CLASSIC EMPIRE RETURNS TO CHURCHILL DOWNS TO PREP FOR BELMONT STAKES

LOUISVILLE, Ky. (Thursday, May 25, 2017) – John Oxley’s Classic Empire, who lost Saturday’s $1.5 million Preakness (Grade I) by a head two weeks after finishing fourth in the $2,395,800 Kentucky Derby Presented by Yum! Brands (GI), is scheduled to begin his preparations for the June 10 Belmont Stakes (GI) with a Friday morning jog at Churchill Downs.

“We are really proud of his Preakness effort,” assistant trainer Norm Casse said. “He came out of the race in great shape and we’re excited to get him back to training.”

The Casse’s are unsure as to when Classic Empire would ship to New York or if he would breeze at Churchill Downs or Belmont.

“We’ll have to look into the plane schedule,” Casse said. “We have a lot of horses at our Churchill division who will run in stakes races that weekend, so there are some logistical questions we need to figure out first.”

After encountering trouble at the start of the Kentucky Derby and running 12 lengths off of the early pace at the half-mile pole, Classic Empire was forwardly placed in the Preakness tracking Derby winner Always Dreaming. Classic Empire opened a three-length lead at the top of the stretch but was caught in the final stages by Cloud Computing.

J Boys Echo, who also is based at Churchill Downs, added his name to the Belmont probable field. Owned by Albaugh Family Stables and trained by Louisville-native Dale Romans, the 3-year-old son of Mineshaft finished 15th in the Derby.

The possible Belmont Stakes field (with jockeys): Classic Empire (Julien Leparoux), Conquest Mo Money (TBA), Epicharis (Christophe Lemaire), Gormley (Victor Espinoza), Irap (Mario Gutierrez), J Boys Echo (TBA), Lookin At Lee (TBA), Meantime (TBA), Multiplier (TBA), Patch (TBA), Senior Investment (Channing Hill), Tapwrit (Jose Ortiz) and Twisted Tom (TBA).

HONORABLE DUTY SEEKS REDEMPTION IN STEPHEN FOSTER – DAARS Inc.’s Honorable Duty, most recently runner-up in the Alysheba (Grade II) on the May 5 Kentucky Oaks undercard, will test his hand in the $500,000 Stephen Foster Handicap (GI) on Saturday, June 17.

“He’s been fantastic this year,” trainer Brendan Walsh said. “He really hasn’t done anything wrong.”

The 5-year-old gelding by Distorted Humor capped off his 2016 campaign with a three-quarter-length victory at Fair Grounds in the Tenacious Stakes. Honorable Duty continued his winning ways in the Big Easy to start the year with a half-length triumph in the Mineshaft Handicap (GIII) and a neck victory in the New Orleans Handicap (GII). In the Alysheba, Honorable Duty closed ground late but finished 1 ½ lengths behind Bird Song.

“He ran a super race in the Alysheba,” Walsh said. “That was really solid second to Bird Song, who is a very nice horse for Ian (Wilkes). We’ve been taking it easy on him since that race but he’s doing really well.”

The Stephen Foster Handicap is expected to attract Dubai World Cup (GI) runner-up Gun Runner, as well as Alysheba winner Bird Song. Nominations close June 3.

TORRES ANXIOUS FOR RETURN TO SADDLE – Jockey Francisco Torres, who was injured March 30 at Fair Grounds, is expected to return to the saddle at the beginning of the Ellis Park meet on July 1, according to his agent Derek Ducoing.

“He’s doing well,” Ducoing said. “If everything keeps going to plan, he’ll be back in the saddle in about five-to-six weeks.”

Torres, 48, fractured his C-6 vertebra and tailbone as a result from a spill at Fair Grounds and has been recovering at his home in Chicago.

This is the fourth neck fracture Torres has suffered in his 28-year career as a jockey.

Torres has won 3,188 races and his mounts have amassed $68,661,344.

WORK TAB – Rain was in the Louisville area Thursday morning so many trainers took advantage of Wednesday’s dry track conditions. Seeking a repeat victory in June 3 Mighty Beau, the Greg Foley-trained Latent Revenge blitzed through a half-mile in :46.20, the fastest of 32 workers at the distance. … Trainer Wes Hawley’s multiple graded stakes placed Hawaakom breezed an easy half-mile in :50.80. … The 2016 Winning Colors (GIII) dead-heat winner I’m A Looker breezed a half-mile in :49.20. … The complete Churchill Downs work tab is available here: churchildowns.com/horsemen/racing/workouts.
FINLEY'SLUCKYCHARM MADE ODDS-ON 3-5 FAVORITE FOR SATURDAY'S WINNING COLORS – Churchill Downs' morning line odds maker Mike Battaglia has made trainer Bret Calhoun's crack female sprinter Finley'sluckycharm the odds-on 3-5 early favorite for Saturday's 14th running of the $100,000 Winning Colors (Grade III) against seven other fillies and mares.

The field for the six-furlong Winning Colors from the rail out (with jockeys and morning line odds): Mayla (Ricardo Santana Jr., 15-1), Sweetgrass (James Graham, 4-1), Covey Trace (Gabriel Saez, 30-1), Ramona's Wildcat (Declan Cannon, 20-1), Game Time Decision (Corey Lanerie, 15-1), Finley'sluckycharm (Brian Hernandez Jr., 3-5), Athena (Joe Rocco Jr., 4-1) and Pleasant Tales (Miguel Mena, 12-1).

Saturday's co-feature is the fifth running of the $65,000-added Keertana Overnight Stakes, a 1 ½-mile turf marathon for fillies and mares. The Keertana field: Daring Duchess (Julien Leparoux, 7-2), Northern Smile (Miguel Mena, 8-1), Yahtzee Queen (Gabriel Saez, 30-1), Rachel Wall (James Graham, 4-1), Grey Stark (Joe Rocco Jr., 7-2), Majestic Angel (Jack Gilligan, 15-1), Giovanna Blues (Corey Lanerie, 5-1), and Quiet Business (Brian Hernandez Jr., 3-1).

The Winning Colors goes as Race 10 at approximately 5:21 p.m. and the Keertana is the fifth race at approximately 2:43 p.m.

MEET LEADERS: LANERIE, CALDWELL TOP JOCKEY, TRAINER STANDINGS – Churchill Downs' 12-time champion jockey Corey Lanerie and Texas native J.R. Caldwell begin the week atop the Louisville, Ky. racetrack's jockey and trainer standings. Through the first 14 days of the 38-day Spring Meet, Lanerie had ridden 23 winners, while Caldwell had saddled 10 winners.

Leading jockeys by wins (with record): Lanerie (108-23-22-16—$1,328,030), Brian Hernandez Jr. (71-15-14-14—$738,120), Florent Geroux (69-12-5-12—$925,117), Ricardo Santana Jr. (49-11-6-4—$310,394) and James Graham (62-10-9-6—$362,334).

Leading trainers: Caldwell (15-10-1-1—$153,435), Brad Cox (32-8-2-5—$620,056), Steve Asmussen (42-7-4-6—$689,372), Mark Casse (36-6-4-3—$564,967), Brendan Walsh (17-6-3-2—$283,641) and Ian Wilkes (28-6-2-5—$500,227).

There's a four-way tie atop the owner's standings and each has three wins: Asmussen, Keene Thoroughbreds LLC, John C. Oxley and Whitham Thoroughbreds LLC.

Ship Disturber, who won for a $7,500 claiming tag on May 11 and a $5,000 tag on Sunday for Caldwell, is the lone two-time winner of the meet. “Scooter” Dickey prevailed in a six-way shake for the 5-year-old gelding and takes over his training for co-owner John Impellizzeri.

DOWN THE STRETCH – With rain in the area late Wednesday and into Thursday morning, Thursday's sixth and eighth races have been taken off the turf and transferred to the main track, which was labeled “sloppy.” The rain was forecasted to move out and track superintendent Jamie Richardson believes the track condition could be upgraded before post time thanks to westerly winds of 14-16 mph. … There is a $37,964 carryover in the 20-cent Single 6 Jackpot Thursday at Churchill Downs. The sequence starts in Race 3 with an approximate post time of 5:58 p.m. (all times Eastern). … Trainer Steve Asmussen is two wins away from reaching 600 victories at Churchill Downs and “Buff” Bradley is one win away from 100 victories at Churchill Downs. … Nominations for the $65,000-added Mighty Beau Overnight Stakes, a five-furlong turf sprint for 3-year-olds and up on June 3, and the $100,000 Old Forester Mint Julep Handicap (GIll), for fillies and mares 3-years-old and up at 1 1/16 miles on turf on June 10, close Saturday. … With Memorial Day on Monday, Churchill Downs will have a special five-day holiday week of racing (with first race post time, number of races): Thursday (5 p.m., 8 races), Friday (12:45 p.m., 9 races), Saturday (12:45 p.m., 11 races), Sunday (12:45 p.m., 10 races) and Memorial Day Monday (12:45 p.m., 11 races). … The Twilight Thursday abbreviated eight-race program is highlighted by $1 draft beers, food trucks, live music on the Plaza stages by funk band Curio Key Club and a Wagering 101 tent for betting advice. … “Inside Churchill Downs,” co-hosted by Churchill Downs Racetrack’s John Asher, Darren Rogers and Kevin Kerstein, airs Saturday throughout the Spring Meet from 10-11 a.m. on ESPN 680/105.7. … Sunday features a Stakes & Eggs brunch in the Stakes Room for $45 ($22 for children). … In celebration of Memorial Day on Monday, all active and retired members of the United States armed forces will be admitted free of charge. Also, Churchill Downs’ bugler Steve Buttleman will perform patriotic melodies following the “Call to the Post” for each race.

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