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features

Battle of the hats at horse race

The Prix de Diane or French Oaks has long been considered a pinnacle of "elegance a la francaise" since its founding in 1843



Women wearing hats attend the 169th Prix de Diane horse racing in Chantilly, northern Paris (AFP Photo)

AFP | Chantilly, France

Champagne corks pop over the pounding of hooves and the "best hat" prize is as fiercely contested as the race itself: welcome to the Prix de Diane, a highlight of the year for France's horsey set.

Some 40,000 well-dressed spectators flocked to Sunday's races in the shadow of a chateau north of Paris, clutching picnic baskets, ice-cold wine bottles, and -- in many cases -- hats ranging from the stylish to the outlandish.

Held each June in Chantilly, a picturesque forest town built around horseracing, the Prix de Diane or French Oaks has long been considered a pinnacle of "elegance a la francaise" since its founding in 1843.

"It's an event unique in the world," said Andre Berteau, a former jockey who has attended the race for 20 years.

"To start with, there's only one racecourse like this with a view over a chateau surrounded by forests. We're really lucky here," added Berteau, his top hat perched at a rakish angle.

While many come for an event that draws some of Eu-

rope's best three-year-old fillies, plenty of others come simply to see and be seen.

In particular, the 300 fashionistas vying in the Concours d'Elegance or Elegance Contest, and the hundreds of others swarming around the catwalk, displayed minimal interest in the flat race won this year by feisty English 7-1 shot Laurens.

Some of the also-rans for the best-dressed award included a huge black-and-red confection resembling a tropical flower, a gold cloche and a riff on a Span-

ish matador's hat.

Mad Hatters

A fair number of those jockeying for the only prize that mattered were professional milliners spying an opportunity to show off their most inventive work.

Some took inspiration from the race itself, topping their hats with model horses or champagne flutes.

But other strayed from the equine theme.

A group of young millinery graduates came in Alice In Wonderland garb, including one dressed as the Queen of Hearts and another as the Mad Hatter's tea table.

"I wanted something very large and something very feminine," explained 23-year-old Nadege Monett, leaning over to display the teapot and saucers perched upon her head, a flamingo-shaped umbrella under her arm.

"I wanted something very stylish, very 19th century -- personally when I think of the Prix de Diane, I think of an Englishwoman with those big hats and lace and umbrellas."

From haute couture to Primark

Comfort and convenience were set aside for the day.

One woman, a hand clamped to the large pink-and-gold contraction attached to her head, could be heard saying: "It's alright so long as I don't turn to the right."

Johanna Contremoulins, a 27-year-old human resources manager from Normandy, clinched the coveted "Most Elegant" title, winning rave reviews for a spiralling pink hat topped with spiky plant fronds.

But the top 10 also included Sara Rose from Carlow in Ireland, who delighted in the fact that she had come close to winning, despite having assembled her chic monochrome outfit mostly from high street brands Primark and New Look.

"It's no fun when somebody wins who spent 3,000 euros (\$3,500) on their outfit," she said.

Rose works at the Newmarket racecourse in England and acknowledged that the French race appeared decidedly better behaved than Ladies Day at Ascot, where even the most elegantly dressed, after a bottle or two of champagne, are frequently a little worse for wear by home time.

"But we're not at the end of the day yet, so we'll see," she laughed.



The Prix de Diane was abandoned throughout World War I, with no running from 1915 to 1918. The first two post-war editions were held at Longchamp, and it returned to Chantilly in 1921

Trash recycling scheme brings hope to Jordanian women

Reuters | Irbid, Jordan

Sameera Al Salam folds a discarded piece of newspaper into a long strip then loops it round her finger to form a tight circle, the first stage of making the upcycled handbags, trays and bowls the Syrian refugee hopes will help her earn a living.

Al Salam, 55, was a hairdresser with a passion for "art and making things" before she fled her war-torn homeland for Irbid in northern Jordan with her family in 2012.

Now she has two teenagers and a husband left paralysed by a stroke to support in a country where she has no automatic legal right to work, and they are three months behind on their rent.

"We were living a really happy life. I had a garden where I grew everything," Al Salam told the Thomson Reuters Foundation.



Sameera Al Salam displays some of the products she made as part of the scheme

"We had to leave because of the airstrikes. We were always trying to put things in front of the door to protect the children. Whenever I remember, it breaks my heart."

Like most of the more than

655,000 Syrian refugees living in Jordan -- and many Jordanians -- poverty, debt and unemployment dominate the family's existence.

Al Salam hopes her involvement in a new rubbish collection

and recycling scheme that aims to alleviate the poverty of both refugees and locals and bring the two communities closer will help turn things around.

The scheme, managed by charity Action Against Hunger, employs 1,200 people to collect and sort waste from the streets and provides temporary work permits to refugees who take part.

Nearly half the participants are female in a country where women can face cultural and family obstacles to employment, including a culture of shame around going out to work.

One in three Syrian refugee households in Jordan is headed by women and more and more are now seeking jobs in an already crowded market.

More than 80 percent of the Syrian refugees in Jordan live below the poverty line, according to Care International.



The scheme employs 1,200 people to collect and sort waste from the streets and provides temporary work permits to refugees

Awsaf Qaddah, a 39-year-old Syrian widow, said working as a rubbish collector initially felt like "a kind of shame", but she now feels only pride.

"The job took me out of this atmosphere I was living in at home. Women can and should

go out and work, especially with the circumstances we're facing," she said. "I have no husband or father or brother to help -- I'm proud to do it."

Fellow worker Berwen Misterihi, who is Jordanian, was forced to earn after her husband left her and their four children.

"Women and men would make comments about me picking up waste," she said.

"I said to one man, 'I'd rather work than come to you for the money' and he apologised."

The project workers were given 50-day contracts paying 12 Jordanian Dinar (\$16.90) a day, plus training and social security provisions. Some of the waste was sold to scrap dealers for extra cash.

Al Salam was among a group of women who started an upcycling project, turning the waste paper and plastic they collected into objects to sell.