



Riddle Me This

George's annual Derby musings and predictions – 2017

Who can solve the puzzle? On May 6, twenty horses, each three years old, will race 1 & ¼ miles for the first time. Which horse wins the 143rd Kentucky Derby?

There is so much data. We know final times, quarter mile, half mile and final 1/8 splits broken into 1/5 of a second increments. We have workout information, video replays, and trainer and jockey interviews. We have family trees, and know more about parents, grandparents, and full and half siblings to these colts than most of us know about our own relations.

Of course we're confused. It would be much easier to get a job at Microsoft, answering one of the famous interview riddles.



You have a 5 quart pail and a 3 quart pail. How do you fill the 5 quart pail with 4 quarts of water?

Hint: if you need help, the answer is on page 9. As a special bonus, you can also learn how to calculate the probability of three ants not bumping into each other if they all start walking, at the same time, from different points of an equilateral triangle.

The Derby is my favorite puzzle, without the high stakes faced by Oedipus when riddled by the Sphinx. Now those were high stakes for that ancient Greek. *Get it right or get eaten.*

What has four legs in the morning, two at noon, and three at dusk?

Of course, we all know the answer from our handy pocket copy of Sophocles.

It's MAN, but I prefer the New Yorker's variation.



Oedipus Solves the Riddle of the Sphinx

The Nine Strike System won't help this year.



Last year, I introduced you to the Nine Strike System of professional handicapper Jon White. A Strike is a negative factor in the horse's history which may make it harder to win the Derby. Strikes include facts like – Never Ran as a 2 Year Old – or - Never Won a Big Stakes Race - or - Never Finished At Least Third in a Long Race. Jon notes that 38 of the last 44 winners had one Strike or less, and that only one horse in the last 44 years had more than 2 Strikes. It should be easy, right?

Wrong. This year the field is too deep. Five horses have Zero Strikes, five others have only one Strike, and you can make a good case for four of them with two Strikes. **Wow. Fourteen legitimate contenders out of 20 horses.**

So who wins this year's Derby? - TRWHIAESRWICIRRNINSEH -

Hint: Sort the letters into two columns of 8 rows each and a third column of 6 rows. Then read top to bottom:

T	R	W
H	I	A
E	S	R
W	I	C
I	R	R
N	I	Y
N	S	
E	H	

Irish War Cry: 2 Strikes

Trainer: Graham Motion
Jockey: Rajiv Maragh

Faugh a Ballagh !
 (1798 war cry of the Royal Irish Fusiliers, meaning "Clear the Way.")

He is 5 for 6. His two strikes come from a puzzling flop on March 24 when he was 7th by 21 lengths. But, on April 8 he won the prestigious Wood Memorial in NY by 3 lengths. Videos confirm this long striding horse looks every bit like a Derby winner. Curlin, his sire, is a regally bred stallion and a former horse of the year.



Always Dreaming: 2 Strikes

Trainer: Todd Pletcher
Jockey: John Velasquez
Exercise boy: Nick Bush

He is arguably the most talented horse, and only has 5 starts. He has won all three races this year by 11 lengths, 4 lengths and 5 lengths. His April 1 Florida Derby win was effortless and fast.

But will he hold it together in front of 160,000 bourbon-soaked fans in Kentucky? Always Dreaming is what is euphemistically called a “high energy” horse.

Mothers, don't let your children grow up to be exercise boys, unless they have arms like Nick Bush, who has gentled horses for top trainer, Todd Pletcher, for ten years.

Todd called an audible and asked Nick to take over morning drills on Monday. Nick is a specialist, and introduced Always Dreaming to special tack called draw reins. It keeps Always Dreaming from raising his head and running loose during workouts. Nick says that Always Dreaming was much better on Tuesday, and expects him to be a gentleman on Saturday. If Nick is right, they won't catch this horse. I will be betting another, because high energy horses often get unraveled in the insane environment of Kentucky Derby Day.





Gunnevera: No Strikes

Trainer: Antonio Sano
Jockey: Javier Castellano

Gunnevera is owned by Venezuelans, and his Florida-based trainer, Antonio Sano, was the top trainer in Venezuela.

It's not good to be tops in anything in that sad country. **Antonio was kidnapped twice in 2009, and one of those times was held for 36 days until his wife paid off the thugs.**

Every TV set in Venezuela will be tuned into the race. *"Twenty years ago, Venezuela is the best country in the world," Sano said wistfully. "Maybe one day it can go back."*

The main knock on Gunnevera is that he is a slow starter, but once he gets rolling, watch out. Horses with this running style often get blocked in a big race like the Derby, but his jockey, Javier Castellano, is a superb pilot. **This is the horse I want to win.** Incidentally, I tried locating Gunnevera on Google Maps. It's some place in Spain but I can't find it.

Practical Joke: No strikes

Trainer: Chad Brown
Jockey: Joel Rosario

Pedigree fans will say I'm nuts: The offspring of his parents are usually sprint horses, and Practical Joke was a precocious sprinter as a baby in 2016. Can he go a full mile and a quarter? He looked pretty good going 1 & 1/8 miles on April 8th to be second in the Bluegrass.



Equipment gurus will also say I'm nuts. It's usually a bad sign to make a major equipment change for the Derby. A trainer should know the horse by this point. Practical Joke has never worn blinkers, but I saw them on him in a workout the other day. (Blinkers focus a horse on what's in front, and not on the sides.) Trainer Chad Brown is so clever, I'll overlook this.

My funny feeling: The Joke will be on the naysayers. This is a racehorse. He may not win, but he will be in the hunt and outrun his pedigree.

J Boys Echo: No Strikes

Trainer: Dale Romans
Jockey: Luis Saez

J Boys Echo is my best hope for a long shot winner. He has one fast performance to his credit – the Gotham Stakes in NY - and otherwise has an average resume. He didn't beat much in NY. I just like his looks and, based on photos, I think he is maturing at the right time.



The sad story is that regular jock, Robbie Albarado, won't be able to ride Saturday. He just broke his ankle and needed surgery.

It will be bittersweet if J Boys Echo wins. In 2011, Robbie also lost the mount on a Derby winner, Animal Kingdom. Why? He'd been kicked in the face a few days before.

These jockeys are not the spoiled babies in professional sports. No big contracts. No getting paid while you're hurt.

Robbie started professional riding at the age of 12 at bush tracks in Louisiana. He is a journeyman, not at the very top, but has won more than 5,000 races.

Talk about tough. There is also titanium mesh and a polymer plate in his skull from fractures in 1998 and 1999. He missed a full year after nearly being killed in 2000. Maybe next year he gets a shot at the ultimate prize.

The next page is for a very important horse: **Classic Empire**, the two year old champion who missed training due to a hoof injury, but is now rounding into form. Classic Empire just won the Arkansas Derby.

Here he is in the sales ring when only a yearling. No name yet – just a hip number in the September auction. Going, going gone for a bargain \$475,000. His earnings are already \$2,120,220.

He will be the favorite on Saturday.



Classic Empire: One Strike

Trainer: Mark Casse
Jockey: Julien Leparoux

Could this be the next Triple Crown winner? Compare him with American Pharoah.

1. Same sire: Pioneer of the Nile.
2. Both two year old champions.
3. Each missed training early in Derby year due to minor injuries.
4. Each won the Arkansas Derby.

I loved American Pharoah in 2015, but did not think he was ready for the Derby. He went on to be a great horse but, frankly, he got lucky in the Derby because two sharper horses that day dueled themselves to exhaustion, while Pharoah laid back and got a perfect rallying trip. I am going to take the same stand against Classic Empire. I don't think he's fully ready, but favorites have done well in recent years, so you won't go too wrong to back him.



McCracken: Two Strikes

Trainer: Ian Wilkes
Jockey: Brian Hernandez

Talk about home court advantage. Three wins as a two year old, and all at Churchill Downs. Every dirt track feels a little different. Horses are suspicious of new surfaces, and there are many who find Churchill Downs dirt to be a little quirky the first time on it. McCracken is comfortable with Churchill Downs.

He will be underestimated on Saturday, because he missed some training after his first 2017 start (which he won). Don't worry. His Trainer, Ian Wilkes, learned as assistant to legendary Carl Nafzger, who is in the American Hall of Fame and who trained the 1990 Derby winner, Unbridled.

Carl Nafzger has the distinction of also being in the Texas Rodeo Cowboy Hall of Fame. After a leg fracture, he finally gave up bull riding in 1972, and took up the "easy" job of training horses.



There are so many good ones this year.

Irap: One Strike

Trainer: Doug O'Neill
Jockey: Mario Gutierrez

Until a horse wins his first race, he is a “maiden,” whether male or female. Irap was a maiden until he won the Blue Grass Stakes on April 8 at 31:1 odds.

Look at the connections: O’Neill, Gutierrez and owner Paul Reddam. They won the Derby last year with Nyquist, and this late bloomer could surprise everyone at huge odds.



Gormley: Two Strikes

Trainer: John Shireffs
Jockey: Victor Espinoza

Winner of the Santa Anita Derby, and he’ll still get no respect at the windows.

John Shireffs is the longshot trainer who won the Derby in 2005 with Giacomo at odds of 50-1. Jockey Victor Espinoza, who gives 10% of his winnings to a cancer institute, rode California Chrome in that horse’s \$14,752,650 career. Gormley is a very live longshot.



Tapwrit: One Strike

Trainer: Todd Pletcher
Jockey: Jose Ortiz

He has the best pedigree in the field, which is why he cost \$1.2 million as a yearling. He has won three of his six starts and was showing real promise. But the last race was a clunker – 5th place and 11 lengths behind.

It could just have been a bad day. Horses have them, too. He will be at least 20:1.





Thunder Snow: No Strikes

Trainer: Saeed bin Suroor
Jockey: Christophe Soumillon

This is a wonderfully bred horse, with proven European talent (on grass). His last two races were at Meydan, on dirt.

Meydan is, to put it mildly, the spectacular racetrack in Dubai created by Sheikh Mohammed bin Rashid Al Maktoum, the Prime Minister and ruler.

If you love racing at the highest level, you appreciate everything the Sheikh has done to preserve and improve the breed. His operations are worldwide. I would love to see Thunder Snow do well, but it is very tough for horses to ship to the States, go through quarantine, and eat different feed (US rules prohibit foodstuffs to be brought in).

French Jockey Christophe Soumillon will ride. I wish them the best, but from what I saw of this horse's stride on video, he looks better suited to grass than dirt.

Who have I left out?



Girvin: One Strike

He is 3 for 4, but all of his races were in New Orleans, where the competition is not so good these days.

He does attract world-class jockey Mike Smith. His young trainer is sharp – Joe Sharpe to be precise.

Although last in my musings, he is better than that.

After all this, it wouldn't surprise me to see one of the others win, but enough is enough.

Answers to the Microsoft Interview Puzzles

You have a 5 quart pail and a 3 quart pail. How do you fill the 5 quart pail with 4 quarts of water?

1. Fill the 5 quart pail.
2. Fill the 3 quart pail with water from the 5 quart pail, leaving 2 quarts in the 5 quart pail.
3. Dump out the 3 quart pail.
4. Dump the 5 quart pail (which has 2 quarts) into the 3 quart pail, which will now have 2 quarts.
5. Fill the empty 5 quart pail again.
6. Pour from the 5 quart pail into the 3 quart pail. You will only be able to pour one quart, because the 3 quart pail already has 2 quarts.
7. After pouring 1 quart, the 5 quart pail now has 4 quarts.

Puzzle solved.



Three ants start walking, at the same time, from different points of an equilateral triangle. What are the odds that they don't bump into each other?

They all have to be walking in the same direction, of course, in order not to bump into each other. They can all walk to the right, or they can all walk to the left.

With three ants, there are eight possible choices: $2 \times 2 \times 2 = 8$.

Because only two choices are correct, the odds are 25% that they don't bump into each other: $2/8 = 25\%$.

If handicapping horses were only that easy. Try it. There are 20 horses. What are the odds you can pick the correct order of finish of all 20?

Enjoy the two minutes.

One thing I am sure of in 2017.



I probably have not picked the winner.

But I intend to enjoy every second of this race.

You do the same.

George Chimento

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