



## Keeneland Winner's Circle: Raise a Glass of Vino Rosso to Crupi

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By *Chris McGrath*

Life is full of coincidence. And our own lives are full of horses: a teeming cavalcade of them, all on different trajectories, rising or falling; sometimes seeming to fulfill carefully planned agendas, more often prey to random twists of luck. So when a single Thoroughbred steps out of the chaos to meet a cue as specific as the one that summoned Vino Rosso (Curlin) at Santa Anita on Memorial Day, it really asks us what we believe about the world, and our place in it.

On the one hand, you could say that for Vino Rosso to win a Grade I race in the achingly hollow days between the death and funeral of the man who found him



for his owners, and then taught him how to be a racehorse, is simply a fortuitous demonstration of the impact routinely made on the business by James “J.J.” Crupi. His eye and touch were such that it was only a matter of time before a graduate of his New Castle training center outside Ocala would reiterate the scale of his loss, aged 79, last Thursday. How much time was a matter of pure chance.

On the other hand, it is not as though Crupi is being mourned merely as a horseman. The sheer dimensions of his character—in terms both of the courage he brought to his own battles, and the generosity with which he assisted others in their own—were such that many of those now grieving will be comfortable with the idea that fortunes on the racetrack, trivial and apparently arbitrary as they are, might reflect a deeper register of our existence.

As Vino Rosso wore down favorite Gift Box (Twirling Candy) in the Gold Cup at Santa Anita, after all, the racecaller happened to mention that they being followed down the stretch by a horse named Higher Power (Medaglia d’Oro)!



Vino Rosso Wins the Gold Cup | Benoit photo

Wherever you stand, the Grade I breakthrough of Vino Rosso was as apt as it was moving. Apart from anything else, he represents a partnership between two men who each owe their finest hours on the Turf to Crupi: Mike Repole, for whom he found champion juvenile Uncle Mo (Indian Charlie) as a yearling; and Vinnie Viola, whose St Elias Stable was likewise put on the map by Crupi, literally so in the case of the top-class miler Liam’s Map (Unbridled’s Song). Viola also had a

stake in the 2017 Kentucky Derby winner, Always Dreaming (Bodemeister), who learned the ropes under Crupi before his transfer to Todd Pletcher.



Pletcher is also the trainer of Vino Rosso and naturally his owners are indebted to him for helping the horse regroup, his form having tapered off at Saratoga last summer after his Classic campaign. But Viola, in the course of paying tribute to a cherished friend and counsellor on Friday, had expressly remarked that this race might prove a perfect testimonial.

Viola explained that Vino Rosso had exemplified Crupi's patience with horses. And not just his patience, but his intuition. There had been a time when the colt had lost his way. "He wasn't progressing," Viola recalled. "But then Jimmy called up Rory Babich [who assists in the St Elias operation] one day and said: 'You know, I figured Vino out. I worked him in the morning, and I didn't like the way he worked. So I worked him in the afternoon, and did it for a few days—until he learned that when he gets on the track, he should put out his best effort.'"

And having seen how the race duly played out, Repole echoed his partner's sense that Vino Rosso could have carved no better memorial to Crupi.

"I think Vino and Johnny [Velazquez] had a little help down the stretch yesterday, in getting past Gift Box," Repole said. "To win a Grade I race a couple of days after Jimmy passed away, and a couple of days before his funeral Mass, I think there's a higher power involved here.

"It meant more than you'd ever think. I know Grade Is are few and far between, but this one had a lot more meaning. It was very special. I spoke to some people on the farm, Vinnie did too: people who were closest to Jimmy, like Monique [Delk] and Johnny Sacco, it was emotional for them all."

Vino Rosso was one of the first couple of horses Repole bought in partnership with Viola, whom he had introduced to Crupi.

"When Vinnie and I started to see some of these partnerships happening we said, 'Hey, you know what, we both root for each other.' When he's winning a race I say congrats and when he's winning a race he says congrats, so it made all the sense

in the world, and for Jimmy to be very involved in the choosing,” he said. “We’ve got about five more [2-year-olds] coming this year that Jimmy picked out.

“But for this to happen, four days later after Jimmy’s passing... He died 12.33 on Thursday night, so really Friday, the day the entries were made. A horse he picked out for Vinnie and I, a horse who’s had a lot of promise and excitement but for one reason or another hasn’t put it all together. I think yesterday was the culmination of a lot, for Vino Rosso and obviously for the relationship of Vinnie and [Viola’s wife] Teresa and myself and Jimmy. And Todd, too, because he and Jimmy had a pretty special relationship.

“Vinnie and Teresa have been so great to Jimmy. Over the years there’ve been so many times when they went above and beyond to get him the best doctors, to put him in the best hospital in New York, the best hospital in Miami.

“Jimmy lived his life like a Grade I racehorse. He gave it his all every single time. Jimmy was like a Grade I horse that had 110 starts. He wouldn’t want to work, he’d want to run every week. Obviously it’s very bittersweet. He’d been suffering. But when you talk about Jimmy Crupi, you’re talking about the Frank Sinatra song: ‘I did it my way.’

“So  
it



Viola and Repole | Sarah K. Andrew photo

was a special, special win. For three Italian guys to be winning with a horse named Vino Rosso. In New England, where I was, and Vinnie in New York, I think

we both opened a nice bottle of wine and toasted Jimmy, and 79 years of a great life, over a nice Grade I vino rosso.”

But let’s not forget, in taking a step back from the poignant circumstances, the role of another remarkable achiever in the Vino Rosso story. For when this colt emerged on the Derby trail last year, what jumped out of his background was not his selection and breaking, but the fact that he had been born and raised on the same farm as Justify (Scat Daddy).

The two horses were born on consecutive days, and sealed their Derby candidature the same day on opposite coasts: the eventual Triple Crown winner in the GI Santa Anita Derby, and Vino Rosso in the GII Wood Memorial. That would have been a stellar day for Claiborne or Lane’s End, never mind for the boutique Glennwood Farm, run by John D. Gunther and his daughter Tanya. To breed both colts, they had identified a stallion going places: Curlin and Scat Daddy were still available at \$25,000 and \$30,000 respectively when covering the dams of Vino Rosso and Justify.

John Gunther had been similarly ahead of the game in the \$42,000 acquisition of Mythical Bride (Street Cry {Ire}) at the 2011 Keeneland November Sale. Winner only of a Sunland Park maiden, she was culled by WinStar before two subsequent sons of her mother Flaming Heart (Touch Gold) could elevate the page. Her weanling by A.P. Indy was Commissioner, subsequently beaten a head in the GI Belmont S.; while her 2-year-old by Distorted Humor, Laugh Track, was foiled by a neck in the GI Breeders’ Cup Sprint. (Both also won graded stakes.)

Besides Vino Rosso, Mythical Bride is since responsible for So Alive (Super Saver), a debut winner at Keeneland last fall and Grade III-placed this spring; and a Pioneer of The Nile colt in training with Aidan O’Brien. She recently delivered a brother to Vino Rosso, and also has a yearling colt by none other than Crupi’s discovery Uncle Mo.

If few can hope to match the Gunthers’ prescience, in picking mares and their mates on the marketplace, everyone can learn something from the matings that produced Justify and Vino Rosso. For both balance inbreeding to Mr Prospector with duplication of a classy stamina influence.

Justify carries Mr P. 3 x 5 x 5: as Scat Daddy’s damsire and also as sire of sisters Preach and Yarn, respectively the dams of Pulpit (sire of Justify’s second dam) and Myth (dam of Scat Daddy’s sire Johannesburg). But all this dash is weighted by that a copper-bottomed Classic force, Nijinsky: not only as the sire of Scat Daddy’s second dam, and grandsire (through Baldski) of Justify’s third dam; but also as damsire of Narrate, the dam of Preach and Yarn. (And actually Narrate’s sire,

Honest Pleasure, is a brother to What A Pleasure, sire of Justify's fourth dam: more ballast across the pedigree.)

In Vino Rosso, that pattern is magnified: between Mr P. glitz, and one of the ultimate conduits of broodmare class and hardiness in Deputy Minister. The Mr P. arrives straight down the line, 3 x 4: a sire by his son Smart Strike; and a dam by his grandson Street Cry (Ire) (Machiavellian). Deputy Minister, likewise 3 x 4, appears as damsire of Curlin; while his son Touch Gold (out of a mare by another broodmare sire legend in Buckpasser) is responsible for second dam Flaming Heart.

Vino Rosso's bottom line has mild distinction, overall, though it's fun to note that both the grand-dams of Flaming Heart's mother were by Lt. Stevens, a son of the linchpin matriarch Rough Shod. Beyond that you find some pretty arcane influences: Vino Rosso's sixth dam, for instance, is by the exported British speedball Pappa Fourway.

Vino Rosso has spent much of his life in Justify's shadow. Even before they had left Glennwood, the herd leader seemed to know who he was. Tanya Gunther once memorably compared them to the Fonz and Richie Cunningham from the old TV series "Happy Days": Justify, the biker swaggering around in his leather jacket; Vino Rosso clean-cut, eager-to-please. Evidently his deportment at the 2016 September Sale was correspondingly laid back, but he caught Crupi's eye as Hip 528 and made \$410,000.

Crupi's fellow Italian-American patrons gave their new colt a name that would invite the most obvious of "brindisi" (toasts). And he gave them a memorable opportunity the day he won the Wood, a very special race for guys raised in the neighbourhood; not least given Viola's success in the GI Carter H. on the same card with another Crupi discovery, Army Mule (Friesan Fire).

At the time, Crupi complimented Viola for giving horses all the time they need. But as Viola told us the other day, that was precisely the lesson he most valued from Crupi. One way or another, Vino Rosso—having always been mellow in character—now appears to be maturing, like fine Chianti, into an animal worthy of the names on the label. And that's saying something: planted by Gunther, harvested by Crupi.

So ultimately, perhaps, we don't really need to ask ourselves whether someone up there might be taking a benign interest in a mere horserace. Because Crupi had long since made all the necessary difference to Vino Rosso, by all his patient development of talent. Perhaps he even imparted something of his own indomitable spirit. As such, then, Crupi would perhaps now like nothing more

than for his countless friends simply to raise a glass to his memory—and to enjoy Vino Rosso among all his other living, vital and lasting legacies.

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