

OVERVIEW

For about 20 years the favorite couldn't win the Kentucky Derby. After Spectacular Bid's 1979 win, no favorite was able to win the roses until Fusaichi Pegasus in 2000 (although my Captain Bodgit came agonizingly close as the 1997 favorite). All that has changed as the wagering favorite has won three of the last five years, including Big Brown's romp last year. Still, longshots can't be totally overlooked. 50-1 Giacomo pulled the monster upset four years ago. But this year's field of twenty horses can easily be divided into those that have a shot and those that don't.

Historically it's been easy to throw out the also-rans. Derby winners ALWAYS: raced at age two, had at least three prep races, were bred for stamina, had won a Grade I stakes, were not gelded, never raced overseas, were bred in Kentucky, blah blah and blah. One by one those rules have been blasted away the last few years. Two years ago Barbaro won off a five week layoff and last year Big Brown won in only his fourth career start. Several of this year's top contenders violate "rules" that still haven't been broken. DUNKIRK never raced at age two and FRIESAN FIRE is coming off a seven-week layoff. Both DESERT PARTY and REGAL RANSOM raced all winter not in the U.S., but in Dubai. I think the rules "still" have merit but can only be given limited weight.

While I think only six or seven horses have a shot to win, if you bet trifectas or superfectas remember that many of the laggards can pass tiring horses and clunk up for third or fourth. The payouts on these wagers have been huge for precisely that reason.

I'll assess each horse's chances, listed in post position order. The numbers are the numbers assigned for wagering purposes.

THE FIELD

#1 WEST SIDE BERNIE---This is a very nice horse who would have won the Wood Memorial four weeks ago had he not been run down in the stretch by #13 I WANT REVENGE. He's a closer that has at least some shot if he doesn't get pinned on the rail. The jockey rode Smarty Jones in his 2004 Derby win.

#2 MUSKET MAN---This horse won the Illinois Derby four weeks ago and has won five-of-six races but is being overlooked by everybody. I'm in the same club as I question whether he can get the 1 ¼ mile distance.

#3 MR. HOT STUFF---He's won only once in seven starts but his last two were in pretty strong races. He's a deep closer who could finish as high as fourth but has little chance of winning.

#4 ADVICE---Trained by Todd Pletcher, who also has one of the prime contenders in DUNKIRK. For years, when Pletcher has run two or more horses in a race, one of the more lightly regarded ones has often won. (He has three in the Derby this year.) I suppose it could happen this year but this is another deep closer who doesn't seem fast enough to win but could clunk up for third or fourth.

#5 HOLD ME BACK---Here's a contender. He made a spectacular move to win the Lane's End Stakes in March and ran decently enough three weeks ago in the Blue Grass Stakes when not fully cranked up. He's only run once on natural dirt and it was his only poor race but this is an improving horse owned by a group obsessed with winning the Derby, trained by one of the sport's best and ridden by two-time Derby winner Kent Desormeaux. He's a closer but is bred to love the race distance. He's one of two horses (DESERT PARTY's the other) that won their career debuts last summer at our "local" track, Arlington Park.

#6 FRIESAN FIRE---He's one of the "rulebreakers." He hasn't run since winning the Louisiana Derby seven weeks ago and he's never run longer than 1 1/16 miles. That would normally make him a tossout but trainer Larry Jones is a Derby savant. He has finished second in this race two years in a row, including last year with the ill-fated filly Eight Belles. Jones also won the Kentucky Oaks last year. I mention all of this because the Derby and Oaks are unique races that require perfect planning by the trainer. This horse put in an astonishingly fast workout Monday in under: 58 seconds. The last horse to do that during Derby week? Hard Spun two years ago. His trainer? Jones. Hard Spun ran great and finished second. FRIESAN is bred to handle the distance and romped in his last win on a sloppy track so any moisture is a plus. The animal nuts and horse-ignorant mainstream media idiotically blamed Jones for Eight Belles' fatal breakdown last year. It would be justice if he won the Derby this year to stick it in their faces.

#7 PAPA CLEM---He won the Arkansas Derby three weeks ago but looked utterly exhausted in the winners circle. I doubt he'll bounce back this quickly. He does have some early tactical speed, an asset in a race that seems to lack any real speed.

#8 MINE THAT BIRD---If this horse wins, I'll never bet on another race and will vote for Jim Doyle for reelection.

#9 JOIN IN THE DANCE---This is another Pletcher trainee but the least accomplished of the bunch. He'll be one of the pacesetters before fading.

#10 REGAL RANSOM---Along with #5 HOLD ME BACK, this is one of my two favorite longshots. Lone speed is the strongest handicapping angle in horse racing. REGAL might not be on the lead but he is the best speed horse by far. He won't get bet because he spent the winter racing Dubai. That is a grave mistake. His debut race last summer at Saratoga was spectacular. He finished second twice this winter in Dubai and then won when they stretched out to 1 1/8 miles. He is bred almost perfectly for a modern-day Derby horse. He raced at age two at a very high level, has three prep races this year and excels at route races. That's the Derby winning formula, folks. Eventually the Maktoums of Dubai, who buy up virtually all of our best young horses, will win the Derby. It might be this year. Do not ignore this horse. Please.

#11 CHOCOLATE CANDY---He finished second to #16 PIONEER OF THE NILE in his last and that horse will be heavily bet. This horse is a deep closer who has been improving with every race. But he hasn't run anywhere near fast enough yet to contend.

#12 GENERAL QUARTERS---Here's this year's feel-good story. The owner has exactly one horse and he's the trainer. He's a 75-year old ex-principal from Louisville. It's impossible not to root for them and the horse has won two excellent stakes races this spring. He has a very strong jockey and the right running style. I think he's a tad below the top horses but further improvement could give him a chance.

#13 I WANT REVENGE---His trainer is a notorious cheater who was caught drugging a horse in the detention barn at Aqueduct four weeks ago. Only the incredible tolerance shown by racing regulators to greaseballs like this keep him from being suspended for the Derby. That being said, no horse has run as impressively as I WANT REVENGE. He won the Wood Memorial after missing the break by five lengths and getting blocked in heavy traffic at the top of the stretch. He's put together two tremendous races in a row and is the race favorite. I wonder, however, if the incredible run in the Wood knocked him backwards and whether his trainer will be able to get away with his shenanigans under the Derby spotlight. He might win but I think others are more likely. (NOTE: Last year's Derby winner, Big Brown, also had the most impressive races and was trained by a cheater. That may be an omen that REVENGE will win.)

#14 ATOMIC RAIN---He finished only four lengths behind I WANT REVENGE in the aforementioned Wood Memorial and might show further improvement. He'll race close to the pace but is likelier than not to fade in the stretch.

#15 DUNKIRK---He's run only three races and all have been spectacular. His last was a loss to Quality Road in the Florida Derby and Quality would have been the Derby favorite had he not been knocked out by a hoof injury. Trainer Pletcher has been hounded for years about his ability to win every American race except the Derby. He really wants it with this horse. His preparation has been unique. They've kept him in Florida to train and he didn't arrive in Kentucky until Tuesday. All reports indicate his training in Florida was excellent. He earned an enormous speed figure in his last race and has been given five weeks to recover. Here's the biggest catch. DUNKIRK's first race was in January. The last time a horse won the Kentucky Derby without racing at age two was back in '82. Not 1982. 1882. That's 127 years ago. Still, as I mentioned above, "rules" like this have been falling the last few Derbys. If you want the best horse, here he is. But you know what---the best horse often loses this race.

#16 PIONEER OF THE NILE---He's won four in a row, all in California and all against top competition. But they don't race on dirt out there so it's hard to say if he'll be able to transfer his form from the artificial surface to Churchill's dirt. Besides, his speed figures have been only modest. But he dusted I WANT REVENGE twice and that one is the likely race favorite. Trainer Bob Baffert has won the Derby three times and jockey Garrett Gomez is the best in America. Look for this horse to sit about five lengths off the lead and try to make a move going into the far turn. One thing seems certain: he'll be ridden masterfully.

#17 SUMMER BIRD---This horse came out of nowhere to finish a strong third behind PAPA CLEM in the Arkansas Derby in only his third career start. He's too lightly seasoned to win but this is one of those that has a good chance to get up for third or fourth while going off at huge odds.

#18 NOWHERE TO HIDE---Nick Zito, a two-time Derby winner and constant presence in Triple Crown races, is this horse's trainer. But this horse has only one win and hasn't been close in any stakes races.

#19 DESERT PARTY---This is the second of the Dubai horses and is the more highly regarded. But his best runs have come in shorter races and his three starts in the U.S. last year were solid but not brilliant. I prefer the other Dubai horse, #10 REGAL RANSOM.

#20 FLYING PRIVATE---Trainer D. Wayne Lukas used to be a force in the Kentucky Derby. But this horse will go off at about 45-1 and deservedly so.

PREDICTION

HORSE

PROGRAM ODDS

#6 FRIESAN FIRE	5-1
#15 DUNKIRK	4-1
#5 HOLD ME BACK	15-1
#10 REGAL RANSOM	30-1
#13 I WANT REVENGE	3-1
#16 PIONEEROF THE NILE	4-1
#11 CHOCOLATE CANDY	20-1
#1 WEST SIDE BERNIE	30-1
#12 GENERAL QUARTERS	20-1
#3 MR. HOT STUFF	30-1
#4 ADVICE	30-1

ANALYSIS

The above horses are the only ones I give any shot of winning. It is very likely, in my opinion, the winner will be one of the top six. I settled on FRIESAN FIRE as my top choice because of his big workout Monday and trainer Jones' great success in the Derby. He's a narrow pick over ultra-talented DUNKIRK. But my next two choices, HOLD ME BACK and REGAL RANSOM will present better wagering value. REGAL RANSOM will have the jump on all of them and HOLD ME BACK will make the latest run of all. This year's field is very strong. Whoever wins will have a legitimate chance at being the first Triple Crown winner in 31 years.

WAGERING SUGGESTIONS

Play an exacta using my top four choices over my top six. That'll cost \$20 for every \$1 bet.

Play a trifecta the same way. That's \$80 for every \$1 bet. Another trifecta idea is to take my top four and put them in the first two slots with all eleven in the third slot. That whopper costs \$81 for every \$1.

Want to spend less money? Pick one of my top six to win and place and hope for the best.

Here's my biggest bet. I intend to play a daily double starting in Race 10, the Turf Classic, using #1, 2, 4 and 6 with my top six Derby picks. That's \$48 for every \$2 bet.

Then I'll make the same bet using only #2 in Race 10 with only top four in the Derby. That's \$8 for every \$2 bet.

Those are just ideas. Come up with your own based on your budget and tolerance for risk. There are a lot of ways to skin this cat. Take a flyer on the superfecta. It always seems to top \$5,000 in the Derby for a mere \$1 bet and is sometimes much higher.

LIKELIEST WINNER OF THE DAY AT CHURCHILL DOWNS

#5 ZIEGFELD in Race 4 (goes off at 11:04 in the morning central time)

BEST LONGSHOT OF THE DAY AT CHURCHILL

I love two bombers:

#4 OROGENIC in Race 3 (get up early; it goes off at 10:30 in the morning)

and

#2 EL CABALLO in Race 10, The Turf Classic (post time for this one is 3:50 in the afternoon)

WHERE TO BET

Potawatomi now has off-track betting as do Oneida in Green Bay and Ho-Chunk in Baraboo. You can also bet at Dairyland Greyhound Park in Kenosha. You can bet all the Churchill races and watch live racing at Arlington Park, northwest of Chicago. There are several OTBs in northern Illinois.

TV

ESPN will show Races 4-10 at Churchill Downs with coverage starting at 11 am. NBC's coverage on Channel 4 runs from 3-6. The Derby itself (Race 11) goes off at 5:24 (all times central).