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Hungary's Spirits Are Back Up, on a Horse



Laszlo Beliczay/MTI, via Associated Press

The thoroughbred Overdose extended his record to 12 w ins in 12 races on Sunday in Budapest.

By NICHOLAS KULISH
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BUDAPEST — A racehorse bought for a pittance has turned into a national hero in crisis-stricken [Hungary](#).

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Karoly Arvai/Reuters

The jockey Christophe Soumillon and Overdose after a victory on Sunday at Kincsem Park.

The thoroughbred known as Overdose pounded down the stretch here at Kincsem Park on Sunday to extend his record to 12 wins in 12 races, his jockey clad in the red, white and green of the Hungarian flag.

And for an afternoon at least, the crowd of more than 20,000 in the grandstand and lining the rail, along with all the Hungarians watching at home, could forget about the resignation of the prime minister and their currency's nosedive.

As times have gotten tougher here, the 4-year-old Overdose has become the Hungarian Seabiscuit, a symbol of hope for Americans during [the Great Depression](#). He appears to remind Hungarians of themselves: undervalued and underestimated.

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"This horse has a mission here in Hungary," said Zoltan Mikoczy, Overdose's owner, a cheerful, balding steel trader with a weakness for thoroughbreds.

It is hard to overstate the great pride that Hungary, a small nation that has suffered many disappointments, feels for Overdose. The country was already afflicted with high debt and anemic growth before the global [credit crisis](#) struck last fall, leading to a bailout by the [International Monetary Fund](#).

But now, instead of bailouts and bankruptcies, talk has centered for a change on Overdose's new flashy [Belgian jockey](#), Christophe Soumillon, who is married to a former Miss France, and on comparisons to the 19th-century Hungarian filly Kincsem, one of the greatest horses of all time and namesake of the track, who retired with an unblemished record in 54 races.

"I can compare [Overdose](#) to Seabiscuit," said Zalan Horvath, the secretary of the Association for the Future of Equestrian Sports in Hungary. "I say that because the Hungarian nation has had a lot of bad times, in the last centuries but also lately."

While Overdose's fame is not as great as Seabiscuit's, his success may be even more surprising. Mr. Mikoczy, 47, went to Newmarket, in Britain, with friends in 2006, after promising his wife that he would not buy another horse after purchasing four at a sale a month earlier. He put up his hand "just for fun" when the bidding for Overdose was merely about \$3,500, never imagining that he would walk out with a thoroughbred for such a bargain basement price.

Nor did anyone predict victories for the horse in [Rome](#) and [Baden-Baden](#), Germany. "We didn't expect anything from the horse when he arrived," said Sandor Ribarszki, the horse's trainer, a quick-witted joker who has called Overdose "short" and "kind of ugly." Now Mr. Ribarszki said he had trouble sleeping at night, wondering if anything had happened to the horse.

Since Overdose's victory streak began, Mr. Mikoczy said, he has been offered \$6.5 million for the horse, but has refused to sell.

"I didn't buy the horse for business or to make a profit," Mr. Mikoczy said. "You do not sell dreams."

Overdose has been called the Wunderpferd, or Miracle Horse, in Germany and the Budapest Bullet in Britain. A writer at Britain's Racing Post recently raved that he "leaves the stalls with the overdrive already engaged."

But Overdose's one setback may have done more to cement his reputation in Hungary than his dozen straight victories. At the prestigious [Prix de l'Abbaye](#) at Longchamp in Paris, Overdose appeared to win the premier sprint race with a time just shy of the 25-year-old course record.

But the seeming victory was nullified because a malfunctioning gate prevented one of the other horses from starting. Overdose's team decided he had expended too much effort to be allowed to run again. His rival, Marchand D'Or, went on to win the race, and later the title of best European sprinter.

Tivadar Farkashazy, a Hungarian television commentator and journalist, compared the debacle to the Treaty of Trianon, signed in 1920 at Versailles, which whittled Hungarian territory down to a fraction of its size and remains a source of national outrage.

"Again the tough luck, again in France," said Mr. Farkashazy, who has also written a book about the horse.

Trianon has special resonance to Overdose's story. While the horse trains in Hungary and wears the colors of the country, his owner is an ethnic Hungarian who lives across the [nytimes.com/2009/.../20hungary.html...](#)



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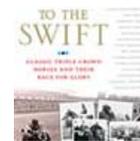
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wears the colors of the country, his owner is an ethnic Hungarian who lives across the border in Slovakia.

"It's important that the horse remains Hungarian," Mr. Mikoczy said, even though there are superior facilities available in other countries. Indeed, Hungarian racing had been in a slow decline since World War II, and the money-losing [Kincsem Park](#) was in danger of closing, a fate Overdose appears to have prevented for the time being.

There is a clear patriotic tilt to the horse's reception. He rode out Sunday with an honor guard of six flag-bearing riders dressed as Hussars, the famous Hungarian light cavalry, as tens of thousands screamed.

"For us Hungarians, it's a big deal," said Livia Nagy, 23, one of the thousands who came out for the race. "Overdose is something we can be proud of."

The horse's popularity has even attracted politicians. On Friday, [Viktor Orban](#), chairman of the center-right Fidesz Party and a former prime minister who hopes to reclaim the job in next year's election, turned up with a crowd of television cameras to pose with the star.

"Failure is the most often heard expression in Hungary today — failure, mistake, pessimism. When even a horse is able to make a miracle from nowhere, it's a sign of hope that we can get out from the desperate situation we are now in," Mr. Orban said.

"If I were a politician, I would do the same, because Overdose is one of the most famous persons in Hungary," said Mr. Horvath, "even though he is a horse."

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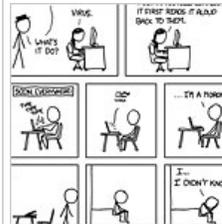
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