



WRITERS UP

AN AMERICAN IN MELBOURNE

By Bill Finley

The Melbourne Cup isn't on the radar of most American owners, which is probably a mistake. The purse is about \$3.6 million, it's as prestigious as any race in the world, it attracts crowds in excess of 100,000 and any top-class American horse with the staying power to excel at two miles is bound to have a solid chance. It's a challenge worth tackling, which hasn't escaped at least one American owner.

Earle Mack, who is the senior partner and CFO of a New Jersey-based commercial real estate development firm and has campaigned numerous stakes winners, is quietly confident that his racing stable is about to land its biggest prize yet. Mack owns Mad Rush, the second choice in early betting for Tuesday's Melbourne Cup at Flemington Racecourse. Mad Rush, who was bred in Kentucky by Avalon Farm, would not be the first American-bred to win the Melbourne Cup, but Australian racing officials have told Mack that he would be the first American owner to win the race.

"It's an honor and a privilege to bring a horse here," Mack said by phone from Melbourne. "I feel like I'm representing my country. To me, it would be like winning the Ryder Cup or an Olympic gold medal. To win this would be a special thrill for me."

Mack bought Mad Rush at the 2005 Keeneland September yearling sale for \$80,000 and sent him to England to be trained by Luca Cumani. A late-developing son of Lemon Drop Kid, Mad Rush didn't start until his three-year-old season and won only one of four starts that year, earning just \$15,326. He hit his stride this year and has been at his best in long distance races. When he finished second in the Group 2 Prix Kergolay, a mile-and-seven-eighths race run in August at Deauville, Mack and Cumani knew they had a serious Melbourne Cup contender.

Mad Rush competed next in the 1 1/2-mile G1 Caulfield Cup, the main prep for the Melbourne Cup, and finished fourth. But he was closing strongly inside the final 200 yards, performing like a horse who was crying out for more distance.

"Luca feels he'll be much better at two miles," Mack said. "And he's yet to have a chance to run at two miles."

He was ridden in the Caulfield Cup by top Australian jockey Damien Oliver, who will also be aboard for the Melbourne Cup. Oliver is a two-time Melbourne Cup winner.

"I feel he's definitely come on," Oliver told Australian reporters last Wednesday after working Mad Rush. "I don't think he needs to make much improvement. He feels just as good if not a bit better than he did at Caulfield."

For Mad Rush, a difficult assignment has become easier in recent days. Caulfield Cup winner All the Good (Ire) (Diesis {GB}), who is part of the potent Godolphin team, has been scratched due to a foreleg injury and 2007 Melbourne Cup winner Efficient was also a recent defection. Still another top contender, Yellowstone, has been battling a hip injury, but is expected to run.

"You hate to see good horses drop out because you understand about the hopes and dreams of the people involved," Mack said. "It took years to develop these horses from the time they were yearlings. But that's what happens in this sport. You hope for the best and prepare for the worst."

The likely favorite is Septimus (Ire) (Sadler's Wells), from the Coolmore team who romped by 13 lengths in the Irish St. Leger in September. Like Mad Rush, Septimus has had to go through a lot to get to the Melbourne Cup. The trip from Europe is a long one and the foreign horses are required to train at a quarantine center. That worries Mack, but he has confidence in his horse.

"I am guardedly optimistic about our chances of winning," he said. "It's a tough field. The racing here is top quality. Horse racing is so important to the people in Australia and that's why they keep investing a lot of money in farms and breeding. They are buying horses in America and Europe and they are breeding to many of our stallions who have become shuttle stallions."

Mack knows that Mad Rush has been handed a difficult assignment. But he also knows that he has a horse who can handle the task to come. Someday, an American is going to break through at the Melbourne Cup. Earle Mack would be delighted to be the one.