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"You cannot be serious!" was the favorite rant of tennis champ John McEnroe when challenging a line call. And that pretty much summed up our reaction to MINE THAT BIRD's upset in last year's Derby. Never mind that our pick, CHOCOLATE CANDY, after being squeezed at the start was a respectable if not threatening fifth of nineteen. What irks is what might have been.

We loved MTB's sire, BIRDSTONE, so much that we bred a mare to him his first year at stud. We followed the sire's first crop assiduously and bet MTB every out in his first season including his twelfth place finish in the BC Juvenile of 2009.

He then disappeared until an uninspiring effort in something called the Sunland Derby. In the stretch at Churchill he looked like he was on a moving sidewalk while the opposition appeared to be running in combat boots. As Chuck Berry once sung, "C'est la vie say the old folks. It goes to show you never can tell."

There is one statistic that hovers over this year's race. And it is an *ofer*, as in 0 for twenty four. Todd Pletcher, twice second in the Derby, with multiple Breeders' Cup wins has never won the Kentucky Derby.

At the conclusion of this year's renewal, he will surpass H.J. "Derby Dick" Thompson with whom he is presently tied for second place in number of starts. Thompson, however, trained four Derby winners, all for Colonel E.R. Bradley. Pletcher's mentor, mentor, D. Wayne Lukas, stands alone in Derby outs with forty two from which he can claim four wins.

"Derby Dick" and D. Wayne share second place in win total behind Ben Jones who won six Derbies from eleven starts.

This year, Pletcher is adopting the Sitting Bull model used at Little Big Horn. Of the twenty three-year-olds going postward Saturday, no fewer than four will be under his care- unfortunately not including heavy favorite ESKENDEREYA. A minor leg problem resulted in the colt's withdrawal.

Imagine being a trainer with Derby hopes with three of the top twenty qualifiers. One is the favorite and is removed by injury (ESKENDEREYA). One you decide really is not a Derby distance doer (RULE) and one you know is really better suited on the grass (INTERACTIF). And imagine that after pulling those three from the Derby, you still have four starters (DEVIL MAY CARE-MISSION IMPAZIBLE-DISCREETLY MINESUPER SAVER). Well, imagine you are Todd Pletcher.

Only in this upside down economy could what would have been the Derby favorite be part of a Chapter 11 proceeding. Owner Ahmed Zayat had last year's runner up, PIONEER OF THE NILE. That one could have been named for Ahmed himself as he was the largest beer distributor in the Middle East before flipping the biz to Heineken. He got in a jam-go figure on this one- lending money to illegal bookies in Nevada. The horse's name, serially mispronounced by race callers and commentators, is the name of Egypt's second largest city, Alexandria. The horse was favored off of runaway wins in the Fountain of Youth and Wood. Sadly for those who supported and opposed ESKIE, the race will be the less for his absence. No pyramid scheme this year.

As James Thurber once observed- "There is no safety in numbers, or anything else."

Here is this year's lineup by post position:

1) LOOKIN AT LUCKY_ Missed by a head in the BC Juvenile after getting a late bump, Salvaged the win in the G-2 Rebel after almost going down. Lost all chance in the S.A. Derby when hammered on the turn and still got the show dough. LAL has been anything but LUCKY but is one tough guy. Rightly ranked at the top of the field and is Baffert's *numero uno*. Never been out of the money and not likely to start now. Here's LOOKIN at you, kid.

2) ICE BOX_ Followed dull effort behind ESKIE in the Fountain of Youth with a come from the clouds win in the Florida Derby at 20/1. That style plus his pedigree (PULPIT out of a TABASCO CAT mare) should fit well in what looks like a Derby with a lot of early speed. Concern over the depth of that F.D. field he faced keeps us cool to his chances. Might fit as part of an exacta BOX.

3) NOBLE'S PROMISE_ This is your blue-collar guy right here. Sold for \$10k as a weanling and his pedigree says he should be at best a miler. He has already earned \$800k and just missed (3rd a half length) in the BC Juvenile. In that race and his next two, he was in the same breathing space with LAL at the wire. Sent off as fave in the Arkansas Derby, he was clobbered at the start and lost all chance ending up fifth. NOBLE is all heart but at a mile and a quarter, the PROMISE may be broken.

4) SUPER SAVER_ Possibly the most intriguing of the Toddlies. Owns a nice win over the CD surface at two in a G-2. A pair of tough beats at Tampa and Hot Springs leave him winless at three. That plus route pedigree make SUPIE likely to get action from the smarts. Could be worth a SAVER.

5) LINE OF DAVID Sadler's second teamer came off of two west coast grass wins to wire the Arkansas Derby field at 17/1. DAVE is now three for three since adding blinkers and is almost certain to seize the lead in the Derby. That will almost insure that SID will take back. That last eighth of a mile may be a LINE that DAVID may not be able to cross.

6) STATELY VICTOR_ This VICTOR is certainly mature having eight outs under his girth. Until his stunner at 40/1 in the Blue Grass, he had only a maiden win. By BC Classic winner GHOSTZAPPER and from a DYNAFORMER (sire of BARBARO) mare, his pedigree

belongs. One stat haunts- last five Blue Grass winners' finishes in the Derby have been: 17th-20th-11th-16th-19th.

7) AMERICAN LION_ Few horses have held our affection as deeply as this guy's sire, TIZNOW. The consecutive BC Classic wins by TIZ will forever give him a place in our personal Hall of Fame. Further detracting from our objectivity is the LION's trainer, Eoin Harty, who has sprung us from monetary traps on multiple occasions down at old Del Mar. That said, all of his four starts since leaving the maiden ranks at two have been graded stakes and he has never failed to accord himself well. Experts are dismissing his Illinois Derby cruise due to the competition. Yet the visual take here was impressive. It's a jungle out there on Derby Day, and don't be surprised if this King roars.

8) DEAN'S KITTEN_ Cannot be denied a shot here after his easy G-2 Lane's End win but his pedigree and past performances all point to the turf rather than the dirt. Anything better than fourth would put this KITTEN on the DEAN's list.

9) MAKE MUSIC FOR ME_ Last one in as ENDORSEMENT came up lame after gallop on entry day. Totally credible resume barring recent dull BG effort at Keeneland. Been right on LAL's heels in three tries in California. As Detective Tony Baretta would say "And that's the name of that tune."

10) PADDY O'PRADO_ This lad looked the winner deep stretch in the Blue Grass before giving way to VIC. The B.G. was his first effort off the grass since a dirt flop in his first start. PADDY'S running style and pedigree suggest he should not only be wearing the green, he should be racing on it.

11) DEVIL MAY CARE_ The lone filly in this year's field is a serious player. Connections were undecided between the Oaks and the Derby but ESKIE's departure apparently convinced Pletcher to go in this spot. Her pedigree suggests and they believe the Derby distance fits her better than the shorter Oaks. Talent level is certainly on par with the best of this bunch but on occasion she lives up to her name. In the Silverbulletday Stakes at Fair Grounds this year, she finished fifth of six as the odd-on choice after losing her cool in the gate. The stress this weekend will be at the DEFCON 5 level. To her credit she subsequently nailed the Bonnie Miss on the same day, same track, same distance, and at a faster time than the boys in the Florida Derby. This DEVIL MAY wear Prada Saturday and maybe even roses.

12) CONVEYANCE_ Beware the Baffert "other horse." This guy was four for four going into the Sunland Derby before coming second at 3/5. Won a pair of one mile preps at Santa Anita and Oaklawn immediately before that flop. His sire, INDIAN CHARLIE, was Baffert's top horse in '98 and REAL QUIET-the "other horse"- got the Roses. . The message needs no further CONVEYANCE.

13) JACKSON BEND_ Same connections as ICE BOX. This guy squeezed into the field when Pletcher wisely pulled RULE who had no chance at the Derby distance. JACK has never been worse than second in nine lifetime starts including the last two to ESKIE. Florida bred

and except for the Wood, exclusively Florida-raced. Tough competitor but the last BEND at Churchill could be a problem.

14) MISSION IMPAZIBLE_ Trying to be the third to double the Louisiana and Kentucky Derbies (BLACK GOLD '24 and GRINDSTONE '96). Not much behind him at Fair Grounds but getting some wise guy whispers. Likely a MISSION person in the Derby frame.

15) DISCREETLY MINE_ Beaten fave in the La. Derby has a solid 2yo foundation and pedigree that says distance will fit. Seems to need an easy lead to accommodate his front runner style. Forget that on Saturday. The "MINE" streak stops at one.

16) AWESOME ACT_ Started his career in U.K. and still Brit-trained. Ran well in BC Juvenile (4th) and took the Gotham on the Aqueduct inner course before being distanced, along with the rest of the field, by ESKIE in the Wood. Runs like a Euro, covered up at a gallop, with one late run. Needs to make major step up to live up to his name.

17) DUBLIN_ This son of AFLEET ALEX is in the hands of ole D.Wayne Lukas. Garnered a lot of interest after winning the G-1 Hopeful last year at Saratoga. Has a lot of foundation but is winless at three, most recently a third in the Arkansas Derby.

Shaping up as the wise guy horse due to his connections and grinder running style. DUBLIN could be doublin' in the stretch this Saturday.

18) BACKTALK_ This son of SMARTY JONES got the last spot when Pletcher decided that INTERACTIF is better suited *sur la pelouse*. Being beaten double digits in the Illinois Derby is not a positive harbinger for the Kentucky version.

19) HOMEBOYKRIS_ Here is an example of what is wrong with the eligibility rules. KRIS is in because of a single stakes win at two (G-1 Champagne) over six months ago. Shutout since then. L.A. Dodgers skipper, Joe Torre, is a 10% owner of this one. Nothing personal but HOMIE should be in the 'hood this weekend not in Louisville.

20) SIDNEY'S CANDY_ Same owner (Craig Trust) and sire (Candy Ride) as last year's pick. Has to be the best horse that nobody likes. He has been first at every call of all three of his starts at three, most recently the S.A. Derby. Depending on the critic, he is "one dimensional," "only a synthetic track horse," "runs slow fractions," "never looked a competitor in the eye." On and on it goes. Sadler the saddler is as hot as any conditioner out there and New Orleanian, Joey Talamo, has proven he can ride with the best. This SIDNEY CAN do.

Whether the subject is race tracks or collateralized debt obligations (CDO's), the modifier of the day is "synthetic." But just like the CDO's that contained differing assortment of failed mortgages, all synthetic tracks are not the same. Gauging their relevance to the dirt surface at Churchill Downs on Derby Day creates brain-spinning exercises for all handicappers.

Before we make our call, a brief Q&A:

Q_What is a "wise guy" horse?

A_ Almost always an entry with double digit odds, usually a closer possessing a stamina pedigree, and a non-winning effort in his last Derby prep. The WGH is favored by track denizens many of whom are known by nicknames with animal kingdom or personality disorder references. "The Mole"- "Psycho Sam"- "Place and Show Joe"- "Elephant Ears"- "Needle Nose"- "Big Time Charlie"- "Confidential Charlie"- "Miller the Killer"- "Exacta Eddie"- "Red Robin"- "The Face"- "Mister Z" are a few WG's of our acquaintance . The WGH horse is always discussed in hushed tones and furtive glances. WGH's typically finish mid-pack.

Q_ You have discussed the conundrum presented by races on synthetic tracks versus dirt tracks. The last two years you picked horses moving from Santa Anita's Pro-Ride surface to the dirt at Churchill Downs. Neither ran exceptionally well. Have you learned your lesson?

A_ Probably not.

Q_ Last year your pick, CHOCOLATE CANDY was a son of CANDY RIDE and two years ago your pick, COLONEL JOHN, was a son of TIZNOW. Given the results, are those sires off your list of potential picks?

A_ They would be if I had any sense.

Q_ How about the owners? CHOCOLATE CANDY was owned by the Craig Family and COLONEL JOHN by WinStar. Would you exclude those owners as well?

A_ Horses don't know who owns them.

Q_ With all the speed horses in this year's Derby, all indications a closer will take the prize, right?

A_ That would be the logical conclusion, but not necessarily mine.

Q_ You seem to have an Irish fixation. Your farm and web site are named Innisfree and you constantly make Irish references in your writing. Should we assume that DUBLIN and PADDY O'PRADO will get a push from you?

A_ That will be the last question as I find them increasingly confrontational. In 1989 we recommended a long shot play on IRISH ACTOR that didn't work out so well. No more Mick-nicks here.

THIS YEAR'S STAB_

The biggest knock on our pick is that he is all alone when he crosses the finish line and he often doesn't extend himself in the process. Other charges include slow fractions, a need to be on an easy lead, and all six lifetime starts on synthetic surfaces at Del Mar and Santa Anita.

In his first start, our pick chased a very speedy sprinter of Bob Baffert's, TINY WOODS, and missed catching him by a head at Del Mar. A month later at that track, at odds of 4/5, he stalked the pace and drew clear by four plus lengths to leave the maiden ranks.

His next start was not until late December at Santa Anita. He hopped leaving the gate as a 3/5 pick, and lost all chance. Though he finished fourth of five, he made a middle move that has become his mark, before tiring.

At three he has been first at every call in all his Derby preps at Santa Anita. We will never know what would have happened if LAL had not been mugged on the far turn in the S.A. Derby. But watching our pick's acceleration at that juncture, the thought here was "Derby move."

In our view all speed is not created equally. There is a tendency to dismiss any horse that takes an early lead as a "speed horse." This implies an almost certain sad ending at a mile and one quarter unless the lucky individual finds him or herself alone on an easy lead. SPEND A BUCK '85-WINNING COLORS '88-WAR EMBLEM '02 are examples.

The consensus view this year is that there are so many horses possessed of front end want and ability that somewhere just inside the quarter pole, there will be a phalanx of gasping sprinters back-pedaling to the benefit of the few closers. Maybe not.

The sense here is that our pick does not have to be on the lead and will be in a stalking position. We are expecting that patented middle move somewhere between the quarter and eighth pole that will put us in front. Then a "hang on, baby" prayer as the closers approach.

As Jackie Gleason loved to say- "how sweet it is!" This year's Derby goes to SIDNEY' S CANDY!

PEDIGREE_

We are again going with a son of undefeated CANDY RIDE. A champion miler in Argentina, C.R. carried his speed successfully in the mile and one quarter G-1 Pacific Classic. He has sired MISREMEMBERED, winner of the G-1 Santa Anita Handicap, also run at the Derby distance. SIDNEY's dam, FAIR EXCHANGE by STORM CAT, is from a family of numerous stakes winners at ten furlongs and more.

CONNECTIONS_

Trainer John Sadler's only Derby try thus far was CORBY, sixth in 1993. In this year's preps, Sadler won both the Santa Anita and Arkansas Derbies with different horses. He was leading trainer in the recently completed Santa Anita meet.

Since the 2008 passing of her husband, Sidney, Jenny Craig and her five children have continued their racing and breeding operation. For the second year in a row we have joined Craig's List.

Jockey Joey Talamo is still not old enough to legally buy a mint julep but has at least graduated from the teenage ranks. Was scheduled to ride the favorite last year, I WANT REVENGE, until that one was a last minute scratch. We sense some Louisiana Karma unfolding. The rider is a New Orleans native and an honor grad of the Folsom Training Center.

To a confused interviewer after the Santa Anita Derby, he said of his mount, in flawless Y'at speak, "When I axe him to run, he runs." Yeah, you right Mr. Joe. And Ms. Jenny, née Genevieve Guidroz, is a native of Berwick. Bon chance, cher. Grip your gris-gris Saturday-we just might cast a who dat spell under the Twin Spires.

LONGSHOT PLAYS- We are back to our 2008 pedigree and connections, a WinStar owned son of TIZNOW. Getting little respect for his Illinois Derby win but we like AMERICAN LION a lot at what will certainly be a huge price. Also saving a little across the board money for Baffert's "other horse," CONVEYANCE.

BETS- All our SID dough will be on the nose. We will bet LION and CON to win-placeshow. We will use those three and LAL in exactas, tri's, and supers.