



Dark Horse: The Incredible True Story of Dream Alliance Discussion Guide

Director: Louise Osmond

Year: 2015

Time: 85 min

You might know this director from:

Deep Water (2006)

FILM SUMMARY

Director Osmond was on the hunt for a strong story to tell when she happened across Dream Alliance. So compelled by the real-life drama she had found, she waited months for rights to clear and deals to be signed before beginning her trip of puzzle-piecing the tale of the “Rocky” of the horse world together for the big screen.

Horse bookmaker Andy Smith best summed up public opinion of the Dream Alliance Syndicate’s forays into the elite sport of horse racing when he stated, “This horse was bred and brought up on an allotment. How can that possibly be a success?” But barmaid and supermarket cleaner Jan Vokes, living in a depressed former mining town in the Welsh countryside could not have cared less what others thought. Determined to breed her own race horse and take it to the tracks, she successfully convinced her husband “Daisy,” former horse breeder Howard Davies, and a group of 25 others to financially back up her schemes.

Over the next few years, Vokes and the group breed on their allotment lot, far from the elite landscape of this upper class hobby, and name him Dream Alliance. Putting everything the syndicate had into his training and well-being, they stand by his side as he takes on the best and rises straight to the top, going on to win the Welsh Grand National. In the words of Davies, “We had all been transformed from village idiots into superheroes,” as the racing world gawked on in disbelief and the British class system was shaken at its core.

Despite the fact that the entire story was a past-tense affair by the time Osmond arrived on the scene, DARK HORSE is a compelling and dramatic offering. A heartwarming tale of community, dreams, and standing up tall against all odds, DARK HORSE offers testimony to the truth that the dreams we honor are much greater than any existing systems of class, hardship, or disbelief that may woefully stand in the way.

FILM THEMES

Living deep in the ashy remains of a once-thriving mining boom, the community of Cefn Fforest is revived by the remarkably unbelievable achievements of Dream Alliance and the team that put him together.

THE EXCLUSIVE SPORT OF HORSE RACING

“Racing itself is an exclusive, expensive hobby,” expressed Howard Davies, who had experience in the field when barmaid Jan Vokes first approached him. Widely considered a pastime of the rich gentry, owning and breeding horses had long served as a reflection of wealth and prestige. “These well-to-do people like to keep their sports to themselves. They like to keep us commoners out,” stated leading lady Jan Vokes, as she set out to bend and challenge the class system by defeating all odds and expectations.

THE POWER OF BELIEF AND PERSEVERANCE

“The attraction was that it couldn’t be done,” stated Howard Davies, who explained that Jan approached him with the offer to breed a horse at just the right time in his life. While the majority of those scoffed at the notion that a thoroughbred horse could be bred in the backyard of a struggling working class community, Jan was dead determined to make her dream come true. Nothing would stand in her way. Through the potent combination of hard work, devotion, and an undying belief in one’s own ability to realize a dream, Jan Vokes, Howard Davies, and the Dream Alliance Syndicate proved that nearly anything is possible if believed in entirely.

THE ALLIANCE OF COMMUNITY

Being recognized as a village through Dream Alliance’s achievements, the community of Cefn Fforest in the depressed mining countryside was granted hope, a sense of belonging, and a feeling of the future and its possibilities. “When he started racing, he was the village’s horse,” stated Brian Vokes. Because the community came together and believed, because they sacrificed what little extra money they had to take Dream Alliance to the top, when Dream won the community glowed with positivity. No longer was the village of Cefn Fforest a place to be forgotten. The achievements of the horse on the race track put the town on the map and restored a sense of pride that had been stripped away when the mining industry left years before.

LEGACY

“When you want something bad enough, you’ll do it,” Jan proffered. For Jan, her legacy, her stamp on the world, would come through horse racing. Although she had no experience whatsoever and no funds to compete with the ultra-rich who populated the sport, Jan set out to leave her mark in the world. Having gotten a taste for success through Dream Alliance’s achievements, Jan is determined to continue, to capture that gold cup in horse racing and to make an even greater mark on the world. No established lines of class, wealth, right, or ability interfere with a person’s individual legacy- the way that person will be recalled once their life is complete.

“It’s elation when you can do something, particularly when no one gives you a chance.”

Howard Davies

“Your circumstances, however tough or bleak, do not define you. What you do is who you are.”

Louise Osmond, Director

“It’s an industry to them. To us, he was one of the family.”

Brian “Daisy” Vokes

FURTHER DISCUSSIONS:

1. Describe DARK HORSE in five words.
2. How much did you know about horse racing before watching the film? Have you ever ridden a horse? Discuss your thoughts on the sport of horse racing.
3. In your opinion, who is the star of the film? Did you feel there were any characters involved in the story that the film did not feature?
4. Have you ever bet on a horse race or any other sport? What do you think attracts people to the sport of betting?
5. Director Osmond describes her film as the "Rocky" of the horse world, a tale of triumph against the odds. Why do you think that people so attracted to these types of stories?
6. Do you have any experience of the British class system? If so, do you find that it is still a present force in British society? If not, is there an equivalent to the class system in your society? How are people judged and their worth valued where you live?
7. Discuss the title of the film - DARK HORSE. What do you think director Osmond wishes to convey with this title?
8. If Jan had approached you to join the Dream Alliance Syndicate in its early days, would you have said yes or no? Are you more of a dreamer or a realist?
9. Have you ever pursued a dream against all odds, despite everyone discouraging you? Do you harbor a dream that you would like to attempt? What holds you back? What do you believe is the most important key to making one's dreams come true?
10. Although the members of the Dream Alliance Syndicate were all working class and continued to struggle to make ends meet in their lives, they unanimously elected to pay for Dream Alliance to undergo expensive stem cell surgery, rather than taking the winning money for themselves. What do you think inspired their decision? Do you think the average upper class breeder would have done the same?

NOTES:

FILM FACTS:

- DARK HORSE premiered at the 2015 Sundance Film Festival, where it won the Audience Award and was nominated for the Grand Jury Prize.
- Director Louise Osmond studied modern history at Oxford University and then went on to work in foreign news coverage before making documentary films. In 2006 she co-directed “Deep Water,” a film about the 1968 round-the-world yacht race, with Jerry Rothwell.
- Director Osmond became interested in Dream Alliance’s origins after a visit to the horse races in 2012 with producer Judith Dawson. After securing funding from British backers for the project, she began reconstructing the story of Dream Alliance through photos, newspaper cuttings, home movies, and racing archive footage. She spent time getting to know the characters in the film, and then went back with a sound engineer to film interviews, spending one day with Jan and approximately half a day with each of the other characters. Having filmed the horse himself, Osmond referred to him as the “George Clooney” of the horse world, adding: “He just loves to show off, he loves to be photographed and he loves attention.”
- Dream Alliance was trained by Philip Hobbs at Sandhill Racing Stables in Somerset, where around 110 horses are trained at a time. During his time as a jockey, Hobbs rode 160 winners.
- Dream Alliance’s win at the Welsh Grand National was the first time one of Philip Hobbs’ trained horses won that race. Jockey Tom O’Brien had been out of racing for 5 months due to a broken leg, and that race with Dream Alliance was his first time back in the saddle.
- The country of Wales borders England and the Irish Sea, and had a 2011 population of just over 3 million. As part of the U.K., Wales is governed by the British. Wales is officially a bilingual country (Welsh and English), with 560,000 people speaking Welsh. The coal mining industry was synonymous with the Welsh for years, and at its peak in 1913, around 233,000 Welsh were working in the South Wales Coalfield, the same region where Dream Alliance was bred.
- The average thoroughbred race horse begins racing at the age of 3, although in recent times more begin racing at 2. The first thoroughbred horses were crossbreeds between native English mares and imported Oriental stallions.
- The average race horse weighs around 1,000 pounds and races at a speed of 35 mph. The average jockey weighs 110 pounds and may ride for a number of owners on the same day.
- The Kentucky Derby is the most prestigious U.S. horse race and was first run in 1875. The first Grand National in the U.K. was held in 1839.

WAYS TO INFLUENCE

1. Share this film. Give others the chance to be inspired by its story.
2. Watch [AFTER COAL](#), a documentary on the mining industry and the transition away from traditional fossil fuels, which highlights former mining communities in Kentucky, U.S., and Wales, U.K.
3. Learn more about the work of the [Thoroughbred Aftercare Alliance](#) that funds organizations that care for race horses once their careers are finished – they offer many ways to help.
4. Realize that life is defined by actions, not thoughts. If you desire something enough, give it a shot, do not let others define your path to it, surround yourself with supportive individuals, and work tirelessly towards reaching it.
5. Support responsible horse breeding and humane horse racing. [The Humane Society of the United States](#) and [Animal Aid U.K.](#) offer more information on how horse racing can be improved.

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They are controversial, divisive, fascinating, unexpected, and surprising. They can be thrillers, dramas, comedies, romance, tear-jerkers, and horror films.

Documentaries provide the perfect topic for meaningful conversations. If you want to talk about the things that matter with people that matter then pick a film, invite your friends, and watch & discuss together. It's as easy as that.

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