

RICE'S DERBY CHOICE JOURNAL

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25th Edition

We feel a little like Cisco, the head of the Oakland Chapter of that fraternal order known as the Hell's Angels who remarked: "When we do good no one remembers. When we do bad no one forgets." To be sure we have been afflicted with a bit of what the rapper, Chuck D, refers to as "dumbassification."

The current renewal is without a clear-cut favorite as the cast is strewn with colts that have taken turns beating each other as well as others with a single impressive score mixed with unimpressive outings. The fashionable training regime du jour is the long pre-Derby layoff of which we are most suspect. The hardened competitor usually prevails over the fresh horse but in this game rules are made to be broken and we are without prejudice in appraising this year's bunch.

ACTION THIS DAY- Looked to be the one to break the two-year-old champ jinx after his sweeping victory in the Breeders Cup Juvenile. Apart from a big middle move in his three-year-old debut before hanging in the stretch, he has produced action on no days. Bred to run until sunset (by Kris S. out of a Trempolino mare), his Hall of Fame trainer, Dick Mandella, attributes his poor showings to a now-cured back ailment. Mandella notched four wins (Juvenile, Juvenile Fillies, Turf, and Classic) at '03 Breeders Cup and his comments should not be ignored. The price will be square but problematic whether he can gain traction this day.

BIRDSTONE- Owned by the insufferable Mary Lou Whitney, widow of C.V. "Sonny" Whitney. Son of '96 Derby winner Grindstone (nosed our pick, Cavonnier, and it still hurts) and brother of Oaks champ Birdtown looked like one of the chosen few before blowing the Spiral Stakes as heavy chalk on a sealed track. That was forgivable but then scratched from the Blue Grass due to a bad blood count. Reportedly training up a storm and trainer Zito (two Derby wins) loves him. Not out of the question but demand a big price if you think this Bird is the Word.

BORREGO- Named for the desert resort town in Southern California, we bet him in the Louisiana Derby (2nd) and again in the Arkansas Derby (2nd). Devoid of speed but definitely a stayer. Expect he will pass tiring horses but doesn't seem to have that classic turn of foot to get it all. Possible back end of the tri or superfecta seems about the best shot for this guy.

CASTLEDALE- Son of Arc winner Peintre Celebre upset in the Santa Anita Derby and has pedigree to run as long as any. The Irish import has only one win on the dirt but it was a stunner. Will probably be the longest price Santa Anita Derby winner in memory and will definitely be picking up the pieces down the lane. Garbage collector or Derby Champ? Tough call.

FRIENDS LAKE- Tries to be second NY-bred in as many years to wear the roses. Son of A.P. Indy sports a winner's pedigree but has not raced since his eye-opening score in March in the Florida Derby. Trainer-Jock combo of Kimmel and Migliore are underrated pair who possess the necessary skills, but question the long layoff between starts which could make this race our Friend's wake.

IMPERIALISM- Possible hunch anti-W play if you are so inclined. Will set new youngest trainer record for the classic as 21 year-old Kristin Mulhall (daughter of former racing manager for late Prince Ahmed, Point Given-War Emblem, Salmen's Thoroughbred Corp.). No doubt he is genuine but think a little too much being made of his being blocked in the S.A. Derby. Don't think he was going to finish any closer than the eventual third spot. Sire was a quality sprinter and just don't see mile and ¼ in this pedigree.

LIMEHOUSE- A striking example of a colt who could win a lot of dough if he skipped the Triple Crown. Only Limehouse we know is a section of London originally housing that city's Chinatown. What that has to do with a son of Grand Slam and Dixieland Blues is a mystery. Did win a 2 year-old stakes on Derby Day last year but would need a major step up to have even a Chinaman's chance here.

LION HEART- A genuine racehorse and runs to his name but has been nailed twice at the wire in both his Derby preps (San Rafael and Blue Grass) at distances shorter than this one. King of the Jungle, maybe...but no crown in Louisville it says here.

MASTER DAVID- Kentucky-bred but spent his early 2 year-old career in England before joining another master, Bobby Frankel. Has only one 3 year-old win (Sham Stakes at Santa Anita) but probably thought he won the Wood Memorial as he out-gamed Eddington from the rail, only to have Tapit pass them both from the outside in the last jump. Frankel-Solis combo is probably the best trainer-rider pair to have never won a Derby.

MINISTER ERIC- The apparent Mandella second-stringer that completed the exacta in last year's Breeders' Cup Juvenile has taken the low road to the Derby knowing his spot was safe due to the wad he earned in that race. Interesting strategy: a sprint on the grass (2nd) and an allowance mile and 1/16 (2nd) at Santa Anita followed by an easy allowance score at Keeneland. This son of Old Trieste out of a Deputy Minister mare will have the rare combo of freshness and bottom. The plot thickens as Pat Day, a victim of musical chairs, takes the ride. Possible 30/1 (make that 20/1 due to St. Patrick) is a must in your exotics- at least. (n.b. your editor bet him in the future pool)

POLLARD'S VISION- Remember Seabiscuit's one-eyed jockey, Red Pollard? This guy shares Red's optical handicap and thus his name. Colt was a game third in the Louisiana Derby and then galloped in the Illinois Derby while posting a huge wire-towire figure much in the style of '02 winner War Emblem. Another with distance limitations in his pedigree that often do not demonstrate themselves until the first Saturday in May. Certainly belongs here but just can't see a win (but then neither can he).

PRO PRADO- Spent the winter chasing Smarty Jones around the Oaklawn Park oval. Looks like he will relish the distance but can't see roses on the Pro although he may finally catch old Smarty.

QUINTON'S GOLD RUSH- His S.A. Derby fourth (we bet him) was a lot better than it looked and his Lexington win (we didn't bet him) was not as good as it looked. Has the pedigree to get the trip but a bet seems like fool's gold.

READ THE FOOTNOTES- Son of the aptly named Smoke Glacken, Like Dad he loves the front-end but failed as chalk in the Florida Derby. Connections blamed a displaced palate (Alysheba '87 winner had one in his final prep). As much as we admire his grit, if he were mine I'd skip the Derby and point to the shorter Preakness. A breathing problem is a heavy burden for a Derby hopeful. The footnotes to the Derby chart may well say this guy took his last gasp at the eighth pole.

SMARTY JONES- The likely morning line favorite off of his domination of the three-year-old stakes at Oaklawn especially the Arkansas Derby. Has low-profile connections, suspected (but unproven) distance limitations, and has been demeaned as a lowly Pennsylvania-bred. The latter charge is a canard as his sire Elusive Quality is a very hot young sire though a miler not a router. Gets his name from the owner's mother's nickname. Theft from the front-end will be his strategy but doubt he can get separation from the likes of Read the Footnotes and Lion Heart. Smarty likely to be tardy at the finish.

SONG OF THE SWORD- Was a horse on the bubble until a few defections opened a slot. As Sam Goldwyn once said on another subject: "Two words. Im Possible."

ST. AVERIL- A month ago we thought this guy might be our pick, but bombed in the S.A. Derby. Son of St. Ballado (sire of Captain Bodgit who just missed nailing Silver Charm) and out of a Lord Avie mare certainly presents no pedigree problem. But missed training and last minute decision to go to Derby leads us to believe that connections may be singing in the rain. Averil showers will not bring May flowers.

TAPIT- Owned by the Estate of Verne (Donut King) Winchell. Could take it off of impressive Wood Memorial win. Trained by the English Mad Scientist, Michael Dickinson, who after winning the biggest fixtures over jumps in his native land, set his sights on the American flat racing game. He has replicated the traditional European training gallops with his own rural training spa in Maryland equipped with a proprietary synthetic surface called Tapeta (Latin for carpet). Only four lifetime starts give us pause but pedigree (Pulpit out of an Unbridled mare) could overcome.

THE CLIFF´S EDGE- Named for famed handicapper, Cliff Guilliams, this guy was awesome running down Lion Heart over speed-favoring Keeneland course in the Blue Grass. Despite closing style we are a little suspect of pedigree (Gulch out of a Danzig mare). Gulch did sire Thunder Gulch, ´95 winner, but that was very atypical and that one was from a Storm Bird mare. Trainer Zito (2 Derby wins) will draw money and expect he will be an underlay. Last Blue Grass winner to convert Derby was also a Zito trainee, Strike the Gold, but that was over a decade ago. Would love to see Cajun-rider Sellers with a Derby win but we will be Cliff sellers not Cliff dwellers.

WIMBLEDON- Served notice that he would be Baffert´s ace when he smashed the field in the Louisiana Derby. But when he tried to regain his western grip in the Santa Anita Derby, he double faulted when forced to press the pace by his inexperienced (former) rider. He emerges from Death Volley (ouch!) with no less than Jerry Bailey in the irons for the Big Dance. If he regains his New Orleans form, it could be game, set, and match.

OUR CHOICE:

W.C. Fields once told a mark who inquired whether his pea and shell scam was a game of chance "Not the way I play it." We wish we had old Dunkenfield´s confidence but luck overwhelms in the Kentucky Derby. As the old Roman, Publilius Syrus, warned: "It is a very bad thing to become accustomed to good luck." Herewith is this year´s stab.

After sorting through the array of speed and closers, we have decided to rest on a colt with the tactical speed to lay close and hopefully prevail whether the pace is torrid or horrid. Our trainer and jockey bring Derby experience (2 seconds for the conditioner and 2 seconds and a third for the rider) and lots of big time wins. The colt´s sire is as hot as any although not likely to produce a mile and ¼ type. That´s mom´s job who is a daughter of one of the great stamina influences in the thoroughbred canon (Sadler´s Wells). The following names appear in the first 4 generations of our selection´s pedigree: Affirmed, Graustark, Northern Dancer, Mr. Prospector, and Secretariat.

Our pick broke his maiden in his third try in England before coming to America and finishing 2nd to Read the Footnotes in last fall's Remsen Stakes. He won the Sham Stakes at Santa Anita at a mile and 1/8 before a very tough beat to Tapit in the Wood Memorial. In that race, turning for home, Tom Durkin said he was "behind a wall of horses." Somehow he found an opening on the rail, slipped through, and looked a winner after out-gaming the highly regarded Eddington (A son of Unbridled that every wise-guy was hoping to bet in the Derby but who will be excluded because of inadequate winnings. Watch for him in the Belmont.) Sadly for our guy, Tapit was rolling on the outside and cruised by the aforementioned pair for a half-length win. How easy was Tapit's win? About as easy as Empire Maker's win over Funny Cide last year in the same race. The figure guys all rated the Wood as the slowest of the late Derby preps which suits us fine.

With all those speed figure Goliaths lining up for this year's Derby, who better to do the deed than

MASTER DAVID!

THE BET: We expect the MASTER to be double digits so we will bet him to win and place. We love MINISTER ERIC as well and almost picked him but at over 20/1 will make him our longshot saver. Bet him across the board. We will put these two in exactas and tri's with TAPIT and CASTLEDALE. No man can serve two masters says the Good Book, but no reason why you can't serve a MASTER and a MINISTER. And when that keg of Bud arrives, just TAPIT.