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*If thou hast run with the footmen, and they have wearied thee, then how canst thou contend with horses?*

Jeremiah 12:5

Revisionist examination of boxing history has recently called into question the bona fides of the perfect won-lost record of no less than Rocky Marciano. The questioning does not involve the actuality of his forty nine wins (forty three by knockouts) and no losses but rather the quality of those wins. Criticism centers on his winning the title from an aged Jersey Joe Walcott and his six title defenses compared to Joe Louis' record twenty five.

Four of the Rock's six title defenses were against accomplished fighters Ezzard Charles (twice), Don Cockell, and the legendary Archie Moore. But all of those opponents were natural light heavies who put on useless pounds in those pre-steroid days to access the richer paydays in the heavyweight division.

One of Marciano's other title defenses was against Roland La Starza, an opponent he had faced on his way to the title when both were undefeated aspirants. In that earlier bout, the heavily favored Rock prevailed in a split decision that was roundly booed by the fans and derided in the press. That's how close a perfect record often comes to negation.

Or in the sport under topic here, consider the otherwise invincible Man o' War whose twenty wins from twenty one starts was marred by a narrow loss to the appropriately named Upset.

The foregoing vignettes came to mind while reflecting on the record of the recently retired race horse Zenyatta. That magnificent mare came within a short head of leaving the competitive realm of the sport with a perfect won-lost record. Her cyclonic close down the Churchill Downs stretch last fall in the Breeders' Cup Classic just missed catching the estimable Blame in the final start for both.

In the byzantine world of professional boxing, promoters determine a fighter's opposition in consort with the handlers of the pugilist. In horse racing, the opposition is determined by connections that weigh the risk/reward of the race's conditions before entering.

Every owner of a racehorse craves a win or placing in a graded stakes race, the sport's highest level. Not only are graded stakes the most lucrative but their prestige enhances a horse's pedigree and thereby the commercial value of the individual and the progeny.

Competitors in such contests are required to contribute monetary “stakes” that are added to the purse distribution post race to the winner and his closest pursuers (typically second through fourth).

Long suffering and loyal readers of this Derby screed may recall our stumbling on a giant payday in 2005 when we suggested a moon shot play on Giacomo. The \$102.80 win mutuel (second highest in Derby history) assured a connection of spiritual force not only to the colt but also to his owners (Jerry and Ann Moss), his trainer (John Shirreffs), and his rider (Mike Smith).

Jerry Moss was the “M” of A&M Records, a company he operated jointly with Herb Alpert, the “A”, of Tijuana Brass fame. Among the label’s greatest artistic successes were Sting and his group, The Police. Giacomo, the horse, was named after Sting’s son of the same name.

From the day of Derby 2005 forward, whenever scrutinizing the race cards, the appearance of that winning triumvirate in the past performances fashioned a wagering Holy Trinity that transcended cold handicapping logic. In other words, bets of the heart not the head.

The Moss’s public demeanor gives no hint of the glitzy world whence their wealth flows never failing to follow by-the-book sportsmanship, win or lose.

The sixty six year old trainer could have played Seabiscuit’s trainer, Tom Smith, as well as Chris Cooper did simply by being himself. John Shirreffs is a man whose comfort level with horses clearly exceeds the level he feels with humans. He prefers to be excluded from win photos and always watches his horses race while positioning himself with the railbirds. His responses to interview questions are brief sentences comprised of one syllable words usually yes or no.

Mike Smith is the son of a jockey whose choirboy appearance is backed up by professional conduct that has earned him numerous awards from his peers and the industry. Now fifty one, he has opted for a shaved head in lieu of a comb over fashioning an appearance that would fit well with a saffron robe.

And so it came to pass that a week before Thanksgiving in 2007, we noticed a Moss-Shirreffs first time starter at Hollywood Park. The three-year-old filly named Zenyatta was quoted at 5/1. The late developing daughter of Street Cry, sire of that year's Derby winner Street Sense, possessed a pedigree and physicality that suggested a "longer the better" racing style. Her height at the withers alone (17 ½ hands equating to about 5'9") suggested that the 6 ½ furlong maiden heat would be a tightener for a later two turn effort. As a reference point, Zenyatta's height would place her three inches above Secretariat and five inches above Ruffian.

This aging rocker, with an inner smile, immediately recognized the Sting association with the horse's name recalling the memorable Police album "Zenyatta Mondatta." Sensing that there was scant evidence that Zenyatta would begin her career with a victory, we made only a modest wager on her to win.

What followed would become the prototypical Zenyatta performance that she repeated with minor deviation over her twenty race career. This triggered an immediate *coup de foudre* that preserved an entranced state for this observer throughout every step of her competitive endeavor.

Breaking dead last in a twelve horse field, she was still tenth at the half mile pole and then began that trademark move of picking off rivals one by one before that final acceleration in deep stretch. The chart had her 3 ½ lengths to the good at the wire. Vic Stauffer on the call:

*And the trailer is Zenyatta...Zenyatta is closing nicely in the middle of the track...and you better take a look at Zenyatta.*

Next was a non-winners of two at Hollywood at a mile and 1/16. The public was wise and sent her off a 6/5 fave. Stauffer again:

*And Zenyatta is making a mockery of this field. Here's a future superstar... Zenyatta.*

David Flores was aboard for those first two starts that would comprise her three-year-old resume as well as for her first of 2008, a convincing score in the Grade II El Encino at Santa Anita. Trevor Denman on the call:

*And Zenyatta, just an amazing coverage of ground- she just covers so much ground with her bounding stride.*

Mike Smith would be up for all of her remaining seventeen starts, each of which would be Grade I or Grade II Stakes. For the entirety of 2008, Zenyatta would enjoy seven wins from seven starts (four Grade I's and three Grade II's) including the Breeders' Cup Distaff; at the conclusion of which Denman exclaimed:

*Undoubtedly now, a living legend.*

Contemporaneous with Zenyatta's perfect 2008, a promising two-year-old filly named Rachel Alexandra was putting the wraps on her year with a convincing win in the Grade II Golden Rod Stakes at Churchill Downs.

Though they would never oppose on the track, their mutually eye-popping perfection in 2009 would create a rivalry in the press and fandom of racing not seen since Alydar and Affirmed.

For her part, Rachel was eight for eight in her three-year-old session, the last five of which were Grade I Stakes. Her dominant victory margins against fillies of her generation (twenty lengths in the Kentucky Oaks and nineteen lengths in the Mother Goose) seemed like footnotes to her Preakness and Haskell wins over colts. Her season concluded with the Woodward at Saratoga where she defeated older males.

Those performances would win her not only a three-year-old filly championship but also Horse of the Year honors.

But while Rachel was strutting in the Eastern Time Zone, Zenyatta was doing the same in the Pacific. Off until May following her Breeders' Cup Distaff, Zenyatta warmed up with two Hollywood Park wins (Grade II Milady and Grade I Vanity). Zenyatta then took the Grade I Clement Hirsch at Del Mar the same day as Rachel's Haskell. And a month after Rachel's Woodward, Zenyatta added the Grade-I Lady's Secret to her resume.

Had the racing year ended with the Woodward, even this Zenyattaphile would have been hard-pressed to deny the Horse of the Year honors to Rachel Alexandra. But the most important date of that year's thoroughbred calendar remained: the Breeders' Cup on November 7 at Santa Anita.

There should have been an announcement: “Gentlemen, start your engines.” Or to borrow from Thayer’s *Casey at the Bat*, “there came a muffled roar” that became less muffled with each passing day.

Rachel Alexandra’s connections declared her season complete disdaining any interest in taking her off of her customary dirt tracks in favor of Santa Anita’s synthetic surface. Even an offer of a one million dollar supplement to the already five million dollar Classic purse by Breeders’ Cup could not move Rachel’s handlers.

Given that Rachel’s only start on a synthetic was a facile three length win at Keeneland, some (including this observer) suspected the Rachels of ducking Zenyatta and the daunting mile and ¼ route. The Rachel defenders countered she had done enough, that Santa Anita provided an unfair advantage to Zenyatta, who from their perspective was just a synthetic surface freak.

While it was true that seven of her eight career starts had been on California synthetics, Zenyatta’s lone dirt appearance (Grade-I Apple Blossom at Oaklawn) produced a dominating 4 ½ length margin that marked the last time she would fail to go to the post as betting favorite.

Had the Zenyattas opted for a Distaff repeat on Breeders’ Cup Day, she likely would have been favored at five cents on the dollar, the minimum legal payout. Instead the team chose the Breeders’ Cup Classic at a mile and 1/4 where the winner’s circle had been a male preserve every year since its 1984 inception.

Lined up against eleven of the best older males in quest of the winner’s share of the five million dollar purse, Zenyatta was Zenyatta. Trevor Denman:

*The field sent on their way to the roar of the Santa Anita crowd.... Regal Ransom bounced away quickly...Zenyatta is dead last...Zenyatta is dead last early...gotta be given them ten or eleven lengths start...now let’s see...Zenyatta has a lotta ground to make up...*

Turning into the stretch:

*Zenyatta if she wins this she'll be a super horse...Zenyatta's coming to the outside...this is un-buh-lievable...what a performance...one we'll never forget.*

In her wake were the winners of that year's Kentucky Derby (Mine that Bird) and Belmont (Summer Bird). The Preakness winner (Rachel Alexandra), as previously noted, was not present.

Both Rachel and Zenyatta had Hall of Fame years but only one could be Horse of the Year. When the ballots of eligible voters comprised of journalists and racing officials were counted, Rachel held a 130-99 advantage. The view here is that because all of Rachel's Grade I's were in the Eastern Time Zone, she benefitted from the geographic weighting of the ballot casters. But as the old saying goes, the decision of the judges is final.

Reflecting on the racing year, Zenyatta memories crowded out every other thought. Her pre-race paddock dances and post parade prancing, her daily measure of Guinness, those tardy breaks from the gate and early dawdling, and of course the whirlwind finishes. The adulation of her fans, many of whom cared for or knew of no other horse, fostered a brief hope of arresting the sport's declining interest.

Anticipating her retirement to a life of motherhood, there was contentment joined with regret. No more worries of failed rallies or catastrophic injury were counterbalanced by the loss of watching her do the seemingly impossible.

Not surprisingly then a feeling of intense ambivalence accompanied the announcement that she would be returned to training in 2010. Anticipation that the long-awaited matchup with Rachel remained a possibility was a clear plus counterbalanced by haunting flashbacks of Ruffian and Eight Belles.

The matchup possibility was short lived when Rachel returned for her four-year-old year with a pair of second place finishes as odds on favorite. Even an offer by Oaklawn Park to raise the Apple Blossom purse from \$500,000 to \$5,000,000, if both ladies showed, could not sway Rachel's handlers to oppose Zenyatta.

Though Rachel bounced back with a couple of wins to complete her career, her connections wisely called it a day prior to the 2010 Breeders' Cup.

For her part Zenyatta, enjoying similar betting favoritism, trounced overmatched fields in the Grade-I Santa Margarita and Grade-I Apple Blossom (again) earning chart comments that read “inhaled foe” and “sweeping move” respectively.

A high degree of angst set in here as she sought to repeat her prior year’s final set up for the Breeders’ Cup with the same trio of Grade I’s (Vanity, Clement Hirsch, and Lady’s Secret). While she got the job done in each (“up late”, “gamely,” “up late” were the chart note summaries), she left herself a lot of work in narrow margins of victory that suggested the grand lady might have lost a step.

If true, the timing would not be fortuitous for her career finale in the Breeders’ Cup Classic. Lying ahead was a race against the year’s most accomplished males on a dirt track and a road trip to an unfamiliar venue, Churchill Downs. Nothing but Zenyatta’s best would do. And maybe even that might not get it done.

As one who seldom watches a horse race without a wagering interest, this writer was spellbound by Zenyatta’s nineteen consecutive wins, only three of which contained a betting outcome of personal relevance. That number was about to rise to four.

An enthralled public had made Zenyatta a huge underlay at even money so the only wagers that held economic and emotional appeal were exactas with Zenyatta over Blame and Zenyatta over Lookin At Lucky. Blame was the best in the older male division and Lucky stood above the 2010 class of three-year-olds.

Despite the overwhelming feeling of looming disappointment, there was also something providential about Trevor Denman’s assignment to call the race. As the voice of Santa Anita and Del Mar, Denman had created the audio frame in ten of Zenyatta’s nineteen wins. Just maybe he might do it again.

At the start:

*There’s the roar from the Churchill Downs crowd as the field is sent on their way and Zenyatta is dead last. Zenyatta was slow into stride.*



At the  $\frac{3}{4}$  pole:

*Mike Smith is asking her to pick it up. At this stage, Zenyatta's gotta be a good eighteen to twenty lengths behind the leader.*

At the  $\frac{1}{4}$  pole:

*And Zenyatta is last. Mike Smith is trying to find somewhere to run. Zenyatta is now hooking to the grandstand side and Zenyatta is now coming with her run.*

Midway the stretch:

*Looking At Lucky, Blame...Blame gets the lead...Zenyatta, Zenyatta, Zenyatta is flying...Blame and Zenyatta...Zen-yat-ta...Buh-lame has won it a head... Zenyatta ran her heart out but had to settle for second.*

At a post race press conference, a weeping Mike Smith said "I left her too much to do. I truly believe I was on the best horse today...she's my everything...she's just amazing...it hurts more than I can explain just because it was my fault, not hers."

In fairness to Smith, though he had executed a less than perfect ride, Zenyatta had always done her best when left to her own good time. On this occasion, that was a beat too long.

No Marciano split decision for Zenyatta could keep the streak intact. In horse racing, absent an inquiry, the photo at the wire renders the final result.

The first thought here was not of a losing bet that almost won- nothing new there. Nor was it a feeling of disappointment for Zenyatta. The first sensation was one of relief to see her galloping out strongly knowing she would retire sound. The next Budweiser tasted just fine.

In the aftermath of the race, once again a Horse of the Year discussion rose to the forefront. A mare of high accomplishment, Goldikova, deserved consideration but apart from her astounding three consecutive Breeders'

Cup Mile wins, she was a Euro-runner and off the American racing grid. So the voting would be Blame vs. Zenyatta with Goldikova essentially a third party candidate.

Each had but one loss in 2010. Blame had been upset by the speedy Haynesfield in the Grade-I Jockey Club Gold Cup just before the Classic where he would finish a distant eleventh. For her part Goldikova's lone loss had come on a boggy Deauville course in Normandy.

The margin of a head prevented Zenyatta being name HOY by virtual acclamation. But the head mattered and Blame owned the BC Classic. Of course Zenyatta had been denied in 2009 despite the same accomplishment. Sentiment certainly played a part when the voting went to Zenyatta 128-102-5. And certainly there was a lifetime achievement aspect as well. Still the result was right.

It's all history now and both Blame and Zenyatta have moved on to what will hopefully be accomplished reproductive careers. The presence of Roberto's son, Kris S., so close up in both of their pedigrees (paternal grandsire of Blame-maternal grandsire of Zenyatta) make a liaison highly unlikely.

Zenyatta was bred this season to the hot young sire, Bernardini, but unfortunately miscarried (slipped in equine vet terms). She has since been bred to him again and we await the results hopefully.

In her three years of competition, never was there a race where she failed to show- literally or figuratively; never a race day when she exhibited anything short of pure exultation in being where she was and doing what she was doing. We can now only hope she fulfills her quest of motherhood and that somehow she passes on her generous traits and talent to her offspring.

In preserving Zenyatta's magical presence in the mind's eye, a phrase spoken by the unjaded barmaid, Pegeen Mike, in Irish playwright John Millington Synge's *The Playboy of the Western World* fits well. Says she: "Well, the heart's a wonder."

## THIS YEAR'S RACE:

*Fuga Mundi* (loosely translated from the Latin as “flight from the world”) is a term often applied to early Christian monasticism. The term also applied equally to your editor’s feeling after watching our pick, Sidney’s Candy, lead the Derby herd all too briefly last year. After falling for a son of Candy Ride two years in a row, we identified with Angelo Maggio, the character played by Frank Sinatra in the film adaption of James Jones’ novel *From Here to Eternity*, who said: “Snake eyes. That’s the story of my life.”

Of course we do not view snake eyes in the fashion of Maggio. We always hold out hope for that *ee-oh-leven* cry from the dealer at the craps table. But getting to this year’s Derby winner will be more like rolling a hard ten. So don’t expect John the Revelator to be hiding in this prolix commentary. Remember our Derby letter is a non-prophet operation.

This year’s Derby might well be called the Outback Derby owing to that steak chain’s slogan “No Rules.” With only the Florida Derby producing a short-priced winner (Dialed In), we are left with a plethora of beaten favorites and double digit winning long shots on the Road to Louisville. To get to this year’s winner, we will need a Road to Damascus moment and Pauline insight.

## SORRY CHARLIE:

As much as we respect Indian Charlie’s ability as a sire of race horses, like Dad they possess distance limitations that make success in the Derby a reach. In the 1998 Santa Anita Derby at a mile 1/8 won by I.C., stable mate Real Quiet finished second but blew by the winner in the gallop out. On Derby day, the roles reversed as Chuck found the extra eighth too daunting and RQ got the roses much to the joy of readers of this letter.

So we are taking a stance: no Charlie Horses in our Derby picks (or hopefully in our legs). That means no Uncle Mo and that includes a son of Bwana Charlie (Comma to the Top) with a similar profile.

## THE ENTRIES:

**ARACHARCHARCH-** If he follows his running pattern of loss/win-loss/win-loss/win, you will have a problem as he is coming off an impressive W in the Arkansas Derby. Sire, Arch, contributes plenty of staying power. Old timer trainer Jinks Fires and son-in-law jock Jon Court have kept Archie on schedule: a race a month for the last six. Now they have to keep him out of traffic jams. If they don't his backers will have a case of fallen arches and be caught flatfooted. Definitely a threatthreat.

**BRILLIANT SPEED-** Same sire (Dynaformer) as beloved 2006 Derby winner Barbaro. Has received no respect for his rousing Blue Grass win due to the synthetic surface. Would probably be better named Adequate or Above Average Speed but tons of stamina in this pedigree. Have to respect trainer-jockey combo of Albertrani and Rosario. Colt is homebred product of a Campbell Soup heir and is no tomato can. Mmm good.

**TWICE THE APPEAL-** Running style negates his sire's profile which is max speed up to a mile. Upset winner of the Sunland Derby at a mile and 1/8 would seem unlikely to get the Derby distance but broodmare sire (Cormorant) was a stayer. He picks up Calvin Borel in the driver's seat which from an odds standpoint will result in half the appeal.

**STAY THIRSTY-** Junior partner to Uncle Mo runs as a separate betting interest. From first crop of young sire sensation Bernardini, his Gotham effort held high promise until Pletcher violated the "if it ain't broke" rule by adding blinkers in the Florida Derby in which S.T. staggered home hopelessly. Owner Repole flipped Glaceau Vitamin Water to Coca Cola for big bucks. Hopefully he saved a few bottles for this guy. Ditching the shades will help and pedigree says he will stay but demand a big price before quaffing.

**DECISIVE MOMENT-** Couldn't hold off Animal in the Spiral but fought hard to the end. Fifty-two year old Cajun rider, Kerwin Clark, gets what is likely his only Derby shot. Almost certain to vie for the lead but the long Churchill stretch may present a decisive moment that will not be welcomed by his backers.

**COMMA TO THE TOP-** Definitely the winner of Joe Six Pack Award in this year's field with twelve lifetime starts. After graduating from maiden

claiming ranks, this modestly bred gelding ran off a six race win streak to close out this two-year-old season with an exclamation point. Lost no respect in getting nailed at the wire in the Santa Anita Derby. Likely pacesetter with Pat Valenzuela picking up the mount as Nakitani opts for Nehro. Tough guy but likely to come to full stop before the wire.

**PANTS ON FIRE-** Upset winner of the Louisiana Derby produced our only Derby prep winning ticket. Displayed plenty of fight holding off favored Mucho Macho Man and fast closing Nehro. Pedigree says mile and ¼ is achievable but needs to improve to ignite our interest. Lady jock, Rosie Napravnik, has been on fire herself winning the riding title over all the boys at the recent Fair Grounds meet. Rosie may wear the pants in the family again.

**DIALED IN-** The likely favorite comes from the barn of repeat Derby winner Nick Zito and has a running style and pedigree that fit the distance. Hot riding Julian Leparoux has been up every step of the way. He may begin in another area code but is capable of making up a long distance quickly. Final prep was the Florida Derby win and workload since has been light raising soundness questions. Will need a clean trip or you could have the wrong number.

**DERBY KITTEN-** This cat looked misnamed until the late withdrawal of Wood winner, Toby's Corner. Draws in as #21 on eligible list after convincing win in the Coolmore Lexington Stakes at Keeneland. Another with grass pedigree (sire Kitten's Joy was runner-up in BC Turf) although broodmare sire, Menifee, missed by a head in his Derby. Nice colt but have a feline that Derby is the wrong spot.

**TWINSPIRED-** Great name for this contestant. Lost a heartbreaking photo in the Blue Grass after opening up daylight on the field mid-stretch. Has plenty of route foundation and pedigree does not deny him. Big question is surface as only dirt start was a disaster. Picks up Mike Smith as partner which is likely to inspire and is a clear plus toward a Twin win.

**MASTER OF HOUNDS-** Beautifully bred son of Kingmambo out of a Sadler's Wells mare can match pedigree with any of these. Beaten favorite in last year's BC Juvenile Turf after walking out of the gate. His only start since was a head-bob loss to sensational filly, Khawlah, in the UAE Derby at a mile and 3/16. Another with no proven dirt form as UAE effort was on

synthetic. Irish trainer O' Brien is 0 for 2 in Kentucky Derbies but has numerous Breeders Cup and major Euro trophies. Some say this year's field has gone to the dogs. If so, the Master is your man.

SANTIVA- This is what Ole Rummy would call a "known unknown." Broke his maiden in the G-II Jockey Club last fall at Churchill and finished second to MMM at Fair Grounds in the Risen Star. Passed on the La and Ark Derbies for the Blue Grass where he finished a bothered and battered ninth as the betting favorite on the synthetic. Pedigree fits fine. Trainer Kenneally and rider Bridgmohan highly capable if not household names. Will probably run better than his almost certain long odds.

MUCHO MACHO MAN- The beaten favorite in the Louisiana Derby lived up to his name by finishing a game third absent a right front shoe. None the worse for it, MMM has trained intensely since. Pedigree for the distance is a close call but stalking style should give him a big shot. *Senor Macho* will need *mucho suerte* to get *las rosetas*.

SHACKLEFORD- Just missed holding off Dialed In's closing move in the Florida Derby so extra furlong in the Derby probably not a plus. Sire, Forestry, gets mostly mile and under performers but Shack picks up stamina influence in broodmare sire, Unbridled. Clever handler Romans will train him to the moment. Should get plenty of calls early on but likely to shackle your shekels in the end.

MIDNIGHT INTERLUDE- Baffert trainee came off of a maiden win to take the Santa Anita Derby with a powerful stretch move and is training well at Churchill. Key number here is 1882- the last time a Derby was won by a horse that did not race at two. But under the "no rules format," *quien sabe?* Still a maiden race-Santa Anita Derby-Kentucky Derby triple is a lot to ask of a young horse even one under Bobby's tutelage. We think the clock may well strike twelve for M.I. in the late stages of the Derby.

ANIMAL KINGDOM- Winner of the Spiral Stakes on synthetic surface at Turfway has only one dirt start to judge. His pedigree does cry out for distance. His sire, Leroidesanimaux (King of the Beasts *en francais*) and his female family are all grassers but colt has had a good work over the Churchill strip. Owner Team Valor just missed with Captain Bodgit in '97 Derby. Lion King or Lyin' King? Tough call but almost sure to be passing horses late.

**SOLDAT-** Although his name is the French word for soldier (properly pronounced sol-dah), you will only hear his name pronounced to rhyme with Who Dat. He appeared to be marching on his way to a short price in the Derby until misfiring badly in the Florida Derby as favorite. Sire (War Front) has sent his first crop out firing but soldier boy appears to prefer turf to dirt. May not be the ultimate doughboy but he will be tough in the trenches.

**UNCLE MO-** Was headed for certain favoritism after his BC Juvenile romp and effortless three-year-old bow at Gulfstream. Finished a disappointing third to Toby in the Wood at 1/10 after which he was found to have a gastro-intestinal infection. Has trained well since and is certain to be well-backed. In fact owner Repole says if Mo is not the favorite, he will make him the favorite. Nice. Even if Unc has his Mo back, he will need every bit of it to stretch out to a mile and  $\frac{1}{4}$ .

**NEHRO-** Almost certainly this year's wise guy horse and deservedly so. After following a maiden win with fast closing just misses in the Louisiana and Arkansas Derbies. Same sire as favorite Dialed In and figures to relish the added furlong of the Derby. Time was the La-Ark Derby route was routine as a path to Louisville but minimalist convention now disdains a three races in six weeks schedule. Nehro won't fiddle in the Derby but he could bounce.

**WATCH ME GO-** Another blue-collar entry that might be the longest price when the gates open. Shocked at 43-1 in the Tampa Derby then was nowhere as favorite in a weak Illinois Derby field. Even a return to Tampa form is unlikely to get this guy in the frame.

## **WARNING:**

**This letter has proven in clinical trials to be a useful tool for handicappers of the Kentucky Derby. Side effects vary widely based on the outcome of the race . If inaccurate (the usual case) side effects may include heart palpitations, night sweats, diminished self-respect, fears of financial ruin, alcohol dependency, and spousal abuse.**

**In the unlikely event that the forecast is accurate, side effects may include illusions of self-importance, feelings of invincibility, and intermittent euphoria. Betting another race will usually cause these symptoms to recede. If symptoms persist for more than three races, contact your physician immediately.**

## **OUR PICK:**

The recently published George Washington biography by Ron Chernow ranks with McCullough's Truman and Boswell's Johnson at the top of our list in that category. Chernow recounts the libelous attacks that were leveled at the poor general by elements of the Jeffersonians for his attachment to Alexander Hamilton. The father of our country was the fodder of our country in the radical press as they accused him of many perfidious acts including participation in (gasp!) horse racing. To his credit, George never foreswore his attachment to the sport and neither will we.

As usual we begin our prognostication with a minority view: the Louisiana Derby field this year was equal to or superior to any other Derby prep race. We reached this conclusion, not on Beyer Speed Figures but on visual impressions as well as subsequent efforts by runner-up Nehro (just missed in the Arkansas Derby) and fifth place finisher Machen (impressive winner of the Derby Trial). The three top finishers in the Louisiana Derby (Pants on Fire, Nehro, and Mucho Macho Man) can all make legitimate claims in Louisville. In the end, we made our selection on a combination of foundation, pedigree, ability, and toughness.



Seven of our pick's eight lifetime starts have been around two turns including all four starts at three. His sire, Jump Start by A.P. Indy, has sired multiple routers including Rail Trip, winner of the Hollywood Gold Cup at the Derby distance. His dam is from the family of Horse of the Year St. Liam. He boasts the blood of Key to the Mint, Secretariat, Seattle Slew, Buckpasser, and Mr. Prospector on both sides of his family.

In the first of the La. Derby preps, the G-III Lecomte, our guy made all the running before being headed at the wire. In the next leg, the G-II Risen Star, he made a sweeping move five wide from mid-pack on the turn, giving every indication of winning potential, that he failed to sustain finishing sixth. Subsequently diagnosed with a lung infection and ringworm, he had only one work between that race and the La. Derby.

The more we watch his La. Derby, the more we like it. We acknowledge he benefitted from a friendly stalking trip behind the pace setter but he was plain tough when challenged first on the outside by MMM and then on the inside by Nehro. This marked an uptick in his ability to hold on late and notably at added distance.

Gainsayers will point to his six week gap between New Orleans and Louisville to which we would point out that his big La. Derby effort came after a five week gap while battling illness.

Another negative would be that only two horses have completed a La-Ky Derby double: Black Gold (1924) and Grindstone (1996). Outback Derby, remember?

We picture our pick placed somewhere between fifth and tenth in the early going. Our hope is that he will get early mover advantage and a Jump Start (couldn't resist) in the money part of the race. Then we'll find out whether his foundation, pedigree, ability, and toughness can withhold those late closers (and they will be in abundance). If you are feeling heat in your knickers, that's because this year's Derby winner is:

**PANTS ON FIRE!!**

**LONGSHOT SPECIAL-** Although we expect odds of 15/1 or more on POF, we always look for an ultra price play in addition to our regular pick and this year it is SANTIVA. Though based at Fair Grounds over the winter, connections passed on the La. Derby in spite of the colt's game second in the Risen Star to MMM. Sent off as favorite in the Blue Grass, this smallish colt was stuck in a pocket on the rail the whole trip. We are willing to throw out that race. This son of Giant's Causeway should welcome a return to dirt and the added distance as well. Price should be huge.

#### **THE BET-**

We will bet POF to win and place. We will bet SANTIVA across the board. As wide open as this Derby is, the payoff in exotics could be mammoth. We will make exacta box an all Big Easy play POF-SANTIVA and MUCHO MACHO MAN.