

# The horse of a lifetime

**Liz Price** meets Corine Barande-Barbe, trainer of Cirrus Des Aigles and finds a love affair between her and the brilliant racehorse

**S**HE HAS BEEN called a dreamer, unrealistic and even mad, yet there is no denying it, when it comes to Cirrus Des Aigles, Corine Barande-Barbe's moves and decisions have been spot on.

From humble beginnings when he finished fourth in a two-year-old maiden at Chantilly to becoming the world's best racehorse three years later, and the only horse to have ever threatened the mighty Frankel, Cirrus Des Aigles and Corine Barande-Barbe have defied the odds more than once.

A "freak" accident of nature, Cirrus Des Aigles is the product of a marriage between an unfashionable sire, with a reputation for producing more jumpers than Flat horses, and a mare whose only claim to fame is that she is a daughter of the Seattle Slew stallion Septieme Ciel.

Barande-Barbe, despite being a Classic-winning trainer thanks to another happy accident of nature called Carling, is considered a small trainer with only a handful of handicappers in her yard at Chantilly.

Cirrus's owner Jean-Claude-Alain Dupouy fits right in with this unlikely duo too. Even though he has been a registered owner since 2007 when Mesnil Des Aigles, Cirrus's older brother, was running in his colours, it would be a vast exaggeration to call his silks famous.

That is if it wasn't for Cirrus Des Aigles. Over the course of his seven-year reign on some of the world's biggest and most prestigious racecourses, Cirrus Des Aigles has not only succeeded in turning himself into a celebrity, who has his own Facebook page, but those who surround him – his trainer, owner, jockey and even his ever smiling lass and fashionista Zoe – have been touched by fame.

He has changed Barande-Barbe's life forever and she freely admits to being a slave to his every move and actions.

So when jockey Christophe Soumillon jumped off Cirrus Des Aigles only moments

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after steering him to victory in the 2014 Coronation Cup at Epsom in June, there was an audible intake of breath from the French trainer's corner.

However, the moment of anxiety was short lived. "I could see straight away from the way he was walking that Christophe had jumped off more as a precaution than anything else," she says. "Yes, he was a bit sore, but I knew it wasn't career threatening."

She smiles and adds: "I know him inside out. If you have spent as much time as I have with him, you just know. He has always had problems with his feet and it wasn't anything important."



Seconds after this shot was taken, Christophe Soumillon jumped off Cirrus Des Aigles (in front) as the horse pulled up lame. The horse has now had six weeks' rest and is ready to start training again (July). Barande-Barbe says Cirrus tells her he'd like to run next in the Prix Dollar and then the Champion Stakes



Corine Barande-Barbe admits that she “did not know how to run a yard”, but Cirrus has taught her how to “manage my yard and life more efficiently”



In the end it was Barande-Barbe herself who insisted that Cirrus Des Aigles should enter the winners' enclosure as she wanted to avoid “a drama and everyone thinking the worst, while I knew it wasn't anything bad”. Following a veterinary exam on track, as well as back at Chantilly, it was confirmed that Cirrus Des Aigles had escaped serious injury and all that was needed was a six-week break with walking exercise only.

It meant giving Royal Ascot a miss, but in the great scheme of things, that was of no importance. In July, he was still wearing his bandage, but was clearly bursting to get back onto the track, which he demonstrated by trying to pull his poor lad from one corner of the green to the other.

“Cirrus has always known to look after himself and he is definitely telling me that he is ready to start training again,” confirms Barande-Barbe. “He wants to run in the Prix Dollar and then the Champion Stakes.”

That Cirrus and Corine have conversations and that she treats him like her best friend is part of the reason why she is often considered, well, let's call it eccentric.

She throws her head back and laughs: “People can say what they want, but I believe that you have to listen to what the horses tell

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you if you want to understand them. And yes, I do consider him my friend who I would like to have around me forever.”

Forever is a big word though and she knows that it doesn't really exist when it comes to racehorses, however, any mention of retirement makes her bristle. She explains: “About three years ago I was told by a journalist that I must surely be thinking of retiring Cirrus, you know seeing that he was nearly six. Why? Why should I retire a horse that enjoys running so much. He is a gelding, so it's not like he can go to stud.

“At the end of each season I'm asked the retirement question and then at the start of each new season I'm asked if I think that he is still as good as last year. And the answer is still the same. Cirrus will tell me when he has had enough and until then we shall go on as usual.”

**T**HERE ARE certainly not many horses who win three Group 1 races at the age of eight. And not just any Group 1 races, but those that attract much the younger Prix de l'Arc de Triomphe winners. Beating Treve doesn't rank that high though and Barande-Barbe clearly prefers his victory in the Champion Stakes at Ascot.

“It seems unreal today, but that was his first Group 1 victory and everyone had told me beforehand that I was mad to take him there based on a couple of Group 3 and Group 2 victories,” smiles Barande-Barbe. “So when he did it, when he beat all those good horses, especially at Ascot, it was just hugely satisfying.”

She pauses, looks at the painting behind her that she has just been given and adds: “Although I have to admit that the next year, when he returned to Ascot and ran against Frankel, that was maybe even more exhilarating. Even though he got beat.

“That one moment, when everyone went quiet in the stands because for one split

second when everyone thought that he might beat Frankel, that is a moment which still gives me goose bumps.

“You might not believe me, surely I would have loved Cirrus to have won that day, but actually, I'm really relieved that he didn't!

“I think it was great that Frankel was able to write such a great story and maybe Cirrus will write his own one day.”

Writing Cirrus Des Aigles's story is something Corine might consider the day he

does eventually retire, but she doesn't really think about what may happen or might not happen. All she would like, is to have him close to her.

“That day at Epsom was nothing in comparison to the winter of 2011-12 when his owners were offered a substantial amount of money for him,” she winces. “It doesn't happen often that those amounts are offered for a gelding and I made a point of not trying to influence the owners, but I can tell you that



had he been sold, he wouldn't have stayed in training with me."

In the end, his current owners calculated, correctly as it turned out, that he could win the same amount and maybe even more by continuing to run in the world's premier races.

"I was so relieved, I can't tell you," says Barande-Barbe. "That was really an awful winter."

She is coy about revealing who it was who made the offer, but whoever it was saw it right



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as Cirrus Des Aigles, a winner of the valuable Dubai Sheema Classic, is well on his way of becoming the highest earner in Europe.

Only the Dubai World Cup winner Gloria De Campeo is financially still ahead of him and his trainer admits that beating that record would be one of her ambitions. That and a victory in Hong Kong.

“Sometimes I wonder why he arrived in my yard and not in someone else’s,” muses Barande-Barbe.

“It could have all turned out so differently. Cirrus has taught me so much. I was quite young when I started in this business – I learnt a lot from Maurice Zilber for whom I have only admiration.

“It wasn’t easy as a woman to obtain a training licence and I frankly didn’t really know how to run a yard, so financially I have known my ups and downs.

“But Cirrus has taught me how to manage my yard and life more efficiently. The day he does retire, and don’t get me wrong, I’m not under any illusion that it will go on forever, I will be all right. I will probably have less

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horses, but that will suit me.

“And hopefully he will remain in my yard so that I can see him. Not that you could use him as a pony as he is quite cheeky, but I think he just loves the hustle and bustle of a training yard.”

So not that much a dreamer then, but a realist? Barande-Barbe laughs and says: “You know it’s so strange, here we are in a business

based on dreams, intuition, gut feeling and living creatures, yet when you dare to dream, you get called mad or crazy!

“Cirrus would have never achieved everything he has achieved if I hadn’t dared to enter him in these races. I am very realistic when it comes to his ability and I would never ask him to do anything he is not capable of doing. And I would never risk his health either.

“So, as I said, when he is ready to end his career on the track, I will not hesitate but give him the retirement he deserves.

“Yet, looking at him, I would venture that he is not quite ready for it yet.”

Yes, watching Cirrus Des Aigles bounce about under the trees in the yard at Chantilly that he has called home for the last seven years, as fresh as a daisy and eager to get back into work, it does indeed seem that retirement is still a long way off.

And while we all can’t wait to read his story, it would be nice if it included a few more chapters before the final page that says The End. ■

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