

# WELL ARMED

*A Thoroughbred  
of Destiny*



**JAY HOVDEY**

## Chapter 13

### ON TOP OF THE WORLD

**B**ill and Susan Casner were watching from a spot high in the Nad al Sheba grandstand.

“I wanted to see as much as possible,” Casner said. “The big video board, the naked eye. The experience was important. My main concern was the start. I just wanted him to break. If he broke good, I knew we’d be in pretty good shape.

“So Susan and I go up these stairs next to the tunnel to watch from there. It was a whole section of Arab men. One of them notices us and says, ‘Do you have a horse in the race? Come sit with us!’ There were two guys sitting with him, and he ran them out of their seats. We looked around, and Susan was the only woman in that entire section.”

At the same time, Eoin Harty took up a place in the jockeys’ room, on the ground level of the grandstand, just off the walking ring.

“It was a matter of my poor eyesight, and wanting a little bit of peace and quiet,” Harty said. “Kathy, Eddie, and Oli were in the paddock, watching on the big screen. I was feeling confident he’d run well. He had been training just so good. Nothing else really occurred to me. Kiaran McLaughlin was there—he was training Albertus Maximus—and Jimmy Bell with Darley came in at the last minute. John Gosden was there as well, and he said to me, ‘You don’t want to be on the lead in this race, mate. You can’t win.’ I said, ‘If I’m not on the lead in this race, he won’t win.’”

Right about then, Aaron Gryder was sitting quietly atop Well Armed in starting gate stall number seven. His horse had behaved perfectly during the warm-up period, perfectly happy to be without the usual American-style pony for company. To Gryder’s left in stall six was the Brazilian stakes winner Gloria de

Campeao and jockey Jorge Leme. To Gryder's right was Casino Drive, the Japanese invader, and jockey Katsumi Ando. It was Casino Drive that occupied Gryder's tactical thoughts.

"I knew he had speed," Gryder said. "If my horse could out-break him, fine. But I couldn't count on that. I was hoping that however the break came out, Casino Drive wouldn't go with us. If he doesn't, I'd be able to get my horse to relax on the lead and get into his nice, easy rhythm."

Horse racing is replete with colorful terms. One of the best is to "catch a flyer," which is what happens when a horse leaves the gate with such efficient thrust that it appears as if they've been given a head start. When the gates for the World Cup opened, Well Armed pushed hard on that healed right hip, Gryder stayed perfectly balanced on the withers, and they caught a flyer, shooting to the front from the very first step. Both Casino Drive and Gloria de Campeao were helpless to neutralize Well Armed's advantage. Their riders had to concede Gryder the lead and be content to track Well Armed as the field raced down the first straightaway to the gentle turn at the top of the course.

"He'd only run an eighth of a mile, his ears were going back and forth, and Aaron had a long cross on him, very relaxed and just cruising," Casner said. "With all that, I knew we had a heck of a shot to win. And the farther he went, the more that feeling grew."

Harty also liked what he saw, watching on the TV screen in the jocks' room.

"So the gates open, and it looks like he's in front by four or five lengths," the trainer said. "At the half mile pole, he's just cruising, and you could tell the rest of them had been pretty much run off their feet. I thought my main competition was Samantha Siegel's horse, Arson Squad, and he was having a horrible trip. He bounced off the rail at one point. Albertus Maximus was going nowhere."

At the top of the course, Gryder pulled down a set of goggles to enjoy a better view.

"One of the good things about riding at night is that you can watch shadows," Gryder said. "I was watching them, on the ground to my right. They weren't gaining on me, and we were going at a nice, leisurely pace."

The sight of the big bay horse loping along on the lead with more than half of the race behind him filled his people with a joy that overshadowed all the trials and tribulations Well Armed had survived.

"At the five-eighths pole, he hasn't been asked for anything," Harty said, "and the rest are being niggled at, so I'm pretty confident. Then at the top of the stretch, Aaron drops his hands, and Well Armed starts opening up."

The real-time description of the action was left to World Cup announcer Terry Spargo, and he did it with flair while rising to the occasion as the field came home:

"There's six hundred meters, and a long hard road home to the end of an era," Spargo declared. "Well Armed shows the way into the straight by two lengths over My Indy. Gloria de Campeao on the fence, Albertus Maximus on the outside, then Snaafy, Paris Perfect, and Happy Boy."

Meanwhile, the Casners were making converts to the unfolding Well Armed drama.

"The men around us were rooting for the sheikh's horse, of course," said Casner. "But as the race went on, they couldn't help but notice us getting excited. 'Your horse?' the one man asked. It most certainly was. He started telling everybody it was our horse out there on the lead, and they all started rooting for him. That in itself made it even more unbelievable."

At the 500-meter mark, Gryder snuck a peek past his right shoulder. His hands were quiet on Well Armed's neck.

"It's a strange feeling," he said, "to be in a position like that and still have so much horse under you."

Then, approaching the red and white-striped pole marking 400 meters to the finish, Gryder moved his hands higher on

Well Armed's neck and began to push. All the familiar signals were being transmitted to the big horse. A few strides later, Gryder drew his whip and slapped his horse once on the right hip—the same right hip that was once so badly broken that Well Armed's life had hung in the balance. But that was then. Now that slap on the hip was a further cue that Well Armed knew from experience, a cue that marked the final phase of this very specific physical exercise. Gryder took another peek, accompanied by three quick slaps of the whip, and Well Armed surged. Up in the announcer's roost, Spargo was taken by surprise.

"Well Armed has slipped the field!" he cried.

Harty, ignoring the announcer, was not ready to celebrate.

"About then, Jimmy Bell starts slapping me on the back," Harty said. "You got it! Congratulations, you just won the World Cup!" he said. But I know there's still a million things that can go wrong. There was a race at Ellis Park I'd seen in some kind of wind storm where a giant umbrella from a picnic table blew onto the track during the last part of a race; horses and jockeys were ducking and diving everywhere. That was absolutely going through my head, that something unforeseen still might happen. Call it the dark Irish soul in me."

Casner, on the other hand, allowed himself a leap of faith.

"When he hit the head of the lane and was still in front, I knew they weren't gonna catch him," Casner said. "I know that stretch is three-eighths of a mile long. But when Aaron asked the horse to run that last quarter of a mile, he just re-broke on them. Just ran off and left them."

Or, as Spargo proclaimed:

"Well Armed in front! He's five lengths in front, six lengths in front, seven lengths in front of Gloria de Campeao."

At which point Harty conceded the obvious.

"Once inside the eighth pole, it looked pretty good from there, short of the earth opening up in front of him," he said. "Inside the sixteenth, I let myself think he'd win."

By then, Gryder had begun to pat Well Armed on the neck in a gesture of unbridled affection, while Casner already was savoring the moment and taking in the scene for posterity.

"I knew what was going through Aaron's head," Casner said. "He couldn't believe this horse is running like this. He's looking back—this is the Dubai World Cup! And there's that moment in the race where he goes to patting that horse. I know how it must have felt, like a validation of his entire career as a rider. He was on the best horse in the world in the most important race in the world on that night, and he rode that horse magnificently."

It was left to Spargo for the final benediction, as Well Armed galloped past the finish line, fourteen lengths ahead of second-place Gloria de Campeao:

"From Cigar to Well Armed, it's all over at Nad al Sheba! Well Armed bolts in with the Dubai World Cup!"

The winning margin was nearly twice the record set by Curl-in the previous year. Fourteen lengths translates to about 120 feet, or 40 strong yards. After Well Armed reached the finish line, it took three full seconds for Gloria de Campeao to complete his race. When Caton Bredar, working for the television feed, approached Gryder on horseback for a post-race comment, he asked, "Who was second?"

Back in California, watching the TV screen in the Santa Anita jockeys' room, Gryder's reality show co-star Alex Solis answered with a shout:

"Who cares!"

Gryder, a man not given to public displays of emotion, was in his own way overcome.

"I am so blessed," the jockey said. "I love this horse."

Harty spoke for all his fellow trainers at the sight.

"It was a great moment," Harty said. "You wish you could have something like that every week."

And Bill Casner, for whom Well Armed represented so much, embraced the moment for all it was worth.

“Amazing,” Casner said. “Just amazing. ‘From Cigar to Well Armed.’ I like the sound of that. So many things are going through your head—the birth of your children, the love of your life. It was an unbelievable moment that Susan and I were so fortunate to experience, the kind of thing you could go through a whole lifetime and never have. In that moment of time, it’s a validation for what you did, and such a joy for the horse to overcome what happened to him, that he was able to achieve what he did. This horse, what he’s meant to us in so many ways, it’s impossible to describe. Karri was there in that moment in time. She rode Well Armed that night with Aaron. It was magical.”



*Bill and Susan Casner crown their story on  
an unforgettable night in Dubai.*