

RICE'S DERBY CHOICE JOURNAL

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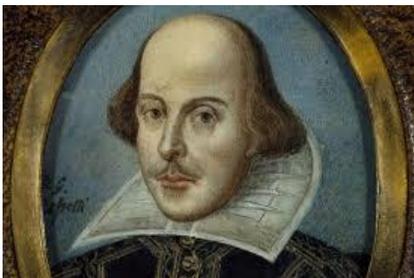
43rd Edition



**“Murder most foul, as in the best it is.
But this most foul, strange, and unnatural.”**

-The ghost of Hamlet's father speaking to his son

The Tragedy of Hamlet, Prince of Denmark by



WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE

Mark Twain's novel, *The Gilded Age*, referenced the late decades of nineteenth century America. Often misread as a term for widespread prosperity, Twain intended to malign the period as one of luxuriant opulence for the robber baron class and scraps for the struggling masses. He used gilded in the sense of a base metal covered by a veneer of gold.

That period has served as a trove for historians mining the unique elements of the American ethos. Whatever judgement is fixed upon those that Teddy Roosevelt called "the malefactors of great wealth," many deserve to also be remembered as the benefactors of great horse racing.

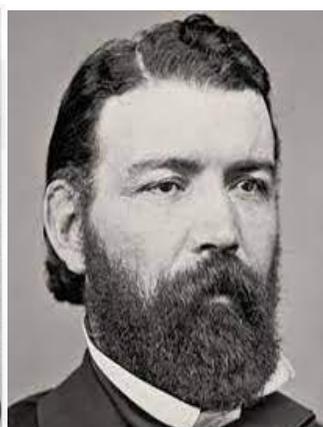
Thoroughbred horse racing boomed throughout the early and middle years of the twentieth century. The investments of T.R.'s malefactors and their heirs had a catalytic effect on the sport's natural appeal. That roguish collection of capitalists, politicians, and assorted freebooters spent lavishly on bloodstock and racetracks leaving a mark that abides to this day.

Most of the hallowed grounds of the country's oldest tracks owe their provenance to those individuals. There was John "Old Smoke" Morrissey, organizer of the first Saratoga meet; Elias "Lucky" Baldwin, founder of Santa Anita; August Belmont, Jr. and William Whitney, joint initiators of the eponymic Belmont Park.

Belmont and Whitney, along with Vanderbilt, Dupont, Phipps, Bradley, Wright, Keene, Mellon, and a few others were arbiters of the social register. Their names were also those most found on the list of leading owners and breeders.



BALDWIN



MORRISSEY



BELMONT



WHITNEY

None of the above would have known a young oil speculator in California named William Myron Keck whose uncanny drilling hits were gaining mythic status by the early 1900's. In 1921, at the age of forty-one, he founded the well-named Superior Oil Company which grew into the largest independent oil producer in the U.S.

W.M. was not a sportsman but his son Howard was. Howard owned back-to-back Indy 500 winning cars in 1953 and 1954. Upon W.M. 's death in 1964, Howard became CEO of Superior.



W.M. KECK (1880-1964)



ELIZABETH AVERY KECK (1921-2017)



H.B. KECK (1913-1996)

Howard abandoned the open wheel game shortly after his big Indy wins to concentrate on horse racing: "horses don't crash and burn." He had some nice ones including Tell, Finjara, and Fiddle Isle. All were trained by Charlie Whittingham. The horses were kept mostly for the pleasure of his wife, Elizabeth "Libby" Keck.

In what was a second at bat for both, Howard wed Bettye Avery, eight years his junior, in 1950. She was Miss Oklahoma and the back half of the Miss America exacta in 1939.



BETTYE AVERY IN THE LOU GEHRIG STORY

Those two prizes made Libby a high draft pick for Hollywood stardom. In 1941 she was a short price to land a co-star spot with Gary Cooper in *The Lou Gehrig Story*. She finished second in a game effort and settled for a minor part in the film. A few more forgettable roles completed Libby's film resume.

The Keck's kept a small but quality band of broodmares at their Kentucky farm. In that group was a fine mare named Banja Luka, a daughter of the grand Claiborne Farm stallion, Double Jay. She was named for a city in what was then Yugoslavia, now the second-largest city of Bosnia and Herzegovina.

The mare was a foal of 1968 and by the early 1980's, Banja Luka had produced five stakes winners for the Kecks. Like many accomplished broodmares, B.L. was not much of a runner. She was winless in three starts (Secretariat's dam, Somethingroyal, went zero for one).

In March of 1983, the Keck's mare produced her ninth and last foal, a chestnut colt by Nijinsky II. She died later that same year.

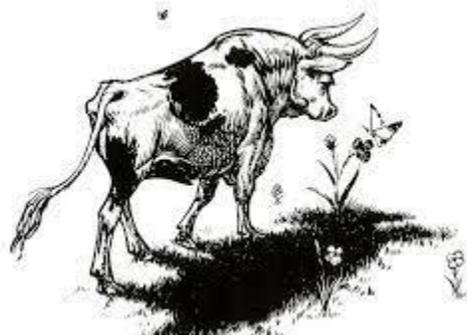
The Canadian-bred Nijinsky II was contestably Northern Dancer's most accomplished son. He raced only on grass and only in Europe. From thirteen starts, his record was eleven wins (including the English Triple Crown and the Irish Derby) and two seconds.

His success continued when upon retirement he joined the Claiborne Farm stallion roster. The Roman Numeral II was affixed to his name in the U.S.

since there had been an American thoroughbred registered in that name previously.

During a farm visit in 1984 to inspect the Keck yearlings, Libby noticed the well-formed chestnut colt from the Nijinsky II-Banja Luka mating. He was roaming apart from the others and seemed happy doing so.

His insouciant nature was remindful of a character in a children's book she had read to her daughter. The book told the story of a gentle Spanish bull that rejected the sport of bullfighting in favor of peaceful rumination and flower smelling. She then decided to give her colt the name of the fictional bull. He would be called Ferdinand.



FERDINAND THE BULL

The traits of the gentle bull seemed imprinted on the young thoroughbred as he combined a willingness to please with an incurious attitude toward the racing game. The Keck's placed Ferdinand in tuition to the methodical Charlie Whittingham, who kept his own counsel while his charge went winless in his first three starts. The Kecks knew well that you don't call Charlie, Charlie calls you.

Charlie was largely mum as Ferdinand progressed and saw promise when his big boy notched his maiden win in the fourth outing. In an atypical Charlie move, he sent Ferdinand straight from the maiden win into the Hollywood Futurity.

In that one Ferdinand was a closing third but was no threat to future Kentucky Derby favorite, Snow Chief, who distanced the field by over six lengths in a joyous romp.

Ferdinand's trainer was sending no signs of a May trip to Louisville. His two previous visits there produced an eighth in 1958 (Gone Fishin') and a ninth

in 1960 (Divine Comedy). For the next quarter-century he made it clear he would not be back unless and until he had the winner in tow.

In the final prep for the 1986 Santa Anita Derby, the San Rafael Stakes, Ferdinand was the apparent winner mid-stretch when he pulled up, finishing second to Variety Road.

Snow Chief returned in the Santa Anita Derby with familiar results. He scorched the fast track winning easily by five lengths over third-place Ferdinand. Jockey Bill Shoemaker dropped a prophetic throwaway line to reporters post-race:

“He couldn’t get ahold of the track. He’ll run better in Louisville.”

Despite his Hall of Fame trainer-jockey connections and royal pedigree, Ferdinand prepared with little notice from the jam of scribes and assorted wise-guys on the Churchill backstretch throughout Derby week.

In those days the tools available to the at home handicapper, of which I was one, were primeval. No simulcasts, no You Tube videos, and all off-track betting was clandestine. Quality print journalists were invaluable in separating the noise from the signal. Many were the pre-dawn vigils, awaiting delivery, at the few newsstands that stocked the Daily Racing Form.

It was my good fortune to enjoy a friendship with an archetypal New Orleans character who was a Derby regular as well as both a scribe and a wise-guy. Buddy loved to bet.... on virtually any horse race or sports event.

Bernard, “Buddy D”, Diliberto began as a sports columnist for the Times-Picayune. He later became a sports anchor on local TV and ultimately the host of a riotous radio sports talk show. For over a decade, I was a Derby week guest on Buddy’s show.

In 1980 Buddy, disheartened by a New Orleans Saints team midway through a 1-15 season, did his sports segment on the evening news with a grocery bag on his head. Thus began a practice that is still alive today for fans of losing teams.

In 1986 Buddy called from Louisville the week before the race asking for my thoughts. I told him my pick was Ferdinand and would appreciate any gossip he might hear.

The following day he reported that all the talk was for Snow Chief and Badger Land, with a few so-called smarts promoting Broad Brush *sotto voce*. Not only was Ferdinand being ignored, but also his connections.

On a jammed backstretch, Buddy meandered to Ferdinand's Derby redoubt and found Charlie Whittingham and Bill Shoemaker conversing alone outside Ferdinand's stall.

Buddy reported that they greeted him hospitably and each gave succinct replies when asked to assess their Derby chances.

Charlie Whittingham: "Buddy, you can bet."

Bill Shoemaker: "He'll win."



BUDDY D. (1931-2005)



AINTS BAGHEAD (1980-?)

On race day Snow Chief and Badger Land vied for favoritism with post time odds favoring Snow Chief at \$2.10/1 with Badger Land at \$2.60/1. Ferdinand entered the starting gate at \$17.70/1. Sixteen horses were entered; only three betting interests bore longer win odds than Ferdinand.

Stuck in the one hole, Shoemaker wisely saved ground into the first turn. Ferdinand was last of sixteen by the half mile marker. After three-quarters he had one horse beat. Ferdinand progressed thereafter, but announcer Mike Battaglia had yet to call his name.

For most Derbies the contender-pretender parting occurs shortly after the quarter pole as the field fans into the stretch. In this one a jumble of horses was in contention moving into the turn. My pulse quickened when I marked the sudden appearance of Shoemaker's pink cap. Ferdinand now trailed the

leaders by a manageable distance and was travelling comfortably on a loose rein.

Badger Land, Bold Arrangement, Broad Brush, and a tiring Snow Chief were still blocking both Ferdinand and Rampage into the lane. When Snow Chief gave way, Ferdinand and Shoe beat Rampage and Pat Day to the hole that opened briefly near the rail.

Not until Ferdinand had cleared the field did an obviously startled Mike Battaglia exclaim: “And here comes Ferdinand!” From that point forward, the unknown was not whether but how much (2 ¼ lengths).



BILL SHOEMAKER (1931-2003) FERDINAND (1985-2002) CHARLIE WHITTINGHAM (1913-1999)

Two weeks later in the Preakness, Badger Land was a 9/5 favorite over Snow Chief at 5/2 and Ferdinand at 3/1 in a seven-horse field. Snow Chief's early speed prevailed with Ferdinand closing well but three lengths back at the finish.

The last leg of the Triple Crown was run in a quagmire. At 7/2 Ferdinand was the second choice to Rampage at 5/2. The winner was Danzig Connection giving the great Woody Stephens his fifth consecutive Belmont Stakes training win. Though Ferdinand finished a respectable third of ten, his reputation was receding into the realm of a one hit wonder.

That stigma risked permanence when Ferdinand went winless in his first six starts at age four. He again displayed the flower-child distraction of his fictional bovine avatar, Ferdinand the Bull.

At the time, the sunder of the Keck's marriage was progressing due to an inheritance controversy in the Keck Family. Howard and Libby lived apart in their 11,000 square foot Bel Air estate, La Lanterne. Relations were so bad that Howard, doubting his parenting of their son Howard, Jr., ordered a DNA test. The kid passed the test and he remained Little Howard.

In late summer Ferdinand regained his focus and put together a three-race win streak setting up a Breeders Cup Classic confrontation with 1987 Derby and Preakness winner Alysheba. Ferdinand held off Alysheba's late charge by a nose, thereby rewarding the chalk eaters who had backed him into even money favoritism.

Alysheba got revenge in the 1988 Santa Anita Handicap holding off Ferdinand's late rush. The issue was finally settled in the San Bernadino Handicap with another virtual match race. The duke went to Alysheba by a nose. (All three races, called superbly by Tom Durkin and Trevor Denman, are available on YouTube and well worth your time)

Ferdinand was retired later that year and relocated to stall number one at the Claiborne Farm stallion barn. In his five years there he sired 133 winners (46.6%) and 8 stakes winners (3.6%) from 336 named foals. Those were not numbers needed to support a commercial stallion of his pedigree, conformation, and race record.



FERDINAND EDGES ALYSHEBA IN THE 1987 BREEDERS CUP CLASSIC

The JS Company purchased Ferdinand and exported him to Japan's Arrow Stud where he stood (1995-2000) with similar results.

At that point the trail became murky. The then owners claimed that they moved Ferdinand to a small farm where he was bred to a few mares over two seasons. That farm's owner used the Japanese word *shobun* to describe what happened next. The translation of that word into English yields *disposed*.

Neither of these jokers made any effort to contact Claiborne Farm or the Keck Family, both of which stood ready to repatriate Ferdinand and retire him in the U.S.

The result was that sometime in 2002 Ferdinand's avoidable and execrable death came in a Japanese slaughterhouse.

Commercial equine slaughter is an ugly practice that need not be detailed here. For decades, injured or slow thoroughbred race horses often met their end in knackers' yards both here and abroad. Many enjoyed useful second careers in polo, hunting, eventing, etc. but far too many lost their lives cruelly when no longer of value on the track or in the breeding shed.

Charitable groups, dedicated to adoption and aftercare for unwanted thoroughbreds, did noble work for decades. The outrage over Ferdinand's murder gave that movement new energy.

In 2003, Michael Blowen and his wife, both retired Boston Globe columnists, started a thoroughbred retirement home in Georgetown, Kentucky called Old Friends (<https://oldfriendsequine.org/>). Today the facility houses 240 retirees on 230 acres and attracts over 20,000 visitors per year. Residing there are 1997 Kentucky Derby winner Silver Charm, as well as Belmont Stakes winners Touch Gold, Sarava, and Birdstone.

Alphabet Soup, whose upset of Cigar in the 1996 Breeders Cup Classic provided me with an in-person \$41.70 mutuel, passed away earlier this year at age 30. He enjoyed a long and happy retirement at Old Friends and was featured in a CBS Sunday Morning segment about Old Friends: <https://www.cbsnews.com/video/a-kentucky-home-for-retired-racehorses/>

Our winning pick from last year's Derby, Medina Spirit, recently died unexpectedly following a routine workout. He is buried at Old Friends.

Knowing how much Ferdinand would have loved living out his late years there is a saddening reflection. By all accounts from his keepers, Ferdinand possessed a kind nature not always found in testosterone laden stallions. The only solace from his grisly end lies in the awareness it brought to the need for aftercare of retired racehorses.

A fitting epitaph to Ferdinand can be found in Act 1 of Macbeth. Malcolm speaks of the Thane of Cawdor's death:

"Nothing in his life became him, like the leaving it."



FERDINAND

EPILOGUE- In 2004 Jennifer and I went to the Breeders Cup at Lone Star Park. At a booth near the paddock were two ladies accepting contributions for thoroughbred rescue. The placard read “Remember Ferdinand.”

It being an hour before post time for the first race, I was still armed with several hundred-dollar bills dedicated to funding that day’s losing stabs. I peeled one off and handed it over. That c-note was but a fraction of the Derby haul that colt delivered to me in 1986. One of the ladies then gifted me the hat pictured below. That hat rests to this day in a favored spot in my collection of sports laurels and keepsakes.

I will remember Ferdinand.



THIS YEAR'S RACE BY POST POSITION & PROGRAM NUMBERS

1- **MO DONEGAL**- Nosed Zandon last year in the Remsen and was sent off the fave in the Holy Bull where he was a well-beaten third to Whitey. Bounced back catching Early Voting at the wire in the Wood. Time was that the Wood Memorial winner was always a skinny price in the Derby. But not since Funny Cide ('03) has the Wood produced a Derby champ. Mo has never started at more than 2/1 but may well be Pletcher's number two here.

2- **HAPPY JACK**- Calumet Farm homebred is by Preakness winner Oxbow and from the wonderful Tapit race mare, Tapestry. After first start maiden win, has trailed the winner by double digits in his other three starts. That includes his third in the Santa Anita Derby won by Taiba. Two-time Derby winner trainer O'Neill said after the colt's final Derby work that he (O'Neill) is "getting pumped". Same will have to be true of his colt if he expects a "Hi Jack!" greeting in the winner's circle Saturday.

3- **EPICENTER**- Well-named colt is where all discussion of the race begins and possibly ends. Son of hot young sire Not This Time who has two starters here. Has not taken an errant step so far. Last race was a dominating score in the Louisiana Derby. Champion rider Rosario, who brought home Orb (picked here) in 2013, will be up. The only missing classic in HOF trainer Asmussen's resume is this one, where he is 0 for 23. A repeat of the New Orleans effort may produce a result that matches the first four letters of this colt's name.

4- **SUMMER IS TOMORROW**- Well-beaten second to C.P. in the UAE Derby after leading til mid-stretch in first two-turn race. Bred in Kentucky and pedigree is respectable. All his races have been in Dubai so impossible to handicap. Trainer says they need the lead. If they send him in this field, summer may be yesterday.

5- **SMILE HAPPY**- Looked the goods at two when he buried the field at Churchill in the Kentucky Jockey Club Stakes. Favored over Epicenter in the Risen Star but second best in the running. Similar result in the Blue Grass when Zandon out finished him convincingly. Trainer McPeck has set a high bar for this colt but there needs to be a big forward step to get the roses. As Hamlet said to Poor Yorick's skull, "Not one now to mock your own grinning?"

6- **MESSIER**- Named for NHL HOF inductee Mark, winner of six Stanley Cups. Son of the esteemed Empire Maker got it going late last year. Came in hot for the Santa Anita Derby but pressing speedy favorite, Forbidden Kingdom, got him caught late by Taiba. Both are trained by former Baffert assistant Yakteen while the former serves a suspension. Yak knows the playbook well and expect Mess to run well for Johnny V. Hockey guy's nickname was The Messiah. If horse guy duplicates that name, Oh Lordy.

7- **CROWN PRIDE**- UAE Derby winners have not run well in prior Derbies but this guy rates a second look. Japanese bred horses won two Breeders Cup races last fall and this guy belongs here. His sire line runs to '89 Derby winner Sunday Silence (picked here) who is a major influence in Japan. C.P.'s female family includes '88 Derby champ Winning Colors. He freaked first time schooling in the starting gate at C.D. when he first heard the bell but now well-adjusted after a month on the grounds. May not wear the crown on Derby Day but certain to run with pride.

8- **CHARGE IT**- Another one with a prodigious scene stealer when he jumped from a maiden win to a second to Whitey in the G-1 Florida Derby. Might have taken it all but for a zig-zag in the lane due to inexperience. A son of the sainted Tapit and trained by double Derby winning Pletcher. Another step forward will put him in the mix.

9- **TIZ THE BOMB**- Came from the clouds to get the place in the BC Juvenile Mile Turf. Was twenty lengths behind Whitey in the Holy Bull on the dirt. Caught the Derby Prep double at Turfway on synthetic. Animal Kingdom in 2011 is only one to parlay Turfway-Churchill to the roses. Deserves a shot but trainer McPeek's chances are better with Smiley. Implode or explode? Your call.

10- **ZANDON**- The most likely candidate to vie for favoritism with Epicenter. Z was a non-threatening third to that one after leaping at the start in the Risen Star Stakes. He was sent off favorite in the Blue Grass Stakes and appeared beaten midway the race but worked his way artfully through traffic from last to win convincingly. Trainer Brown like his mentor, the late Bobby Frankel, is a master at turf races but gets plenty of them home on dirt as well. Likely to see a new ZZ Top in this one.

11- **PIONEER OF MEDINA**- Pletcher third stringer draws into the race with defection of Early Voting. No shame being backup to Mo and Charge It.

Bred to stay and ran big in the Louisiana Derby to be third. Kind of a grinder that could stick around longer than expected. Two Medinas in a row?

12- **TAIBA**- The latest myth-buster, as this guy goes from first start, six-furlong maiden win in March to ten-furlong Grade I Stakes win a month later. Whew! Grand looking son of Gun Runner brought \$1.2 mill as a 2yo. Owner same as last year's score for us, Medina Spirit (R.I.P). The other transfer portal move from Baffert, Inc. to Tim Yakteen. Mike Smith at fifty-seven looks to break oldest Derby winning rider record held by Shoe (Ferdinand, '86 at fifty-four). Don't know whether to expect a bounce or a pounce.

13- **SIMPLIFICATION**- Same Dad, Not This Time, as likely fave Epicenter. Was second to Whitey in the Holy Bull and was an easy winner in the Fountain of Youth. That win made him favorite in the Florida Derby. Unexpectedly went to press the leader early and was easy prey by mid-stretch finishing third. A stalking trip might have put him right there with Whitey and Charge It. Trainer Sano, now a naturalized U.S. citizen, remains Venezuela's all-time training leader. Top NY jock, J. Ortiz, rides. Not complicated: stalk don't press.

14- **BARBER ROAD**- If you are looking for the achieving blue collar guy, here he is. Same sire as Whitey, B.R. always shows up. First win was a \$30k maiden claimer and has never been out of the money since, including a second in the Arkansas Derby. Speed figures are modest but willing to bet he is passing some of those more fashionable names the last quarter-mile. If so, he could blow up some exotics.

15- **WHITE ABARRIO**- Sire Race Day was exiled to Korea in '20 and now has two Derby starters. Whitey was third to Smile Happy and Classic Causeway at two in the Ky Jockey Club but is perfect at three with the Holy Bull and Florida Derby wins. Difficult to determine where he fits here but he sure likes to win. Trainer Joseph is a native of Barbados where he trained a Triple Crown winner when only twenty-two. Jock Gaffalione has won six straight riding titles at Churchill Downs.

16- **CYBERKNIFE**- Owner named him for the surgical instrument used in his prostate surgery. That's a first. Son of fashionable Gun Runner was a \$400k yearling and looked it early. Took a stab at him in the LeCompte at Fair Grounds where he was a dull sixth. Regained confidence in an allowance

race there. Then shipped to Hot Springs where he won the Arkansas Derby with ease over a mediocre collection. In good hands with trainer Cox and rider Geroux, but must improve over his last. If he does, you may be quoting Macbeth at the finish: "Is this a dagger which I see before me?"

17- **CLASSIC CAUSEWAY**- Won first out at Saratoga last September with a 90 Beyer Fig. Rest of last year looked promising and then he wired the field in the Tampa Bay Derby. Was well-backed in the Florida Derby at 7/2 and led briefly. He then went kerplunk and finished dead last. Appeared to be out of the Derby picture despite qualifying points, but owners prevailed on Trainer Lynch to give the colt a shot. Capable of being a pace factor. Never matching that speed figure from his first start is a worry.

18- **TAWNY PORT**- Finished mid-pack here in the Risen Star. Runner-up at Turfway to Tiz. Two weeks later he earned last chance Derby points winning the Lexington. Three starts in a month is a big ask. Nice colt with substantial pedigree but prob ranks third of the Cox-trained trio here. Better quaffed than bet.

19- **ZOZOS**- Named for the owner's favorite restaurant, Zo has progressed steadily in his three starts. His last was a solid second in the La Derby while no match for Epicenter. On paper his pedigree for a mile and a quarter is not encouraging, but horses sometimes outrun their pedigrees. Well managed by Cox but rider Geroux stays with another barn trainee, Cyberknife.

20- **ETHEREAL ROAD**- Took a shot at needed Derby points in the Lexington, following a seventh in the Blue Grass. Fourth place finish there left him on the wait list, but defections by Early Voting and Un Ojo gets him in. Racing results have not lived up to his breeding. Trainer D. Wayne Lukas has as many Derby wins as wives (4). Now eighty-six, a win here would truly be ethereal for him. Highly unlikely.

“Once more unto the breach, dear friends, once more”

(Henry V by William Shakespeare)

CRITICAL RACE THEORY-

One of our long-embraced Derby handicapping practices has been to rate the quality of the key Derby prep. The horses that don't win often have as much of a story to tell as the winners do.

Unfortunately, dear reader, this year's results have confused more than enlightened for the selection processes. But knowing you have read this far in hopes of a pick, you will see the usual format of best chance, longshot, and ultra-longshot.

The view here is that the Santa Anita Derby 1-2 showed best of all the eligibles. We were torn between Messier and Taiba but went with the former because of the experience factor and a sense he was not fully cranked for that race. But what to do with Taiba? You can't have two best bets, and his odds will not qualify for a longshot designation.

A further complication is that Taiba is attempting a feat not seen since Leonatus in 1883—win the Kentucky Derby after only two starts. There is probably a one in four chance that he bounces from his huge effort in the S.A. Derby. That would spell disaster. But if not, he will be right there at the finish.

Saturday will tell whether Taiba is the next Justify or the next Rock Your World. That's why they play the game.

So...I will have a win saver on Taiba and load him with Messier in all exotics.

Our pick to win will be **MESSIER**

Our longshot will be **SIMPLIFICATION**

Our ultra-longshot will be **CROWN PRIDE**

For exactas trifectas, and supers we will also use **TAIBA and ZANDON**

Slainte,

Tim