages, and he edged away handily to beat Aflame Hanover (Tony Schadel) by four lengths after parrying a mild first-over challenge from Volley Ball Beach.

Southwind Ozzi (\$2.80) and Brian Sears took the speed badge in Sire Stakes action with a 1:48.4 score in the first division, and Lyons Night Hawk (\$3.60) turned in a 1:50 victory to give Tetrick a stakes winner on the card along with his pair of invitational wins.

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