

# **RICE'S DERBY CHOICE JOURNAL**

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History does not record whether Aristotle was a handicapper or whether he ever even attended the chariot races. But among his contributions was the word *kairos* found in his treatise on rhetoric. The most broadly accepted English translation is perfect timing. No other term better summarizes the one element without which no horse can hope to wear the garland of roses in Louisville on the first Saturday in May. The list of superior runners that were denied the Derby trophy is seemingly endless. His training peaked too early or too late, he was boxed in tight quarters, a hole closed in a blink just as the winning move was underway, etc.

Last year our selections had *kairos* in spades as Street Sense and Hard Spun ran 1-2. Let's hope our Aristotelian streak stays alive for 2008. In this year's multiple Oscar winner, "No Country for Old Men" (the title borrowed by the Coen Brothers from the opening line of Yeats' "Sailing to Byzantium"), Tommy Lee Jones is in character as grizzled lawman Ed Tom Bell who is not afraid of dying but does not want "to push my chips forward and go out and meet something I don't understand." Welcome to the Kentucky Derby, Ed Tom, where we do exactly that every year. We will try to our best to avoid the opprobrium leveled by the Grateful Dead in their classic Casey Jones: "Got two good eyes but still you don't see." We will abide by the Buddha's last words to his monks: "Strive on diligently!"

The challenge of this year's renewal can best be summed up in one word: polytrack. The widespread introduction of synthetic racing surfaces has introduced a metric into the handicapping complex that is analogous to the so-called "Dome Teams" in the N.F.L. Putting syn-track results in perspective for key Derby preps such as the Lane's End, Santa Anita Derby, and Blue Grass is a maddening exercise. But at the risk of oversimplifying, syn-tracks seem to be favored by turf horses more than by dirt specialists. And it seems that racing from syn to dirt works better than dirt to syn. So there is your short course on synthetic surfaces. You are now a polymath (ouch!) certified to engage in racing form hermeneutics and join in the appraisal of the cast in this year's renewal:

(1) COOL COAL MAN- Was in backup role until WAR PASS' defection but now main hope of LaPenta/Zito team. Well-traveled colt owns a win over Churchill strip and won the Fountain of Youth that was a graveyard for several other contenders here. Blue Grass bomb could be syn-related. Broodmare sire (RUBIANO) was all speed but daddy MINESHAFT a good distance influence.

(2) TALE OF EKATI- Named for the Ekati diamond mine discovered by his owner-breeder, this son of TALE OF THE CAT got up late to run down sidelined one-time Derby favorite, WAR PASS, in the Wood Memorial. Trainer Tagg conditioned '03 Derby champ FUNNY CIDE. Pedigree suggests Derby distance may be a stretch.

(3) ANAK NAKAL- In case you are curious, the name translates as “naughty boy” in the Indonesia language. But this boy has been more tardy than naughty in recent efforts. Annexed the Ky Jockey Club at Churchill at two but just galloped around in the Fountain of Youth and Rebel. Got the proverbial “passed tiring horses” chart comment in the Wood for a dull fifth. Pedigree (by Belmont champ VICTORY GALLOP from a QUIET AMERICAN mare) says he’ll pass some quitters on Saturday as well. Hard to figure more than a minor placing.

(4) COURT VISION- If by GULCH out of a STORM BIRD mare sounds familiar, look no further than the 1995 Derby won by THUNDER GULCH as the same pedigree combo was present there. Dam is from the family of A.P. INDY, SUMMER SQUALL, and LEMON DROP KID. Co-owned by connections of BIG BROWN and COLONEL JOHN, this colt’s brilliance at two has produced only a couple of plodding placings at three but his first work at Churchill adding blinkers stopped the clocks and the clockers. Mott and Gomez as strong a trainer/rider combo as any. The former, also conditioned the legendary Cigar, is the youngest trainer to gain Hall of Fame entry. Fits the profile of the likely wise-guy horse.

(5) EIGHT BELLES- Lone filly in this year’s Derby and a deserving presence for sure. She is built like an Amazon (17 hands) and has same connections as last year’s pick, HARD SPUN. Very hard to figure where she fits as all previous starts are vs. fillies but this daughter of UNBRIDLED’S SONG can look all the boys in the eye without elevator shoes.

(6) Z FORTUNE- Owner Ahmed Zayat is an Egyptian beverage magnate with the annoying habit of placing Z’s in his horses’ names. But this pyramid scheme has worked well. Was undefeated until barn mate PYRO overtook him late in the Risen Star at F.G. but closed impressively to be second in the Arkansas Derby. Z has significantly outrun his pedigree although his Brazilian-bred sire Siphon was a game stakes horse in California. Still Asmussen’s second stringer but coming to Z Big One just right.

(7) BIG TRUCK- Barclay Tagg’s second stringer had good form at two and looked like a comer after Tampa Bay Derby nose win over ATONED the day WAR PASS blew up at 1/5. But another victim of the syn-tax as he beat precisely one horse in the Blue Grass. New York-bred is another with an interesting pedigree. Maternal grandsire GO FOR GIN won this one in ’94 and dad HOOK AND LADDER off to a decent start at stud. Will have to get truckin’ a lot quicker to have a big chance Saturday.

(8) VISIONAIRE- Marks return to the event for BARBARO’S genial trainer, Michael Matz. Followed a literal out of the fog closing win in the Gotham with a puzzling poly trip fifth in the Blue Grass. Hard to get a firm handle on this guy but sons of GRAND SLAM certainly have every right to be here and the V-man is no exception. Did make up ground late in the B.G., but handicapping him here requires a visionary.

(9) PYRO- The PYRO-maniacs got a full throttle fire hose dousing in the Blue Grass. After his game second to WAR PASS in the BC Juvenile was followed by winter dominance at Fair Grounds, he looked to be at least headed to co-favoritism in Louisville. Then came the poly-collapse in the Blue Grass. Was it the surface, was it the



horse? His performance in his final prep was so uncharacteristically bad, we are inclined to draw a line through it. Trainer Asmussen agrees. Bred for the Derby distance (by PULPIT from a WILD AGAIN mare) and still a major player.

(10) COLONEL JOHN- The Colonel's S.A. Derby impressed us every bit as much as Brownie's Florida Derby. By one of our all time faves, dual Breeders' Cup Classic winner TIZNOW. Broodmare sire, TURKOMAN, was same for last year's runner-up (picked here) HARD SPUN as well as '01 Preakness and Belmont winner POINT GIVEN. All starts so far on California synthetics so dirt form unknown. Asked about his plan, the affable Irish trainer Eoin Harty said he would ship to Louisville twelve days out: "Then he'll have one work, and I'll pray." Capable Cory Nakatani inherited the mount after Gomez opted for COURT VISION prior to S.A. Derby. Third choice at worst but first time dirt might help odds.

(11) Z HUMOR- The other Z horse is winless at three and really shouldn't be here but big bucks from the Delta Jackpot last year gets him in. Only pluses are same dad as FUNNY CIDE and trainer Mott. No chuckles here.

(12) SMOOTH AIR- Honest old school type as is his septuagenarian, New Orleans native trainer, Bernie Stutts. Runner up finish in the Florida Derby looked like a solo effort with BIG BROWN five in front of him and show horse seven behind. Never run a bad race but distance here could be an issue.

(13) BOB BLACK JACK- Very hard not to pull for this horse and his four horse barn connections. Co-owned by trainer Kasparoff, his brother, and pal from Brooklyn. This group would normally be seen in the last race on a Wednesday. All have outrun their pedigrees by a large margin. BOB was a game second in the S.A. Derby (killed our exacta). Doing nothing wrong but afraid that Derby distance will come up 22 for BLACK JACK.

(14) MONBA- Was on many Derby short lists until his last place finish as the Fountain of Youth chalk. He bounced back to take a slowly run Blue Grass and save the juggernaut Pletcher barn from Derby exclusion. Dad is MARIA'S MON (sire of '01 winner MONARCHOS) and Mom is by Belmont winner EASY GOER. So distance not an issue but speed is. Another difficulty is part owner Paul Saylor stiffed me on his one half share on a Fair Grounds box after the track burned to the ground. Haven't forgotten that one.

(15) ADRIANO- Owner's middle name is Adrian but we link this colt to Leite Ribeiro Adriano, the star Brazilian Soccer striker (nicknames are The Emperor and The Tank). This ADRIANO has been an emperor on synthetic tracks and turf but tanked in his lone dirt effort at Gulfstream in the Fountain of Youth. The colt has a faultless Derby pedigree being by A.P. Indy and from a dam whose family includes '87 Derby runner-up (picked here) and Belmont winner, BET TWICE. Hall of Fame '08 inductee Edgar Prado gives up mounts on Wood and Blue Grass winners to ride here.

(16) DENIS OF CORK- Gets in at last minute with defection of BEHINDATTHEBAR. Was on our very short list until Fig Guys consulting the connections trumped the trainer David Carroll's Derby prep race schedule. An awful Illinois Derby left DENIS at twenty one on the money list. Trainer is Irish and colt is named for a priest in Ireland (Fr. Denis Casey). Irish priests and horse racing have a winning history in Hollywood. Training at Churchill has been superb and could be a cork popper if he returns to pre-Illinois form.

(17) COWBOY CAL- This son of European Horse of the Year, GIANT'S CAUSEWAY,

completed the Pletcher exacta in the Blue Grass and appeared to run as good a race as the winner. Another whose winning form is confined to turf and syn-tracks making the Derby's dirt course a giant question mark. In Irish legend the giant Finn McCool built the causeway to expedite his invasion of Scotland. Cal's 's female family includes the stayer, BEHRENS. Still trying to figure why the owner of the Houston Texans would name one of his horses Cowboy

(18) RECAPTURETHEGLORY- Two decades after accompanying RISEN STAR to wins in the Preakness and Belmont, the New Orleans team of Roussel and Lamarque is back. Reprised the Illinois Derby wire job of WAR EMBLEM in '02 to earn Derby worthiness. Pedigree suggests that ten furlongs is a reach but he looked to have something left in Chicago after nine. Almost certain to be the early pace at a minimum.

(19) GAYEGO- Just in case Jerry Falwell's subliminal police force is looking for another Teletubby signpost, the name is pronounced guy-eh-go not gay-ego. GAYEGO is a phonetic English spelling of Gallego, both the dialect and people of Galicia in northwest Spain. Despite his gutty score in the Arkansas Derby in his first non-syn start, pundits have declared his pedigree wanting for the Derby. We always liked his dad, GILDED TIME, and his dam is inbred to RIBOT, a potent stamina influence. Brazilian native trainer Paulo Lobo makes first Derby start but is one for one in the Oaks. Rider Mike Smith is on our preferred list after lining our pockets on GIACOMO in '04. Possesses all important tactical speed and will be around a lot longer than most expect. A sleeper.

(20) BIG BROWN- This year's late breaking phenom in the Curlin profile of a year ago. Majority interest was purchased by an equine hedge fund for \$3 mill after his first start. Heckuva job, Brownie! Tender feet have forced bombastic trainer Dick Dutrow to think outside the hocks. The result has been only three lifetime starts for his sizzling barn. All

have been laughers. Dutrow has made it no secret that he expects to win and will back it up at the window. The colt's sire, Boundary, was a favorite of ours (we bred a mare unsuccessfully to him) but was not a router and his offspring have followed that pattern. But if Brownie repeats his Florida Derby effort, he can jog the last eighth and still win. Likely favorite and his odds will be made even shorter by the wagers of an army of U.P.S. drivers.

#### OUR PICK:

The pick this year has been on our watch list since he just missed in his first start at Del Mar last summer. He has wisely not hurried to make the Breeders' Cup Juvenile, winning in his second start and following that with a minor stakes win at Santa Anita. He then closed out his year with a narrow loss in the Grade I Cash Call Futurity. He has shown in his two wins in as many starts at three that he can stalk or close. His late move to grab the Santa Anita Derby was stunning.

We were in attendance at the 2000 Breeders' Cup at Churchill Downs when we were rescued in the Classic from a disappointing day of tough beats. Attention was focused on Derby winner FUSAICHI PEGASUS, Belmont winner LEMON DROP KID, and Eurochamp GIANT'S CAUSEWAY. A lightly regarded California-bred three-year-old named TIZNOW came home at 10/1 in a display of true grit. He would repeat that performance in the Classic the following year at Belmont making him uniquely a dual winner of that race.

In 2004, TIZNOW was bred to the TURKOMAN mare, SWEET DAMSEL, and foaled our pick the following year. Whatever critique experts might offer of this pedigree, there is no denying it is one that favors routing over sprinting. TIZNOW was a ten furlong monster and SWEET DAMSEL's family includes 2004 Derby third, IMPERIALISM.

The only question about our pick is how will a colt that has raced exclusively on syn-tracks handle the Churchill going. That question got a resounding response when our guy fired a bullet 57.80 in a 5/8 mile work without urging on Sunday.

We have always prided ourselves as value seekers in our Derby selection and are aware that this guy could well be the second choice when they load on Saturday. Nevertheless rank must be respected and we salute: COLONEL JOHN!

#### LONGSHOT SPECIAL:

We have long admitted to a bias toward California prospects in the Derby and this year confirms it because both our top and long shot picks are West Coasters. We love GAYEGO and his connections and believe those dismissing his pedigree are mistaken. This guy's Arkansas Derby was his first dirt effort. He stalked the pace, put away the leader and then withstood a determined charge by Z FORTUNE. We love an effort like that. GAYEGO's sire, GILDED TIME, was no one pace sprinter and won the BC Juvenile at a mile and a sixteenth. True he was third in the BC Sprint at three but he is from the DAMASCUS sire line and his female family includes Belmont winner HIGH ECHELON. While GAYEGO's

female family may not be steeped in quality, his dam DEVIL'S LAKE is inbred to RIBOT and that counts a lot to us. Most importantly GAYEGO did not look to be a short horse at Hot Springs and is training beautifully in Louisville.

#### **THE RACE:**

Our mind has become addled from conjuring the infinite number of outcomes for this year's race. Our best guess is that BIG BROWN puts away pace maker RECAPTURETHEGLORY around the quarter pole and that GAYEGO reaches even terms with that one coming out of the turn. Midway the stretch GAYEGO opens daylight on the field as the onrush of closers PYRO, COURT VISION, Z FORTUNE, DENIS OF CORK, and most importantly COLONEL JOHN gain ground. At the finish it's COLONEL JOHN from GAYEGO with any of another ten completing the trifecta and super.

#### **THE BET:**

Due to single digit odds, we will bet the COLONEL to win only but bet GAYEGO to win and place. We will make an exacta box with those two and DENIS. Key those three in tris and supers in front of BROWNIE, PYRO, ADRIANO and COURT VISION.

**LET'S HOPE THAT 2008 MIRRORS 2007 – GOOD LUCK TO ALL!**