



147th Longines Kentucky Oaks

Post-Race News Conference
Friday, April 30, 2021
Churchill Downs



JIM MULVIHILL: The winner of the 147th Longines Kentucky Oaks was Malathaat. And a very emotional victory. We're happy to be joined now by winning trainer, Todd Pletcher, Rick Nichols of Shadwell Farm. Congratulations to you both.

TODD PLETCHER: Thank you.

RICK NICHOLS: Thank you.

JIM MULVIHILL: We will talk about the emotions of the day in a second. First, if we can just go through the running of the race. Todd, if you would take us through it.

TODD PLETCHER: I thought I would jinx myself because I commented coming over that Her dam finished fourth in this race and got off to a really poor start, got basically eliminated. When she didn't jump real well the first stride or two and then got jostled around, I was concerned we were going to have the same misfortune we had with her dam.

I thought Johnny made a key decision to quickly try to get her back into position after that. And I felt a lot better after about a 16th of a mile once he got to a good stalking position, had her in the clear, and had her in a rhythm. Then it was just a matter of hopefully there was enough pace on up front that they would come back to her a little bit. I think Johnny can tell you more. He said she's the kind of filly, she loves a target, and when she gets past her target, then she idles a little bit. He can tell you more about that. It was great ride for a great filly and a great team. We are very fortunate to have her.

JIM MULVIHILL: Johnny, can you take us through the race?

JOHNNY VELAZQUEZ: I didn't leave the gate the way I would have loved to. We can plan whatever we want when the gate is opened, and it doesn't work out that way you think it's going to. She let me do what I wanted to do.

Unfortunately, I didn't want to do what I needed to do. But she actually took it really well. She didn't break good. We got bumped around a little bit. When I saw the two horses that -- the two horses to beat in front of me, so I had to make a decision. And I had to get as close as I can to the horses in front where she didn't have to make too much ground. She allowed me to do it.

Obviously riding a good horse and making decisions like this counts a lot, and I am glad I was on top of her.



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JIM MULVIHILL: This is Johnny's second Oaks win, Todd's fourth.

Rick, I would just like to hear from you. I know it's an emotional win in light of Sheikh Hamdan's passing in March. Can you tell us what this victory means and what's been going through your mind.

RICK NICHOLS: A million things have been going through my mind. But the victory for Sheikh Hamdan's family and all of our operations in the United States, but also Derrinstown in Ireland, Shadwell Estate in England, and all of his horses in Dubai, all the stables. I know they were all watching it. We heard that there's several people in Dubai that stayed up late hours to watch. You know, losing the boss the way we did and him coming off a great year -- he was the leading owner in Europe last year. And we have many good horses in our stable this year. And having Malathaat to step up and give him an Oaks win is, you know, more than we could ask for.

JIM MULVIHILL: And would you mind just trying to put into words what he's meant to racing and also to you personally?

RICK NICHOLS: Sheikh Hamdan, to racing, was such an influence, in England, in Ireland, in the United States. He was so supportive. He loved the sport. Even in his advanced years, he didn't lose his passion for it. I remember last year, when he was talking about his good sprinter and comparing him with Dayjur. You could just see the passion coming out of him; that he was sure Dayjur was better than his good sprinter last year because Dayjur was a 3-year-old.

But personally, June 1st, I have worked for him 36 years. He was a very, very close friend. He was a lot of times a father figure, sometimes like a brother, sometimes like a friend. But he was always the boss. I loved him dearly. He'll always be missed.

JIM MULVIHILL: And for this filly to win this race so soon after, what are the chances of that?

RICK NICHOLS: I don't know. But oddly enough, if he hadn't had passed when he did, she would have come into this race a Grade II winner probably. But since he passed, I honored him by not running any of our horses for ten days during the period of mourning. Because when his older brother, Sheikh Matoum passed, he called and asked me to do the same thing. So I thought that was the thing I needed to do for him.

Well, that kept her -- I asked Todd not to enter into the Grade II. But luckily enough, the Ashland was on the morning after the tenth day.



147th Longines Kentucky Oaks

Post-Race News Conference
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Churchill Downs



JIM MULVIHILL: Todd, the Gulfstream Park Oaks was the original target, and then this ten-day mourning period that you all observed happened. How did that affect her schedule? And did it have an impact on her conditioning and what transpired today?

TODD PLETCHER: Well, I think she's such a good filly, it probably wouldn't have mattered. But I can say this, I've only trained for Shadwell a little over a year, but I have never been around an organization who admired and loved their boss as much as Shadwell. And so I was 100% supportive of Rick's decision to respect Sheikh Hamdan and his family for not running for ten days. It was a simple conversation. Rick said ten days, and that was end of story.

Q. In terms of the strategy for the race, could you outline that a little bit? Especially with regard to making the move on the final turn.

JOHNNY VELAZQUEZ: Well, the strategy was break well and get a good position. That didn't happen. That blew it right from there. (laughter)

Obviously, we knew the horses to beat. And it's important to get a good break and get a position that you like. When that didn't happen, we had to change it right away. Riding a good horse like her, I took my chances that I'm going to take my chances and try to put her in the position that I thought I should have been. She helped me to get there.

Once I was there in the first turn, I was comfortable where she was and I found the horse that I think I wanted the horse to be. I'm watching the horse in front closely. And I see Irad [Ortiz] is watching it as well. Once I saw Irad is paying attention to him, I didn't have to worry about that one. I only have to worry about him.

From then on, I was pretty comfortable. She is a horse that's steady coming, steady coming. When I got to the 1/4 pole, I thought he was going to give me a much better run in front. I said, Well, I'm going to put some pressure before he goes down. When I asked her right away, she was instantly. (Snapping) She got ahead in front until tell the horse -- Man, now I'm too soon because I know she was going to wait.

That's what she did. Looked like the other horses calling back at her, but she just basically waited and fighting with the other horse.

Then, again, I'm glad that the result came our way and the way she ran. Makes my job a lot easier. Made me look good.



147th Longines Kentucky Oaks

Post-Race News Conference
Friday, April 30, 2021
Churchill Downs



Q. Rick, was that stretch run the kind of moment that Sheikh Hamdan would have appreciated?

RICK NICHOLS: Yes, would he have. He would have loved the race. And he really enjoys, like I do, seeing horses come from behind and winning. We got beat the other day by a horse that came from behind and beat us. But I like winning that way; I don't like losing that way. (laughter)

JIM MULVIHILL: Todd, you referred to her as a star this week. Can you talk about her leading up to this race and her spring and the talent she's shown all along?

TODD PLETCHER: She is just such a professional. Not only is she a tremendously talented filly, but she's also a very kind filly around the barn. You just can't help but love her personality. You can literally do anything with her. So to have that type of personality around the barn and be as special as she is on the racetrack, it's just rare that you find too many like this.

Q. Todd and Johnny, can you both talk a little bit about the fight that she shows in the final 1/8?

JOHNNY VELAZQUEZ: Obviously, I thought that I was probably there a little too soon. And when she put the head in front, she was just waiting. So the fight looks like a lot worse on your end watching from here. I thought it was pretty comfortable that she put the head in front, and the other horse was not going back at her. She was literally waiting for the other horse.

The other horse touched her a little bit behind, kind of got her backend a little off stride. But she didn't really lose any momentum. So I was pretty comfortable.

TODD PLETCHER: One of the things we talked about before the race is this filly loves a target. She'll identify that target and go get it. Once she gets there, then to her the game is complete.

But like Johnny said, when she got there, there was still another 1/8 of a mile or so to go. As long as that filly kept engaging her, she was going to find a little more. But I think, like Johnny is saying, there was more in the tank. She was just sort of waiting on her competition.

Q. Is there any thought of taking on males in the next two Classics?

RICK NICHOLS: We'll have to see how she comes out of this, and I'm sure Todd will come up with some really good suggestions from where we go from here. And we'll discuss it with Sheikh Hamdan's family and develop a plan.



147th Longines Kentucky Oaks

Post-Race News Conference
Friday, April 30, 2021
Churchill Downs



I would have loved to run her tomorrow. (Smiling)

TODD PLETCHER: He did say that last week, too.

JIM MULVIHILL: It was the sixth fastest Kentucky Oaks in history, for what's that worth. She was bred by Stonestreet, but you all purchased her at the Keeneland sale for just over \$1 million. Rick, maybe you can tell us about what attracted you to her in the first place and how the purchase came to be.

RICK NICHOLS: Well, first thing we saw going through the catalog was her pedigree. You don't just see too many fillies end up in a sale with that kind of pedigree because she was an obvious choice to go look at. And, of course, we did and we loved her physically. And when I took Sheikh Hamdan to see her -- and, by the way, this was his last year to purchase yearlings himself at Keeneland. We bought a few last year, but this was the last time he was there. And he loved her. And I told him, I said, I'm going to show you this filly and you're going to like her, but it wouldn't surprise if me if they didn't pull her out of the sale before the ring. Luckily they didn't, and we were able to buy her.

JIM MULVIHILL: Todd referenced Dreaming of Julia at the beginning. Can you talk about any similarities there? And, of course, you knew the class that was coming to your barn.

TODD PLETCHER: Yeah, I mean, the main similarities, they are just both really special fillies with a lot of talent. Malathaat's a little bit scopier and just a little bit of a bigger filly. But, again, I mean, Dreaming of Julia showed enormous talent from the very beginning, as this filly did. So it's easy to draw comparisons in that way.

Q. There hasn't been a filly run in the Derby since the point system came in. Rick, you apparently wanted to run tomorrow. What is it going to take to make that happen? And, Todd, do you have any objections to that?

RICK NICHOLS: There needs to be a way to qualify one or two of the top fillies each year, if the owner would like to run against the colts. I think it's a very special thing when a filly runs and wins the Derby. I realize that you set up the Derby to find out who's the best colt for breeding purposes. It's an opportunity to prove a horse that can go on to stud.

But at the same time, if you got a really nice filly, it's kind of nice to rub their faces in it, if you can. And I think she probably could have.

TODD PLETCHER: I think the system needs to be tweaked a little bit. The way it currently is set up is if you don't run against colts prior to the Derby, you're not going to get any points. So you could



147th Longines Kentucky Oaks

Post-Race News Conference
Friday, April 30, 2021
Churchill Downs



take a shot and run against colts. But if you don't do well, you could jeopardize your chances of getting into the Oaks because you're not getting any points that way.

So I've heard some speculation that they're looking at some things, and I think that they should.

Q. Rick, may I ask you Sheikh Hamdan's reaction when he did see Malathaat as a yearling? And could you tell he was rather determined to get her?

RICK NICHOLS: His reaction was this. We would show him a yearling, and he'd have his catalog. He wouldn't say anything a lot of times. Later, he might tell me what he liked about her or if he didn't like about her.

And he would drive consignors crazy, because when he saw a good horse, it didn't take him very long to look at it. And they'd bring it out, and he would kind of glance at it and tell them to put it away. They would think, oh, he didn't like it. Well, that meant he really did like it, because it didn't take him long to figure out a good horse.

But what I knew, after he would look at a horse, he would have his catalog. He would go (indicating). And we always referred to that she was a finger-licker. (laughter). That means he liked her.

Q. Following up a little bit about the sale, if I understand the story, Todd, she was a filly you liked at the sale. And obviously Shadwell comes in and buys her. And through a series of events, you end up getting her at the end. So maybe Rick could talk about how that came to be with Todd. And, Todd, maybe the emotional roller coaster of not getting her at the sale, and then getting her to train?

RICK NICHOLS: Of course, at the time, that was before Kiaran [McLaughlin] retired, and she was allocated to Kiaran. And when Kiaran decided to retire, I asked Todd if he would train for us. And he said he would love to. And Sheikh Hamdan said, yes, I'd love to have Todd to train for us.

And since Todd trained the dam, there was obvious decision to let him have the filly.

TODD PLETCHER: I loved the filly at the sale. I was having trouble -- it's a lot easier to get someone on a colt than a filly sometimes, even with one that has as great a pedigree as she does. And I kept trying different owners: This filly is going to be expensive, but I really would like to try and buy her. Ultimately, we put together a partnership that wasn't quite able to get there.



**147th Longines
Kentucky Oaks**
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Churchill Downs



But I remember three or four days after the sale, I saw Kiaran McLauglin. And I said, Kiaran, are you getting to get that Dreaming of Julia filly? He said, I think so, yeah. And I said, Man, great, I love that filly.

When I met with Rick and his team at Shadwell before we started training, I saw the filly was on the roster. I was really hoping she would come our way.

JIM MULVIHILL: Johnny, you have been watching a replay on a loop. Do you see anything new?

JOHNNY VELAZQUEZ: I was listening to all the interesting things that goes behind the scenes, buying a horse and everything, since I'm not involved in it.

Watching the race, I mean, obviously I'm just glad I was on top of her and she gave me everything she can. And she allowed me to do what I wanted her to do with her.

Q. Talk about 17 years ago you won this race. You're back together again. Todd, Joel [Rosario] rode this horse in Ashland. Was it always a no-brainer that Johnny was going to get her back?

TODD PLETCHER: She was always Johnny's filly. And with the COVID situation over the last year, I said earlier this week I don't think that I've had more jockey changes in the last year than maybe in the 20 years combined prior.

There's so many different things. Like, Johnny was supposed to ride her in the Gulfstream Oaks. And then he was committed the next week to ride Medina Spirit in the Santa Anita Derby. So he wasn't available, and that's why Joel [Rosario] filled in for him that day.

It's an example of all the -- especially early in the pandemic, the travel restrictions and the testing restrictions when you come back. And so there was a lot of scenarios where it might have seen like Johnny wasn't riding a horse for us that he normally would. But a lot of that was events that were out of all of our control.

And after the Ashland, Rick and I talked. We felt like it was Johnny's filly all along. And when the money's down, there's no one better. And I think he showed that today.

JOHNNY VELAZQUEZ: I'm glad that I was on her. Thank you very much.

JIM MULVIHILL: Also, Dave also asked 17 years since the Ashado and y'all's journey together.



147th Longines Kentucky Oaks

Post-Race News Conference
Friday, April 30, 2021
Churchill Downs



TODD PLETCHER: 17 years.

JOHNNY VELAZQUEZ: It has rained a lot since then. We forgot how it feels.

JIM MULVIHILL: Johnny, I wonder if you could weigh in on how this horse could do against the colts.

JOHNNY VELAZQUEZ: Obviously she has the talent than any colt I've ridden this year. And to tell you the truth, this year -- not taking anything away from any colts or anything like that, a good horse like her with the 3-year-olds that we have right now, she would be very, very competitive.

Q. Winning the Oaks, momentum-wise, now you're heading into tomorrow, is there something with mojo going now or not?

JOHNNY VELAZQUEZ: Remember, I'm not riding anything for Todd tomorrow. I'm against him tomorrow. I have to beat him tomorrow. I hope that mojo goes my way tomorrow. (laughter)

Q. Todd, is there anything to it?

TODD PLETCHER: The one thing I always think about when you are in these situations leading up to the big races, whether it's the Breeders' Cup or what have you, what I'm always looking at is did the decision to ship in and where to do your preparation work out? And right after March 26th or whatever, we didn't think we had maybe any Derby horses. And things went well over the next couple weeks. And so I was trying to figure out what do I do with these horses in terms of giving them all the best chance to show up here and do well?

And so I had no agenda at Palm Beach Downs, which is our headquarters for the winter. Then I had Malathaat at Keeneland after the Ashland. We had Dynamic One and Bourbonic at Belmont. And so I figured, let me do what hopefully is best for everyone, and just consolidate at Churchill and prepare here.

So when you have it go well today, it gives you hopefully a little more confidence that you made the right decision and hopefully everyone's prepared as well as they can be. And then at least you made the right decision in that area. And if you're successful, great.

Q. Do you feel like she redeemed her mother? Her mother was the beaten favorite in her Oaks, which I believe was beaten by your horse, Princess of Sylmar.

JOHNNY VELAZQUEZ: I was hoping somebody would ask that question. I'm having nightmares when that happens out of the gate today. I had the same thoughts of what happened in the Oaks with



147th Longines Kentucky Oaks

Post-Race News Conference
Friday, April 30, 2021
Churchill Downs



her mom. And I couldn't get the position that I wanted. And, obviously, the outcome was not the same.

Today we got the position we wanted and she responded to things that we wanted to do. So I definitely think she definitely did, yes.

TODD PLETCHER: This filly did not get away well today and got jostled around. But I think you would have to go back and look at some of the photos and head-ons of the start of Dreaming of Julia. There's some photos that will emphasize how bad she got cremated at the start.

JIM MULVIHILL: Thanks for the time. Congratulations again.