DOWNS AFTER DARK, STEPHEN FOSTER HANDICAP RETURN SATURDAY NIGHT

LOUISVILLE, Ky. (Sunday, June 11, 2017) – One of Louisville’s biggest summer parties returns in earnest to Churchill Downs on Saturday as the home of the Kentucky Derby welcomes back its wildly-popular “Downs After Dark Presented by Stella Artois and el Jimador” nighttime racing program for Stephen Foster Handicap night.

A perfect blend of an upscale night on the town with the excitement of Thoroughbred racing, Saturday’s action-packed “Downs After Dark” marquee will feature 11 races in prime time and under the lights, headlined by the 36th running of $500,000 Stephen Foster Handicap Presented by GE Appliances (Grade I) – one the nation’s premier events for older horses. The 1 1/8-mile Foster is the richest of five graded stakes races on an evening that will feature total purses in excess of $1.3 million, making it the most lucrative racing day for horsemen at Churchill Downs outside of the Kentucky Derby and Kentucky Oaks programs.

The Foster headliner is expected to be Gun Runner, who is rated fourth on the Longines World’s Best Racehorse Rankings. Owned by Winchell Thoroughbreds and Three Chimneys Farm, trained by Hall of Famer Steve Asmussen and regularly ridden by Florent Geroux, 4-year-old Gun Runner won last fall’s Clark Handicap Presented by Norton Healthcare (Grade I) winner and was runner-up to top-ranked Arrogate in March’s Dubai World Cup (GI). Overall, the Kentucky-bred son of Candy Ride (ARG) has a 14-7-3-2 record with $4,337,800 in earnings.

Gun Runner’s expected rivals include Bird Song and Honorable Duty, who ran 1-2 in the $400,000 Alysheba Presented by Big Fish Casino (GII) on the Kentucky Oaks undercard; Canadian invader Breaking Lucky, who ran second to Gun Runner in the Clark; last year’s Charles Town Classic (GII) and Harlan’s Holiday (GIII) winner Stanford; and Mo Tom, winner of last year’s Lecomte (GIII) and Ohio Derby.

The other “Downs After Dark” graded stakes are the $200,000 Fleur de Lis Handicap Presented by el Jimador (GII) for fillies and mares at 1 1/8 miles featuring a rematch between $300,000 La Troienne Presented by Spirited Funds (GI) top two Big World and Romantic Vision; the $200,000 Wise Dan (GII) for 3-year-olds and up at 1 1/16 miles on turf led by defending champ Pleuven (Fr); the $100,000 Matt Winn (GIII) for 3-year-olds at 1 1/16 miles led by defending champion McCraken, who finished eighth in the Kentucky Derby (GI) at odds of 6-1; and the $100,000 Regret Presented by Cox’s Smokers Outlet (GIII) for 3-year-old fillies at 1 1/8 miles on grass, which is expected to attract the third and fourth-place finishers in the $150,000 Edgewood Presented by Forcht Bank (GIII) on Kentucky Oaks Day, Sweeping Paddy and Proctor’s Ledge, respectively.

Entries for the races will be taken Wednesday morning.

Both the Foster and Fleur de Lis are part of the Breeders’ Cup “Win and You’re In” Challenge Series which means the winners will be assured berths in the $6 million Breeders’ Cup Classic (GI) and $2 million Longines Breeders’ Cup Distaff starting gates, respectively, this November at Del Mar. The Foster is the first U.S. “Win and You’re In” for the 1 ¼-mile Classic.

NBCSN will be onsite live from 8:30-10 p.m. to launch its 2017 “Breeders’ Cup Challenge Series: Win and You’re In, presented by Lane’s End Farm and America’s Best Racing” television schedule. Also, Horse Racing Radio Network (HRRN) will air live coverage from 8-10 p.m. ET online at www.horseracingradio.net.

The theme for Saturday night’s “Downs After Dark” is “South Beach” and guests are encouraged to dress in Miami-inspired bright colors.

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Select connections from Team Always Dreaming – owners MeB Racing Stables (Mary Ellen Bonomo), Brooklyn Boyz Stables (Anthony Bonomo), Teresa Viola Racing Stables, St. Elias Stable (Vincent Viola), Siena Farm LLC (Anthony Manganaro) and West Point Thoroughbreds (Terry Finley), breeders Santa Rosa Partners, trainer Todd Pletcher and jockey John Velazquez – will be on hand to accept their newly-engraved Kentucky Derby 143 trophies for the Bodemeister colt’s triumph in America’s greatest race on May 6. The ceremony in the G.H. MUMM Winner’s Circle, which includes an unveiling of the official event logo for the 2018 Kentucky Derby, is tentatively scheduled to follow Race 5 just after 8 p.m.

Fans in attendance will be able to take pictures with Always Dreaming’s engraved Kentucky Derby 143 trophies as they’ll be on display on the north side of the paddock in the Plaza area from 5-7 p.m.

General admission to Churchill Downs is $10 on Saturday night. Box seats are $25 and reserved dining packages are $70. New this year is the Guest Chef Series @ Millionaire's Row, which will showcase Chef Anthony Lamas of Louisville’s popular Latin restaurant Seviche. The $149 tickets include a specially-designed menu by Lamas and a full-bar package featuring specialty cocktails by el Jimador Tequila. All ticket options can be purchased online at www.ChurchillDowns.com/Tickets.

The evening’s entertainment includes music on the Plaza Stage courtesy of Milenio Salsa Band from 7:30-11 p.m., Salsa dance demonstrations, cocktail demonstrations by el Jimador, a “James Beard Culinary Challenge” and “Bet or No Bet” where four lucky fans can take $100 in cash or place a free $1,000 win bet on a horse in Races 6-9. The party will be elevated to new levels at 11 p.m. when popular DJ A-trak mixes sounds on the turntable until midnight on the Plaza Stage.

Admission gates will open Saturday at 5 p.m. and the first of 11 races will begin at 6 p.m. (all times Eastern). The final live race will be 11:10 p.m. but the on-track party will continue in the spacious Plaza area until midnight.

BREEDERS’ CUP BETTING CHALLENGE QUALIFIER ON STEPHEN FOSTER HANDICAP NIGHT – Some of the nation’s elite horseplayers will descend upon Churchill Downs on Saturday night as they pit their handicapping skills against the best Louisville has to offer and attempt to secure seats at the 2017 Breeders’ Cup Betting Challenge.

Churchill Downs’ Breeders’ Cup Betting Challenge Live Bankroll Qualifier is a “real money” handicapping tournament with a $2,000 buy-in, of which $1,500 will be used by participants to wager on Saturday night’s 11-race Stephen Foster Handicap card with the other $500 going toward the entry fee and prize pool. Wager types permitted are Win, Place, Show, Exacta, Trifecta and Daily Double only.

The top two finishers in the satellite tournament will receive $10,000 Breeders’ Cup Betting Challenge seats for the Nov. 3-4 event at Del Mar plus a $1,000 travel voucher. The third-place finisher will receive a $2,500 partial BCBC entry and $500 travel voucher.

Saturday’s prize pool is based on 50 entries. All entry fees will be paid back to prize pool should more than 50 entries participate. Horseplayers can register by emailing Gary Palmisano at Gary.Palmisano@KyDerby.com.

Same as the qualifier, the BCBC is a “real money” handicapping challenge. Players will required to deposit $10,000, of which $7,500 will be the players’ bankroll for wagering during the tournament. Of the $10,000 buy-in, $2,500 will be placed in the prize pool. If 400 players enter the tournament, the cash prize pool paid will be $1 million.

WILKES PREPARES CONTINGENT FOR STEPHEN FOSTER NIGHT STAKES – Trainer Ian Wilkes is gearing up for a busy Stephen Foster Handicap night with five entrants in four different stakes races.

Wilkes is scheduled to lead the charge with Alysheba (Grade I) winner Bird Song as he is set to take on Dubai World Cup (GI) runner-up Gun Runner in the $500,000 Stephen Foster Handicap Presented by GE Appliances (GI).

Bird Song breezed five furlongs in 1:02 Sunday morning at Churchill Downs. Regular rider Julien Leparoux has the call again on Saturday night.

“He’s a speedy horse,” Wilkes said. “We can’t really worry about anyone else in the race, just run to what we’re good at doing. We know the talent level of some of the other competitors but at the end of the day we just need to do our thing and hope it works.”

Janis Whitham’s Walkabout, a 4-year-old daughter by Stoll, is set to ride a two-race win streak into the $200,000 Fleur de Lis Handicap Presented by el Jimador (GII) after breezing five furlongs in 1:01.40 at 6 a.m. Sunday.

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“She’s an improving filly,” Wilkes said. “She’s really been coming into her own as of late. Her last win in the Matron (GIII) was very gutsy. Whenever we have a homebred for Mrs. Whitham, we get excited to run them in a race like this. She’s done so much for the game and this filly has been doing very well.”

A star on the Road to the Kentucky Derby, McCraken disappointed after finishing eighth in the Kentucky Derby (GI) but Wilkes is excited to have the 3-year-old colt by Ghostzapper back on track for the $100,000 Matt Winn (GIII).

“He’s been doing great,” Wilkes said. “It was very frustrating with the cut he suffered in the Derby. It took a long time to heal and get him back to where he’s comfortable. It’s still not completely healed but it doesn’t bother him at all to run. We were once at the top of the 3-year-old list but now we need to prove ourselves again.”

McCraken, ridden by regular jockey Brian Hernandez Jr., breezed five furlongs in 1:00.20 inside of stablemate Fifth Title at 7:15 a.m. Sunday.

Wilkes has a pair of entrants scheduled for the $200,000 Wise Dan (GII) in multiple graded stakes-placed Bondurant (McCraken’s older half-brother) and 2016 River City Handicap (GIII) winner Thatcher Street.

“Both of these horses have been doing well,” Wilkes said. “Bondurant does his best running late. We’ll have to see who enters in the race and what the pace scenario looks like on paper.”

Bondurant breezed five furlongs at 6:45 a.m. Sunday at Churchill Downs in 1:00.20.

Wilkes’ other Wise Dan entrant, 6-year-old gelding Thatcher Street, is based at Skylight Training Center, located about 30 miles east of Churchill Downs in Goshen, Ky.

“Thatcher Street just thrives at Skylight,” Wilkes said. “We have a string of horses there and it’s so different than the hustle and bustle of all the horses stabled at Churchill. Some horses just seem to do better that way and he’s always loved it out there.”

Wilkes began Sunday tied with Tom Amoss for fourth in the Churchill Downs trainer standings with 11 wins. Steve Asmussen leads the way with 15 victories and Brad Cox and Brendan Walsh are tied for second with 12 wins apiece.

With two stakes win at the meet – Bird Song in the Alysheba and Walkabout in the Matron – Wilkes became only the 15th trainer in Churchill Downs history to win 20 career stakes races at the home of the Kentucky Derby.

HOWARD HOPES FOR BRIGHT FUTURE WITH STONETACULAR – Stoneway Farm’s Stonetacular seeks back-to-back victories in Sunday’s fourth race allowance feature at Churchill Downs for trainer Neil Howard.

Listed at 8-5 on Mike Battaglia’s morning line, Stonetacular was most recently a wire-to-wire winner in an allowance event on May 5 at Churchill Downs.

“She’s a very nice horse,” Howard said. “We were excited to get that win on Kentucky Oaks Day with her. We could’ve easily run her in stakes company in this start but I want to take my time with her. I want to get her past these conditions this afternoon and we’ll look at bigger races down the road. She’s really been training great and Brian (Hernandez Jr.) fits her well.”

Stonetacular, a 3-year-old filly by Speightstown, has never been worse than second in four career starts with $83,200 in earnings.

STAKES PROBABILES – Next Saturday’s “Downs After Dark” 11-race program is highlighted by the $500,000 Stephen Foster Handicap Presented by GE Appliances (GI) and $200,000 Fleur de Lis Handicap Presented by el Jimador (GII). Both races are part of the Breeders’ Cup “Win and You’re In” Challenge Series. The winner of the Stephen Foster receives an automatic berth to the Nov. 4 Breeders’ Cup Classic while the Fleur de Lis victor receives a starting gate spot in the Breeders’ Cup Distaff on Nov. 3. This year’s Breeders’ Cup will take place at Del Mar in Southern California.

Along with the Stephen Foster and Fleur de Lis, the 11-race card offers three other graded stakes events. Below are the known probable entrants for all five races and assigned weights for the Stephen Foster Handicap and Fleur de Lis Handicap, according to Churchill Downs stakes coordinator Dan Bork:

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Stephen Foster Handicap (with assigned weights): Gun Runner (124), Bird Song (119 pounds), Honorable Duty (119), Breaking Lucky (117), Stanford (117) and Mo Tom (115).

Fleur de Lis (with assigned weights): Big World (121), Walkabout (120), Romantic Vision (118), Carrumba (117) and Weep No More (116). Possible: Divine Elegance (116).

$200,000 Wise Dan (GII): Bondurant, Conquest Panthera, Pleuven (FR) and Thatcher Street.


$100,000 Regret Presented by Cox’s Smokers Outlet (GIII): Anothertequilashot, Chubby Star, Fizzy Friday (GB), La Manta Gris, Like a Hurricane, Proctor’s Ledge, Sameeha, Savannah Belle and Sweeping Paddy.

Entries for Saturday’s races will be taken Wednesday.

MILESTONE WATCH – Jockey Julien Leparoux is one win away from 800 career victories at Churchill Downs while trainer “Buff” Bradley is one win away from 100 career victories beneath the Twin Spires. Bradley has three scheduled runners in races six, nine and 10. Leparoux is riding at Belmont Park on Sunday but is named on four horses Thursday at Churchill Downs. … Trainer Dale Romans (688 victories) is 13 wins behind Churchill Downs’ all-time leading trainer Bill Mott (701).

DOWN THE STRETCH – There is a $62,761 carryover in the 20-cent Single-6 Jackpot Sunday on races 5-10 at Churchill Downs and a $6,694 carryover in the $1 Super Hi-5 in Race 10. … The “Who’s the Champ? Handicapping Contest” returns Sunday. Interested participants can enter for $35 ($30 for TSC Elite members) for a chance to win a $1,000 cash voucher first prize by placing mythical $2 win and place bets on Races 3-8. Second place receives a $500 voucher and third place is worth a $200 voucher. Registration takes place between 11:30 a.m. and 1:30 p.m. at the top of the Gate 17 escalators. … Saturday’s “Downs After Dark” is the centerpiece of an action-packed, four-day, Thursday-Sunday racing week at Churchill Downs. Post times each day: Thursday (5 p.m.), Friday (12:45 p.m.), Saturday (6 p.m.) and Sunday (12:45 p.m.). … The Twilight Thursday abbreviated eight-race program starts at 5 p.m. and is highlighted by $1 beers, food trucks (Red Top Gourmet Hot Dogs, Pollo, 502 Café, Mark’s Feed Store and Zoom Zoom Yum), live music on the Plaza stage by Louisville’s Frederick the Younger and a Wagering 101 tent for betting advice. … Churchill Downs is offering a special $15 Father’s Day Combo for Sunday, which includes a reserved box seat, official program and a voucher for a domestic draft beer or souvenir soda and a hot dog. Tickets can be purchased online at www.ChurchillDowns.com/Tickets.