

RICE'S DERBY CHOICE JOURNAL

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24th Edition

Toots Shor was once pressed into leaving his fight-crowd watering hole to watch a performance of Hamlet. Midway the performance, he leaned to his companion and said sotto voce: "I gotta be the only guy in the jernt that don't know how dis ting ends." We feel a little like Toots in that we have a favorite this year (Empire Maker) that even Hans Blix could find. His daddy (Unbridled) and his mama (Toussaud) were personal favorites of ours. His trainer is the white hot Bobby Frankel and his rider is the unequaled Jerry Bailey. So what will go wrong? Probably nothing. What could go wrong? Plenty. Thus begins our search for the chinks (not the SARS kind). So hang on dear readers. As Herbert Hoover famously promised in 1930: "Prosperity is just around the corner."

THE FIELD-

1- SUPAH BLITZ- If experience counts, this is your winner. Has 15 starts and Dad (Mecke) could route for sure. Would be a major, major surprise. Lone entry with a female rider (Rosemary Homeister, Jr). That is the right name folks; we just report. But don't forget world poker champ, Amarillo Slim, who warned that "All trappers don't wear fur hats."

2- BRANCUSI- Named for the Romanian sculptor, he is another son of Deputy Commander (Travers and Super Derby winner and second to Skip Away in the Breeders' Cup Classic). Guess he is a chip off the old block (ouch!). Maternal grandsire (Alysheba) got the roses in '87 over our pick Bet Twice. Showed promise at 2 and has hit the board in the San Felipe and Blue Grass. Same owner as '95 winner Thunder Gulch, but trainer and rider will be humming the Marseillaise not My Old Kentucky Home. Don't know of a first time frog angle. Last Derby work was on the grass at Keeneland (how French). We may not have seen his best yet. Allons l'enfant!

3- SIR CHEROKEE- Hard to get to a son of Cherokee Run at the Derby distance but he sure looked like a whirlwind closing in the Arkansas Derby. The other Cherokee Run (Kafwain) trained by Baffert has had second thoughts and will not go. Field in Hot Springs was suspect to be kind. Owner is World War II vet that settled in Guam and now owns it. Rookie Derby trainer-rider also a worry. Goodnight good knight.

4- ATSWHATIMTALKNBOUT- Mouthful of a name but a classic deep closer by the venerable A.P. Indy and out of a Red Ransom mare. They can't write a race too long for this guy but we think he has been rushed to make this date (no starts at 2 is a major concern; 120 consecutive winners have raced at 2). Stephen Spielberg and friends coughed up \$1 mill for a 10% bite after his impressive maiden win. Threw a clunker in the Santa Anita Derby but training well at Churchill. Trainer Ellis knows his biz but we are bothered by his walking around with blinkers in his hands sounding like the Prince of Denmark when asked if he plans to use them (last word he does). Notwhatweretalknbout.

5- PEACE RULES- Frankel's "other horse," we loved him in the Louisiana Derby where he ruled at 9-1. An unbetttable chalk in the Blue Grass, he was a punctual favorite. Pedigree buffs question his ability to get the Derby trip but he is inbred to Tom Rolfe (a great stamina influence) and he is from a Hold Your Peace mare. Figures to make all the early running and has the now rider in Edgar Prado. Don't know if Peace will Rule but he will certainly contend. Don't be fooled by that slow finishing quarter in the Blue Grass; this is a racehorse.

6- FUNNY CIDE- This is one gritty gelding. Made all the pace in the Louisiana Derby, lost the lead, and then came back late to be third. In the Wood, he dug deep to be only a ½ length back of Empire Maker though the latter was not under pressure. Son of Distorted Humor could be a bad joke for chalk players if he moves forward from his Wood effort.

7- OFFLEE WILD- Hmmmm. At first glance doesn't seem to belong. Smoked 'em in the Holy Bull then bounced in the Fountain of Youth after which illness compromised training. Distant third in the Blue Grass but blew by the winner in the gallop out after the race. Son of Wild Again should love the distance and the price will be offlee right for sure.

8- BUDDY GIL- The blue-collar horse and a stone runner. Simply does not like horses passing him...an admirable trait. Has reeled off 3 straight at big prices including most recently the Santa Anita Derby. As a gelding he carries the Clyde Van Dusen curse (the last gelding to win this race in 1929). His sire Eastern Echo was a blueblood but was exiled to Maryland after flopping at stud in Kentucky. Trainer Mullins scorched the recently concluded Santa Anita meet and rider Gary Stevens knows the way home in Louisville (3 Derby wins). The Buddy System is working. But Buddy is twice cursed as he carries the curse of Damascus, his grandsire, as well. Damascus, a superb racehorse and sire, was the beaten favorite in the '67 Derby. Since then no direct male descendant of his (and there have been plenty) has been able to win the Derby.

9- INDIAN EXPRESS- If Buddy is the blue-collar horse, this is the no collar horse. Utah-bred son of '98 beaten fave, Indian Charlie, the colt was knocked down for a paltry 4 grand and sent to Panama where he demolished the field in 2 starts. Purchased by Phil Chess (remember Chess Records? Chuck Berry? Fats Domino?) and moved to Baffert's barn, the injun lost the Santa Anita Derby by a dirty head in his second U.S. start. Lightly raced (4 lifetime starts), he is tough to figure but hard to throw out too. As Chuck would say: "C'est la vie say the old folks, you know you never can tell."

10- LONE STAR SKY- Last minute addition from barn of New Orleanian Tom Amoss sports a win over the course. Colt was credible in Louisiana Derby but disappointed in the Illinois Derby (especially since we bet him). This guy has a Derby with his name on it but it is in Dallas. Hate to dis a homie but this sky is the limit.

11-DOMESTIC DISPUTE- This son of Unbridled's Song was on our watch list but failed to progress in the Baffert barn. After being declared out of Derby contention, the colt was sold to new owners who decided to enter. Doubt Baffert would sell a Derby winner two weeks before the race. Those empty slots always seem to fill.

12- EMPIRE MAKER- On any consideration of form, this colt stands clear at the head of the class. We fell in love when we saw him break his maiden at Belmont lat October. Trainer Bobby Frankel fell in love when he saw the colt at age two weeks. He trained his remarkable dam Toussaud who has produced Chester House , Honest Lady, and Chiselling: all Grade 1 winners. Dad is the sainted Unbridled...nuff said on pedigree. As he has matured, the colt has become a

dominator and blinkers have improved his focus. Comes into the race in perfect form following a facile score in the Wood. Toussaud was an unruly gate horse and Empire is his mama's son. Temperament is the only flaw. Awfully hard to oppose but oppose we must; rules are rules- no favorites! And as Mrs. Loman exclaimed in Death of a Salesman: "Attention must be paid!"

13- EYE OF THE TIGER- Late addition following his second to Scrimshaw in the Lexington. Lots of respect for trainer Hollendorfer but race seems out of reach. We won't be baited by this tiger.

14- TEN CENTS A SHINE- Talented son of Devil His Due but has resisted all attempts at training by D. Wayne. Same owner as sidelined Badge of Silver who apparently is determined to have a starter in the Derby. As President Lincoln said of General McClellan: "He has a case of the slows."

15- OUTTA HERE- Last 2 starts at Delta Downs and Dubai. Huh? Outta here!

16- TEN MOST WANTED- Could end up one of the 2 most wanted by post time. Son of the hot young sire, Deputy Commander, this guy is trying to repeat the War Emblem parlay of Illinois and Kentucky. Credible connections in Dollase and Day but we are a little concerned that his popularity is based on a single race (Ill Derby) which notwithstanding last year has not been a reliable path to the roses. May still be at large come sundown on Saturday.

17- SCRIMSHAW- The name comes from the carvings made from whalebone. Same owner-trainer (Lewis-Lucas) as Charismatic ('99) which also won the Lexington in final Derby prep. Tries to become second son of Gulch (Thunder Gulch was first) to get the roses. Tough to throw out D. Wayne ever but colt will add an extra 3/16 of a mile to longest effort so far: no mean feat.

THIS YEAR'S PICK: MICHELIN STAR OR FRENCH TOAST?

Talleyrand said about the Bourbon Dynasty upon its restoration that "they have learned nothing, they have forgotten nothing." Hopefully that doesn't apply here...it shouldn't. We will be decanting bourbon not restoring it.

If you have a problem standing in the cashier's line with Jacques Chirac and Dominique de Villepin, read no further. If this horse comes in, we will have wall-to-wall Sacre Bleu's! But in this sport, we check our politics and six-shooters at the door (the favorite has an Arab owner and a Jewish trainer).

John Maynard Keynes once said that it is better to be vaguely right than precisely wrong. The Keynester was obviously not a horseplayer since betting on the Derby does not provide the latitude afforded economic forecasts. We gotta get it right and sorting through Empire Maker's sore foot, Scrimshaw's throat surgery, or Offlee Wild's bacterial infection is hard work. But we don't want to suffer poor Dr. Watson's fate of castigation by his mentor. Said Sherlock Holmes: "You see, Watson, but you do not observe." Well we may not be right but we've sure been observing. So here goes:

After finishing second in his first start at Saratoga last summer, his connections thought enough of him to go straight to the Grade I Champagne where his immaturity was apparent. A couple of third places in maiden races concluded his 2 year-old campaign. He blew away a maiden field at Santa Anita in February. He went from there to the principal prep for the Santa Anita Derby (the Grade II San Felipe). Sent off at 48-1, he looked like the winner a few jumps from home, but was

edged out by a game Buddy Gil and a fast-closing Atswhatimtalknbout. His next race and final Derby prep was the Blue Grass where he appeared to be easily passed by Peace Rules and finished second. But our pick was hung wide and the winner had the notorious golden rail at Keeneland.

Our pick has stayed at the more quiet confines of Keeneland where he has been all but ignored by the racing punditry that is loath to stray far from the press tent at Churchill Downs. A muddy track forced his last work onto the grass but we really don't think that matters. His trainer acknowledged that he had not asked his horse for everything yet, saying after the Blue Grass: "Now it is time to tighten zee screws." We think the trainer has molded a winner for Saturday. It's BRANCUSI!

THE TRAINER- Patrick Biancone is a third-generation French trainer who we best remember as the trainer of the marvelous mare All Along. He has a couple of Breeders' Cup seconds and in his few full-time years in the U.S. has quickly caught on to the American game.

THE JOCKEY- Tony Farina is also a Frenchman and at 24, Biancone's house rider. He and only he gets on the back of the colt: gallop, work, or race. He has had a couple of beefs with the racing stewards here for rough riding but he is a clear talent and fearless.

THE BET- We expect odds of about 15-1 (though the morning line is twice that) on Brancusi so we will make a win-place play on our pick. We'll box him with Empire Maker and Peace Rules to complete our exactas. For tri's and superfectas we'll take those 3 and add Offlee Wild who will be 35-1 or more. We'll also make a small win-place-show bet and exotics on Offlee Wild, this year's moonshot- longshot.

BON CHANCE MES AMIS!