"On any given day a miracle can happen. We've had a Kentucky Derby each year since 1875 and each year we've had a winner. Were they all great horses? No. It just means for that moment in time -- about 2 minutes -- that horse was the best.”  

Wilt Chamberlain

Is it just me, or has the hoopla leading up to the 142nd Kentucky Derby been muted by this year’s overall craziness?

We owe it to civilization, and our mental health, to think finer thoughts this week.

The first Kentucky Derby was run in 1875. It has endured, through World Wars and a Great Depression, never missing a year.

I will reveal this year’s winner, or at least a horse who could win, but I first have to explain the nine strike system of Jon White, who has worked at racetracks and as a turf reporter all his life.

It’s a sure fire way of picking Kentucky Derby losers. Horses with three (or even two) of nine possible strikes are up against it. Pick enough losers and you have the winner; that’s the theory.

All 9 of the possible strikes are listed at page 3. This year there are 2 horses with no strikes, 8 horses with 1 strike, 9 horses with 2 strikes, and 2 horses with 3 or more strikes.

In 1990, late greats Willie Shoemaker and Wilt Chamberlain were selling credit cards for American Express. Willie Shoe, only 4’ 11”, won four Kentucky Derbies. About 2 pounds when born in rural Texas, he beat the odds. His sharecropper grandma put baby Willie in a shoebox and used a stove as his incubator. Wilt, at 7’ 1”, was the best athlete in NBA history. He also enjoyed a good horse, spent lots of time at the harness track in Delaware, and was part owner of a near champion pacer in 1965. He is the only one to score more than 4,000 points in a season, had 100 points in a single game, and could bench press over 500 pounds. (Arnold Schwarzenegger was a work-out buddy.)
There are nine potential strikes for a Derby horse. Count them up. Maybe he didn’t run as a two year old? Strike one. Never placed in a long race? Strike two. At page 3 there is more detail about each of the nine strikes, a system developed by Jon White after years working for the Daily Racing Form and major racetracks.

37 of the last 43 winners have had 1 strike or less.
Only 4 winners had 2 strikes.
3 strikes and you’re out, except for Mine That Bird (who had 4 strikes).

Rainy, rotten weather can foul up the nine strike system.
In 2009, Calvin Borel snuck 50-1 shot Mine That Bird (4 strikes!!) through a rain-drenched rail with the cleverest ride in the history of the Derby. Mine That Bird missed the break, was 8 lengths behind, and just loved the mud.
Second place went to favorite Pioneer of the Nile, the daddy of American Pharoah, last year’s Triple Crown Winner who was a 1 strike colt, because he lacked six previous starts.

With the Nine Strike System, horses have sorted themselves out.
### Zero Strikes – Highly Likely

| Image | Brody’s Cause, Nyquist |

### One Strike – Definitely possible

| Image | Creator, Exaggerator, Gun Runner, Lani, Mohaymen, Mor Spirit, Oscar Nominated, Outwork |

### Two Strikes – Probably not, but possible

| Image | Cherry Wine, Destin, Fellowship, Majesto, Mo Tom, Suddenbreakingnews, Tom’s Ready, Trojan Nation, Whitmore |

### Three Strikes – Up against it and unlikely

| Image | Adventist, Danzing Candy |

## The nine possible strikes

Notice there’s not a word in the Nine Strike System about jockeys, trainers, speed figures, pedigree or pace. Any horse who passes all nine conditions without a Strike will have all that stuff, so keep it simple. (And you can keep it even simpler by skipping to the next page, where all the work has been done for you.)

1. *The horse has to have raced as a 2 year old.*
2. *In either of his last 2 starts, he had to be 1st or 2nd with 1/8 of a mile to go.*
3. *In either of his last 2 starts, he should not have lost a placing in the last 1/8, i.e. if he was running 2nd he did not finish worse than 2nd.*
4. *The horse has to have run in at least one graded stakes race this year by March 31.*
5. *The horse has to have won at least one graded stakes race this year or last.*
6. *The horse has to have finished at least 3rd in a race of 1 & 1/8 miles or more.*
7. *The horse has to have had at least 6 lifetime starts.*
8. *The trainer should not have added or removed blinkers in the start before the Derby. It’s too late to experiment.*
9. *The horse has not been gelded.*
So, who’s on first?

It’s Nyquist, of course, but it is still a horse race.

Nyquist – No strikes
Trainer: Doug O’Neil
Jockey: Martin Gutierrez

Not one strike. And this undefeated colt – 7 wins, 7 starts, and a 2 year old championship – has many other things going for him: a great recent 1 mile workout, the ability to win at multiple tracks, and an experienced jockey-trainer combo that won’t be flustered by the Derby craziness. Trainer O’Neil, Jockey Gutierrez, and owner Paul Reddam teamed up in 2012 to win the Derby with I’ll Have Another. Is it time for another? What’s not to like?

Maybe he can’t get the distance because of pedigree? They said the same of American Pharoah. Nyquist won the 1 & 1/8 mile Florida Derby and was gearing it down in the stretch with plenty of gas in the tank.

Bad racing luck? It happens, but this horse is quick enough to stay out of trouble, a huge factor in a 20 horse race where late chargers often get boxed and blocked.
Speed figures not sky high? None of the horses this year have figures that pop off the chart. And speed figures do not measure that indefinable desire of champion horses to stay ahead of their rivals. Nyquist is a cool customer who takes his game with him. Past wins are in California (2 tracks) Florida, and Kentucky.

You will make $1 profit on a $2 bet to show. Come on. It’s the Derby, not your pension fund. Bet $2 to win and you will probably get back at least $6.

Exaggerator - One Strike (He drifted from 2nd to 3rd in a March 12th race when he was bumped.)

Trainer: Keith Desormeaux
Jockey: Kent Desormeaux

Look at the chest on this guy! Lots of room for a big heart and capacious lungs.

This colt overwhelmed opposition in the Santa Anita Derby on April 9, and is an A + possibility. He has speed, and has learned how to rally from behind.

April 9 was a sloppy day, so doubters think he might not do as well on a dry track, but he’s won on dry tracks, including Saratoga last year.

Then there is the bounce theory. Did he run so fast on April 9 that he will be pooped in the Derby? He’s had a month and two decent works since. I’m not worried about that.

What I really like is that he is California-based and has been running against the best horses, including Nyquist (beaten 1 &1/2 lengths) and Mor Spirit (beating him on April 9 and just losing on March 12). The brothers Desormeaux have this race in their crosshairs and, on his best day, Exaggerator is faster than any, including Nyquist. Jockey Kent Desormeaux has won the Derby three times.

I’ve just named two California-based horses, and a third, Mor Spirit, is next. It may be coincidence, but you have to notice the recent California influence on the Derby.

The top three Derby finishers in 2015 were all from California (American Pharoah, Firing Line and Dortmund). In 2014, the winner was California Chrome. In 2012 it was I’ll Have Another (from the same barn as Nyquist). Except for Chrome, they are Kentucky horses bought and trained by California connections. Smart or lucky?
Mor Spirit – One Strike (He was not 1st or 2nd with 1/8 of a mile to go in either of his last two starts, although he finished 2nd in each.)

Trainer: Bob Baffert
Jockey: Gary Stevens

What’s the opposite of Poetry in Motion? Mor Spirit runs with his head down and seems out of balance. He does not have brilliant acceleration. Exaggerator beat him soundly on April 9.

So what’s to like? In seven starts, he has never been worse than second. He’s a grinder, and just clicks off the furlongs in good time, one after the other, and if he is passed he fights back hard. It doesn’t hurt to have connections like Bob Baffert and Gary Stevens, of course, and that is some of his appeal. His most recent work surprised Stevens with his eagerness, and Gary has seen enough horses not to be surprised. I’m thinking he could have a big race on Saturday.

But what about that head down stride? A.P. Indy, one of the greatest racehorses in the modern era ran that way, too. Here’s Gary’s take: “If you go back to watch A.P. Indy, they have very similar action. A.P. Indy used to run like an anteater, with his head right down on the ground.”

Mo Tom – Two Strikes (but it should be No Strikes. Read on.)

Trainer: Tom Amoss
Jockey: Corey Lanerie

Everyone who saw his last two races, including his jockey, knows it isn’t Tom’s fault that he didn’t win or finish second. Jockey Corey Lanerie, usually solid, admits he blew it and repeatedly steered Mo Tom into trouble when there was clear running room elsewhere.
"It was a bad ride and totally my fault," Lanerie said. "He came underneath me and I had more horse than I knew what to do with and I got him in trouble and went inside when I shouldn't have. I doubt they'll let me sit on him again. He's a great horse."

So much is on the line in these big races. Trainer Tom Amoss tore into jockey Corey Lanerie with what the Press called a “profanity-laced admonishment.” But Tom Amoss is a good guy, and apologized 20 minutes later.

"A lot has been written about my blow-up after the Louisiana Derby which, for the record, was totally uncalled for. Corey's handling of it was a class act all the way..."

It wasn’t certain that Lanerie would get a third chance, but Amoss has confidence that Corey knows Mo Tom better than anyone:

“The thing about Mo Tom is that he has this switch; he turns it off out of the gate and relaxes, but when you turn that switch on, he goes in a hurry.... With Corey on him, he knows that when he turns that switch on, it's go time...Corey also knows how long he can carry that kick, and it's more than the average horse. Those aren't things you can describe to a rider who has never ridden him in a race. We feel lucky to have him."

Good luck, Guys.

**Brody’s Cause** - No strikes, and he’s out

Trainer: Dale Romans

Jockey: Luis Saez

He is big, beautiful, and oh so lucky. My absolute certainty that he will not win gives him an extra two lengths. And he won’t be fast enough then.

BC drew the horrible 19th post, and he is a slow starter who will give up many lengths to the field. As a two year old, he did beat Exaggerator twice, but Exaggerator has matured immensely, and I don’t think Brody’s Cause has improved that much based on his times this year. Smarter money than mine will be betting Brody’s Cause, so let’s see.
The others

My theory is that on the 7th day God really didn’t rest. He created these beautiful creatures and then went to the races. Here are pictures of a few others that caught my eye.

**Gun Runner** – one strike.  
(He has not had 6 previous starts, only 5.  
American Pharoah had the same strike, so that doesn’t mean much.)  
**Trainer:** Steve Asmussen  
**Jockey:** Florent Geroux

This is a nifty little horse who goes where you point him. Don’t take that for granted. Many horses are hard to steer, especially at these speeds.

He’s had it easy in Louisiana this year, because the horses he faced were of lesser quality. As a two year old in Kentucky, he lost to Mor Spirit and Mo Tom. He would have lost to Mo Tom this year if it were not for all the trouble Mo Tom encountered.

**Creator** – one strike. (He was not 1st or 2nd with 1/8 of a mile to go in either of his last two starts.)  
**Trainer:** Steve Asmussen  
**Jockey:** Ricardo Santana

He is a “deep closer,” which means slow to start, with a good kick at the end. He won the Arkansas Derby on April 16th against a modest bunch. The leaders faltered and he just picked up the pieces.
Mohaymen - 1 strike (he lost a placing in one of his last 2 starts)
Trainer: Kiaran McLaughlin
Jockey: Junior Alvarado
He was everyone’s darling for the Derby until a horrible 4th place effort against Nyquist in Florida on April 2. He was within 1 length, and lost by 8. He’s beautifully bred, and it was an off track, but you do not usually see rebounds after bad efforts in this type of race.

AND, from Japan, a happy horse

Lani -1 Strike (he lost a placing in one of his last 2 starts)
Trainer: Mikio Matsunaga
Jockey: Take Yutaka
He has won in Japan this year and last. He won a $2,000,000 Stakes in Dubai on March 26.
His sire, Tapit, is the most successful sire in the US, with a $300,000 stud fee.
The training method has been bizarre, long slow gallops and an initial Kentucky work on April 20 that was so slow it barely qualified to be recorded as a work. Lani picked it up on May 3rd with a pretty fast 5/8. International travelers don’t do so well in the Derby. There are just too many changes from their routine, including the feed. However, the trainer says the horse is very happy. That’s the way it should be.
Longshots with a chance

Destin
Trainer: Todd Pletcher
Jockey: Javier Castellano
Won the Tampa Bay Derby and has not raced for 8 weeks. Pletcher has worked him 5 times and he is creating a nice visual impression at Churchill during training hours.

My Man Sam
Trainer: Chad Brown
Jockey: Irad Ortiz
He has only raced 4 times. He’s only won once, but he is a fast learner. On April 9th he was a fast closing second behind Brody’s Cause in the Grade 1 Bluegrass Stakes. Hmmm. The trainer and jockey are first rate. Hmmm.

Danzing Candy
Trainer: Clifford Sise
Jockey: Mike Smith
He is the speed of the speed. He may run off with Mike Smith and then spit it out, as he did on April 9th in the Santa Anita Derby. He might get an easy lead and just stay in cruise control to win, as he did on March 12 in the San Felipe Stakes. He would be a shocking triple strike winner.

Suddenbreaking News
Trainer: Donnie Von Hemmel
Jockey: Luis Quinonez
This is a slow horse with a decent kick. He was second in the Arkansas Derby behind Creator.

Whitmore
Trainer: Ron Moquett
Jockey: Victor Espinoza
He’s a slower horse with an ok kick. He was third in the Arkansas Derby. Brilliant jockey Victor Espinoza, who had American Pharoah last year and California Chrome the year before, cannot make up the difference, as great as he is.
Have Fun on Saturday! You can make fun of me on Monday, like you always do.

George Chimento
May 5, 2016