



Scott Burton looks back at last year's emotional running and assesses this year's contenders

IF ANY further proof were needed that the Japan Cup has made itself a permanent home in the turf's very top echelon, then the 44th running showed off all that is best about this iconic fixture in the racing calendar.

Ten of the 14-runner field boasted at least one Group or Grade 1 success and totalled 21 wins at the highest level between them.

The value of the international links forged between the Japan Racing Association and the organisers of many of the world's best middle-distance races was on full show, with each of the three European challengers having won a Japan Cup bonus race en route to Tokyo.

Bred in Germany and trained in France, Goliath arrived on the back of winning Britain's greatest all-aged prize – the King George VI and Queen Elizabeth Stakes – for trainer Francis Graffard, who was making his long-awaited return to the Japan Cup after saddling Erupt in 2015 and 2016.

Another German-bred, Fantastic Moon had proved the best of the Classic crop in his home country in 2023 as the winner of the Deutsches Derby, and showed he remained a potent threat when taking the Grosser Preis von Baden, another Japan Cup bonus race.

And then there was Auguste Rodin, a six-time scorer at Group and Grade 1 level and the winner in 2024 of the Prince of Wales's Stakes at Royal Ascot, securing his ticket to the generous bonus structure offered in addition to the Japan Cup's highly attractive prize-money.

But the story surrounding Coolmore's great champion went far beyond his achievements on the track.

The first Derby winner to run in the Japan Cup since Epsom heroes Quest For Fame and Dr Devious lined up in 1992, Auguste Rodin came from the tiny final crop of the stallion and racehorse that Japanese fans hold dearest to their hearts, the great Deep Impact.

Trainer Aidan O'Brien had long spoken of just how different the colt was to any horse he had previously trained at Ballydoyle, as well as of Auguste Rodin's future

importance to Coolmore's breeding operation, offering the team the chance to unite the best of European and Japanese bloodlines.

And in a final poetic act, O'Brien and the Coolmore ownership team had decided to make the Japan Cup Auguste Rodin's last race before taking up stallion duties in Tipperary; it was to be a homecoming in every sense.

Reflecting now on the experience, O'Brien says: "It was always the plan to end up in Japan. Unfortunately, it just went a bit wrong for us on the day and we got the tactics wrong, but that can happen. It was a lovely place for him to finish his racing career and it was a special way to end what was a very special career."

Loyalties must have been divided among the 85,000 fans lucky enough to be selected to attend the Japan Cup in the JRA ticketing ballot.

Here was a Derby winner by their own national hero Deep Impact, bidding to become the first foreign-trained winner since Alkaased in 2005.

But tugging at the heart strings as well would be Do Deuce, who managed to beat Equinox back in a box-office 2022 Tokyo Yushun (Derby), and ridden by Deep Impact's iconic jockey, the ageless Yutaka Take.

As a contest, the big match didn't really materialise, for

while Take and Do Deuce were last for more than half the race, they produced a sustained and irresistible surge from the home turn, running the last three furlongs in a scorching 32.7 seconds.

Auguste Rodin was another to be forced wide under Ryan Moore on the final bend but, as Do Deuce rushed past him, there was no response and he could do no more than battle to a brave eighth place.

That also turned out to be Do Deuce's final race as he would be scratched shortly before his intended swansong in December's Arima Kinen.

And so it meant the massed crowds at Tokyo racecourse got to salute two outstanding champions.

Almost two hours after the race and with night having descended, more than 15,000 people stayed on for Auguste Rodin's official retirement ceremony, an honour reserved for only the very best and never before bestowed on any racehorse trained outside Japan.

With his near-black coat and white blaze, the four-year-old was paraded before the two giant grandstands, his racecourse highlights played out on the big screens.

Moore and O'Brien gave their own tributes, while the importance of the occasion was illustrated by just how many of Auguste Rodin's

owners were present, including John Magnier, the man whose vision and determination has driven Coolmore to its position at the very apex of the racing and breeding world.

At the end, Auguste Rodin was led back from the track to the strains of Auld Lang Syne.

"We genuinely couldn't believe it and we were gobsmacked at how many people stayed for the ceremony," O'Brien recalls. "It was unbelievable and incredibly special. The fans are incredible in Japan and it was so special to see the send-off they gave him. We'll never forget it."

Participants in the 2025 Japan Cup might not get to experience quite such a unique emotional high as the connections of Auguste Rodin, but both the rewards for taking on the challenge and the world-class welcome which awaits them will be the same.

The quarantine station in the centre of the racetrack offers state-of-the-art conditions for the foreign challenge to finalise their preparations for what remains one of the biggest challenges the sport has to offer.

First used for the 2022 Japan Cup, each of the six separate and airy barns boasts just two boxes, its own grazing area and remote monitoring, while horses can be trotted around the 300m exercise track which encircles the quarantine facility,

before accessing the main dirt and turf tracks by tunnel.

O'Brien had saddled six runners in the Japan Cup before Auguste Rodin, although none since Japan and Broome took up the challenge in 2021, meaning last year was his team's first experience of the new quarantine facilities.

"They did an incredible job with the quarantine facilities and people from all over the world need to see it. It's a beautiful job in every possible way."

ONCE again the Japan Cup bonus races have produced a cast of potential international challengers that, in terms of quality, may be unmatched since Danedream and Shareta – first and second in that season's Prix de l'Arc de Triomphe – led a four-strong assault on the prize in 2011.

The Aga Khan Studs' Calandagan boasts a similar profile to Do Deuce in some regards, although as a gelding he didn't run in the Classics as a three-year-old.

After a string of four near-misses in Group 1s in Britain and the Middle East, Francis Graffard will have breathed a huge sigh of relief when he gained his long overdue reward in the Grand Prix de Saint-Cloud, running away from the previous season's Arc runner-up, Adventure.

Even better was to come three weeks later when Calandagan took the King George VI and Queen Elizabeth Stakes at Ascot, preserving Graffard's grip on the prize.

Both Group 1s form part of the Japan Cup bonus series and, should Calandagan come out on top in Tokyo on

November 30, he would add £2.34 million (€2.76m) on top of the £2.605m (€3.068m) first prize.

Graffard has made no secret of his desire to win the Japan Cup and with Goliath's victory in the Grosser Preis von Baden it means he also has a golden ticket for the race.

Sixth in the Japan Cup 12 months ago, owners John Stewart and Philip Baron von Ullmann have the appetite for a return attempt.

And then there is Ombudsman, the brilliant winner of the Prince of Wales's Stakes and Juddmonte International at York – both Japan Cup bonus races – with performances which have elevated him to a world-leading rating of 128 in the Longines World's Best Racehorse Rankings.

Joint-trainers John and Thady Gosden have nominated the Japan Cup as the third leg of an ambitious autumn campaign which is also scheduled to take in the Champion Stakes at Ascot and the Breeders' Cup Turf.

Racing in the all blue of Godolphin, Ombudsman would be bidding to give another of the world's great owner-breeders, Sheikh Mohammed bin Rashid Al Maktoum of Dubai, a second victory in the Japan Cup, 29 years after Singpiel scored under Frankie Dettori for trainer Sir Michael Stoute.

For John Gosden, one of the world's most renowned conditioners, Tokyo is not quite a new frontier, although both the Japan Cup and his own training career are unrecognisable when set against his only previous participation in the race in just its fifth year.

In 1985 Gosden trained in California, not Newmarket, and sent Alan Clore's filly Alydar's Best to run a fine fourth to one of Japan's finest and most popular champions of the era, the winner of the previous season's Triple Crown, Symboli Rudolf.

Some 40 years on, Gosden hopes to be back, while Aidan O'Brien – his benchmark rival in European racing – continues the search for the horse to end his own quest for Japan Cup glory.



Auguste Rodin is paraded in front of the packed grandstand at Tokyo racecourse during his retirement ceremony before the Coolmore team take the podium

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