

RICE'S DERBY CHOICE JOURNAL

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22th Edition

Mycroft Holmes' more famous brother would have called it "quite a three pipe problem." We call it the annual challenge: finding a bettable non-favorite in the Derby. Our problem is not the one that Mycroft's brother Sherlock faced in the Scandal in Bohemia: "I have no data. It is a capital mistake to theorize before one has data." We are eyeball high in data and we have theorized to the point of dementia. But for the second year in a row, we are faced with a very deserving favorite. Trying to build a case against POINT GIVEN is a little like being appointed to the Devil's Advocacy opposing the canonization of Mother Theresa. Popular though the colt is, POINT GIVEN is, for our purposes, Dr. Moriarty and must be defeated. We don't possess the ability to see around corners, but like Sherlock Holmes (in Conan-Doyle's Silver Blaze), we are taken by "the dog that didn't bark in the night." This is a deep field and if the POINT doesn't fire or gets blocked, several can take it. But what if he runs his race? There, indeed, is the rub. We think if our pick runs his best, it could be better than POINT GIVEN's best. So let's be about our task and review the field listed in order of post position and program number. Since all horses will run as separate betting interests (no entries, no field), post and program numbers are the same.

#1- SONGANDAPRAYER- By '96 Derby favorite Unbridled Song, ex-NBA star Bobby Hurley forked over \$1 million dollars last year to bring this guy home. First Derby try for trainer Dowd. Regular rider, Prado, opts to ride THUNDER BLITZ so colt will reunite with Aaron Gryder who won a stakes on him last year. Very athletic and very speedy, he ran his heart out to be second in the Blue Grass. This colt is a Grade I type at lesser distances and should be pointed to the Preakness. For him to win the Derby will require a songandaprayerandamiracle.

#2- MILLENIUM WIND- by Cryptoclearance, best known for siring '98 runner-up and Belmont winner Victory Gallop. His dam, Bali Babe is also the mom of '99 Derby winner, Charismatic. No wonder he brought \$1.2 million as a yearling. Apparently named for the previous White House occupant, he was a competitive second to POINT GIVEN in the Hollywood Futurity. Has been bothered by foot problems that surfaced in prep for his second place finish in the Louisiana Derby. Made all the running in the Blue Grass but can rate as well. Trainer Hofmans a Derby rookie but nailed the Breeders Cup Classic with Alphabet Soup in '96 over the great Cigar and the Belmont with Touch Gold in '97. Laffit Pincay rides. 'Nuff said.

#3- BALTO STAR- By sprint-sire, Glitterman, this gelding at least has some stamina influences on his dam's side (Halo and Stage Door Johnny). Never headed and hardly used in the Spiral Stakes and Arkansas Derby, conjures memories of frontrunners Spend a Buck, '85 and Winning Colors, '88. When we first heard of this horse, we thought his name was Balthazar, and if he carries his speed a mile and ¼ anyone who bets him will look like one of the Magi. Regardless of who his victims have been, this guy has not been asked to empty his tank yet so dismiss at your peril. Second trips for another ex-Lucas protégé, Todd Pletcher, as well as rider Mark Guidry. Presence of so much other speed in the race makes a front-running winner unlikely. Investors in dot-com stocks looking for an omen might like to know that last gelding to win the Derby was Clyde Van Dusen in '29.

#4-THUNDER BLITZ- By '94 Derby favorite Holy Bull, late developing colt took 4 tries to get maiden win, but was very impressive in winning the Flamingo in second lifetime win. Stable mate of sidelined Breeders' Cup Juvenile champ, Macho Uno (also by Holy Bull and also gray) has trained sensationally since arriving in Kentucky. First trip for trainer Joe Orseno and second for jock Edgar Prado though both are accomplished. Colt's dam is by Assert, winner of the English and French Derbies over 1½ mile so pedigree not a worry. Will be a very big price and is a very live play.

#5-FIFTY STARS- By Quiet American whose Real Quiet (picked here) won the '98 renewal, this guy slipped through on the rail to nail the Louisiana Derby. His rally in the Lone Star Derby fell a neck short on a speed-biased track. Trainer Steve (brother of rider Cash) Asmussen and rider Donnie Meche are Derby rookies but had huge meets this past winter at Fair Grounds. Another who should like more real estate but we will see a hundred stars if he takes it all.

#6- EXPRESS TOUR- By the useful Florida stallion, Tour D´Or, this colt dominated the Florida stallion series for 2-year-olds and was privately purchased (reportedly \$1.2 mill) by the Godolphin (Dubai) Stable. Ex- Dubai policeman (ethnic profiling is not an issue there since everyone has a black beard and a white burnoose) Saeed bin Suroor saddled the sixth and seventh place finishers last year. In his only start at 3, the colt came back to defeat mate, Street Cry, in the Dubai Derby. The latter was third in last year´s Breeders´ Cup Juvenile and was expected to be the stronger half of the entry but has ankle problems and will miss the Derby. EXPRESS has scorched the track in Kentucky and gets California vet David Flores as a partner. Big questions are pedigree and whether the colt will be as tight as needed with only 1 start at 3. He´ll have to be tighter than a camel´s ass in a sandstorm to win this one. The Tour de Flores could be a tour de force.

#7- ARCTIC BOY- By 2- year-old champ Maria´s Mon, connections blame his last place finish in the Arkansas Derby on the muddy track. Could be but can´t see any form to justify his presence here. Even a North Pole venue wouldn´t move him up.

#8- CONGAREE- By wonder horse Arazi, he is the second barrel in the Baffert arsenal. Went gate to wire in the Wood Memorial in just his fourth career start. Owned by the proprietor of the new Houston entry in the NFL, colt is named for the eponymous river in South Carolina. First trip to Derby for young riding sensation, Victor Espinoza. The colt has done nothing wrong but inexperience is a worry. Remember Stephen Got Even, Pulpit, and Indian Charlie? All of those wunderkind regressed in the Derby. Just can´t join this Conga Line.

#9- A.P. VALENTINE- By the champion A.P. Indy, his win over POINT GIVEN in the Champagne made him the better´s choice in the Breeders´ Cup Juvenile producing a Valentine´s Day Massacre for the chalk-eaters as he arrived home 14th and last. Set a track record at Hialeah before bombing again in the Blue Grass. Nick "Alibi" Zito has had an excuse at every dark turn and owner Coach Rick Pitino seconds every one of Nicky´s emotions. Top rider in Nakitani but he has not hit the board in 8 Derby tries. A.P. has some nice works in Louisville but just too inconsistent to get our support.

#10- DOLLAR BILL- By Canadian Champion, Peaks and Valleys, colt went off favored in the Louisiana Derby, which he was lucky to survive after clipping heels while going for a closing hole. Came from the rear in the Blue Grass to be a well-closing third. Should relish additional ground but wise-guy support may inhibit value as will Churchill favorite Pat Day. Second appearance for ex-Lucas assistant and New Orleans native, trainer Dallas Stewart ("This is war. We are here to kick ass."). Will pass a lot of horses in the stretch, but we´d rather book this Bill than bet on him.

#11-TALK IS MONEY- By the revered Deputy Minister, he was 19 lengths back of MONARCHOS in the Florida Derby and 10 lengths to the aft of THUNDER BLITZ in the Flamingo before running a game second in the Tesio at Pimlico. Apart from the fact that his connections were able to secure an idle Jerry Bailey to pilot (money is talking we think), there is no reason to think that a first half finish is likely.

#12-STARTAC- By the great grass sire Theatrical, we had this one on our watch list until a couple uninspiring efforts in Northern California prep races. A last minute addition for the widow of Allen Paulson (Cigar and others), at least gets the riding services of Alex Solis. Getting this one home first will be a greater fantasy than Star-Trek.

#13-INVISIBLE INK- Another son of Thunder Gulch, and Pletcher's second-teamer. No problem with rider Velasquez. Colt was third in the Florida Derby and fourth in the Blue Grass, but failed to seriously threaten in either. When his connections see the winning photo, they may rename the stable Invisible, Inc.

#14- KEATS- By bright young sire Hennessy, this colt seemed out of the Derby picture until a poetic front-running win in the last chance Derby prep (Lexington Stakes). Certainly figures to keep Balto Star busy on the front end. Trainer O'Callaghan and rider Melancon are having a good year together and both know the territory.

#15-JAMAICAN RUM- By relatively unknown sire Exemplary Leader, this colt is one of those one-paced plodders who never seem to get tired. Closed a lot of ground to be third to POINT GIVEN in the San Felipe and second to BALTO STAR in the Arkansas Derby. It was just this kind of horse that rider Eddie Delahoussaye brought home in 1982 (Gato Del Sol). A lot of the field will be coming back to this one in the lane. Race could set up late for a rum punch.

#16- MONARCHOS- By '95 2- year old champ, Maria's Mon, jumped from maiden ranks to win Florida Derby two starts later. Sweeping move in that race launched him into favoritism in the Wood Memorial, where he closed willingly to be second, but no threat to the winner, CONGAREE. The quality of the Florida Derby field is now questionable as is that of the horses behind him in the Wood. Second Derby appearance for veteran trainer John T. Ward who said he didn't want too tough of an effort in the Wood. However, top N.Y. rider, Jorge "Chop Chop" Chavez lived up to his nickname by making Monarchos work hard every step of the last $\frac{3}{4}$ mile. Has trained well over the Churchill strip, but our work says he won't hit the board though he could be second or third choice in the betting.

#17- POINT GIVEN- By 1995 Derby winner and sizzling sire Thunder Gulch, his favoritism is certainly a point taken. What is there not to like? Since his cyclonic close fell a head short in the Breeders' Cup Juvenile, he has been a dominator in California. In the Santa Anita Derby, he looked as though he was just reaching cruising altitude at the end of the mile and an eighth. Trainer Bob Baffert won the Derby in '97 and '98, and his rider Gary Stephens won the Derby in '88, '95, and '97. Seems fine with the Churchill surface and looks grand. In a field this size and a likely price below 2/1, opportunity for

us is elsewhere.

OUR PICK-

"They have sown the wind, and they shall reap the whirlwind." (Hosea 8:7)

Over the years of this letter, we have had good luck with also-rans in the Blue Grass Stakes, frequently the deepest of the late Derby preps. Gato Del Sol, Unbridled, and Sea Hero (all picked here) as well as Thunder Gulch each took the roses after being well behind the winner in the Blue Grass. Keeneland's surface is notorious for inhibiting closers and favoring speed horses which is contradictory to the usual Derby environment. Secrets are not kept forever in the world of handicapping and consequently turf wisdom now dismisses Blue Grass winners (last Blue Grass-Derby winner was Strike the Gold, '91) in favor of horses that "closed well" (e.g. DOLLAR BILL) in the race. This year, we think, that would be a mistake.

Our pick this year won in his first start last November at Hollywood Park. In his second start a month later; he lost the Grade I Hollywood Futurity by a short length to the more experienced POINT GIVEN. His 3-year-old debut was a victory in the Santa Catalina. Then it was on to New Orleans where he aggravated a cracked-heel problem and returned from one workout with his feet bleeding copiously. A skin fungus made him look more like some feral equine wanderer than a world-class thoroughbred. Still he managed a very respectable second in the Louisiana Derby while racing three wide the entire race. His trainer later acknowledged that the colt was but "80% fit" for the race. At about the same time, the trainer was having a recurrent dream in which our pick won the Triple Crown with Laffit Pincay riding. The only hitch was that the colt's regular rider was Chris McCarron and what sane man would take him off of a Derby contender? At this point the story gets a bit murkier, but one thing is factual: McCarron surrendered the mount voluntarily, apparently to ride the favorite in a major turf race in California the same day as the Blue Grass. So whom did the trainer call? In your dreams and his- Laffit! In our pick's last work before the Blue Grass, he worked so fast that there were whispers he has left his race there. Gossip was rampant about the feet, the fungus, and McCarron who "must know something." At race time, consensus held that Songandaprayer would seize the lead, but when he broke under restraint, the savvy Pincay put our pick on the front end and was never headed. Now came the naysayers: "He can thank Songandaprayer for that win," "Caught the golden Keeneland rail," "Beneficiary of the speed bias." Blah, blah, blah. For the record, the colt was 5 lengths clear of the highest quality field of any Derby prep. We would also note that in the 9 other races run at Keeneland that day, only one other was won with a gate to wire lead.

Since the short trip to Louisville, a lot of other horses have posted faster workouts, and our pick has been a bit overlooked except for his medical problems. But this colt is dead fit and does not need the screws tightened any further. It's MILLENIUM WIND!

THE PEDIGREE- M.W.'s sire, Cryptoclearance came from dead last to be fourth in the '87 Derby. His previous Derby starters have been Crypto Star (5th, '97 and Victory Gallop (2nd, '98). Now the good news (and bad news): his dam, Bali Babe, is also the dam of Charismatic (1st, '99). That's great except that the odds of a mare producing 2 Derby winners are incalculable. Bali Babe is by Drone (broodmare sire of Grindstone 1st, '96). He has the pedigree to get the distance, trust us.

THE TRAINER- David Hofmans is an accomplished veteran who spoiled Silver Charm's Triple Crown by winning the Belmont in '97 with Touch Gold. He also lined our pockets in the '96 Breeders' Cup Classic when his 20/1 chance Alphabet Soup nosed the great Cigar. First Derby but lots of experience in the Big Top.

THE JOCKEY- Readers of last year's letter know the esteem we have for Laffit Pincay, Jr. We closed a profile of him with the lament that he had not had a mount in the Derby since '94 and noted, "there is always next year." Well next year is here and at age 54, there is no other rider I would want if M.W. were in contention the last 1/16th of a mile. There has never and may never be a stronger finishing rider.

THE BET- Make a win bet on MILENNIUM WIND like you mean it. Make a win-place saver on EXPRESS TOUR. Hard to leave the favorite out of our business so we'll box exactas and trifectas with those two and POINT GIVEN.

GOOD LUCK!