

## The Kentucky Derby: My pick for 2009

George Chimento

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[Friesan Fire](#) will win the Derby. Here's a succession of "what I likes."

1. Larry Jones, the trainer, has had two consecutive seconds in the Derby. Not adulated by the press, he's a humble sort, with a bad suit and twangy way of speaking. His more famous brethren in the trade have coiffures that cost as much to maintain as Larry's truck. As you can see from the picture, he actually gets on his horses in the morning. Many trainers spend more time training clients than horses, and rely on assistants to do the actual job. A non-prepossessing style does not attract the wealthy. Jones has a limited pool of horses to draw on, and excels with what he has.

This trainer went through a lot of naive and unwarranted criticism last year when his filly, Eight Belles, broke down after finishing second in the Derby. The subsequent tests showed she was clean of illegal medication and just ran too fast, too hard. Hard Spun was Jones' horse the prior year. He also ran fast early, fought back competition, and then lost to Street Sense who had an easy time at the end. Bottom line: two horses from a small stable who "almost won" the Derby. Advantage Jones, who has announced he will retire from training this year.

2. Friesan Fire is big. Size matters. Twenty horses is the biggest field in American racing, and they will all be bumping for position at the first turn. Little ones win occasionally (Northern Dancer - 1964), but they are the exception.

3. Friesan Fire is fast. When horses lose the Derby, it's usually because of trouble in the first part of the race. Friesan Fire has the speed to win the "race within a race." Although the Derby is a long (1 & 1/4 miles) race, it is not won by plodders who dally at the rear and then charge at the end. Almost always at Churchill Downs, the horse who can be in front after a mile is the horse who has the best chance to win. Friesan Fire can keep up with the early pace, stay out of the trailing mob's trouble, and then keep running.

4. Friesan Fire is growing. He was born in April, 2006. Friesan Fire will be only 37 months old when the gate opens. Many of his competitors will have an extra few months of growth, and that is a huge advantage for these babies (3 years old - think about that). Most importantly, it puts Friesan Fire's speed figures in perspective. His last race was in mid March and his "figure" was 103 in the rating service I use. An extra few months of growth could improve that by 10 points, putting him at the top of the group.

3. He has run in easy company. This is a compliment to Jones. He does not put them in the toughest races early in their careers. You would not put a golden gloves champ in the ring with Mike Tyson. Jones' style is to build a young horse's confidence. Friesan Fire has three races at the Fairgrounds (New Orleans) this year. Three wins, by increasing margins, and all without much effort.

4. He has had 7 weeks "rest." Conventional wisdom says that's too much time, and he will not be fit for the Derby. Don't believe that. Jones planned it this way, and is known for being able to keep a horse ready on workouts. It's all about winning on the first Saturday in May. Jones happily passed up the "big money" races in April.

5. He likes dirt. One of the silliest recent changes in racing has been to require that tracks replace dirt surfaces with polymers. My constitutional law professor at UC Berkeley is on the California Racing Commission, and was a big proponent of this, although he's never owned a horse or ridden a horse or trained a horse. However, he's a California lawyer and knows it all. So, the California tracks (Santa Anita, Del Mar and Hollywood Park) all have this new high-tech polymer surface. A big guessing game is to determine if California horses coming East (such as Bob Baffert's favored Pioneer of the Nile) can run on the Churchill dirt. We do not have that concern with Friesan Fire, who has run well on traditional dirt tracks.

6. He likes the mud. The weatherman counts. This will probably be a muddy track on May 2. Some horses just hate the stuff. They don't like the feel of it. They hate getting it splashed in their eyes. Friesan Fire's best race was on a muddy track.

7. He has breeding. You don't get much better than his sire, AP Indy. On the dam (mother's) side is an Austrian mare who could run all day, and is a stakes winner in Australia.

8. He was precocious at two. For a horse to win the 1 & ¼ mile Derby in May of his three year old year, he must be precocious. Although foaled late (in April), Friesan Fire won his first start as a two year old, by three lengths, and "with good energy."

With all of that, it's still just a horse race. I'm concerned that the jockey (Gabriel Saez) is not as seasoned as others in the race. However, he is an exceptional young talent from Panama. Here is a charming excerpt from the Times Picayune (New Orleans):

***Saez has ridden a long way from humble beginnings in his native Panama. He grew up in the Darien region, where few people live and jungles grow. "There's still tribes there," said Ruben Munoz, Saez's agent and godfather of his son. "It's Third World." When Saez was born, his mother was 14, Munoz said. "His father pretty much left him alone when he was small," he said. "His grandparents pretty much raised him." Saez, his mother and grandparents slept in a house covered by a roof made of layers of branches from coconut trees. His grandfather, a farmer, planted corn and had pigs, cows and horses. Saez milked the cows and, when he had a chance, rode the horses. "I grab the horse in the field, jump on the horse and go," he said. "I started getting on horses when I was 5 or 6 years old. I get along with animals really well. I can't live without animals in my life."***

No fool for pretense, Jones is more to the point about the young jockey:

***"Some jockeys learn their trade, with study, hard work," Jones said. "Then you have the other end of the spectrum, like Gabriel, who's a total natural. I don't even want him***

*to read the (Daily Racing) Form. He just has this sixth sense of what's going on around him."*

Anyway, that's why I like Friesan Fire. As for how to pronounce his name, it's a toss-up. The announcers are calling it Freejan Fire, because there is an Austrian connection to the dam's pedigree, and Friejans are descended from the medieval warhorses that carried heavily mailed fighting men. However, I think it should really be Freeze an' Fire. He's owned by good ol' boys. Let's see if there is a consensus on Saturday afternoon. And, for the record, I also like long-shot Musket Man and heavily favored I Want Revenge.

George