

## The Challengers Within: Can Takagi's Duo Derail Forever Young's Historic Bid? Can Experience Overcome Brilliance in the Middle East's Premier Contest?

As the US\$12 million Gr.1 Dubai World Cup approaches, trainer **Noboru Takagi** is finalising preparations for a formidable two-pronged attack with **Ushba Tesoro** and **Wilson Tesoro**, both targeting Japan's new dirt superstar, **Forever Young**.

In an exclusive interview, Takagi provided insights into his strategy to reclaim the Dubai World Cup glory against the seemingly unstoppable Saudi Cup winner, who is attempting an unprecedented double under trainer **Yoshito Yahagi** and jockey **Ryusei Sakai**.

### The Veteran and His Apprentice

The 7YO Ushba Tesoro enters as Takagi's senior campaigner, having won this prestigious race in 2023 and finishing runner-up last year. His stablemate, Wilson Tesoro, though less accomplished internationally, has shown remarkable progress in recent months, suggesting a changing of the guard might be imminent within Takagi's stable.

Both horses come into the race following respectable performances in the Saudi Cup, where Ushba Tesoro finished third and Wilson Tesoro fourth behind Forever Young and Hong Kong champion Romantic Warrior.

During Ushba Tesoro's training in Saudi Arabia, some observers noted his reluctance to enter the track, but Takagi dismissed these concerns.

"That's something he always does, so we were prepared to handle it. As long as Wilson Tesoro guided him in, he entered the track without any issues, so there was no need to worry. In fact, he was looking more and more energetic each day, which was a good sign," Takagi revealed.

This curious relationship between the stablemates – with the younger horse providing confidence to his accomplished senior – adds another fascinating dimension to their Dubai challenge.

### The Saudi Cup Performance

Reflecting on Ushba Tesoro's Saudi Cup run, Takagi provided valuable insights into the horse's racing style and current condition.

"It's normal for him to settle at the back of the pack, and over 1800 ~~meters~~metres, I expected him to be in last place early on. But I had faith that he would pick up speed in the final stretch, as his running form looked good," he explained.

The trainer viewed his charge's pre-race demeanour positively, noting, "On race day, Ushba Tesoro showed some signs of excitement, but Takagi saw that as a positive."

While acknowledging that age may be catching up with his stable star, Takagi remains impressed with his consistency. "Compared to when he was younger, he has inevitably lost some muscle mass, and his performance has declined slightly. But even so, his running time was not much different, which is impressive."

### Wilson Tesoro's Rising Status

What makes this year's Dubai World Cup particularly intriguing is Wilson Tesoro's improved form, which suggests he might be ready to eclipse his more famous stablemate.

"He was in good condition," Takagi said of his Saudi Cup preparation. "In fact, he was in better shape than when he ran in the Tokyo Daishoten just before that."

That Tokyo Daishoten performance was particularly noteworthy, as Wilson Tesoro finished just 0.3 seconds behind Forever Young, ahead of both Ramjet and stablemate Ushba Tesoro. His subsequent Saudi Cup showing demonstrated his continued competitiveness at the highest level.

Takagi believes Wilson Tesoro's Saudi Cup performance might have been better with different tactics.

"In the Saudi Cup, Wilson Tesoro raced aggressively, trying to take down two strong horses. Because of that, he ran out of stamina at the end. Depending on the race tactics, the outcome could have been different."

This tactical analysis suggests Takagi may instruct his jockey to ride a more patient race in Dubai, potentially preserving Wilson Tesoro's energy for a stronger finish.

### **Post-Saudi Preparations**

The transition from Saudi Arabia to Dubai has been managed meticulously, with both horses shipping directly after their Saudi Cup exertions.

"They traveled to Dubai on the Monday after the Saudi Cup. I stay in touch with my staff daily about their condition. Wilson Tesoro initially showed some fatigue after the race, but with proper care, he was able to complete his first workout on March 11," Takagi explained.

The training reports from Dubai have been encouraging, with both horses showing good energy in their workouts. "Both horses galloped individually, covering the final three furlongs lightly in around 40 seconds," he noted, adding, "I've received reports that they're both continuing to do well."

This methodical approach to preparation highlights Takagi's experience and attention to detail – qualities that have made him one of Japan's most respected trainers on the international stage.

### **The Forever Young Factor**

The elephant in the room remains Forever Young, who enters as the world's highest-rated dirt horse following his Saudi Cup victory. With a Timeform rating of 131, he stands 2lb clear of last year's Dubai World Cup winner, **Laurel River**.

Takagi is under no illusions about the challenge his horses face.

"Yes, Forever Young is so strong," he acknowledged. "But racing isn't just one-on-one, and anything can happen depending on the race flow. Instead of worrying about our rivals, we'll just focus on preparing our own horses as best as we can."

This pragmatic approach may serve Takagi well, allowing him to concentrate on maximising his own horses' performances rather than becoming preoccupied with Forever Young's formidable talents.

### **The Course Advantage**

While Forever Young attempts to make history, Takagi believes his horses have a significant advantage – their proven form at Meydan Racecourse and over the Dubai World Cup's 2000-metre distance.

"That's right. The change in track and the longer distance will be more of an advantage than a disadvantage. Since both horses have already raced here, we don't need to make any special adjustments, which is a positive factor," he confirmed.

Ushba Tesoro's record at Meydan speaks for itself – a win in 2023 and a second-place finish in 2024. Wilson Tesoro also acquitted himself well last year, finishing fourth, and his subsequent form suggests he may be capable of an improved showing this time around.

The Dubai World Cup's 2000-metre trip – 200 metres further than the Saudi Cup – could prove influential in determining the outcome. Forever Young has won over this distance in Japan but has never raced at Meydan, potentially giving Takagi's experienced campaigners a slight edge.

### **The Owner's Vision**

Behind Takagi's Dubai World Cup challenge stands owner **Kenji Ryotokuji**, whose relatively brief but intensely successful involvement in racing exemplifies the ambition driving Japanese racing's global expansion.

At 77 years old, Ryotokuji has made extraordinary progress since obtaining his JRA owner's licence in 2015. Having two contenders in one of the world's richest races speaks volumes about his investment and commitment to excellence.

Takagi spoke warmly about their relationship and Ryotokuji's rapid rise in the sport.

"There are many owners who have been in the game longer, but Mr. Ryotokuji has expanded into breeding as well, now owning around 80 broodmares. Wilson Tesoro was from his first crop of homebreds. He also recently opened a training farm. His passion is unmatched, and his dedication is extraordinary."

This respect clearly motivates Takagi as he prepares for Dubai. "With that passion in mind, Takagi expressed his desire to win in Dubai to repay the owner," he noted, understanding the significance of a potential victory for Ryotokuji's racing operation.

### **The Final Countdown**

As race day approaches, Takagi's schedule reflects his hands-on approach to training, even with horses stationed thousands of miles away.

"I plan to travel to Dubai after overseeing my other horses' races in Japan the week before. I trust that both horses will be in top form when I arrive, and our only job will be to bring them to their best condition for the race," he explained.

This calm, measured perspective contrasts with the palpable excitement surrounding Forever Young's historic bid. While Yahagi and Sakai have captured headlines with their charismatic partnership and ambitious goals, Takagi's quiet confidence suggests he believes the established stars may yet upstage the rising one.

Will Ushba Tesoro reclaim his crown after finishing runner-up last year? Could Wilson Tesoro emerge from his stablemate's shadow to claim Japan's premier international prize? Or will Forever Young complete an unprecedented double and cement his place as Japan's greatest dirt performer?

As Takagi pondered in our conversation: "Will the one to defeat Japan's champion be another Japanese horse? All eyes will be on Dubai's biggest race on the first Saturday of April."

In a year when Japanese racing continues to expand its international influence, the answer to that question may define the sport's next chapter. What is certain is that Noboru Takagi will have his horses primed and ready for their greatest challenge yet.