

RICE'S DERBY CHOICE JOURNAL

2007

28th Edition

One of the endearing qualities of thoroughbred horse racing is its slowness to change and its virtual Luddite resistance to technological advance. Watch a Derby from 50 years ago and apart from the grainy film and the fashions of the spectators you would be hard pressed to separate it from the present. The shunning of broad television coverage in that medium's early days (fans would stay home instead of going to the track the wisemen calculated) conceded the canvas to sports that have long since surpassed horse racing in popularity.

Now we have a new entry to the sport's glossary: Polytrack. Briefly Polytrack is a synthetic racing surface that after a successful run at Turfway Park is growing in popularity due to its consistency (always a fast track) and its kinder treatment of horses' limbs. But the version at Keeneland produced a result in the Blue Grass Stakes that makes determining that race's relevance to the Derby all but impossible. Most of the race was at a Euro-style gallop followed by a mad dash to the finish. So those of us obsessed with finding the Derby victor have another imponderable to weigh. Just what is present in the handicapper's DNA that directs us thus? We would borrow Hannibal Lecter's answer to a similar question in *Silence of the Lambs*. "Nothing happened to me Officer Starling. You can't reduce me to a set of influences." Ever mindful of the import of our task, we venture forth with a favorite Latin quote of our high school writing teacher: "verba volant, scripta manent" (spoken words fly away, written words endure).

THIS YEAR'S FIELD (BY PROGRAM NUMBER AND POST POSITION)

1) SEDGEFIELD- Same Daddy as Curlin and was a decent second in the Lane's End. We are operating on the assumption that this colt is named for the English Race Course. Possible hunch play for the Queen but a Sedgefield win would surely come from left field.

2) CURLIN- This colt is in the "pay whatever it takes to buy after a maiden win with a big figure" category of prospects. Principal owner at present is Jess (Kendall-Jackson Winery) Jackson whose partnership paid \$3.5 million for the colt after his stunning debut at Gulfstream in February. The prior owners paid but \$57k for Curlin as a yearling. They are two lawyers, named William Gallion and Shirley Cunningham, Jr., who are in a legal boil after allegedly pilfering over \$60 mill from their client plaintiffs in the Fen-phen diet drug case. Almost certain to be the favorite after posting a perfect 3 for 3 tab, the colt is up against the well-worn historical taboos: Apollo in 1882 was last Derby winner with no starts at 2 and the filly Regret in 1915 was last Derby winner with 3 or fewer starts. Most of sire's (Smart Strike) runners seem best at less than Derby distance, but there is plenty of staying power on the dam's (by Deputy Minister) side. Trainer Asmussen (not one of our favorites) has multiple leading trainer titles as well as multiple medication violations; jockey Albarado is latest Louisiana star. If this colt's on the lead turning for home, the only thing curlin' at our house will be our toes.

3) ZANJERO- This guy made steady progress all winter here and looms as the wise guy horse after his tough beat in the Blue Grass while stuck on the rail. Zanjeros were the irrigation workers in the west who traveled by horseback opening and closing gates. This is the other Asmussen trainee and has labored in Curlin's shadow. Sire Cherokee Run was a sprinter but dam (by A.P. Indy) has lots of Europeans stayers in her family. Outsider with a shot.

4) STORM IN MAY- Hats off to this \$16,000 over-achiever. To have 8 starts at 2 and still be able to finish second in the Arkansas Derby certainly gives him a right to be here. A top ten finish is about our most optimistic expectation.

5) IMAWILDANDCRAZYGUY- We find people that name their horses with the maximum allowable letters in one word especially annoying. This son of Wild Event was a surprising second in the Risen Star but was subsequently well beaten in the Louisiana and Florida Derbies. Drew in after defections of Cobalt Blue and Xchanger. If she is thinking of junior, this could complete the Queen's exacta but Youwouldbeawildandcrazyguy to bet this one.

6) COWTOWN CAT- Another Pletcher prize, this guy sold for \$1.5 million at 2. Son of Distorted Humor, out of a Storm Cat mare and comes to the big one off of 2 convincing wins in the Gotham and Illinois Derby. Female family is a little light for the price tag. We have no beef with Cowtown's record but looks a better Preakness fit to us.

7) STREET SENSE- If we had any, we would pick him. Looking to break the Breeders' Cup Juvenile winner jinx (none has won the Derby), this guy has done nothing wrong and has proven fondness for Churchill. Trainer Nafzger, a great guy and great horsemen trained beloved 1990 Derby champ Unbridled (picked here). Another Louisiana rider, Borel, has been with the colt every step of the way. The colt is from the first crop of the magnificent \$5 million winner Street Cry out of the speedy Dixieland Band mare, Bedazzled. Apart from having only 2 starts at 3, there is absolutely nothing not to like here. Street Sense has street cred.

8) HARD SPUN- Connections are Derby firsters but deserve respect. This colt took the Smarty Jones route through the Keystone State at 2 and impressed during his later stay in New Orleans. Blew his perfect record at Hot Springs in an inexpicably dull effort in an Arkansas Derby prep. Made resounding amends in the Lane's End. With no starts in April, this guy was nearly forgotten until white hot work at Churchill this week. Impeccable Derby pedigree with stalker speed equals major contender.

9) LIQUIDITY- Another Reddam-O'Neill participant, this colt was thought to be at the head of the California class until 2 consecutively dull efforts in the Louisiana and Santa Anita Derbies. Sire Tiznow won the Breeders' Cup Classic twice. We admit to a soft spot for Liquidity as Tiznow was awfully good to us and his female family contains Innisfree Farm's lone homebred stakes winner, Scruffy Murphy. Loads of stamina in this pedigree and if O'Neill has a formula for converting liquid into gas, this colt's best would put him in the frame for sure.

10) TEUFLESBERG- A blue collar yearling buy (\$9000) that took 9 tries before he won a race. By Johannesburg out of a Devil's Bag mare, his name translates as Devil's Mountain. Part of the blanket

Blue Grass finish, he figures to be a pace factor but think he will have a devil of a time climbing the Derby mountain.

11) BWANA BULL- This son of Holy Bull won the two major Northern California fixtures, El Camino Real and California Derbies, which is sort of like winning the Arena Football League. Tried to step up to the bigs in the Santa Anita Derby and was no threat. Respect Trainer Hollendorfer, who always springs some NoCal shipper upsets to Del Mar, but we are bearish on this bull.

12) NOBIZ LIKE SHOWBIZ- Wonderfully named colt owned by the widow of Tommy Valando, a delightful character and producer of Broadway music, who owned Breeders' Cup Juvenile winner and Derby 5th '91 Fly So Free. Trainer Barclay Tagg found the way with Funny Cide '03. So impressive was Biz's maiden win that an offer of \$17 mill was received (and rejected) on behalf of the elder Dubai Brother, Sheikh Mohammed bin Rashid al-Maktoum . The colt's failure to maintain concentration was seemingly solved in his Wood Memorial win in which blinkers and ear plugs were added. For this race a show biz, a place biz, and even a win biz are all possibilities.

13) SAM P.- This colt is named for one Sam P. Burton, a legendary WWII hump pilot who flew countless high risk missions over the Himalayas and happily will be watching Saturday. Sent west by Pletcher to avoid the rest of his Derby team, the colt finished second in the last prep for, and third in, the Santa Anita Derby. The equine Sam P. has not quite gotten over the hump yet. If you are looking for a Derby Letter swami angle, this son of Cat Thief has both Alydar and Affirmed in his pedigree.

14) SCAT DADDY- From first crop of Breeders' Cup Juvenile Champion, Johannesburg, this colt comes to Louisville off of consecutive impressive wins in the Fountain of Youth and Florida Derby. Another soldier in the Pletcher army, about the only reservation we can muster is his taste for those last 220 yards at Churchill. Will partner with Barbaro's jock of last year, Edgar Prado, and figures to get some prominent calls. Whether this Daddy scats or scuttles at crunch time is your call.

15) TIAGO- Except for the sire (replace Holy Bull with Pleasant Tap), you have a replay of 2005's edition with Giacomo. Same mama, owner, trainer, and jock. Much like Giacomo (named for Sting's son), Tiago is named for the son of Sergio Mendes. Also following his older brother, this colt was slow to come to hand. Tiago was visually stunning in his last to first (sound familiar?) win in the Santa Anita Derby. With apologies to Shakespeare and Othello, you could say a more "Honest Tiago" emerged in that race. We never forget our friends and we'll have something on this guy just in case, but not enough in the original Iago's words "to ever make my fool my purse."

16) CIRCULAR QUAY- First of all, it is pronounced "key" and is the hub of Sydney, Australia's harbor. Damon Runyan once wrote a gem called "All Horseplayers Die Broke." A sequel could have been "But Not The Bookmakers." From his successful career from turf and sports accountancy, Michael Tabor has already produced one Derby winner in Thunder Gulch '95. Now he comes with a homebred son of that one who took this year's Louisiana Derby handily. This colt is not robust of build and has been handled accordingly. Top trainer in Pletcher and rider Johnny V is probably the best rider to have not won a Derby. Only 2 starts at two, an 8 week layoff, and no start beyond a mile and 1/16th are major issues for an obviously serious threat.

17) STORMELLO- Admit to being stumped on this one as he showed both solid form at two and promise in early preps at three. Two California-Florida commutes in the month of March along with a taxing setting of the pace in the Florida Derby set this colt back some. But he should go to the gate well-rested. Owner-trainer Currin is an acquaintance of ours and we hold him in high esteem both professionally and personally. With Kent D at the controls, you can pretty well assume that the game plan is to steal. Without a classic stamina pedigree, there is a late stage risk of legs turning to jello. But no one will call this fellow Stormello yellow. He carries his track and his game with him.

18) ANY GIVEN SATURDAY- Another Pletcher trainee that ran an excusable sub-par effort in the Wood Memorial on short rest. Being a son of Distorted Humor (sire of Funny Cide '03 winner) and from an A.P. Indy mare leaves little doubt that he will stay the distance. Rider Gomez is the now rider and certainly has a Derby waiting in his resume. Our beef is with the owners, founders of a pyramid scheme in the long distance reselling business that lost a lot of people money apart from them. There could be a given Saturday where we could bet this guy but not this one.

19) DOMINICAN- Although not without some stamina influences in his pedigree, this surprise winner of the wackily run Blue Grass, does not look suited to the Derby distance. His sire El Correador was at his outer limits at a mile. The Dominican Republic is the wellspring of major league shortstops. We expect this guy to come up short and stop major league.

20) GREAT HUNTER- Another 2 prep starter, this son of Derby and Belmont runnerup, Aptitude '00, figures to relish the distance but also to be far back early. Has a tendency to get caught in traffic and in the Blue Grass was forced to check sharply mid-stretch. Owned by J. Paul "just lost another loan to Ditech" Reddam and trained by top Californian Doug O'Neill, he will be piloted by Corey Nakatani. The latter, though only 35, is 0 for 11 in this one. If the hunter can avoid being the hunted, he could make it very interesting late in the running.

OUR PICK:

Thoroughbred horse racing is a pure meritocracy once the minimal requirements of breed certification have been met. That said, we have always weighed pedigree heavily in our Derby analysis simply because it works.

In the hopes that there may be a first time reader or two out there, we remind you that this letter seeks a value bet not necessarily the most likely winner. We would name Street Sense if that were the case. But unless he goes off at 5/1 or better, which is highly unlikely, we are looking elsewhere.

The sire of our pick, the recently deceased Danzig, will be remembered as Northern Dancer's most influential son having produced 192 stakes winners and 10 champions. The dam of our pick, Turkish Tryst is a daughter of Alydar's son, Turkoman and offers a peek into a beautiful Darby Dan foundation family developed by the late John Galbreath. That industrialist and sportsman was owner of the Pittsburgh Pirates, one English Derby and 2 Kentucky Derby winners. Third dam, Luiana, was not only a sister of Derby winner and champion Chateaugay and champion Primonetta, she produced Preakness and Belmont winner, Little Current. Additionally Luiana produced Water Dance, Prayers 'N Promises, and our pick's second dam, Darbyvail by Roberto.

Normally you would expect this pedigree to produce the deep closer type but our pick has exhibited a handy ability to quicken whenever asked. Our trainer, Larry Jones, is a Derby newbie but trained Grade I winner, Island Sand. Our rider is 46 year old Derby rookie, Mario Pino. Mario is a perennial leader on the Mid-Atlantic circuit. Patience is crucial in the Derby and his ability to wait patiently in turf contests has produced a betting angle known as "Pino on the green-o."

Since our pick's last start winning the Lane's End in March, he had slipped somewhat from notice until blowing by his Grade I winning filly workmate, Wildcat Bettie B., in a 5/8 mile work at Churchill this Monday. Eyes popped when the clockers caught him in 57 3/5 seconds. Was this too much too fast so close to the race as many observers think? Our vote is no. Our pick has a history of bullet works and has recovered well from this one.

We are certainly assured of double digit odds with this year's pick. There will be a slight change in the betting angle since the Derby is on dirt not grass. Instead of "Pino on the green-o," how about "Pino with the green-o?" We know this year's edition will be hard won-let's hope it is also **HARD SPUN!**

THE BET- Time to put your gamble on, my brothers and sisters. We will bet Hard Spun to win and place. We will box a serious exacta with Street Sense and Hard Spun. Our moonshot-longshot will be Liquidity which we will bet across the board. Throw in Great Hunter for tris and superfectas.