



# BLUE BLOODS

Adayar and Hurricane Lane put Godolphin back on top with starring roles in three Classics and the King George

By Peter Thomas

**T**HE world in 2021 was no place for anybody seeking restoration of their trust in the old order of things. If there was a God at work, he must have been one with either a dark sense of humour or a deep-seated desire to test our faith, as he swept away the certainties of life with one devastating sweep of a pandemic and dared us to guess what might come next.

Racing people of a certain age, mind you, may have been better prepared than most for this virus-led sea change. The past couple of decades have seen the erosion of many of the old rhythms of the turf year, to the point where it has been hard to recall which country we were in, let alone which month. It's

► *Continues page 30*



ADAYAR AND HURRICANE LANE



IMAGE COURTESY OF ITV RACING

November so it must be Cheltenham, or maybe Bahrain via Melbourne.

It was all so much simpler a while back, when a promising domestic two-year-old might emerge from any number of sources, plot its course through the Classics in Britain and Ireland, then climb selected domestic peaks in high summer before rounding off the year with an audacious tilt at the Arc, accompanied by a small army of travelling turfists.

Since 2001, however, the princely total of zero winners of Epsom's formerly pre-eminent Derby had gone on to emulate Galileo by landing the King George VI and Queen Elizabeth Stakes in the same year. They surely can't have been put off by the glittering later career of the horse who went on to become one of the greatest stallions in history before his death in July at the satisfactory age of 23; but year by year, the winners of the blue riband either declined the challenge or accepted and failed. Where once Nijinsky, Mill Reef, Grundy, The Minstrel, Troy, Shergar, Reference Point, Nashwan, Generous and

Lammtarra lit up Ascot on the last Saturday in July, there suddenly appeared a drought of biblical proportions.

★★★★

IT WAS a conundrum to which Adayar wasn't supposed to be the answer. With a Nottingham maiden win under his belt as a two-year-old, he was subsumed beneath the traditional host of Ballydoyle contenders in the winter betting for the Derby, with his reputation hardly elevated by second places in trials at Sandown and Lingfield in the spring.

When Aidan O'Brien cherry-picked Bolshoi Ballet as his number one for Epsom – in fact his only one, which has often been seen as a sign of great confidence emanating from the yard – it's unlikely he was quaking in his boots at the prospect of meeting Adayar, who was a 50-1 shot come race morning. Hurricane Lane, Adayar's stablemate carrying the first colours of Godolphin blue, looked the danger at 6-1 second favourite.

For those whose idea of a great

▲ Winning move: Adam Kirby takes the Derby on Adayar after squeezing through on the inside in the straight (inset)



Derby is a triumph of the obvious over the forces of romance, O'Brien's six-length Derrinstown Stud Derby Trial winner was a perfect fit; but out there in the land of fairytales lurked a story to warm the cockles.

When Adam Kirby committed himself to ride John Leeper for Ed Dunlop at Epsom, there were thoughts that the horse named after the trainer's father, the late John Leeper Dunlop, might involve him in an emotional journey that would lead to poignant victory. When Kirby was jocked off John Leeper in favour of Frankie Dettori, there were many who felt he had been shabbily treated. When Charlie Appleby instantly called Kirby to offer him the ride on the horse he had broken and nurtured at his farm near Newmarket, a little faith was restored in the integrity of the game – and so began the perfect denouement to a neat racing fable.

John Leeper never threatened to be involved in the finish of the Derby; Bolshoi Ballet, sent off 11-8 favourite, finished 17 lengths seventh; but Kirby, belying his misplaced reputation as

merely an 'all-weather jockey' – "run of the mill" was his own piece of self-deprecation – had Adayar in prime position throughout, tracking the leaders on the inside rail and biding his time.

He had the option to wait for matters to unfold, to put his fate in the hands of the gods, but in typically forthright and uncomplicated fashion, he sensed Gear Up drifting off the fence before the two-furlong pole, identified his opportunity and burrowed through the gap on a partner who was both willing and able to carry out instructions. The rest was simply an unchallenged march into the history books for the man in the Godolphin blue with the red cap.

Four and a half lengths was the gap back to Mojo Star, with Hurricane Lane and William Buick a further three and a quarter lengths back in third. Adayar had won and won convincingly, at starting odds of 16-1, but as with all the best Derbys of yore – yore really was a great place to live, back in the day – this was just the

» Continues page 32

'A first-class rider who reads a race and is a supreme judge'

ADAM KIRBY had to overcome a difficult passage through Derby week and in the big race to claim Classic glory on Adayar for Godolphin and Charlie Appleby. It all made for one of the most popular and heartwarming stories of the year.

First there was losing the ride on the Ed Dunlop-trained John Leeper to Frankie Dettori less than 72 hours before the Derby. "It can all be said now," the 32-year-old said after Adayar's triumph. "I was asked to ride John Leeper, which was an exciting moment. Five minutes later Charlie rang and asked me to ride this lad. I told him I was sorry but I had just committed myself to John Leeper. I'm a man of my word and I had put my name to him.

"Then came the day when Ed rang and said, 'I'm very sorry Adam, but you've lost John Leeper – Frankie's on him. I was angry and must have been like a pit bull when I got back to the house. I rang Charlie and he said, 'You can ride mine. I've spoken to Oisín [Murphy, who was booked for Adayar] and he's been an absolute gentleman'."

Kirby then had to play his part on only his second ride in the Derby – and it was far from easy. "I really had to stoke him up early as he's a big horse to get into gear and I was worried about that early climb, so I had to ask him for plenty. In fact, I had to burn him for a furlong and a half, but he was more than up to it," he said.

"I wasn't happy at the top of the hill and found myself following Ben Curtis [on Gear Up] and the last thing I wanted was a 50-1 chance coming back suddenly and landing in my lap. I didn't want to switch him out because it can affect heartbeat, rhythm and screw their stride pattern.

"There was just enough room up the rail. I thought I needed to get in or get out. I knew I had to make a decision, so I went in. When that little sliver opened up I didn't think twice about getting in there. Luckily the horse was brave enough to go through the gap. And God did he pick up – he really surprised me just how very, very good he was."

Some people were surprised by how good Kirby was in his Derby-winning ride, but not his fellow professionals. "Adam is a natural horseman and you can put him on any type of horse," Appleby said. "He can settle them, he can send them and when I first got my licence Adam rode winners for us from very early on. I don't need to say what he does – he's just done it."

Lambourn trainer Clive Cox has long been Kirby's biggest supporter. "Adam came to me when he was 17 and he was very special right from the start," he said. "His first ride for me was on a difficult, hard-pulling horse and as a 7lb claimer Adam got on him and did exactly the same as Pat Eddery, who used to have the best hands in the business. He's an amazing horseman with the strength of a lion – a first-class rider who reads a race and is a supreme judge."

Kirby's fellow jockeys paid their own tribute as he returned to Epsom's hallowed winner's circle. "Coming into the winner's enclosure and seeing all the boys from the weighing room coming outside to clap and congratulate me was a great feeling. Usually it happens when you retire and I don't mind admitting it touched me very much. You usually have to wait for your funeral to find out how good people thought you were but I imagine you don't really take it in then!" said Kirby, whose phone was flooded with congratulatory messages in the minutes, hours and days that followed. "There were quite a lot of them!" he said. "I'm privileged to have had so much support and people saying 'well done'."

Every single one of those messages was well deserved.

