

## Dark Horse

For horse racing fans during these days of the American Triple Crown, there is a new film that could surely warm their cockles: “Dark Horse” tells the heartening story of a racehorse adopted by a small Welsh village that triumphed beyond all expectations

The saga begins in 2000 in the region of the Cefn Forest in south Wales, where once thriving coalmines have long closed, leaving a poverty level among the highest in Britain. There Jan Vokes, barmaid at the local working man’s club, hears a pub regular talking racehorses. Jan, who is an animal breeder herself, gets the idea to try breeding a horse. She recruits her husband, Brian and the regular, Howard Davies, who together buy a thoroughbred and an ageing stallion and raise the consequent foal—named Dream Alliance—on weekly contributions from 23 villagers whom Jan has formed into a local syndicate.

To the astonishment of Britain’s racing elite, Dream becomes an unlikely champion in steeplechase competition, leaving more blue-blooded rivals in his wake, until one day, running at the famous Aintree racetrack, he suffers a potentially fatal injury. Yet the village syndicate refuses to let him die and pours the horse’s winnings into high-risk, revolutionary stem cell surgery. Eighteen months later, defying all odds, Dream Alliance makes an amazing comeback in the 2009 Welsh National. His fantastic victory makes the national news with headlines screaming NAGS TO RICHES! and SLUMNAG MILLIONAIRE!, and Dream is entered in the biggest race of all: the Grand National.

Director Louise Osmond tells her inspiring tale mixing interviews with the two Vokes, their friends Howard Davies and his wife Angela (skeptical about the whole project), and other townsfolk together with archival footage and media coverage of the Dream’s ascent. The interviews are charming, made the more so by the interviewees natural self-deprecation and melodious accents.

In remarking on the film, Osmond singled out Jan Vokes as a “sort of pied piper for the project, one by one persuading her friends and then her village to get behind her outlandish plan. Where most of us might look forward and see the obstacles or the snobbery or the doors locked shut, Jan sees only intriguing challenges... For that reason, one of the most touching things about the story is that it comes full circle. At the end of the film the characters are in the same jobs, the same lives, Jan is still cleaning the tills; they are no richer materially but they are richer in every other way.”

The audience will come out of the theater the same way.  
(*The film runs 85 mins. and is rated “PG.”*)

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