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ORTIZ EYES GRADED STAKES COMPANY FOR HAPPY IS A CHOICE FOLLOWING CAREER-BEST SPEED FIGURE IN LOUISVILLE THOROUGHBRED SOCIETY

LOUISVILLE, Ky. (Thursday, Sept. 19, 2024) – **Happy Is a Choice** appears ready to step up to graded stakes competition following his victory in Saturday's Louisville Thoroughbred Society Stakes at Churchill Downs. Trainer **John Ortiz** reported the 4-year-old gelding is being pointed to the \$350,000 Phoenix Stakes (Grade II) on Friday, Oct. 4 at Keeneland, a "Win and You're In" race for the Breeders' Cup Sprint division.

"This horse has shown a lot of talent since he was a 2-year-old," Ortiz said on SiriusXM's *"At the Races with Steve Byk."* "When he first came in, he was pretty thick in the neck and body. We gave him time and when he ran at Keeneland at 5 ½ furlongs, he won very convincingly. The third time was the charm, it all just clicked in his head."

Happy Is a Choice, owned by **Hooties Racing, WSS Racing** and **4G Racing**, earned a career-best 102 Brisnet Speed Rating in his ¼-length victory over the swift **Skelly** in Saturday's Louisville Thoroughbred Society Stakes.

"He just beat one of the fastest horses on the backside in Skelly, so I wouldn't mind seeing him take on that level of competition in the Breeders' Cup," Ortiz said. "We let him do the talking, and if he's ready, it would be great to face those horses again."

Ramon Vazquez, who guided Happy Is a Choice to victory, has returned to ride in Kentucky this fall before moving to Oaklawn.

"It's great to be back in Kentucky, especially getting started by riding a horse like this," Vazquez said. "He's an extremely talented horse and keeps improving quickly as he gets older. The racing is tough in Kentucky but I'm making the most out of these opportunities."

Happy Is a Choice has now improved his record to five wins from 11 starts with career earnings totaling \$561,580.

KEITH ASMUSSEN SET FOR RETURN SATURDAY – Jockey **Keith Asmussen** is set for his return to the saddle Saturday afternoon at Churchill Downs following more than three months on the sidelines because of a fractured femur and broken ribs.

Asmussen remarkably began getting back on horses in early August and has been regularly galloping and breezing some of the top horses in the stable of his Hall of Fame father, **Steve Asmussen**.

Asmussen was named aboard **Payne** in Race 3 Saturday and **Vittorio** in Race 9 on Sunday.

The Texas-native's riding career began in 2020 and he's since amassed 131 wins from 946 starts with \$8.8 million in purse earnings.

DOWN THE STRETCH – Racing at Churchill Downs resumed Thursday for a special “Purple Takeover” during Twilight Thursday from 5-8 p.m. in the Paddock Plaza. There was a meet-and-greet with players from **Racing Louisville FC** (5:30-6 p.m.) and **Louisville City FC** (6:15-6:45 p.m.); a soccer skills game; \$2 select domestic can beer; live music by **Kevin Niehoff**; food truck appearances from **Black Rock Grille**, **DonutNV**, **Hot Buns** and **Hurrikanes**; and an exclusive area for Racing Louisville and Lou City fans to watch the races. ... There was a stout \$142,817 carryover in the 20-cent Derby City 6 Jackpot on Thursday. The bet spanned Races 3-8. ... Iroquois Stakes (GIII) winner **Jonathan’s Way** returned to the track Thursday morning and galloped around 9:40 a.m. for trainer **Phil Bauer**. The son of Vekoma is likely to run next in the Breeders’ Cup Juvenile (GI). ... On Friday, guests 60 and up will receive \$3 general admission or can enjoy lunch and a day at the races in Millionaires Row for \$45. Senior Day tickets can be purchased by calling (502) 636-4450. ... Sunday is Family Adventure Day and is the perfect event for everyone in the family to experience a fun-filled day at Churchill Downs. There will be more than 15 kid-friendly activities for children under 12 to enjoy, including stick-horse races; face painting; inflatables; bubble station; game zone; arts and craft station; and an appearance by Kona ice truck and DonutNV. Guests are encouraged to bring up to five cans of soup to help support Blessings in a Backpack Louisville Chapter and win opportunities for special Family Adventure Day experiences, including a personal meet and greet with popular track bugler Steve Buttleman. The day also will mark the second annual Thoroughbred Aftercare Day to introduce young learners to the interesting life of Thoroughbreds after retirement and bring awareness of family opportunities to engage with these magnificent animals after their career in racing. Children may attend for free with paying adult (who is at least 18 years old with a valid ID). Limit two children per paying adult. Additional children will require the purchase of a full price general admission ticket. Reserved Seating: Children under the age of 2 may attend for free, provided the child must be held or on the lap of an adult; children ages 2-12 or any child that needs his or her own seat, will require the purchase of a child’s or full price ticket.

ABOUT CHURCHILL DOWNS RACETRACK

Churchill Downs Racetrack (“CDRT”), the world’s most legendary racetrack, has been the home of The Kentucky Derby, the longest continually held annual sporting event in the United States, since 1875. Located in Louisville, CDRT features a series of themed race days during Derby Week, including the Kentucky Oaks, and conducts Thoroughbred horse racing during three race meets in the Spring, September, and the Fall. CDRT is located on 175 acres and has a one-mile dirt track, a 7/8-mile turf track, a stabling area, and provides seating for approximately 60,000 guests. The stable area has barns sufficient to accommodate 1,400 horses and a 114-room dormitory for backstretch personnel. CDRT also has a year-round simulcast wagering facility and Race and Sports Book. www.ChurchillDowns.com.

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