

A BETTER MOUSETRAP



op/ed

by randy moss

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Pondering the possibility that Mafaaz could make the Kentucky Derby while Dunkirk is left in the cold, I have dusted off columns previously published elsewhere in May 2005, May 2007 and June 2008.

Needless to say, the Derby's graded earnings rule has been one of my pet peeves for some time.

Churchill Downs first instituted an earnings provision in 1975 and updated it a decade later to its current form, which has been mostly adequate with a few notable exceptions. But wrinkles are starting to show. The Delta Jackpot is a graded stakes and counts as much toward Derby eligibility as the Santa Anita Derby or Florida Derby. The \$2-million UAE Derby has twice the purse money of the Arkansas Derby, and the \$800,000 Sunland Derby is on the verge of being graded.

The system was always dodgy, but now is aging badly thanks to casino money and Maktoum riches. And a simple Botox injection or facelift won't do. It's plastic surgery time.

Others have been banging drums in this parade, too, and their various ideas for reform also would be an improvement on the status quo. Whatever the source, we need change we can believe in.

The inspiration for my Kentucky Derby qualification idea is the 18-step system the Masters uses to determine who gets to play for the green jacket. Invited to play at Augusta National next week are all previous Masters winners; the last five U.S. Open, British Open and PGA champions; the last two winners of the Players Championship; the first 16 finishers in the previous year's Masters; the top eight in the previous year's U.S. Open; the top four from the British Open and PGA Championship; the top 30 on the Official PGA Tour Money List from 2008; the top 50 on the Official World Golf Rankings from 2008 and as currently ranked in 2009; plus amateur champions and a few others as well.

Judging from that, the Kentucky Derby needn't worry about its system being too complicated. It is far better to worry about getting it right.

My idea is to give first priority for Derby eligibility (Tier One) to the winner of the previous year's Breeders' Cup Juvenile plus the top three finishers in the big five preps: Florida Derby, Santa Anita Derby, Blue Grass, Arkansas Derby and Wood Memorial. All are Grade I stakes except the Arkansas Derby, a separate fiasco we can tackle at a later date.

Tier Two includes the winners of the Grade II Fountain of Youth, Louisiana Derby, San Felipe, Rebel, Lane's End, UAE Derby, Illinois Derby and Lexington Stakes, ranked in order of graded earnings.

Tier Three is the winners of the Grade III Lecomte, San Rafael, Holy Bull, Risen Star, Sam F. Davis, El Camino Real, Southwest, Sham, Gotham and Tampa Bay Derby, also ranked within the tier by graded earnings.

Then you have the All Others category. Graded earnings would be used to determine the remainder of the 20-horse field if any additional spots are open due to duplicate qualifiers.

Every graded non-turf three-year-old prep at a mile or longer is included in this approach. And as you can see, graded earnings aren't completely thrown out with the bath water; they still take on great importance to rank horses within the three categories as well as any leftovers.

Heading into Saturday's races, the pecking order would look like this:

With Midshipman out, the Florida Derby top three of Quality Road, Dunkirk and Theregoesjojo currently make up Tier One. The four other major preps are still to come.

Tier Two horses No. 4 through No. 8 ranked in order based on graded earnings would be Regal Ransom, Pioneerofthe Nile, Friesan Fire, Hold Me Back and Win Willy. Fountain of Youth winner Quality Road was removed from this tier and upgraded after winning the Florida Derby. The Illinois Derby and Lexington S. have yet to be run.

Tier Three races have all been run, with Old Fashioned at No. 9, followed in order of graded earnings by I Want Revenge, Chocolate Candy, Musket Man, The Pamplemousse and No. 14 General Quarters.

Six remaining spots would be up for grabs, presently headed by Square Eddie and Desert Party, topping the graded earnings list in the All Others category.

This system isn't foolproof, and someone else may have a better mousetrap. But it's an improvement on the status quo, and using this method, three-year-olds previously excluded from the Kentucky Derby such as Rock Hard Ten, Eddington, Sunday Break and Chelokee would have made the starting lineup.

Whatever revisions to the present format Churchill Downs decides to make--and it will eventually have to do something--it must now hope Dunkirk catches a break and lands in the gate. He just might be the best three-year-old in the country, and if he is sitting in the barn on the first Saturday in May, the Kentucky Derby will have only itself to blame.

Comments? Please email TDN management at suefinley@thoroughbreddailynews.com.

Kentucky Derby Graded Stakes Earnings

Compiled by Churchill's Ben Huffman (Through Apr. 1)

<u>Horse</u>	<u>Trainer</u>	<u>Graded \$</u>
Stardom Bound (Tapit)	Dutrow Jr	\$1,770,000
Regal Ransom (Distorted Humor)	bin Suroor	\$1,250,000
Square Eddie (Smart Strike)	O'Neill	\$774,981
Pioneerof the Nile (Empire Maker)	Baffert	\$743,250
Desert Party (Street Cry {Ire})	bin Suroor	\$641,667
Quality Road (Elusive Quality)	J Jerkens	\$600,000
Friesan Fire (A.P. Indy)	Jones	\$570,465
Big Drama (Montbrook)	Fawkes	\$480,000
Terrain (Sky Mesa)	Stall	\$410,830
Old Fashioned (Unbridled's Song)	Jones	\$330,000
I Want Revenge (Stephen Got Even)	Mullins	\$324,000
Hold Me Back (Giant's Causeway)	Mott	\$288,000
West Side Bernie (Bernstein)	Breen	\$235,160
Chocolate Candy (Candy Ride {Arg})	Hollendorfer	\$220,000
Bittel Road (Stormy Atlantic)	Pletcher	\$211,000
Musket Man (Yonaguska)	Ryan	\$200,000
The Pamplemousse (Kafwain)	Canani	\$180,000
Win Willy (Monarchos)	Robertson	\$180,000
Papa Clem (Smart Strike)	G Stute	\$160,000
Charitable Man (Lemon Drop Kid)	McGlaughlin	\$150,000
Dunkirk (Unbridled's Song)	Pletcher	\$150,000
Mine That Bird (Birdstone)	Woolley	\$138,705
Theregoesjojo (Brahms)	McPeck	\$133,063
General Quarters (Sky Mesa)	McCarthy	\$130,645

*Not nominated to Kentucky Derby.

HOW THEY GOT THERE:

RECENT KENTUCKY DERBY WINNERS' PREPS

<u>Year</u>	<u>Winner</u>	<u>Last Prep</u>
2008	Big Brown	1st, Florida Derby
2007	Street Sense	2nd, Blue Grass
2006	Barbaro	1st, Florida Derby
2005	Giacomo	4th, Santa Anita Derby
2004	Smarty Jones	1st, Arkansas Derby
2003	Funny Cide	2nd, Wood Memorial
2002	War Emblem	1st, Illinois Derby
2001	Monarchos	2nd, Wood Memorial
2000	Fusaichi Pegasus	1st, Wood Memorial
1999	Charismatic	1st, Coolmore Lexington
1998	Real Quiet	2nd, Santa Anita Derby
1997	Silver Charm	2nd, Santa Anita Derby
1996	Grindstone	2nd, Arkansas Derby
1995	Thunder Gulch	4th, Blue Grass