



By Jack Mansour

*Below are my thoughts on the 141<sup>st</sup> Run For The Roses. The tradition of writing this article continues. Whether you're in the industry or a casual fan whose only brush with the sport of kings is an annual Derby party, this is written for you. The goal is to convert new fans to the sport one Derby at a time while including enough detail and insight for the semi-serious handicapper. Here's my standard disclaimer... this analysis is FREE and you get what you pay for.*

This is the best crop of three year olds we've seen since... well, last year. Yes, last year's three year olds proved to be the best crop in years as evidenced by the 1-2-3-4 finish in the Breeders' Cup Classic. The difference is that California Chrome was the only top three year old to stay healthy enough to make it to the Derby. This year, the best are all here and they are a very good and "top heavy" group. The top 4 horses have won 17 of 19 career races and several horses swept their respective prep race series. The average winning odds of the 6 major prep races for the Derby this year was only 6-5, which is unheard of. It's interesting to note that, in the last 10 years, the average winning odds of the 6 major prep races were below 10 to 1 six times, the favorites won 4 of those 6 Derbies (in the two Derbies where the favorites didn't win, the race completely fell apart and illogical horses won... in 2005—Giacomo and 2009—Mine That Bird). Longshots won 3 of the 4 years in which the average winning odds were above 10 to 1. I would expect one of the favorites to win this year, unless something crazy happens and the race completely falls apart.

The discussion of this year's field needs to begin with the four clearly fastest horses... AMERICAN PHAROAH (yes, his name is misspelled, but don't tell him), DORTMUND, MATERIALITY and UPSTART. On paper, it's difficult to separate these four, but AMERICAN PHAROAH has definitely separated himself from the field with his visually impressive performance in the Arkansas Derby and his spectacular workout this week at Churchill Downs, leaving some very rational handicappers to speak irrationally and declare his workout the best they've ever seen. PHAROAH has an effortlessly long stride that makes him look like he's barely moving while blowing by everyone else. We, as a society, are desperate to see the first Triple Crown winner in 37 years; so, we may be quick to jump on a horse with this amount of talent to crown him before he earns it. This guy appears to be the real deal, but he'll have to beat the most talented group of Derby horses in years. The Derby may prove to be his toughest obstacle as his running style fits the Preakness very well and his long stride and pedigree

makes him a natural for a huge performance in the Belmont. DORTMUND is a monster (literally, he's over 17 hands), is undefeated and has been battle tested in several amazing stretch battles (with FIRING LINE twice). Like AMERICAN PHAROAH, DORTMUND is trained by Hall of Fame trainer Bob Baffert, who has won the Derby 3 times (although it's been 13 years since his last win). DORTMUND is similar in size to one of Baffert's best Triple Crown horses in the last 20 years, Point Given (who lost on Derby Day but dominated in the Preakness and Belmont). Many blamed the fact that he only had two prep races as a three year old on that Derby loss. Baffert made sure to get three solid preps into this huge son of a Derby winner (Big Brown) and he looks great, been training extremely well and loves this track as he won by over 7 lengths at Churchill Downs as a two year old. If PHAROAH doesn't fire his best shot (even if he does), expect DORTMUND to fire his best. These two Baffert horses are the ones to beat and there aren't any chinks in their armor. Will they end up being the Affirmed/Alydar of 2015?

MATERIALITY and UPSTART finished one-two, respectively, in the Florida Derby, which was rated as the fastest prep race this year. The time was actually quite slow but the track was very deep and tiring and both separated themselves by more than 12 lengths over the field. They should both be considered top contenders (although their morning line odds are 12-1 and 15-1, respectively). MATERIALITY may eventually prove to be one of the best horses in this crop, but he comes in here with question marks as he's only had three career races and is bucking the trend with no races as a two year old (no horse since Apollo in 1882 has won the Derby without a start at two). His inside post is also a concern as he'll need to gun from the gate to avoid traffic issues and may have to expend too much energy early and not have anything left for the stretch run. His trainer, Todd Pletcher, is the best the top trainer day in and day out; BUT, not on the big stage (he's something like 1 for 60 in the Derby). He enters 3 to 4 horses in the Derby each year; but, they have typically run their best races prior to the Derby and are usually "over the top" on Derby Day. Unlike Baffert, who will learn from the past and make adjustments (like adding a 3<sup>rd</sup> prep race to DORTMUND after what he learned with Point Given), Pletcher's arrogance won't allow him to do so. I'll typically bet against Pletcher in the Derby and am able to eliminate 3 to 4 horses (usually favorites) every year. I'm going to try to beat MATERIALITY on inexperience and the Pletcher Factor. Although UPSTART couldn't match strides with MATERIALITY late in the Florida Derby, UPSTART needs to be considered a top prospect as he was a very good two year old



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(finished third in the Breeders' Cup Juvenile) and has been even better as a three year old. He's as consistent as they come and should be right there in the end. The one concern is that he battled a slight illness three weeks ago and had to reschedule a workout due to a fever. Things have to go perfectly leading up to the mile and a quarter Derby; and, although he appears fine now, I'm concerned that he won't be his absolute best based on that bump in the road. It's interesting to note that a leading contender, Prospect Park, was removed from Derby consideration by his trainer due to a similar illness around the same time. I like UPSTART, but will try to beat him.

The other three major prep race winners must be considered as they all won at short odds and are very good horses. FROSTED shipped from Florida to New York to win the Wood Memorial in impressive fashion while closing into some moderate fractions. This horse may be as talented as any out there but he has had to overcome some adversity including a horrendous performance two races back when he displaced his soft palate and shut down mid-stretch. He can close for a piece of it (or all of it) if he runs his race. INTERNATIONAL STAR won all three prep races in Louisiana including the Louisiana Derby and is a son of a Derby winner (Fusaichi Pegasus). He showed the grit needed to handle the Derby's huge field with all its traffic issues by rallying up the rail and splitting horses while winning his Louisiana races. He'll be closing late. The knock is that he wasn't that impressive before he went to Louisiana and ran a dull race in his only attempt at Churchill Downs. His best is still a notch below the top horses here. Is he an improved horse? Or did he just like the water down in the Bayou? He would be a sentimental local choice as his owners, Ken & Sarah Ramsey, are top Kentucky breeders who have contributed a lot to the sport. CARPE DIEM was a very expensive (\$1.6 Million) 2 year in training purchase and has won 4 of 5 career races. His only loss was by over 6 lengths in the Breeders' Cup to Texas Red, who AMERICAN PHAROAH had just beaten by 5 lengths. CARPE has gotten faster from last year to this year, but he hasn't gotten that much faster and is still simply slower than AMERICAN PHAROAH. Couple that with his inside post position and the Pletcher factor; and, I'm taking a stand against him.

The only two other horses I would consider on the win end in this race are the winners of the *other* two final prep races (not yet considered one of the six majors)... FIRING LINE who won the Sunland Derby (the same race that 2009 Derby winner Mine That Bird won) and the UAE Derby winner, MUBTAAHIJ. FIRING

LINE just missed twice to DORTMUND and won the Sunland Derby by over 14 lengths when he finally got away from that foe. He comes into this race with confidence and with hall of fame rider, Gary Stevens (who came out of retirement two years ago to win the Preakness on Oxbow). There are very few knocks on FIRING LINE; except, I believe his pedigree is better at a mile and an eighth. This is a mile and a quarter. Will he have enough kick in the stretch once they pass the eighth pole? MUBTAAHIJ, on the other hand, has already won at a mile and three sixteenths (twice) and is bred to get every bit of a mile and a quarter. His grandfather, Dubai Millennium, was the most impressive winner of the Dubai World Cup, *ever*. Toast Of New York proved that Dubai three year old form can translate to the U.S. by coming over last year to run second in both the Pacific Classic at Del Mar and the Breeders' Cup Classic at Santa Anita. MUBTAAHIJ has a terrific late kick and may be making a big run at the end. Even if it's not enough to win the race, he may have a big say in the exotics and may be ignored on the tote board.

Here's a look at the field by running style...

*Pace Scenario:* The top five horses... AMERICAN PHAROAH, DORTMUND, MATERIALITY, CARPE DIEM and UPSTART have all run on or near the lead in their prep races, so one may think there's going to be a pace meltdown which would result in a crazy longshot winner like Mine That Bird or Giacomo. There's no crazy speed signed up unless a longshot like OCHO OCHO OCHO goes flying out from the rail or TENCENDUR sprints out to try to steal the race. Short of that, MATERIALITY will likely set the early pace with AMERICAN PHAROAH, DORTMUND, CARPE DIEM and UPSTART settling in behind. I expect 3 or 4 horses to settle in close to the pace with 4 or 5 settling into the second flight of horses and the majority of the field settling near the rear of the pack. The pace should not be too fast. I believe the winner will come from the forwardly placed groups while some closers may pass the tired frontrunners to complete the exacta or trifecta.

*Frontrunners:* With his stablemate, STANFORD, scratching after the post position draw, MATERIALITY will likely be allowed to gun out of his #3 post to establish the early lead. OCHO OCHO OCHO from the rail may show early speed as well but will not be able to match strides with the best here late. AMERICAN PHAROAH and Victor Espinoza should have plenty of time to survey the speed and pick a spot to get over towards the rail by the first turn. He'll likely be just behind the leaders with DORTMUND settling a little further back early and CARPE DIEM up



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close on the rail. UPSTART will likely follow just outside of AMERICAN PHAROAH and try to track him all the way around.

*Stalkers:* FIRING LINE, BOLO, TENCENDUR and ITSAKNOCKOUT will likely join CARPE DIEM, UPSTART and DORTMUND just behind the leaders. BOLO is an outstanding turf horse who ran well enough in the Santa Anita prep races to give the Derby a shot. BOLO is bred to run all day and can stick around long enough to get up in the top five by the end of the race. He will eventually be a better turf horse but his trainer, Carla Gaines, is giving the owners' Derby dream a shot. ITSAKNOCKOUT is a Pletcher horse that's just not fast enough to compete for the win here. The owners are capitalizing on his name to plug Saturday's big fight. He'll be a TKO victim here. TENCENDUR is a massive New York bred who ran his career best race when he ran second in the Wood Memorial to FROSTED after settling a little closer to the pace than his previous race. Expect him to settle in with this group but I'm not convinced he wants the mile and a quarter distance, so he may be back peddling when some of the others are making their moves.

*Mid-pack Closers:* MR. Z, MUBTAAHIJ, INTERNATIONAL STAR and FROSTED will likely settle in behind the stalkers a little further back in the pack. MR. Z (who along with AMERICAN PHAROAH and the late scratch, EL KABEIR, are all owned by the Zayat family, whose horses have run second in this race three times in the last 7 years) is the most experienced horse in the race with 12 starts. He's only won once but has finished in the top three in 9 of his 12 races. He's trained by the "Coach", D. Wayne Lukas, and you can never rule out the Coach. I will here, though.

*Deep Closers:* KEEN ICE, FAR RIGHT, DANZIG MOON, FRAMMENTO and WAR STORY will all settle at or near the rear of the pack and will try to make up ground late. FAR RIGHT with his jockey, Mike Smith, is the most intriguing closer in this group as he was the top horse in Arkansas until AMERICAN PHAROAH decided to roll through town and flash his brilliance in Hot Springs. He closed strongly to finish a distant second in the Arkansas Derby and broke his maiden by 5 lengths on this track as a two year old. Never rule out Mike Smith, especially on a closer. KEEN ICE is bred to get this distance and will be flying late. But, he wasn't able to make up that much ground on the long stretch in New Orleans, so I'll look for another closer to complete my exotics. DANZIG MOON has made the best impression among the longshots in Louisville this week. He is a late bloomer who could be the Commanding Curve of this year's field. His jockey, Julien Leparoux, knows his

way around the Churchill Downs oval and his trainer, Mark Casse, is making a name for himself playing on the big stage. DANZIG MOON is a dangerous longshot. FRAMMENTO got into the race at the last minute with a scratch and will wear the rare Derby number, #21. He's trained by Nick Zito, who *used to* know how to win this race and will be running at the end. The race will have to really fall apart for him to have a chance. WAR STORY is a closer who won his career debut on this track then chased INTERNATIONAL STAR in all three Louisiana prep races. He seems to like the Churchill Downs surface and should pass tired horses in the stretch under Joe Talamo.

*RACE ANALYSIS:* AMERICAN PHAROAH has created quite a buzz all week long at Churchill Downs while his undefeated stablemate, DORTMUND, has quietly been just as impressive leading up to this race. To me these are the best two horses in the race and may likely run one-two in all three Triple Crown races. The comparisons to Secretariat are hyperbole if he doesn't win this race; but, could prove prophetic if PHAROAH is the horse many believe him to be. Or is it his stablemate, DORTMUND, who will wow the nation over the next 5 weeks? For the sake of racing, let's hope these guys are that good. If so, the rest of the field is running for third place. Since the other top contenders will be on or near the lead, PHAROAH and DORTMUND can wear those horses out and open it up for longshots to come running on for third and fourth, which will boost the exotic payoffs. Who are those longshots? MUBTAAHIJ, FAR RIGHT and FROSTED seem to be the most likely beneficiaries of the top two knocking out the other speed in the race. But, don't be surprised if DANZIG MOON, KEEN ICE, FRAMMENTO or even WAR STORY get up in the top five. As fans, we can only hope to get that fun Triple Crown ride over the next five weeks. ENJOY THE RACE and ENJOY THE RIDE!!

#### **JACK'S PICKS:**

- 1. AMERICAN PHAROAH (#18)**
- 2. DORTMUND (#8)**
- 3. MUBTAAHIJ (#6)**

**LONGSHOTS: FAR RIGHT (#20) or DANZIG MOON (#5)**