

2025 USA TRIPLE CROWN

(5/16/2025) By Jean Derench

Journalism is a serious racehorse. I don't like to play favorites as I've said many times in the past but in the Preakness, there was no other horse that jumped out at me and for Saturday's Belmont Stakes, there is no other horse yet again. His record now stands at 5 for 7 and that Preakness win was very impressive, even it was just by a half length. He made it count at the wire. In the Kentucky Derby, the situation was reversed on him as he appeared to be on his way to victory when Sovereignty caught him at the wire.

I kind of chuckle when I read that this is being looked at as a "rivalry" between the Derby winner and the Preakness winner. How is that? They have only met the one time. A true rivalry was Easy Goer and Sunday Silence, Alydar and Affirmed. Heck, Journalism has raced against maiden Mellencamp more times and that is hardly a rivalry. But, it draws interest in the race from non-horse-racing viewers I guess.

I won't go over the pedigree of Journalism, Sovereignty, Baeza, or Heart of Honor (once again my choice for last) as I have done so in the last two columns. Just a couple of comments. Because I am so high on the professionalism of Journalism, that doesn't mean I do not respect Sovereignty as this is a class race horse as well but I just think "Big J" has the look. I don't want to think in the future but I silently hope, if he remains sound, that he will remain in training as a four year old but we all know that it doubtful. But, Fierceness came back this year which was good for racing...and he'll be in action this weekend in the Metropolitan against the born-again White Abarrio. All in all, the program for the weekend is just amazing...unbeaten Good Cheer appears in the Acorn again 6 others that appear overmatched; there's a very competitive Ogden Phipps Stakes brewing; The New York Stakes for older fillies and mares on grass brings together She Feels Pretty and Gimme a Nother (I'm liking outsider Beach Bomb myself), The Just a Game has Excellent Truth, Kehoe Beach and Choisy, the Bed O'Roses drew Scylla, Ways and Means, Jody's Pride and others and then there is the Belmont Gold Cup...but I digress from the race in the spotlight, the mile and a quarter, at Saratoga for the second time, Belmont Stakes.

The workouts by Sovereignty and a 5 week rest show he is fit and ready to run. So sad his connections skipped the Preakness and it will be actually sadder (at least to me) if he does win on Saturday as a possible Triple Crown was sacrificed all due to that untruth that a horse needs longer than two weeks to come back to run its best. Did Journalism? Enough of that tho Now instead of the time between races the experts are jumping on the "we should lessen this distance of the Belmont forever" chant. Ugh!

I really loved Baeza in the Derby and it would be huge press if he wins on Saturday as his dam, Puca, has of course produced a Derby winner (Mage) and a Belmont winner (Dornoch). Fun side story about Baeza that made the racing news was his love of blended carrots. Adorable photo of him with "carrot mouth" appeared in the *Blood Horse Daily*. Anyway, he's only won once in five starts but his last three races have been front page news. In the Santa Anita Derby back in April, he was second to Journalism after gaining the lead but, according to the chart, he "yielded begrudgingly" at the wire. Of course, he followed that with a third place finish in the Kentucky Derby. In his maiden win, four races back, he showed a lot of speed (haha..Mellencamp appears

in the also rans of that race as well...is that a rivalry?). I'm a big fan of John Shirreffs and I told you two columns back that Braulio Baeza, for whom the horse is named, was one of my all time favorite jockeys and had ridden my beloved Carry Back during his career on the track. The only thing about him that concerns me (and it shouldn't as the Derby showed he could do the distance) is that his sire, tho he did win the 9 furlong Whitney and Pennsylvania Derby at 9 furlongs, I thought his stronger races were the Malibu Stakes and Triple Bend Stakes wins and they were at 7 furlongs. Plus, outside of Baeza thus far, he has produced nothing of merit. I think Puca, the dam, is a stronger influence of stamina for Baeza.

Saturday's weather will play havoc with the planned day's festivities as storms are predicted so you have to consider a muddy or sloppy track. The Kentucky Derby was, of course, in mud so the top three indicated they can handle it. It was the first time each of them raced on an off track. Flavien Prat (I am still annoyed at the Preakness ride on Goal Orientated, but that's just me...no official action was taken against him) will ride Baeza. Prat has not won the Belmont stakes with 4 previous rides.

Heart of Honor (GB) is back after his Preakness fifth in which he passed tired horses after showing a bad attitude at the starting gate. They've apparently been working on this bug-a-boo. Trainer Saffie Osborne has him looking good and daughter Jamie Osbourne rides.

Chad Brown, looking for his first Belmont win, saddles Hill Road who will be ridden by Irad Ortiz Jr. (has won two Belmonts). In his last start, he won the Peter Pan, often said to be a Belmont prep. Tonalist, Archangelo, A P Indy won it and then went on to with the Belmont Stakes. Those horses won both races at Belmont Park. This weekend, we're visiting Saratoga for the second time while it returns to Belmont next year (and if you had not heard, the "new" Belmont Park will host the Breeders Cup in 2027! Yippee!) (1992 and forward while others like Danzig Connection, Coastal, Stage Door Johnny did the same further back). In the Peter Pan (G3, 9 furlongs) he came from behind to win by $\frac{3}{4}$ of a length. The same distance as the Wood Memorial, he ran it in 1:49:22 while Rodriguez took 1:48:15 to win the Wood. He was ridden that day by Flavien Prat who, of course, opted to stay on Baeza this weekend. Hill Road has won two of his five starts. He broke his maiden in his first start, that being in Ireland last year at Leopardstown. He was unplaced in his only other European start and then came stateside to finish third in the Breeders Cup Juvenile (to Champion Citizen Bull, while being ridden by Umberto Rispoli who is, of course, riding Journalism on Saturday). He started his three year old career off at Tampa Bay Downs, finishing third in the March Tampa Bay Derby. He was ridden that day by Tyler Gaffalione while the eventual winner, Owen Almighty, was ridden by Prat. That was another come-from-behind effort.

The dam, Exotic Notion, was a stakes placed winner in Argentina and Hill Road is her first foal to race. Broodmare sire is Belmont Stakes winner Lemon Drop Kid, who was also the sire of distance loving turf Grade One stakes winner Beach Patrol, and dirt loving distance horse, Richard's Kid, as well as G1 Stakes winning mare, Somali Lemonde and many others.

Uncaged comes into the Belmont for trainer Todd Pletcher after his somewhat dismal performance in the Peter Pan (6th of 9 starters). He's won half of his 4 lifetime races after he was purchased for \$450,000. His first start was back in August last year at Saratoga (ridden by Irad

Ortiz Jr) which he won by 1 ¾ lengths. He started 2025 at Gulfstream Park (again ridden by Irad) and as favorite showed precious little in the 6 furlong sprint, finishing 4th of 5. Back in New York in April, he won a one mile allowance optional claiming event (Kendrick Carmouche riding), coming from last to first to win by 1 ¾ lengths. And then the Peter Pan. He is a Pletcher horse (he's won the Belmont 4 times) and this time Luis Saez will be aboard and he's won the Belmont with Dornoch and Essential Quality. His sire is the mighty Curlin, also the sire of Journalism, which gets him a couple of points. Oh, and his wins have both been on muddy tracks.

Dam of Uncaged is Delaware Oaks (G3) winner Dark Nile, a Pennsylvania-bred daughter of Pioneer of the Nile (sire of American Pharoah, etc). Uncaged is one of two winners from three foals for her.

Crudo is interesting and an upset possibility. I say interesting for one major reason and that is his speed. In a race lacking speed, you have to consider him viable. Sadly lacking in experience, though, he is 2 for 3 with all three races coming this year. In February at Gulfstream Park, he was favored and ended up fourth in a field of 10 (six furlongs, maiden race) after having been bumped and having other excuses. Back to the races in April, at Keeneland, he won as favorite, leading all the way in a race that was just 7 furlongs. He was stretched out to 8 ½ furlongs on Preakness day when he ran in and won the Sir Barton Stakes. Regular rider John Valazquez is back aboard, and the trainer is Todd Pletcher. Hall of Famer Johnny V has won the Belmont twice (Rags to Riches, Union Rags) in 27 attempts. A jockey with a whole lot of experience will take a colt with the least amount of experience into the gate on Saturday.

Triple Crown winner Justify is the sire of Crudo while unraced Blossomed, a daughter of Deputy Minister (Can), is the dam. She has quite a broodmare record having 12 foals and ten winners including 5 stakes winners. A full sister to Crudo, Awesome Patriot, races in Japan where she is a stakes winner and has won 8 of her 9 starts to date. Other winners include Grade 1 Stakes winner Sippican Harbor, sprinting stakes winner Bodacious Babe, and Jebal Ali stakes winner Saayedd.

And then we come to the last entry and that is Bob Baffert's Rodriguez who skipped both the Derby and Preakness after winning the Wood Memorial in April, which was his last start. (just for information, Mo Donegal and Empire Maker are a couple of horses that won both the Wood Memorial and went on to win the Belmont Stakes). He is pretty much the only other speed in the race and Baffert has indicated they don't intend to try to rate him. Mike Smith rode him in the Wood and will be back aboard on Saturday. Rodriguez has won 2 of his 5 starts and has never been out of the money, winning just over \$500,000. Since he cost \$485,000 he's won himself out but add in training fees, vet bills and on and on and the owners are still looking for a return on their investment. And there are a lot of owners. SF Racing, Starlight Racing, Madaket Stables, Stonestreet Stables, and on and on. His maiden win came in January of this year on the occasion of his second start. That was at a mile and, as favorite, he won by 7 widening lengths. He was then entered in his first stakes, the Robert B Lewis (G3, 8f) and was second, 3 ¾ lengths behind the favored Citizen Bull and 2 ¼ lengths in front of Madaket Road. Baffert trained all three of them. Once again, a California stake race could only draw five entries. Do they just make the checks out to Baffert before the race? I digress again...

Citizen Bull is the one who made the pace in the Lewis with Rodriguez second all the way around. Next came the Grade 2 San Felipe Stakes at 8.5 furlongs and that's where he met Journalism. Favored Barnes (Baffert again) was second, nine lengths in front of Rodriguez (with Flavien Prat aboard). Then he was shipped to New York where he won the Wood over Grande. Five horses that started in the Wood have not started since. Sand Devil, who was 6th in the Wood, has made only one start since then, that being at a mile in an allowance event and he was second to Todd Pletcher's Tip Top Thomas, a winner of just a maiden event. Third in that race was My Mitole who was last in the Wood Memorial. My Mitole was also third in another allowance event prior to that. I mention these horses only to show that there doesn't seem to have been much of quality in the last 5 horses in the Wood Memorial. McAfee, 5th in the Wood, returned to be second in the Peter Pan while Captain Cook, 4th in the Wood, was third in his next start, also the Peter Pan. Captain Cook lead most of the way in that event. (remember, it was won by Hill Road).

So, like Crudo, Rodriguez is interesting in that he is the only other speed horse but, considering the lack of anything of merit, I don't know how much the Wood showed in form. I will admit that I was backing Rodriguez for the Derby and was kind of disappointed when he didn't get in. But for this race, I'm not feeling it. His sire is Champion three year old Authentic (by Into Mischief), who won the Kentucky Derby in 2020 and Rodriguez is from his first crop of foals to race. Dam is Cayala who, in her 12 race career, started and ended up racing in Germany and in between had 8 races in the US, winning once. The win was in a maiden event at 6 furlongs on the turf at Hollywood Park. Broodmare sire is Cherokee Run who was second in the Kentucky Derby in 1993 and sixth in the Belmont. He had won the 9 furlong Dwyer Stakes (G2) during his three year old year but did a turn about when he won the Breeder's Cup Sprint and won the Eclipse Award as Champion Sprinter of 1994. As a stallion, he sired three US millionaires (War Pass, Chilukki, Zanjero) and many stakes winners like Kafwain, During, Cherokee Artist, During, Yonaguska and Recapturetheglory), and they won long, short, dirt or turf.

Cayala produced 7 foals, 7 winners. When bred to Rodriguez' grandsire, she produced SW One Liner, SW Provocateur, and stakes placed winner Roderick.

More information: the youngest jockey in the year's Belmont Stakes is Jaime Osborne at 23 while the oldest is Mike Smith at 59. And because I like factoids, the youngest horse in the race is Rodriguez while the oldest is Journalism, even tho all celebrate their birthday officially on January first. I checked their actual foaling dates. How important is that? Not at all...

Belmont History: Fifty years ago, AVATAR won the Belmont Stakes covering the mile and a half distance in 2:28 ½. He was ridden by Bill Shoemaker and defeated Champion & Kentucky Derby winner Foolish Pleasure by a half length with Master Derby, the Preakness winner, third. Nine horses competed in the race on a fast track. Braulia Baeza finished fifth on Prince Thou Art. Avatar had finished second in the Kentucky Derby after winning the Santa Anita Derby. As a Four year old, he returned to win the G1 San Luis Rey Stakes and place in the Hollywood Gold Cup, San Fernando Stakes (G2) and Del Mar Handicap (G2). Unraced at two, he ended his career after 33 races in which he won 9, placed second in 7 and third in 2. The son of Graustark (by Ribot), went on to a career at stud where he sired G2SW Honor Medal (who raced for 8 years), Grade One turf winner Craelius (44 starts in his career), stakes winner Waitlist (107

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starts, 18 wins with 34 other placings), Grade Three winning First and Only (44 starts, 14 wins), Lawrence Realization Stakes (G2)winner Ten Below (44 starts, 11 wins), and others.

Foolish Pleasure, Avatar, Diabolo, Master Derby, Prince Thou Art ran in all three races. Funny how things have changed.

Enjoy the race!