

2025 USA TRIPLE CROWN

(5/16/2025) By Jean Derench

As soon as I read that Godolphin had decided to skip the Preakness and aim for the Belmont, I knew a discussion about re-arranging the Triple Crown races was going to start up again. I was happy to read on a racing website the other day that both Bob Baffert and D Wayne Lucas have no issues with the two weeks between the Derby and Preakness and none with the five week period during which all three of the US Triple Crown races are run. Of course, they have no issue if the races were moved either. Baffert even suggested bringing one of the races out to California. That made me wonder, which one? Run the Preakness at Santa Anita (if it doesn't close) or Del Mar? Certainly, you can't run the KENTUCKY Derby in California and even tho the Belmont was run last year and will be run this year at Saratoga, it's due to construction. So, does he expect the Preakness to move? Heck, they are going to be piling in a mess of money to refurbish that track so I don't see them even considering it...so does Baffert mean create a whole new "triple crown"? What's up with that? Someone also commented about a fillies limited chance of getting in the Derby (I have thoughts on that, as you might expect!) and a response was that Canada has a Filly Triple Crown. Ahhh, well the US does as well. It used to be the Acorn, Mother Goose and Coaching Club American Oaks, all run in New York. Then someone gave it the moniker (which I hate) of the Triple Tiara and then the races changed with the Kentucky Oaks being the "first jewel" and then it was the Alabama and CCA Oaks. I have no idea what's going on there ... but I digress....let's talk about Saturday's race.

As I write this, it's been raining all day here in Massachusetts. I have my TV where I can click on the weather at my saved locations and three of those are Louisville, KY; Baltimore, MD and Saratoga. I can look at what the weather is going to be (if they are right, that is). I looked earlier this week and rain was predicted for Baltimore. So I pictured a track similar to the one they had in Kentucky for the Derby two weeks ago. Then, yesterday, I looked again and now it is said it's going to be 87 degrees and partly cloudy. Hope so. A venue this big should not be sullied by inclement weather.

Like I said, I digress...let's talk about the horses entered Saturday.

Journalism (the Derby second) comes back as does Lucas' American Promise (16th) and Sandman (7th). Sandman didn't have it easy in the Derby with a whole lot of bumping but when he got to running, he went from 18th to 7th. He was second choice that day and was truly a fan favorite due to his favorable grey coat (who doesn't like a grey horse?) and the name as well. And look, they have changed from Jose Ortiz to John Velazquez (who didn't ride in the Derby as his mount, Grande, was scratched. And then there are six new faces. I won't spend any more time on the three stalwarts that will go from Derby to Preakness as I spoke at length about them in my last column. Journalism ran a spectacular race in the Derby as far as I am

concerned and was just out-finished. He'll be favorite again in the Preakness and retains his regular rider, Umberto Rispoli.

Baffert has entered GOAL ORIENTATED with Flavien Prat set to ride. At first I thought it was typical of this trainer to enter a grade one when the colt has but two starts to his entire career but then I looked at a few of the others and they were pretty much the same.

Goal Orientated is by Not This Time, a son of Giant's Causeway, who has sired Champion, the Travers winner Epicenter as well as 2.5 million dollar earner Up ToThe Mark, G1SW turf sprinter Cogburn, UAE G1SW Sibelius, G1SW Just One Time, distance loving Next and many more. He started his stud career at \$15,000 in 2017 and now stands at Taylor Made Stallions for \$175,000. To say he is successful is an understatement. There's stamina in this family. Not This Time ran but 4 times as a two year old, (his career was over in 5 months) winning two and he was injured and retired. His maiden win was at a mile and he lead all the way. His follow up race, and win, was in the Grade 3 Iroquois Stakes at 8.5 furlongs in mud and he won by over 8 lengths defeating LookinAt Lee who, the following year, would finish 2cd to Always Dreaming in the Kentucky Derby. The two year old champion Classic Empire defeated Not This Time in the Breeders Cup Juvenile, his last start. He actually turned three on May 15th.

Afleet Alex' daughter Bizzy Caroline is the dam of Goal Orientated. She was a mare who preferred to run on the grass, having won two G3 stakes (at 8.5f and 9f) and placing in 3 other graded stakes. She is the dam of 9 other runners, 4 of which have won. It's a hard luck family, tho as two died prematurely due to racing injuries. And Afleet Alex won the Preakness and Belmont after finishing 3rd in the Kentucky Derby.

Goal Orientated won his first start under jockey Juan Hernandez at Santa Anita the beginning of April in a six furlong event, racing from mid pack as favorite to win by just over three lengths. The chart indicates that he climbed at one point in the race. Baffert had two others in that race, by the way, neither has won since. In his next start (on Derby day in the 3rd race, an optional claiming race at 8.5 furlongs), he lead all he way and won by $\frac{3}{4}$ of a length.

HEART OF HONOR (GB) comes stateside to try his luck in the Preakness. I always pick a last place horse for some reason and this is my choice for this honor here. His race record isn't bad but it isn't really good. He's started 6 times and pretty much has "second-it is". He was second to Admire Daytona in the UAE Derby. Admire Daytona was last in the Kentucky Derby. He was also second in the UAE Guineas (1 mile) to Golden Vekoma who went on to win the Saudi Derby. The trainer has never started a horse in the US and the jockey, who is the trainer's daughter, has never ridden in the US as well. Doesn't scream "pick me, pick me". He is from the first crop of US-bred Honor A P who won the Santa Anita Derby and then was 4th in the Kentucky Derby who proved to be his last start as he pulled a tendon. Honor A P stands at Lane's End in Kentucky;

Heart of Honor is in his first crop to race. He is by G1SW Honor Code, a son of A P Indy. The dam is Chilean bred G1SW Ruby Lane who won 3 of three in her native land before being exported to the US. She is pretty much all US-bred, being by Scat Daddy out of a First Samurai mare. Heart of Honor is her only foal to race.

PAY BILLY comes into the race with a record of 8 starts and 4 wins, placing in two other races and has a total earnings of \$234,475. He is a “horse for course” at Laurel Park, also located in Maryland, having won all four of his races there. In his last two starts, he won the Federico Tesio Stakes and the Private Terms Stakes and previously had won the Miracle Wood Stakes. His win in the Tesio guaranteed him a spot on the Preakness field. He was favored in the 9 furlong race, coming from mid-pack to win on a fast track. In the Private Terms, he won the 8.5 furlong event by 3 ½ lengths while he just lost the Miracle Wood by a nose at a mile to Barbadian Runner.

The story that circles this horse is that in 2011 in his native Chile, his jockey, Raul Mena fell during a race and ended up breaking 24 bones and being in a coma for 5 weeks. He was not expected to ride again. He was told he’d need at least 18 months to heal but he was back at the track in 8 months. He came to the US in 2014. His mounts have won over a million dollars in each of the last 7 years. Pay Billy will be his first Triple Crown mount.

Pay Billy is by the 2020 Champion Older Male, Improbable who was put down last year when he broke a right tibia due to ataxia. Pay Billy is in his first crop to race. He is also the sire of SW Governor Sam who is basically a turf sprinter and turf stakes winner Starship Impulsive. The dam is Harlington’s Rose who was sold for \$3700 while carrying her Improbably colt foal. A California-bred, she won 4 of her 34 starts in a period of 3 years, her best win coming in the graded Las Flores Stakes at Santa Anita. All 5 of her wins were at sprint distances. She has had three foals to race with one other winner, Espionage, who won a minor stake race.

The trainer is Michael Gorham, 60, who has been around since 1985 and his record includes a Grade 1 win with the filly Mandy’s Gold and 5 other graded stakes. He started training not far from where I live at the now closed Suffolk Downs in Boston. I expect Pay Billy will be one of the longest shots in the field, if not the longest, but I’m kind of rooting for a placing for the trainer, who certainly deserves it. But, if I am being realistic, even Pay Billy’s wins were not that impressive, time-wise.

RIVER THAMES has my interest because I’d like to see a horse with Maryland connections do well in this, their most famous race. Irad Ortiz Jr has the mount for trainer Todd Pletcher, who ended up without a Derby starter for the first time in several years. River Thames is a New York bred colt by Maclean’s Music (son of Distorted Humor, sire of Kentucky Derby/Preakness winner Funny Cide). The sire also got champion sprinter Jackie’s Warrior, Panamanian Champions

California Music and Tamborera, Preakness winner Cloud Computing, and G1 winners Complexity, Drain the Clock and many others. He holds court at Hill n'Dale in Kentucky. His race career consisted of one start, one win, a six furlong maiden event at Santa Anita. His connections had faith in him and he has proven them right. The dam of River Thames is Proportionality, a Maryland-bred who won 2 of her 3 starts in her home state (both sprints) as well as a claiming sprint at Belmont Park. She started 22 times. River Thames is her first foal. Her sire is G1SW Discreet Cat, who died in 2023. His best US-bred son was the sprinter Dads Caps. He was a successful sire in Japan, where he was exported to in 2017.

In January, River Thames won his first start, a 6 furlong race at Gulfstream Park by almost 5 lengths, showing good early speed. In his next start, in February, he won again. This time it was an optional claiming event at a mile, getting the lead at the half way mark and pulling away to win by over 6 lengths as the favorite. He lost his next start but he wasn't embarrassed with the loss. Guess who beat him? Sovereignty. (Believe it or not, neither Sovereignty or River Thames was favored; that honor went to Burnham Square who ended up fourth). River Thames was lapped on pacesetter Neoeqous (13th in the Kentucky Derby), gained the lead just before the head of the stretch and was nailed at the end by a surging winner, at least according to the race chart. I did note that John Velazquez was the rider in the first 3 starts but for the colt's next start, the April 8th Blue Grass Stakes, the mount went to Irad Ortiz. This time Burnham Square came thru, winning by a nose over East Avenue. River Thames was 3rd, lacking any major rally.

CLEVER AGAIN is trained by a 2 time Preakness winning trainer, Steve Asmussen (2007 with Curlin and 2009 with Rachel Alexandra) who comes back to Pimlico since he was 4th in 2023 with Red Route One. That one is still racing; in fact, he won the Essex at Oaklawn in March, still being trained by Asmussen. Jockey Jose Ortiz won the 2022 with Early Voting.

The sire is the Triple Crown winner American Pharoah and the dam is Flattering, who was bred in Ireland, and is by Champion Galileo. He's sired stakes winner in Australia, Japan, France and the US, the best of them seemingly better on grass.

Flattering won the Munster Oaks, G3, at Cork but thereafter tried additional graded stakes in both Ireland and England and didn't fair well. She won a total of 2 of 10 starts. Clever Again is the third of three foals for this mare, and the second winner.

Winchell Thoroughbreds paid \$500,000 for Clever Again as a yearling and Mrs John Magnier, Michael Tabor and Derrick Smith have bought into him. He appears to me to be better suited to grass, even tho his three lifetime starts have been on dirt. He made his first start at the end of April last year in a maiden event at 4.5 furlongs and finished second, losing by a head. Ten months later, in February of this year, he made his second appearance and won his first race. He won a 8.5 furlong maiden event as the favorite by over 3 lengths (Jose Ortiz rode). In March, he

went to Oaklawn for the Hot Springs Stakes and in his best showing, defeated the favored Gaming (trained by Baffert) and recent winner Perfect Force (Lucas). That was a mile and he once again lead all the way to win. He's got speed and he's got stamina.

Rounding out the field is the longshot **GOSGER** who will be ridden by Luis Saez, 2cd in the Preakness with Bravazo in 2018, and is trained by Brandan Walsh, who comes back to Baltimore with his second Preakness starter. He was sixth with Multiplier in 2017. The grey colt is named for major leaguer Jim Gosger, who is now 82 years old and lives in Michigan.

Sire of Gosger is Nyquist, winner of the Kentucky Derby and 3rd in the Preakness in 2016. He is a son of outstanding sire Uncle Mo. Nyquist is the sire of Champion Vequist, Canadian Champion Gretskey the Great, Grade 1 winners Immersive, Randomized, Slow Down Andy, Johannes, Tenma, and many other graded and non-graded stakes winner. He stands for \$175,000 at Darley in Kentucky, several of his yearlings commanding prices in the millions.

The dam is Gloria S, an unraced daughter of Tapit, himself an outstanding sire. She's had six foals and they have all won. Her daughter Harvey's Lil Goil was a Grade 1 winner on grass and is now a broodmare in Kentucky; and son Archie the Giza was 3rd in the G1 Ben Ali Stakes in 2024.

Gosger has started 3 times, with two wins and a second place finish, earning \$292,200. He was second in his first start (December 2024, Gulfstream Park). He won in his next appearance, a mile maiden event at Gulfstream (ridden that day by Edgard Zayas) and his last start was a win in the Grade 3 Lexington Stakes (rider Irad Ortiz Jr), he was bumped at the start, went three wide and outkicked the second place finisher. That race was April 12th.

Summarizing a few facts: Clever Again is the oldest horse in the race (they are all technically three year olds of course, but using the actual calendar, he becomes the oldest); The youngest is Goal Orientated. The average amount of starts is 5.66. The horse with the most starts is American Promise, which is no surprise at Lucas isn't afraid to run a horse back and obey any kind of made up rule of 6 weeks between races. Goal Orientated has the least amount of starts with 2. Johnny V took off River Thames to ride Sandman; WinStar bred and sold Pay Billy and bought River Thames; Gosger is the only entrant that the breeder still owns.

It is tough to look beyond tough Journalism. It'd be fun to see Lucas take back-to-back Preakness (he won last year with Seize the Grey); it'd be great to see a horse with Maryland connections (Pay Billy) do well in this crown of Maryland races. A female jockey, not from the US, riding in a triple crown race is interesting and adds another story; Pay Billy is being ridden by a jockey who should be dead. 9 entrants, 9 stories. Who do you like?

PREAKNESS history. 40 years ago, in 1985, Mr Prospector's son Tank's Prospect, won the Preakness, ridden to victory by Pat Day and trained by D Wayne Lucas. He finished a head in

front of favored Chief's Crown who in turn was 2 ¾ lengths in front of third place finisher Eternal Prince (co owned by Yankess owner George Steinbrenner). Future Haskell winner, Skip Trial and later sire of Horse of the Year, Skip Away, ended up 9th in the 11 horse field (fast track, 1:53 2/5). Over 81,000 people packed the stands and the infield that day.