

RICE'S DERBY CHOICE JOURNAL

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23th Edition

"Nullity and despond" was the phrase chosen by baseball's Boswell, Roger Angelle, to capture the mood in the Boston Red Sox clubhouse during last year's mid-season collapse. The same feeling enveloped your editor at the conclusion of last year's Derby.

We relearned an old lesson: never bet on a horse overcoming a lingering physical problem in the Derby. We still hold MILLENNIUM WIND in the highest regard and expect his long-awaited return to the races very soon. Don't be surprised if he turns up in a major stakes race or even the Breeders' Cup before the year is out. Now let's take a look at this year's field and remember dear reader, a horseplayer's paradise awaits: no entries, no field horses: twenty aspirants and discrete odds on everyone. Program numbers, in parentheses following the horse's name, are identical to post positions. Don't be given pause by Damon Runyon's short story title that All Horseplayer's Die Broke, but instead heed the familiar instructions given to combatants by boxing referee, Mills Lane: "Let's get it on!"

Sons of OUR EMBLEM- You will recall the PERSONAL ENSIGN saga reported earlier in our letter. In 1991 she produced a colt by MR. PROSPECTOR named OUR EMBLEM. He raced with moderate success but with his golden pedigree went to stud at Claiborne Farm with high expectations. After a couple of so-so foal crops, the commercial guys in Kentucky gave up on him and he was quietly sold to a small operation in Maryland. So what happens this year? He has two sons in the Kentucky Derby. PRIVATE EMBLEM

(11) (winner of the Arkansas Derby) and WAR EMBLEM (5) (winner of the Illinois Derby). The latter was purchased privately by the POINT GIVEN connections after that score. Both colts have similar running styles though WAR EMBLEM is all speed where PRIVATE EMBLEM is more of a stalker. Their quality of opposition has not been outstanding and doubt they can go head to head early with the likes of BUDDHA and MEDAGLIA D'ORO.

JOHANNESBURG (1)- This is beginning to feel like ARAZI déjà vu. None can fail to be impressed with his destruction of the Juvenile field in last year's Breeders' Cup. But his only prep for the big one is an uphill seven-furlong dash on sticky grass in which an older mare ran him down while conceding weight. Wintered behind the walls of the secretive Ballydoyle Training Center near Dublin from which no information is ever forthcoming. You have a better chance of walking into the White House than through the gates of Ballydoyle. The young wizard, Aidan O'Brien, successor but no kin to founder Vincent O'Brien, is rightly held in similar awe professionally. But nothing about this colt speaks a mile and a quarter and notwithstanding our deepest respect for his trainer, Jo'burg just doesn't fit.

WILD HORSES (2)- Son of solid SAINT BALLADO. Ran well in the Arkansas Derby. Could

be a very good colt by summertime but looks a bit behind these now.

PERFECT DRIFT (3)- gelded son of DYNAFORMER closed well to take the Spiral Stakes (the old Jim Beam) at Turfway. Brings up the old CLYDE VAN DUSEN (the last gelding to win the Derby, '29) jinx as well as the EXTERMINATOR (last Derby winner without an April start, '18) jinx. Although it should be said our two picked geldings, BEST PAL, '91 and CAVONNIER, '96 were both second by a collective whisker He'll be coming late and his semi-secret training away from Churchill figures to get a lot of wise guy longshot money. Lotta jinxes to overcome but does get Eddie D.. LUSTY LATIN (4)- Not a reference to the language spoken by wayward clerics. The "other" EL PRADO son in the entry box finished fastest of all to be third in the Santa Anita Derby. Robust gray that could bull his way through for a part of the pot.

WAR EMBLEM (5)- See Above

OCEAN SOUND (6)- Finished willingly to be a distant second in the Blue Grass when allowed to lay off the pace. If he wins, the guy doing the solo wave in the grandstand will have the only winning ticket.

REQUEST FOR PAROLE (7)- Sire (JUDGE T.C.) is modest and not known for stamina although effort to be a neck behind PERFECT DRIFT was classy. He will need clemency to even get a piece we think.

ESSENCE OF DUBAI (8)- Saw this guy at Del Mar last summer and makes a great physical appearance as he should being a son of PULPIT and the top race mare, EPITOME. You can't buy this kind of pedigree (well, you could have for \$2.3 million). Came from last to first in The Dubai Derby at the Kentucky Derby distance with a sweeping move against older horses. Has looked good since clearing quarantine. But why is regular rider, Frankie Dettori, flying to Louisville to ride in the Oaks on Friday and heading back to England to partner a 10/1 chance in the 2000 Guineas rather than stick around for the Derby? Hmm.

MEDAGLIA D'ORO (9)- Just nodded by BUDDHA in a ding-dong Wood finish. No trainer in the country is as hot as Bobby Frankel as evidenced that his contacts found this guy in a private purchase after a maiden win at Oaklawn. He immediately goes into a Grade II and polishes off then Derby favorite SIPHONIC. Then runs huge in the Wood. Will he bounce, can he run off the pace? Big questions but pedigree is legit for the route (by EL PRADO and from a BAILJUMPER mare) and he gets the ageless Laffit Pincay in the irons. Training beautifully at the Downs and very difficult to leave out.

BUDDHA (10)- This is one BUDDHA the Taliban failed to blow-up. Comes in with only four starts but the last three have been torrid. Trained by Bond, James Bond, whose saddlecloths have 007 on them. The courage this son of UNBRIDLED'S SONG showed on the rail in his Wood win suggested a much more seasoned colt. Feels a little like CONGAREE and INDIAN CHARLIE to us: lots of brilliance but lacking the depth to carry a mile and a quarter at this point. Tibet or not Tibet, that is the question; Derby karma says your no-buddha til some-

buddha loves you. Day, Pat Day, rides.

PRIVATE EMBLEM (11)- See above

CASTLE GONDOLFO (12)- Named for the summer residence of the pope, this is the apparently lesser half of the Aidan O'Brien Irish shipper entry. Colt did a mile and a quarter at two, unheard of in this country; and it was on a heavy turf. Yet another son of GONE WEST and out of a stout NORTHERN DANCER mare; has a single start this year with a win over the Lingfield dirt track. Behind him that day was eventual winner of the Italian 2000 Guineas. Grade I form in France and England as well. Jerry Bailey apparently booked for JO'BURG now on what was supposed to be weaker half of O'Brien charges. Beginning to wonder if JO'BURG is not a beard for a betting coup from the Emerald Isle.

PROUD CITIZEN (13)- Just when you thought ole D. Wayne might be fading from the Derby scene, those pearly whites and Oakley's are filling up the screen again. This son of GONE WEST exhibited a lot of potential last year. Showed speed and faded in the Santa Anita Derby after a six-month layoff. Set him up perfectly for a gate to wire score in the Lexington at an overlaid 7/1 (thank you Mr. Lukas). Didn't beat much but coming to the big one perfectly and floating over the Churchill surface.

HARLAN'S HOLIDAY (14)- The answer is WINTERGREEN, '09. The question is who was the last Ohio-bred to win the Derby. This guy is trying to be the next. Morning-line favorite and why not with dominating wins in the Florida Derby and Blue Grass. A son of the deceased HARLAN, (sire of MENIFEE 2nd, '99 and picked here) covers lots of ground and has never thrown in a clunker. Distance not a problem but feel we may have already seen his best. Also not overwhelmed with those that followed him home in his two big wins. As always, we will pick against the fave.

CAME HOME (15)- You would think the Santa Anita Derby winner with one career loss (a throwout in the BC Juvenile) would be a short price, but he has two knocks: declining speed figures and a questionable distance pedigree: by GONE WEST out of a CLEVER TRICK mare. Still have to admire his street-fighter determination. Built like a miler and strides like one too, but think he will stick around longer than expected, maybe much longer. Same connections as FREE HOUSE, 3rd '97, who avow CAME HOME is better. A clear and present danger.

SAARLAND (16)- Lots of pedigree and great connections but without a win in two starts at three. Training forwardly for the big one and distance will be no problem.

DANTHEBLUEGRASSMAN (17)- Bumped WINDWARD PASSAGE from the 20th spot at the last minute. Both should have stepped aside for SUNDAY BREAK but that's history. Ninth in the Santa Anita Derby is entered as vanity move for owner who had REAL QUIET (1st, '98 and picked here). Dansacaseofderbyfever.

IT'SALLINTHECHASE (18)- Was way up the track in the BC Juvenile but finished a

respectable third to the sidelined REPENT in the Louisiana Derby. We'll be chasing our beer with belladonna if he wears the roses on Saturday.

EASY GRADES(19)- Honest sort of gelding that chased home CAME HOME in the San Vicente and the Santa Anita Derby for a pair of seconds. Out of an EASY GOER mare and by HONOR GRADES, this guy will be running when others are gasping and the price will be square.

BLUE BURNER (20)- same ownership as the beloved or despised (your call) New York Yankees. We took a future book 50/1 flyer on him back in March but haven't seen the development we hoped from this son of FRENCH DEPUTY. Second in the Florida Derby was decent but was going up and down through the lane in the Wood. Lazy worker but doing well at Churchill and should relish the extra ground but will have to make major stride forward to figure in the outcome. Don't forget at Belmont time, but have the feeling that if trainer Mott were making the call, they wouldn't be here. If George wants to run, you can finish the sentence.

OUR PICK- Of this we are certain: our selection has not run his best race yet and he possesses the pedigree that screams a mile and a quarter. His dad won the Derby and his mom won the Alabama and was second in the Breeders Cup Distaff twice. He is trained by a methodical pro that has been as close as second in three tries. His rider has been as close as fourth in as many tries and is among the emerging stars of his trade.

Our pick broke his maiden in his second start and followed with a fourth in the Champagne and an eighth in the BC Juvenile. He won the Remsen in his last start at two against an undistinguished field. The colt was still a work in progress. Put away for the winter, he emerged at three in the one mile Gotham where he closed well to be second to the speedy MAYAKOVSKY. Big things were expected in the Wood but he was a disappointing fourth by 3.5 lengths to the precocious trio of BUDDHA, MEDAGLIA D'ORO, and SUNDAY BREAK. After that race it was discovered that he had displaced his soft palate, a disorder that prevents horses from drawing air until they relax and slow down. His rider reported that the colt took a deep breath at the quarter pole and held it until eased past the wire.

Horses commonly stop running completely when this happens. Our pick carried on with courage. A minor surgical procedure called a myectomy was performed which only involves about a day of recovery but does not always solve the problem (it sure worked for ALYSHEBA in '87). The test would be a swift half-mile work in New York before shipping to Kentucky. The grade was A+ as it was in his five-furlong work on Monday at Churchill. We have a fresh horse peaking at the right time with lots of gas in the tank. Our trainer is Shug McGaughey, who trained EASY GOER (2nd, '89). Shug speaks with the animation of Wilfred Brimley but he is on record saying "ah'm ril cited," which translates "I'm real excited."

Regular rider John Velasquez will be up. The dad is UNBRIDLED (1st, '90 and picked here). His mom is VERSAILLES TREATY, a bred in the purple mare from the Phipps

broodmare band. Despite their many grand racing moments, the Phippses have never won a Derby and sadly paterfamilias Ogden passed away last week at age 94. Our pick is a homebred of his daughter, Cynthia. VERSAILLES TREATY was sired by the revered DANZIG. The city by that name was declared free under the terms of the treaty following World War I. That document also placed a portion of southwest Germany under French rule until 1957 when it became part of the Federal Republic of Germany. That corner of the world and our pick is SAARLAND!

THE BET- Can't believe the morning line is 15/1. Get me to the window! We expect a sweeping late move from SAARLAND. We'll bet him to win and place. We will also take across the board flier on longshot CASTLE GONDOLFO (20/1 on the line). For our exacta, trifecta, and superfecta box we will add CAME HOME and MEDAGLIA D'ORO. Don't spend it all in one place! THE PITCH- If you enjoy the letter and can afford a charitable gift after the results come in, please consider a contribution to either or both of the following: Randy Romero Transplant Fund National City Bank 12009 Shelbyville Rd. Louisville, Ky. 40243 Legacy Donor Foundation 650 Poydras St. Suite 2710 New Orleans, La. 70130