

WEEK 12

Belmont Stakes: the triple crown finish line is near

June 10, 2023

Beautiful Belmont. Recently, it has been covered by a brown haze that has gripped most of the northeast, it being from wildfires from our neighbors to the north. It was so bad in New York, that racing yesterday (June 8) was cancelled and that caused ripples throughout the racing community - what about the Belmont Stakes on Saturday?

Thankfully, all racing fans that looked to the heavens for a solution, got what they wanted and the air quality has been deemed "much better" and the Belmont Stakes will be run tomorrow as scheduled. Whew!

50 years ago, the concerns were of Bold Ruler and that the fact that his get were not considered distance horses, especially at a mile and a half. So Secretariat came into the Belmont with his nay-sayers. The brilliant Kentucky Derby, the powerful run in the Preakness...surely, the Bold Ruler blood will bubble to the top and put this colt asunder and prevent yet another Triple Crown winner. Citation's title in 1948 appeared safe. To the joyfulness of everyone who was there (and those that watched from home), his 31 length canter in the Belmont Stakes was one of magnificence that will long be remembered. The pedigree experts be damned! This colt was the real deal.

And so we come into this year's Belmont Stakes with the two year old champion of last year, Forte, having his nay-sayers. For the same reason. He won't be able to get the distance. I don't agree. The sire, Violence, won 3 of his four starts, progressively adding distance which each start. At two, he was undefeated with wins in the G2 8 furlong Nashua Stakes, after being held off the pace, running fourth, and then winning by a full two lengths (the favorite in the race was Darwin, a son of Derby winner Big Brown who shortly after running unplaced in this race, headed to Europe and beyond to not do much of anything, OK, a G3 win in Ireland) and then coming from 5th to pull away by 1 length and a quarter in winning the 8.5 furlong (all weather track) in the CashCall Futurity (G1). In that race, the following year's Preakness winner, Oxbow, was 4th. He showed class in all of his starts and for his three year old debut, Todd Pletcher chose the Fountain of Youth Stakes at Gulfstream Park which was at 8.5 furlongs as well. A bigger field, he ran what I thought was a really good race. He chased the pacesetter, Majestic Hussar to the top of the stretch, took over the lead and was comfortable in front, maybe too comfortable as when he was challenged by Orb (the eventual Kentucky Derby winner), he had to be reminded it was a horse race and he dug in but lost by 1/2 length. After that, he was retired. Forte is Violence's best racing son by far in his short stud career. He is also sire of the G1SW sprinter Dr Schivel, 9 furlong G2SW Newgrange, middle distance graded SWs Cosmic Burst and Talk Veuve to Me and others. OK, nothing to suggest classic distance winners here. But... I have dismissed Forte in the past not because I didn't think he was capable, but because I just don't back favorites. I've said that before. Forte comes into this race with 6 wins in 7 starts and he's won at 9 furlongs. His last race, the Florida Derby, I thought was his best, coming from 9th to hold off Mage and if you remember 5 weeks back, Mage won the Kentucky Derby while Forte was back in the barn. My concern is the upset to his schedule, the injury that made him skip the Derby and the veterinarians list that kept him out of the Preakness. (in the Belmont, he'll be ridden by Irad Ortiz, Jr who also rode him in the Florida Derby)

OK, let's move on.

Todd Pletcher also has in Tapit Trice. What a one-two punch, huh? I, of course, have written about him before but let me recap. He has won 4 of his 6 career starts. He last raced in the Kentucky Derby in which he finished 7th, the only race in which he was out of the money. He broke last and was slow finding his stride and needed urging and then soundly bumped Mandarin Hero (who I wish was in the Belmont) and that was that. Was it the big field? Was it the big crowd? Whatever, it was not Tapit Trice who showed up that day and I expect much more of him in New York. Luis Saez will be back on board. This grey coated colt is none other than Tapit, whose persona is all over the Belmont.

The Preakness winner, National Treasure, has drawn post position 4 for the Belmont and John Velazquez will be aboard again. Bob Baffert trains (thank you Jimmy Barnes for all you do!). The Preakness field was dull and had it not been for the fact it is identified as a classic, I would have thought it was a non-graded race. There was no speed and Johnny V took full advantage, keeping the son of Quality Road's mind on the business at hand and he won by a short head. Prior to that, he had only one other victory. The same for Kentucky Derby winner Mage. Only one other Preakness starter has travelled north to compete in the Belmont.

Red Route One was 4th in the Preakness and that disappointed me greatly as I backed him. There wasn't much else to choose from. Oh well. He's now had some more education and trainer Steve Asmussen would not have brought him here if he didn't think he had a chance. Joel Rosario will ride again. He had a minor stakes win prior to the Preakness at Oaklawn Park and prior to that, showed some ability in both the Rebel Stakes and Southwest Stakes. His sire is Horse of the Year Gun Runner and that's the best that can be said for this colt attempting a mile and a half. His dam, Red House, is by Tapit. She is unraced and has a full brother to Red Route One called Red Run who was second in the recent Isaac Murphy Marathon at Churchill Downs (a mile and a half, by the way) and prior to that was 3rd in last year's American Derby at

Churchill Downs and that was at 9 furlongs. He has won another stake (on turf). There is stamina in the pedigree but the horse has so far not shown the ability at a route.

Angel of Empire, post position 8, rider Flavien Prate and trainer Brad Cox. Pedigree: Classic Empire x Armony's Angel by To Honor and Serve. Classic Empire won the Arkansas Derby, was second in the Preakness and 4th in the Kentucky Derby. Angel of Empire went on to emulate his sire and won the Arkansas Derby as well in his last start before the Kentucky Derby (Red Route One as 6th). The dam was a non-winner and Angel of Empire is her only foal to race thus far. To Honor and Serve (who now grazes in South Korea) was a Grade One Stakes Winner—the Woodward, 9 furlongs; Pennsylvania Derby (G2 at 9 furlongs); Remsen Stakes (G2, 9 furlongs) as well as the Cigar Mile, Westchester Stakes, etc. His best US-bred racing son was Mr Freeze who won the West Virginia Derby and other races. And there was Florida Derby 2cd placed State of Honor, Alabama Stakes winner (G1, 10 furlongs) Eskimo Kisses and others. Kentucky gave up on To Honor and Serve too soon but they do that often, don't they? Of this 3 Brad Cox Belmont entries, this is the one that stands out, despite the fact he is void of early speed.

Tapit Shoes is post position 1 under Juan Ortiz and his morning line shows he is 20-1. He broke his maiden in December at Fair Grounds in a 8.5 furlong event and showed little after that until his last start in which he ended up second in the Bath House Stakes to Red Route One. As you can guess, his sire is Tapit and the dam is Awesome Flower who raced 33 times, winning 11 in a four year career that had her win over \$550,000. She won listed and black type stakes and was graded stakes placed. She won on turf, all weather and dirt tracks and she sold for 1.6 million dollars in foal to Gun Runner last year. You may just remember her other son by Gun Runner, a 2019 colt named Cyberknife who won races like the Haskell Stakes and the Arkansas Derby. Her sire is Travers winner (G1) Flower Alley who was also the sire of Kentucky Derby winner I'll Have Another and G2SW the ill-fated Neck and Neck. (Flower Alley is now in South Africa). The pedigree indicates ability but the promise has not been fulfilled. But, worse horses have won the Belmont (D'Tara, Sarava, Sir Winston in recent years. This one at least has the pedigree). Brad Cox is the trainer.

The third Brad Cox entry is Hit Show who was my pre-Kentucky Derby hopeful for a long while. He won 3 of 5 races coming into the Kentucky Derby and was second in a somewhat slow Wood Memorial. His only stakes win was in the Withers (G3) which was at 9 furlongs. He was a credible fifth on the first Saturday in May beaten by 6 1/4 lengths and it looked really promising as he raced three wide and made a bid by the top of the stretch...and proceeded to flatten out. He was ridden in the Ky Derby and will be ridden tomorrow by Manny Franco. Mage gave Javier Castellano his first Kentucky Derby win; the Preakness was the first win for Johnny V...will this be Manny's first Belmont? On to pedigree, he is by one of my favorites, Candy Ride(Arg) who does not lack on stamina. The dam is Actress, whose daddy is Tapit (where Hit Show gets his color from). She broke her maiden in winning the Black Eyed Susan Stakes and she was also 4th in the Alabama Stakes. A few other stakes tossed in as well. I love this pedigree!

Horse of the World, Arrogate, (who won over 17 million dollars and regretfully died young. He entered stud in 2018 and died in 2020) is the sire of Arcangelo who will have the services of Javier Castellano on Saturday and is trained by Jena Antonucci who will be only the 11th female trainer in the history of the Belmont Stakes. She got her public trainers license in 2010. Doctor J Dub was her first graded (3) stakes winner (in 2016) and her biggest money winner to date was Five Star Momma who won over \$400,000 and was graded stakes placed. Arcangelo comes into the Belmont stakes with 2 wins in 4 starts. At two, he made his first start in a 6 furlong maiden race at Gulfstream Park (ridden by Jose Ortiz). At 3, also at Gulfstream, he was 4th (ridden by Jose Ortiz again) to Kingbarns when that one broke his maiden (a mile event) and he finally made it to the winners circle on the occasion of his third start, at Gulfstream Park, in a maiden race again at a mile, this time with Javier on board and he won it by 3 1/2 length over the promising colt Todd Pletcher's Magical Power (still a maiden but you WILL hear from him during the year, to be sure). After that, he was shipped north to Belmont Park for the Peter Pan Stakes (G3), a 9 furlong race that has been used by others as a springboard to the Belmont in the past. Over the years, Sir Winston (2019) Tonalist (2014), Lemon Drop Kid (1999), Colonial Affair (1993), A P Indy (1992), Danzig Connection (1986), Slew O'Gold (1983) and Coastal (1979) have won or placed in the Peter Pan and went on to win or place in the Belmont -- (Tonalist, Sir Winston, Lemon Drop Kid, Colonial Affair (ridden by Julie Krone), Danzig Connection (one of 5 consecutive Belmont Stakes winners trained by Woody Stevens) and Coastal won). So Arcangelo is in good company. In the past I have always argued that it is best that a horse racing in the Belmont Stakes has had at least a start on the course, better a win. Well, there are only two horses in this year's renewal that has ever raced at Belmont Park, and they are Arcangelo and Forte.

Back to the pedigree, Arrogate has sired Kentucky Oaks winner Secret Oath, G1SW Fun To Dream, G1SW Cave Rock, G1SW And Tell Me Nolies and others in his short career. The dam is Modeling who was unraced. And she's grey. Why's that? She's another by Tapit (and she passed the color to her son, Arcangelo). In 2014, she sold for \$2,850,000 in foal to Distorted Humor. That foal grew up to be Montmartre, a winner of one race. That is her only other foal to race. Her 2019 foal by Empire Maker (a Belmont winner) is currently in training at Will Rogers Downs, a long long way from Belmont Park. The sales price, I am sure, is because she is a half sister to a G1SW, 2 stakes winners and two stakes placed winners.

OK, and last of the entries, and with morning line odds of 30-1, is Il Miracolo. It's a horse race. Anyone can win. I know that. I say it all the time. Not this time. But he's got speed and this race needs speed (the only two in the race with any natural early speed would be National Treasure and Forte). So, he'll be up front early and he'll be done early. My selection for last. Sorry. Anyway, his sire is Gun Runner (I've commented

about him earlier) and his dam is Tapit's World (another Tapit!), a graded stakes place winner who did not win over 8.5 furlongs. She has one other US-raced foal to win. Il Miracolo has started 10 times so is pretty much the most seasoned of the Belmont entries. At 2, he raced 5 times and won once. That was in his fourth start (all at Gulfstream Park) and he won that 8 furlong event by 5 1/2 lengths. So, the connections jumped at the chance to put him in a stake so it was to New York he went and he was entered in the Remsen in which he ended up 6th of 7. At 3, he has started 5 times as well and he has won win and four unplaced efforts. His last start marked his first win this year and that was in an optional claiming event at 8 furlongs in his last start. The jockey was Marcos Menses then and will be again tomorrow. The trainer is Antonio Sano who has been training for over a dozen years and has enjoyed success with Gunnevera (G2SW), Simplification (G2SW), City of Weston (G3SW) and others. He seeks to be a dragon slayer.

OK...that's the field. A few more facts you might find interesting: Todd Pletcher won last year's Belmont with Mo Donegal (who was ridden by Irad Ortiz) and he won the race in 2017 with Tapwrit (by Tapit & ridden by Jose Ortiz), Palace Malice (2013 with Mike Smith) and Rags To Riches (2007 with Johnny V). Riders this year with a little Belmont experience: Luis Saez won in 2021 with Essential Quality; Manny Franco won in 2020 with Tiz the Law; Joel Rosario won in 2019 with Sir Winston; Irad won his first Belmont on Creator in 2016 (by Tapit) and Johnny Velazquez, in addition to winning the 2007 renewal with the filly Rags to Riches, won in 2012 with Union Rags.

And for a "where are they now" question and answer....in 2022 there were 8 starters in the Belmont Stakes. The race was won by Mo Donegal who never raced again. He's currently at stud at Spendthrift Farm in Kentucky. 2cd was the 2022 Champion Three Year Old Filly, Nest who is back in training (she was ridden by Jose Ortiz and trained by Todd Pletcher, so it was Pletcher 1-2); 3rd was Skippy Longstocking who is still in training at four and has been successful since his Belmont experience. He won his very next start, the West Virginia Derby (G3) and followed that with wins in the G3 Harlan's Holiday S and G3 Challenger Stakes. He last raced in April in the G3 Ben Ali Stakes, in which he was unplaced. He was trained for the Belmont by Saffie Joseph Jr who continued to train him but he is experiencing some troubles lately so it will be interesting to see if the owners keep this horse with him. He had White Abarrio, his last year Kentucky Derby starter, taken from him (he is entered on the Saturday Belmont Park program and is being trained by Richard Dutrow Jr, himself back after a ten year suspension). In the Belmont, Skippy Longstocking was ridden by Manny Franco. 4th in the 2022 Belmont was We the People (who was my pick, so much for that). We The People was trained that day by Rodolphe Brisset & ridden by Flavien Prat. Since then, he was second in the 2022 West Virginia Derby and had one other 2022 start. This year, transferred to Todd Pletcher's barn, he won his only start thusfar, that at Keeneland at the end of April.

Belmont fifth was Creative Minister ridden by Brian Hernandez Jr and trained by Ken McPeck. This son of Creative Cause out of a Tapit mare, has raced 7 times since the Belmont. Last year, he had 4 more starts with 3 placings including a second in the Bourbon Trail Stakes and 3rd place finishes in the Curlin Stakes (G2) and Smarty Jones Stakes (G3). This year, he has raced 4 times and has been in the money 3 times but with no wins. He last started at the end of May at Churchill Downs. His connections remain the same.

Belmont sixth was the Kentucky Derby winner Rich Strike, who has been winless in 6 starts since. He was second in the Lukas Classic (G1) in October. His last start found him unplaced in May at Churchill Downs. He has been making headlines, tho. Well, his trainer has anyway. The owner and trainer had a disagreement about a film in the works and they could not come to terms so Eric Reed resigned as trainer and Rich Strike is now in the barn of Bill Mott. I'm guessing that jockey Sonny Leon has lost the mount on the best horse he's ever ridden. Such is racing.

Seventh in the 2022 Belmont Stakes was Barber Road who was trained by John A Ortiz then and he remains with that trainer. He didn't start again until December after the Belmont and he was 3rd at Oaklawn Park. This year, he has started 5 times with one win and one second. The win came in April at Keeneland in a 8.5 furlong allowance race and in his last start he was 4th in the G3 Blame Stakes at Churchill Downs. Belmont jock was Joel Rosario but recently he has been ridden by Reylu Gutierrez.

Eight and last was Golden Glider who was the longest shot in the field, got bumped and flattened out to trail by over 24 lengths. He was trained on the day by Mark Casse who continues to train him. Dylan Davis rode him in the 2022 Belmont. Since the Belmont, Golden Glider, a gelded son of Ghostzapper (you thought I was going to say Tapit, didn't you?), he's raced twice. In December, he won the Tropical Park Derby. He's still in training, having a reported work at Woodbine Race Course in Canada earlier this month.

OK...that's it for this column. Enjoy the race!