

Helenus to grab his thunder

March 7 2003



Picture: TIM CLAYTON

Helenus is led out for exercise at Randwick as he prepares to take all before him during the autumn carnival. Andrew Eddy predicts that the top three-year-old of the 2002 spring will finally get his due recognition as a champion during the autumn.

It is not that Helenus has no personality or that he is not a genuinely striking thoroughbred. It is not that the horse that wears the black shadow roll fails to possess as much talent as any other racehorse in the land or is not capable of winning at almost any distance. So why, on the verge of his three-year-old autumn campaign, has Helenus so far failed to fully capture the racing public's attention?

Certainly, strange events last spring conspired against him. The farewell of three-time Australian racehorse of the year Sunline and the continuing emergence of Northerly as a weight-for-age champion of rare quality stole much of his thunder. As did the performances, or in some instances, the lack of them, of his opposition.

Tomorrow at Randwick, Helenus gets his first chance for the year to put an early score on the board when he resumes in the group 2 Hobartville Stakes. It will be a short campaign of just four runs, but by the end of it, racing truly may have another superstar.

Helenus' first victory on the racetrack came in the group 2 Bill Stutt Stakes at Moonee Valley in early October. It was a performance that amazed all those who saw it. Instead of racing, Helenus wanted to play, and so for much of the middle section of the 1600-metre race he threw his head around, shifted off the track and looked thoroughly disinterested. Eventually, Helenus decided that running fast was fun also and so, in just a few strides, he put his head back down and simply powered away from his rivals to eventually win by three-and-a-half lengths.

Eight days later and he was sent out the second favourite in the Caulfield Guineas. Helenus seemed to understand that play time was over and he did not put a foot wrong. His jockey, Steven King, pulled him out before the home turn and he swept past the leaders to win comfortably. He ran the 1600 metres in 1.35.43. No three-year-old had ever run faster to win the race and that includes the likes of Mahogany, Red Anchor, Manikato and Surround - all of whom were voted horse of the year in their respective three-year-old years.

But still he didn't get the credit he was due. All the talk post-race was about the runner-up Bel Esprit, who had flashed home late from last.

Critics found what they claimed was more ammunition that Helenus was no superstar in the AAMI Vase at Moonee Valley on Cox Plate day. Helenus again flung his head around before cruising to victory, but the fact that filly Macedon Lady got within three-quarters-of-a-length at the finish was enough for some to view the victory as hollow.

Then, there was the Victoria Derby. But even before the race Helenus was never going to satisfy the critics whatever he did after the news that his main rival - the Sydney colt Platinum Scissors - was ill and would not take his place.

So, less than three months after making his racetrack debut, Helenus was sent out as an odds-on favourite for the classic. Privately, his connections were worried that he'd come so far in such a short space of time that he had to start feeling the pinch soon.

"He wasn't over the top," Troy Corstens, son of trainer Leon Corstens, said this week. "But he'd come from nowhere to be derby favourite and it had to be taking its toll on him at just his first campaign.

"He raced a bit flat and any other horse might have got beaten but he showed that not only does he have class, he has guts and he has stamina."

Corstens, who initially recognised Helenus' potential when he saw him at Widden Park Stud before the 2002 Sydney Easter sales (where he bought him for \$80,000), said this week that racegoers may not see much of a difference in Helenus this campaign, but he swears the horse is not the same rogue youth he was in the spring.

" There is not a lot of difference as he was pretty big as he was," Corstens said. "But his attitude has changed. He's grown up mentally more so than physically.

" He did some things wrong in the spring like throwing his head around, but it was like he was playing. He was like a kid who was just enjoying being out there, but he's much more mature now."

King, who has ridden Helenus in all his eight starts, is of the same opinion. "The difference for me is that he now understands what racing is all about. He has certainly improved mentally. He was never a pig - he was just playful in the spring but he's lost a lot of that now. He's ready to race."

King said that in a winning trial at Randwick last week, Helenus again threw his head up after the gates opened. "But he quickly dropped it and came back underneath me. That just might be a trait of his like Northerly has his trait of shifting in and Sunline had her trait of wanting to go hard from the gates and not wanting to be restrained. All good horses have their little tricks."

The outstanding spring carnival of Helenus has resulted in a renewed surge of interest in his sire Helissio. Due to a lack of patronage from Australian breeders, the stallion has not shuttled to Australia from Japan's Shadai Farm in the past few seasons.

Helissio stood two seasons at Widden Park Stud in the Hunter Valley in 1998 and 1999 but attracted comparatively small books of 46 and 34 mares.

The emergence of Helenus on the racetrack and, in recent seasons, of stallion Encosta de Lago, who, like Helissio, is by the now deceased stallion Fairy King, has rekindled interest in the breed.

Widden Park is confident the stallion will attract much bigger and better books of broodmares next season. Helissio was one of the world's great horses when in his prime. As a three-year-old in 1996, he won five group 1 races, including a five-length win in the Prix de l'Arc de Triomphe in Paris. He will stand next season at Widden Park for \$13,750.