

MUCHO MACHO MAN



Saturday is the 137th running of the Kentucky Derby. The winner will be Mucho Macho Man, an every man's horse trained by an every woman's trainer, Kathy Ritvo. Kathy, age 41, is alive because of a heart transplant three years ago. She is from a family of racetrackers, and got her first training license as an 18 year old at Suffolk Downs. Like many New Englanders, she has relocated to Florida, where the state government is more hospitable to the racing industry than Massachusetts.

Kathy has trained a lot of cheap horses, some solid but not famous horses, and maybe I'm just dreaming that she will win the Derby with Mucho Macho Man. There is so much going against him. His pedigree is nothing to speak of and he's younger than the rest, just a June foal. Remember, they all have to be born in 2008 to be eligible for a Triple Crown Race this year. When running against horses born in February or March, that few months difference with a June birth date means a lot. In just two months at that age, a horse can grow another inch or two and pack on an extra 100 pounds of muscle. At the auctions, June foals sell at a discount just for that reason.

So, how can a modest horse who is just a June foal with a nice, but relatively unknown trainer, win the Derby? Here's how. He's faster than the others, and his running style is perfect for this race.

On Saturday, there will be some fast runners up front, the type which handicappers call “need to lead” horses. Now getting the lead is great, if a horse has it all to himself. A nondescript horse like Go For Gin (1994) can win that way with an unrivaled head start. However, when lots of horses go for the lead, they tend to psych each other out and someone else wins the race. After looking at all the early speed types entered for Saturday – Soldat, Shackleford, Pants on Fire, Comma to the Top, and Decisive Moment – I’m pretty sure that the winner will be passing those early leaders.

The wise guys are picking Nehro, a “deep closer.” And the likely favorite, Dialed In, is another who comes from far back. Master of Hounds and Animal Kingdom also have that patient style, coming fast in a late rush. However, closers all face a common problem. In a crowded race like the Derby, it’s pretty easy to get caught in traffic. That means bumps and, in some cases, an outright mugging. They almost always have to wait for an opening. In a race where winning margins are measured in fifths of a second, deep closers give up a length or two unless very, very lucky.

So, this is where Mucho Macho Man comes in. He is very fast, does not need to be in front, and can pace just behind the early leaders. He is a very fit horse who gallops his two mile licks during training without a deep breath. His last race was a third, but that’s no big deal. He lost a shoe in the race and still put in a great effort. Kathy is gluing them on for this race (honest).

As for pedigree, his sire, Macho Uno, didn’t win any of the classic races (mile and a quarter and up), but he was good enough to win at a mile and an eighth twice, including the Mass Cap and the Pennsylvania Derby. That extra eighth of a mile is always a puzzle, but that’s one of many reasons why Mucho Macho Man will be 12:1 or better. And don’t worry about not knowing his jockey, Ravi Maragh. He is just a notch below the top tier, and perfectly capable.

Finally, I spent all winter waiting for this because I wanted to see the two year old champion, Uncle Mo, sweep the Triple Crown. He got a gastrointestinal infection a few weeks ago and lost his first race after four consecutive wins, including a Breeders Cup. It’s not sure at this writing if he will start on Saturday. It would have been fun to watch his coronation, but I’m reasonably sure he will be scratched and, even if he runs, he has missed too much training, I think, to win a tough race like this.

George

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