

Al Zahir Looks to Defend Emirates Championship in Next to Last Race of Abu Dhabi Season

14 March 2019, Abu Dhabi, UAE ~ Racing at the Abu Dhabi Equestrian Club this week has moved to Friday, 15 March 2019, for what is arguably the biggest meeting of the season in the Capital. The six-race card is highlighted by the Group 1 Emirates Championship, as well as the biggest Thoroughbred race of the campaign, the Group 3 Abu Dhabi Championship over the same 2200m.

Trained by Ali Rashid Al Rayhi for His Highness Sheikh Hamdan bin Rashid Al Maktoum, the Madjani colt, defending champion **Al Zahir**, bounced back after a pair of lacklustre efforts in style five weeks ago to land a second consecutive Group 1 HH The President Cup in comprehensive fashion. The owner's retained jockey Jim Crowley was in the saddle for that victory, as well as for both big race successes last year and maintains the partnership.

"He was back to his best last time and full credit to Ali and his team," Crowley said. "The blinkers certainly seemed to help and hopefully he is the one to beat on Friday."

When **Al Zahir** was fifth in the **Group 1 Kahayla Classic on the 2018 Dubai World Cup** card at Meydan, he was ridden by Dane O'Neill with Crowley electing to ride **Barnamaj**. The pair finished third, but Barnamaj has not been in public since. Subsequently, this will be his first outing for 349 days and first locally on turf having just four dirt starts last year since joining Al Rayhi from Europe.

The main danger to the Sheikh Hamdan pair looks to be **Darius Du Paon**, trained by Eric Lemartinel for His Highness Sheikh Khalifa bin Zayed Al Nahyan. The choice of Pat Cosgrave from three for owner and trainer, he was third in HH The President Cup. Lemartinel also saddles **Shaheer** and **Abu Alabyad**.

"Darius Du Paon was probably a bit unlucky in HH The President Cup and we expect a big run from him," Lemartinel said. "Abu Alabyad also ran well in that race and he probably still needed the outing. Shaheer is in good form at home so hopefully all three will go well."

The Thoroughbred equivalent, the Group 3 Abu Dhabi Championship, has attracted nine runners and appears wide open with South African Mike de Kock seeking to win the 2200m feature for a third time. The trainer saddles Hermoso Mundo, having just his second UAE outing after having been well beaten in a 2000m turf handicap at Meydan's Dubai World Cup Carnival a fortnight ago. A 6-year-old Ideal World gelding and thrice a Grade 3 winner, including over marathon distances, he will be ridden by Bernard Fayd'Herbe.

This fixture was due to be the final one at the Abu Dhabi Equestrian Club, but the Liwa

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Oasis fixture, cancelled two weeks ago when the track was deemed unfit, has been rearranged for early April.

Full Race Card: