TRIO OF KENTUCKY DERBY RUNNERS RETURN TO THE TRACK AT CHURCHILL DOWNS

LOUISVILLE, Ky. (Wednesday, May 10, 2017) – Three horses that chased Always Dreaming to the finish line in last Saturday’s 143rd running of the Kentucky Derby Presented by Yum! Brands (Grade I) returned to the track on a warm Wednesday morning at Churchill Downs.

John Oxley’s Classic Empire, the morning-line favorite for the Derby who finished fourth, jogged at 6 a.m. (all times Eastern) under regular exercise rider Martin Rivera. Trained by Mark Casse, the champion 2-year-old of 2016 is scheduled to gallop Thursday and leave for Baltimore by van Sunday for a run in the May 20 Preakness (GI).

Trainer Steve Asmussen had his two Preakness probable starters out also before the break. Calumet Farm’s Hence, 11th in the Derby, was first out and was followed a bit later by Derby runner-up Lookin At Lee, owned by L and N Racing. Both colts galloped one mile and are scheduled to breeze Monday before flying to Baltimore on Tuesday.

“I’ve been very pleased with how they came out of the race,” Asmussen said. “Very impressed with their energy level and how they’re traveling.

“A lot of credit needs to go to the racing surface, the trackman (Jamie Richardson) and the crew for the job they did under very trying circumstances weather-wise — from what I’ve read how good everybody has come out of the race. I’m dumbfounded with how well my horses came out of the race considering the circumstances. Horses at this level, under those circumstances, the track deserves some credit. As worried about it as we were, and we come out of the race with so much horse — amazing. Considering how fast they go, what time of year it is and circumstances they ran on, the racetrack deserves a lot of credit. It was not ideal, and everybody is happy with their horses’ condition.”

Asmussen said repeatedly after the Kentucky Derby’s post-position draw that, as unproductive as the No. 1 post has been in the race the past several years, that Lookin At Lee was the sort of horse that could handle it. (Note: Lookin At Lee was the first horse to break from post 1 in and finish in the Top 3 since Risen Star was third in 1988.)

“You know the statistics from the one hole, and you’ve watched the race and how troubling the crowding can be or whatever. I did not consider the lack of room for the horse individually in the paddock to saddle — just as much as covering him up in front (in the race). You had to move people out just to get him in it (the stall) to saddle. That was a bit surprising. But Lookin At Lee was the perfect horse for it. He hung out there, waited his turn and was ready to go when they called upon him.

“On normal days, you don’t saddle (the No. 1 horse) until about three or four stalls down. The outriders’ horses are in the first few spots. You’re down a ways. You don’t use all 20 stalls except for the Derby. But the one hole for the Derby, with the (paddock) gate right there and the amount of people, the celebrity making the ‘riders up’ call and all the camera crews are directly in front of the horse in the one. It takes a good personality – Lookin At Lee’s temperament – for that not to alarm them a bit.”

Peacock Racing Stables’ Gunnevera went to the track shortly before 9 a.m. with exercise rider Victor O’Farrell aboard. The colt backtracked alongside a pony to the starting gate, turned around and jogged to the five-eighths pole before galloping an easy mile.

Gunnevera, who returned to the track Tuesday morning for the first since his seventh-place Derby finish, is scheduled to leave by van for Pimlico Race Course in Baltimore early Saturday morning.

After dark days Sunday-Wednesday, racing at Churchill Downs will resume on “Twilight Thursday” with an eight-race program at 5 p.m. that features $1 beer, live music and offerings from some of Louisville’s finest food trucks.

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