

JAPAN CUP 2026

Sunday, November 29



JOIN THE JOURNEY



Calandagan wins the 2025
Japan Cup for France, jockey
Mickael Barzalona and
trainer **Francis Graffard**



JRA

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‘THE ATMOSPHERE. I’D NEVER FELT IT BEFORE. IT WAS INCREDIBLE’


Scott Burton talks to Francis Graffard about achieving his dream of winning last year’s Japan Cup

FRANCIS GRAFFARD spent most of the first half of November 30 wracked with self-doubt. On the 20th anniversary of Frankie Dettori and Alkaased winning the Japan Cup he was about to saddle Calandagan in an attempt to break a long losing streak for Europe’s finest in a race which the home team had come to dominate.

He privately wondered whether he had set the Aga Khan Studs’ athletic superstar an impossible task; if his own ambition to win the Japan Cup meant setting up for failure the world’s best turf horse at the end of a miraculous season.

But there was a moment, 20 minutes before the climax of what would be a titanic stretch duel with Masquerade Ball, when Graffard realised why Tokyo racecourse on Japan Cup day is like nowhere else on planet racing.

“I remember when I saddled Calandagan it was so quiet and then I followed him through the tunnel, walking into the parade ring,” recalls the trainer. “The number of people looking, and the silence, the atmosphere; I’d never felt that before. It was incredible.

“I was so proud of the horse, it’s like a gladiator going into the arena.

“It was a really personal feeling because I was the only one walking with the horse. For me the whole experience of the day was incredible.”

Graffard was making his fourth attempt at ending that long wait for a foreign-trained winner of the Japan Cup, having first tried with the

Niarchos Family’s Erupt in 2015, just four years after taking out his training licence.

Having finished sixth to Shonan Pandora, Erupt would be back to try again the next year, although he was no match for Japan’s superstar of the era, finishing down the field behind Kitan Black and legendary rider Yutaka Take.

Eight years would pass before Graffard returned with Goliath, a winner of the King George VI and Queen Elizabeth Stakes at Ascot, who ran a gallant sixth to Do Deuce and that man Take again.

Over that time Graffard had become one of the leading trainers in Europe and his approach to big international challenges had been honed through experience . . . and with no small success.

Tokyo racecourse and the Japan Cup experience for foreign-trained horses had also moved on significantly.

And, as the 2025 season progressed, Graffard identified the perfect candidate to take him to the Japan Cup for a fourth time.

“The start of the season was a little tricky with Calandagan; we got beaten in Dubai, beaten at Epsom,” Graffard says.

“The key decision was to run him in the Grand Prix de Saint-Cloud and when he won that I started to really plan the rest of the season. The Japan Cup, in my mind, was always a race I wanted to target.

“Every time I’ve had a horse able to compete there, I’ve had this race in my calendar and I start thinking this is the horse for the Japan Cup.

Nor had Graffard gone off the radar of the Japan Racing Association during the eight-year hiatus between visits.

“After my two trips with Erupt, the JRA came to visit and they wanted to know what they could improve for foreign horses to make their journey better,” says Graffard.

“My biggest concern was the quarantine situation. We had to quarantine somewhere else, the journey was very long and I thought the horses spent too long in Japan.

“Since then they have built these amazing quarantine facilities at Tokyo racecourse and that’s a key factor. It’s completely different; a big improvement.”

The racing surface at Tokyo is invariably well maintained and it is no surprise that this fair and flat oval is where the fastest turf mile and a half has ever been run.

The Japan Cup is the best race run on the track and when Almond Eye stopped the clock at 2m 20.6s in the 2018 edition, she broke Alkaased’s 2005 record by a second and a half.

Even the mighty Equinox had to settle for second-best in the record books at 2m 21.8s in 2023.

They are two of the best middle-distance horses to race anywhere in the world in the last decade and their talent, allied to the fast track, proved to be a recipe for fireworks.

That too was a lesson not lost on Graffard.

“You really need to handle fast ground,” he says: “I remember the second year



with Erupt we had snow two days before the race yet the next day [in training] it was fast ground, so you really need a fast-ground horse and a horse with a very strong turn of foot, and that can stay as well.”

Calandagan appeared to fit the bill in terms of handling the surface, while his success in the Champion Stakes at Ascot had propelled him to the very top of the Longines World Thoroughbred Rankings; the talent was there too.

What happens in the week between a horse arriving in Tokyo and the running of this monument of a race can make all the difference to their chances of success.

Graffard was not the only member of Team Calandagan with experience of the race.

The Aga Khan Studs’ last Japan Cup runner was in 2011, when Alain de Royer-Dupre sent the Arc runner-up Shareta, accompanied by her regular work rider, the former jump jockey Jeremy Lobel.

Changing the human personnel around a top-class thoroughbred on the eve of their biggest challenge is not

something any trainer would choose to do and, by happy coincidence, Lobel has also ridden Calandagan ever since his arrival at the Aga Khan Studs’ Aiglemont training yard in Chantilly.

Lobel knew the track from his visit with Shareta, although the change in facilities was immediately striking to him.

“I went to Tokyo with Shareta and I remember the previous quarantine centre, which was across the other side of the city and where you had to spend a week before you could go over to the racecourse,” Lobel says.

“This was another universe by comparison. It’s brand new and the concept is to make everything as practical as possible for the horses and us.

“The stables are spotless and as soon as you arrive you have a small track around the barns to walk and then to trot.

“The major advantage is that from day three onwards you can head straight to the track to canter, which is a huge positive compared to what went before. There’s a lot less chopping and changing.

“It’s a very calm area in the middle of the course and he never got stressed by the place. It was as if he’d been there before, nothing fazed him.”

While the equine star of the show was settling in – accompanied by the Graffard-trained handicapper Le Nomade to ensure being the only foreign runner didn’t get too lonely – Lobel and vastly experienced travelling head groom Antoine Creton were also experiencing a level of help that made their work much easier, as well as turning the trip into a hugely pleasurable experience.

“It was an exemplary

welcome,” says Lobel. “We were received like kings and given a lot of staff to help all week. We stayed in a nearby hotel and there was always someone on hand to get us a taxi.

“We had an exceptional translator. She made working with the JRA staff very easy.

“We were finishing quite early each morning and between then and evening stables we had time to see the city, the Tokyo Tower and some spectacular ornamental gardens. It was fantastic to be able to do some sightseeing while working as well.”

For Graffard and wife Lisa-Jane there was also time away from the preparation of Calandagan.

“During the season the JRA put a considerable amount of effort into making you want to go to compete in the Japan Cup and, if you have any questions, the office in Paris helps a lot,” Graffard says.

“I was really keen to go back there because it’s a racing community in Japan and the JRA put in an incredible amount of work to welcome us. The gala dinner is very special and to discover Japanese culture makes it my best trip.

“In previous years we’d been to the stud farms in Hokkaido so in Calandagan’s year we spent a day in the mountains at Hakone and my wife and I went to an onsen [hot spring bath] which was amazing.

“We love Japanese culture. We love the food and it’s our best trip of the year. If we have the chance to go back we would love to go for a few days before or after to see Kyoto, while my dream would be to ski in Hokkaido one year.”

There is no doubt that, at the end of a hard year, the Japan Cup offers the chance for

connections to sample something unique in the racing world.

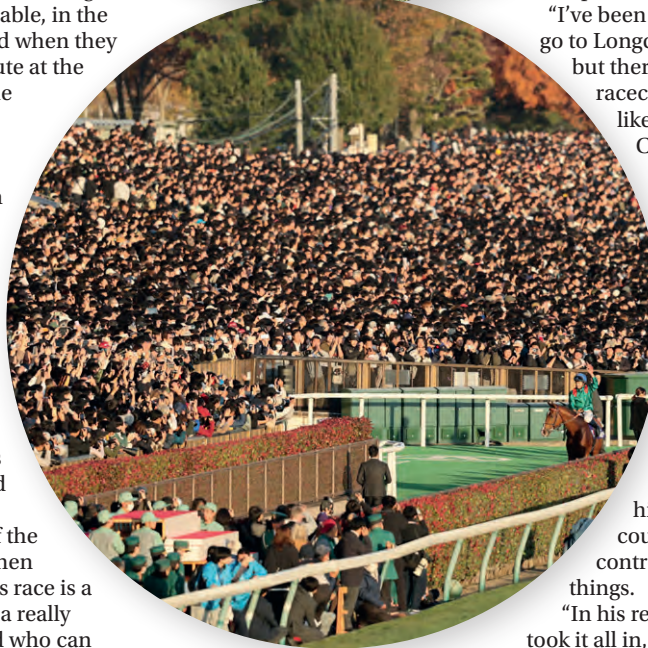
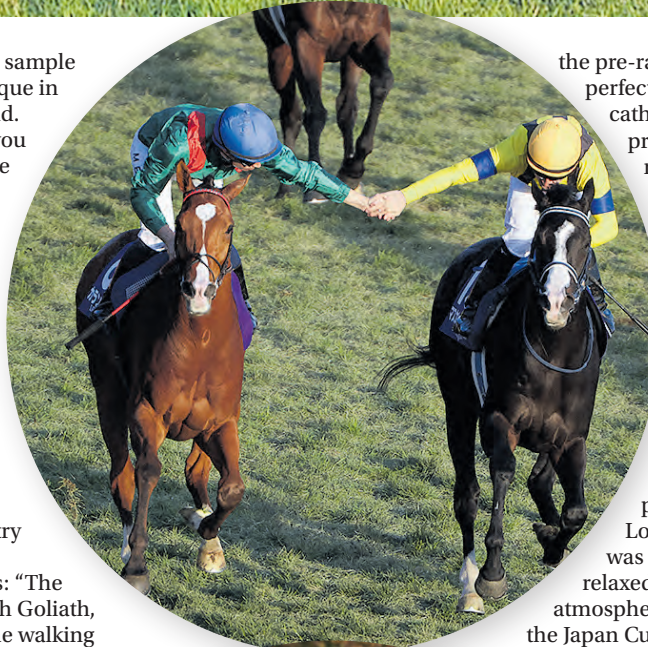
However, if you are bringing the thoroughbred ranked the best in the world to take on the best group of middle-distance horses anywhere, you’re not going as a tourist. You’re going there to try to win.

Graffard says: “The year before with Goliath, there was all the walking before in the stable, in the parade ring and when they went to the chute at the back behind the stalls.

“So I approached it differently with Calandagan. I briefed my staff when to come and we didn’t walk him too much in the stable; we saved him.

“Little things like that helped me in that respect. One of the big qualities when you take on this race is a horse who has a really good mind and who can handle the pressure because they walk in front of the grandstand and there’s all this ceremony with the screens and the clapping just as they are nearly ready to load.”

From Lobel’s point of view,



the pre-race plan worked perfectly, while the cathedral-hush of the preliminaries remained just as impressive as when he has first experienced it with Shareta.

“It really is a mark of how respectful the Japanese people are, because there is a huge crowd around the parade ring,” says Lobel. “Calandagan was able to stay relaxed and it’s an atmosphere you only get at the Japan Cup.

“I’ve been lucky enough to go to Longchamp and Ascot but there’s no other racecourse in the world like Tokyo on Japan Cup day.

“The one slight doubt we had was that going out of the stable yard until they are circling behind the stalls takes around 40 minutes. It was something he was going to handle for himself; we couldn’t really control that side of things.

“In his red hood he just took it all in, and his jockey, Mickael Barzalona, said he was calm at every step of the process.

“He gets into his own bubble and it saves him from expending excess energy before a race. He was calm and

took it like a professional, like the champion he is.”

Everything had gone perfectly, through Calandagan’s ever-improving sequence of Group 1 wins, his training pre-flight and his acclimatisation during the week in Tokyo.

Now it was down to the horse and his rider.

“It was an incredible, dramatic race to watch,” says Graffard. “When the horse started to come in the bend with his beautiful stride and the attitude of Mickael, he passed Masquerade Ball quite easily, I thought the race was over, I thought it was for me.

“And then I saw Masquerade Ball fighting back and I really thought Mickael had gone too soon. Christophe Lemaire knows the track and he didn’t move and I thought ‘God, we went to soon, we’re going to be beaten.’

“Masquerade Ball took the lead and I stopped shouting. I didn’t really know on the line what had happened.

“I had so many mixed feelings in the straight.”

But Barzalona knew, and as he reached out to tap hands with his compatriot Lemaire,

one of racing’s most iconic images was frozen in time.

For 19 years the European trainers had been back in the racecourse stables by the time the victory ceremony was played out in front of the packed stands.

Now it would be a horse trained in France who would be serenaded, having beaten the local hero, and a well-backed one at that.

“For me the whole experience of the day was incredible and after the race, the winning ceremony is long, and the public stayed on the racecourse to witness the podium ceremony. I was amazed by that.

“The respect all the Japanese people have for the sport, it’s beautiful to watch and it’s unique.”

In 2025 Graffard won 14 Group and Grade 1 races – a record for a French trainer – and among them were his first successes in the Prix de l’Arc de Triomphe and at the Breeders’ Cup.

But on November 30, he realised one dream he had worried might be impossible.

“We had amazing emotions during a season when we made a lot of owners happy and it was an incredible year,” he says. “But the Japan Cup was special for me personally because of the pressure and responsibility I felt on my shoulders that day.

“I really felt I’d achieved something on that day to win this race.

“For me it was personally a very big moment in my career and my life.”

Oh and Calandagan’s winning time? 2m 20.3s. Faster than Equinox. Faster than Almond Eye. It can be done.

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I’VE BEEN LUCKY ENOUGH TO GO TO LONGCHAMP AND ASCOT BUT THERE’S NO RACECOURSE IN THE WORLD LIKE TOKYO ON JAPAN CUP DAY

NOW WITH A \$5m BONUS AND A POTENTIAL FIRST PRIZE OF \$8.2m

NEW BONUS SYSTEM FOR 2026

From 2026, the Japan Cup bonus is a record \$5m, bringing the total winner's prize to \$8.2m, a world-leading prize for a turf race. The eligibility has expanded to include qualifying performances from both the current and previous year. Tier One bonus eligibility now extends to second and third place finishers of those qualifying races.

RACE DETAILS

When **Sunday, November 29** Where **Tokyo racecourse**
Track **Turf, left-handed** Trip **2,400m (1m4f)** Max field **18**
Nomination deadline **Tuesday, October 6**
Nomination fee **Free**
Deadline for arrival **Thursday, November 19**
Declaration **Thursday, November 26**
Declaration fee **300,000JPY (£1,562, €1,840)***
*Currency conversion rate: £1 = 210JPY, €1 = 182JPY, US\$1 = 155JPY

THE PRIZE-MONEY ORIGINALLY PRICED IN JPY

1st	\$3,226,000	£2,381,000	€2,747,000
2nd	\$1,290,000	£952,000	€1,099,000
3rd	\$839,000	£619,000	€714,000
4th	\$484,000	£357,000	€412,000
5th	\$323,000	£238,000	€275,000
6th	\$258,000	£190,000	€220,000
7th	\$226,000	£167,000	€192,000
8th	\$194,000	£143,000	€165,000
9th	\$129,000	£95,000	€110,000
10th	\$65,000	£48,000	€55,000
Total	\$7,034,000	£5,190,000	€5,989,000

THE BONUSES ORIGINALLY PRICED IN US\$

Winners of Tier One races (based on Japan Cup finish)
1st \$5m (£3.69m, €4.25m)
2nd \$2m (£1.47m, €1.70m)
3rd \$1.25m (£922k, €1.06m)
4th and below \$200k (£147k, €170k)
Placed 2nd or 3rd in Tier One races
1st \$2m (£1.47m, €1.70m)
2nd \$800k (£590k, €681k)
3rd \$500k (£369k, €425k)
4th and below \$100k (£73k, €85k)
Winners of Tier Two races (based on Japan Cup finish)
1st \$3m (£2.21m, €2.55m)
2nd \$1.2m (£885k, €1.02m)
3rd \$750k (£553k, €638k)
4th and below \$100k (£73k, €85k)

THE APPEARANCE MONEY

Any invited foreign horse who starts in the Japan Cup, unless qualifying for a higher bonus, will receive a participation bonus of \$100k (£73k, €85k) regardless of their finishing position.



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Scan here for more
details on the Japan
Cup 2026



TIER ONE QUALIFYING RACES

Britain
Derby Epsom; King George VI & Queen Elizabeth Stakes Ascot; International Stakes York; Champion Stakes Ascot
Ireland
Irish Champion Stakes Leopardstown
France
Prix de l'Arc de Triomphe Longchamp
US
Breeders' Cup Turf Keeneland

TIER TWO QUALIFYING RACES

Britain
Oaks Epsom; Coronation Cup Epsom; Prince of Wales's Stakes Ascot; Eclipse Stakes Sandown
Ireland
Tattersalls Gold Cup The Curragh; Irish Derby The Curragh; Irish Oaks The Curragh
France
Prix Ganay Longchamp; Prix du Jockey Club Chantilly; Prix de Diane Chantilly; Grand Prix de Saint-Cloud Saint-Cloud; Grand Prix de Paris Longchamp; Prix Vermeille Longchamp
Germany
Grosser Preis von Berlin Hoppegarten; Grosser Preis von Baden Baden-Baden; Preis von Europa Cologne
US
Manhattan Stakes Saratoga; Arlington Million Colonial Downs; Christophe Clement Turf Saratoga; Joe Hirsch Turf Classic Belmont; Breeders' Cup Filly & Mare Turf Keeneland
Hong Kong
Hong Kong Gold Cup Sha Tin; QEII Cup Sha Tin; Champions & Chater Cup Sha Tin; Hong Kong Cup Sha Tin; Hong Kong Vase Sha Tin
Australia
Ranvet Stakes Rosehill; Tancred Stakes Rosehill; Queen Elizabeth Stakes Randwick; Caulfield Cup Caulfield; Cox Plate Flemington; Melbourne Cup Flemington
UAE
Dubai Sheema Classic Meydan