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A NO-DOUBT-ABOUT-IT WINNER

BY BRENDAN O'MEARA

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Two hundred and fifty-four days had passed and an abscess on Barbaro's recovering right hind leg worsened and two new cases of laminitis — the agonizing hoof disease — on the front limbs made the decision clear. Two hundred and fifty-four days after Barbaro's right hind leg became shrapnel inside the skin at the beginning of the 2006 Preakness Stakes, Dr. Dean Richardson and his veterinary staff dripped an intravenous concoction of barbiturates into the jugular vein, letting Barbaro go to sleep. In an instant the dreams of the owners, the trainer, the jockey, and a fan shattered — quite literally. That's what happened to Roy and Gretchen Jackson, Michael Matz, Edgar Prado, and me.

What seemed to be the moment of doom was when Barbaro — the dominant winner of the 2006 Kentucky Derby presented by Yum! Brands — smashed through the gates at the start of the Preakness. Prior to the race he seemed nervous, pacing in circles while never seeming to settle. Before the bell sounded and the magnets holding the doors together discharged, he crashed through on his own. Prado finally calmed him and reloaded. At last the gates slammed open with a metal-on-metal crash and the horses jockeyed for position. Then, two hundreds yards in, Barbaro's right hind leg snapped at the fetlock and he proceeded to run, breaking the cannon bone, sesamoid, and pastern into smaller and smaller pieces. The herd swept around the clubhouse turn, down the backside, and Bernardini went on to win.

Barbaro kicked his grotesque leg in the air. It flopped lifelessly. His skin kept the hoof from falling off altogether. My stomach sank watching him break down like that — the same way it sunk when I'd heard that he was finally put down on January 29, 2007. Champions aren't supposed to break like that. Certainly not the champion I had seen two weeks prior to the Preakness in Kentucky.

It is 7:15 A.M. and already the beer cascades from 24 oz. cans of Coors Light for four dollars a pop, the official beer of Kentucky Derby 132 presented by Yum! Brands. Whether it's an early morning drink or a late night drink, beer is a hot item just outside Churchill Downs. Wagners, open since 1922 — the year of the 48th running of the Kentucky Derby, won by Morvich — sells the beer in coffin-sized aluminum tanks, iced and ready to pound down. A stand decorated with orange and teal flags fills the air with the sweet aroma of powdered sugar on funnel cakes. Carnival or horse race?

Helicopters fly overhead surveying the scene. A small one-motor airplane coasts across the rich, blue sky towing a Kroger sign. To the right across 4th St. is Becker and Durski Turf Goods, selling jockey silks, saddles, bridles, saddle towels and blinkers since 1875, the year of the Derby's first running, won by Aristides.

A man with beads, purple and green, coaxes men to buy them for the hoped-for exhibitions of flashing women. "Get your Derby beads!" he says. One guy buys half a dozen. He's covered head to

toe in denim with a jacket that says: "Live to Ride, ride to live."

Over at Wagner's, a vendor slipped ass-end first into a tank. To the right stands a man in his fifties wearing a University of Alabama sweatshirt.

"He sat, maybe he fell, but his butt sure fell into it," he remarks to a stranger while laughing.

"Yep."

"Well, that screwed up the day. Plan B," he says.

Another man in a Miller Genuine Draft sweatshirt, short, squat, maybe 5'4", turns to his buddy. "There was 100,000 (people) on the infield, man, when we came here a couple years ago. The water was up to here," he says pointing to his knees. Up toward the entry gate, security begins opening the turnstiles and hundreds of race fans and partiers alike rustle to the gate, much like horses — in one end, and with the trilling click of a turnstile arm, out the other. The horses are restless this morning. An officer pulls her cruiser to the driveway adjacent to the human's starting gates.

As her windows roll down, Alabama says, "Happy Derby Day." On such a day, there's plenty of entertainment. For the fraternity-driven co-eds there's the debauchery-laden far turn where it's Mardi Gras two-months late. The homestretch and backstretch are where the seasoned traditionalists sit. They've been to the far turn and, at this point, no longer care for it. That's where I stand with Pete, my betting confidant. Granted, this is only my second Derby in the last three years, Pete's third in three years, but we consider ourselves serious horse players and do our homework, mulling over The Daily Racing Form, the tabloid with all the horses' past performances from their previous races.

We situate perfectly along the fence, ten feet from the turf track and thirty yards from the main track with Porta-Johns directly behind us. There's a mint julep building a mere fifty yards away. The only inconvenience is how far away the betting windows are. With a morning chill still in the air, we unfold our chairs and blankets. People still pour in trying to find a good spot to watch the races — a full twelve-race card. Feeling comfortable, we decide it's time for an early morning cocktail. I walk the fifty yards to the mint julep building.

"Starting the morning off right, two mint juleps, please," I say.

"Alright," says the vendor. "That's \$18, you remember us, right? Keep comin' back here?"

"Sure."

Palming both glasses of the bourbon with crushed ice and mint leaves, I carefully make my way past onlookers who look at me and say, "Already?"

It's the Kentucky Derby. It's a wonder there aren't more people doing the same.

I made a special trip to Alberta, Va. on Friday, May 5th, the day before the Derby to place a couple bets: a Kentucky Oaks-Kentucky Derby daily double. The Oaks is the Derby for the fillies, the three-year-old female horses, run on Friday. To hit this bet, you need to pick the winner of the Oaks and the Derby to win. I chose to wheel Bushfire and Balance in the Oaks with Steppenwolfer and Sweetnorthernstain in the Derby. I also picked up Saturday's Daily Racing Form a day early. I bought two sharp, crisp copies, with the famous Triple Crown mural on the cover painted by Pierre Bellocq. This particular one — titled "Horsefeathers" — had the morning line favorite, Brother Derek, as the centerpiece, portrayed as a peacock in honor of his owner Cecil Peacock. From his perch, Brother Derek displays races he's won on his blue feathers as his badges of honor: the Hollywood Futurity, Norfolk Stakes, San Rafael Stakes, Santa Catalina Stakes, and the Santa Anita Derby. Peacock sits between Churchill's famed twin spires with his head cupped in his hands next to his paraplegic trainer Dan Hendricks and jockey Alex Solis (who also broke his back a few years back in a nasty fall, but was not paralyzed). They all have wide, boyish grins.

All the other horses, portrayed as pink birds with horse heads, take aim at Brother Derek. Shooting

from the upper left is Keyed Entry, Seaside Retreat, Sweetnorthernsaint, and Lawyer Ron. From the upper right, Bluegrass Cat, Barbaro, Deputy Glitters, and Jazil eye the cocky Derek. Trainers Todd Pletcher, Bob Baffert, Steve Asmussen, Kiaran McLaughlin, Jerry Hollendorfer, and Michael Trombetta smirk, smile, and grimace at Hendricks from the lower left. Daniel Peitz, Bob Holthus, Dale Romans, Michael Matz, Barclay Tagg, and John Shirreffs also share similar countenances staring from the lower right corner of the page. The mural captures what the day is all about. It's a hodgepodge of trainers and horses, a spectacle mixing the characters who belong and those just happy to be there.

A month prior, Brother Derek was on the cover the Form on the day he was to run the Santa Anita Derby and the headline read "SCARY". Before and after his romp in that derby, that's what he was, scary good. But unlike any Kentucky Derby in recent history, there were ten horses in the field of twenty who were also scary. For the first time in years, there were more than five legitimate horses who could win this race, meaning tough handicapping, long odds, and good payoffs. Sweetnorthernsaint, the Illinois Derby winner trained by Trombetta, had a cruising speed indicative of comfort, perfect for the mile and a quarter Kentucky Derby. There were the stretch runners in Jazil and Steppenwolver, expected to come from fifteen to twenty lengths off the pace. Lawyer Ron, one of two millionaire horses in the field, had been toying with the likes of Steppenwolver and Private Vow on the Arkansas circuit, drawing comparisons to the popular Derby and Preakness winner from 2004 — Smarty Jones. Where 2005's Derby season only had one compelling narrative (trainer Nick Zito saddling five horses for five different owners), this year's crop had no shortage of stories. Unfortunately, these don't surface until the big stages. And that's too bad. Take Hendricks and Solis and the bond they have over a catastrophic injury. Where else can a man who was paralyzed team up with a man who was nearly paralyzed to have a chance at racing's most prestigious crown? Matz, trainer of the undefeated Barbaro, rescued three children from a burning airplane that he was also on, representing only a handful of people that actually walk away from a plane crash. Pletcher, the nation's best trainer over the last three years, was 0-for-12 with horses in the Derby; the racing press dubbed him the 'best trainer to never win one.' Sadly, for a trainer like him, there's been a trend since 2003 of victories by first-time Derby running trainers.

Barclay Tagg with Funny Cide, John Servis with Smarty Jones, and John Shirreffs with Giacomo all broke their Derby maidens first time out. Then there's Bob Baffert, a trainer who's been there and won it, who had three horses all with different running styles: the speedster Sinister Minister, the rater (a horse that sits just off the pace of a race) Bob and John, and the closer (a horse that sits at the back of the pack then makes a late charge) Point Determined.

With so many flavors and so much sampling, all twenty horses have something in common — they are elite, majestic, graceful, and good. One more thing these horses have in common — they know it.

I returned from Alberta to find that Lemons Forever, the longest shot in the Oaks' field at 47-to-1, was Friday's winner. This did not set a good tone. So with this information in hand, we had a game plan: get to the Derby and, naturally, lose our money in what we chalk up to be one of life's many, many crushing defeats.

Shortly after finding out that Lemons Forever won, Pete and I left Durham, N.C. at 8 P.M. The car was packed with a cooler full of Mountain Dew and turkey sandwiches with pepper jack cheese. The racing forms rested on the dashboard holding all we would need to know come Saturday. We traversed the piedmont region of North Carolina and the Appalachian mountain chain of West Virginia and, at last, into Kentucky where the hills rolled smoothly beneath the tires. After eight hours on the road, we pulled into a Best Western parking lot in Louisville, full of people who booked their hotel rooms months ahead of time. We checked into our first-come-first-serve parking spot, reclined the seats and fell asleep for a few hours.

On the infield, sitting comfortably in our chairs, feet up on the chain-link fence, mint juleps in our hands, we look over the Form, picking out horses for the entire day's card to beat the inevitable lines. All day, there are rolling daily doubles, pick 3's and pick 4's. These latter two bets mean you have to pick three or four winners in a row on a single ticket. You can pick any number of horses and any number of combinations, but the cost rapidly increases as you add horse after horse.

The "dumb" money being bet creates a large pool for winners. It's called dumb money because this is a popular day when people bet without knowing what they're doing thus increasing the payoffs. Patrick Effgen, a former roommate of mine from college who lives in Kentucky, meets up with us. His strategy relies solely on looking at the tote board, finding the longest shot in the field, and

throwing anywhere from \$10 to \$20 on his choice. This tends not to work, but he's had remarkable success doing it thus far.

"Remember the Blue Grass Stakes?" he says.

"Yes," I reply.

"Sinister Minister treated me well. I had \$10 on him to win."

"That's awesome, man. What did you see about him that you liked?"

"His odds were 15-to-1."

With people like this pumping money into the races, solid favorites would be leaving the gates with 5-to-1 and 6-to-1 odds. So Pete and I dig in and work on a pick 4, starting with Race 7, the Churchill Distaff Mile and ending with Race 10, the Kentucky Derby. With a warm, gentle sun heating our backs, we settle on two horses from each race: Mirabilis and Wend in the Distaff, Behaving Badly and Pussycat Doll in the Humana Distaff, English Channel and Cacique in the Woodford Reserve Turf Classic, and Barbaro and Sweetnorthernstain in the Derby.

Race 7 goes off and Mirabilis sticks in a good stalking position and comes thundering by us on the backstretch, her colors sharp and muscles rigid. We claw onto the fence as they breeze by and look up to the screen to see her performance on the far turn and homestretch — and she lets loose, winning convincingly.

We are alive. We slap five, nodding our heads for picking the 6-to-1 choice as our first winner. After the first leg you just want to be alive. We relax and enjoy a beer and hear a wave of cheers coming from the left. On a golf cart, police officers taxi away a handcuffed drunkard. The officer riding shotgun, mustached with sunglasses, waves his arm up and down to rouse the crowd in honor of the man making an early exit by the peanut gallery.

"Oh man, that is just mean," Pete says.

The horses for the Humana Distaff enter the gates and Behaving Badly, as expected, shoots to the lead and sets a torrid pace. The field glides by us, then Garrett Gomez takes Pussycat Doll in hand and charges her down toward the middle of the track for the win. Again, the second choice wins at 4-to-1. "You and your favorites," Patrick says scornfully as another one of his long shots lost. "Have some balls."

"Our favorites have us alive in our pick 4, so take that!" Pete says, turning his back to the track to address our friend who now totes two mint juleps and shows early signs of inebriation. He sways from his left foot to his right, his eyes glaze over, and his cheeks are bright red.

People rush to the windows as we near the Derby, still two races away. We walk around the infield, 150,000 strong, and see wrestling, fighting, and flashing. This quenches our thirst for the local color, so we walk back to camp. Patrick's brother, Brett, meets up with some of his friends, making our stakeout a little party. Our conversations stall when a young man climbs on top of the row of bathrooms starting from the right and parades across the tops, sinking them with every step, until he successfully dents every ceiling on the row of twenty. Confused users poke their heads out.

"He'll be arrested soon," Pete observes.

Race 9 is another turf race, so we'll be only ten feet away from the running horses.

"I can't believe how close we are to the turf," I say.

"That is so cool."

Brett, reminiscing on a Derby Day when he was five or six years old, says, "We used to be able to go right under the fence. Our uncle would lift it up and we would go right up to the track and watch

the race. That was before they had the grass there."

"There has officially been an Effgen at the Derby for the last thirty years," Patrick adds proudly, as he courts a very unattractive bird with a black tank top and large, looming sunglasses.

The horses break and again it's Gomez who rates his horse, English Channel, and gets the jump on the field and pulls away from Cacique to win easily. Still alive through three races.

We act reserved, calm, and hushed. It's like we're throwing a no-hitter. You aren't allowed to talk to us. You can't talk to us. You'll jinx us.

"Hey B.O., you win?" Patrick says.

"We're alive. That is all," I say.

"Who do you have in the Derby?"

"Barbaro and Sweetnorthern saint."

"I hope they lose! I hope Flashy Bull wins. That's right. I said it. Flashy! Bull!"

He and his lady friend get awfully close and they meander away to some remote location. Pete and I figure they went to a Porta-John. It would only be fitting.

"Hey, check that out," I say, pointing to the grandstands that envelope Churchill Downs' signature twin spires. There are thousands of fans now bellying up to the balconies. They line the aisles and rest their arms on the fence, taking in the sights of 150,000 people down on the infield. You don't have to look at a clock to know the Derby is coming. In fact, you need not possess eyes, or even ears for that matter: you can just feel it. Of course, where we sit is a prime spot, so people fill in the holes, much like pouring sand into a jar full of golf balls. Before long we are shoulder-to-shoulder with everyone: the young, the old, the beautiful, and the annoying. "High five!" says a guy of twenty-one behind me in a red polo shirt. "High five!"

I slap him five, Pete slaps him five, and we turn and claw the fence as the horses warm up on the backside before us.

"Look at Lawyer Ron," Pete says, admiring his physique.

"Yeah, check out Barbaro," I say in a similar tone.

"High five, guys. Hey ladies, high fives!"

The girls to my left high five him.

"Guys, c'mon, high five!"

Pete and I turn our backs to him.

"What? Are you too cool for high fives? C'mon, high five." He puts his hands up again.

"No, I am not giving you a high five," Pete chirps and turns his attention back to the track. "After the race."

"What is this kid, too cool? Is he too cool? Too cool for school? Too cool for school! Too cool for school! Too cool for school!"

This guy somehow manages to get everyone chanting this. Pete faces me and asks, "Are they making fun of me?"

“Yeah.”

“You guys are pretty serious, huh,” the girl next to me asks. She’s wearing a black and white flowered sundress. Her hair is frazzled and her eyes squint. She is slender and sways back and forth on the fence. “Well, not usually, but we have a chance to win a lot of money this race, so we’re just reserved.”

“Who do want to win?”

“Either Barbaro or Sweetnorthernstaint.”

“C’mon guys, high five!” the red polo shirt says again, having no regard for anything but high fives. I turn to him and slap him five, thinking this will shut him up. “That is it!”

“I can’t believe you just did that,” Pete says to me.

“I was patronizing him.”

“Yeah, sure.”

The horses finish warming up on the backside and eagerly gallop to the starting gates at the top of the home stretch. Jazil slots into Post 1 and the crowd roars and roars. At last, the final horse, Flashy Bull, slots himself in Post 20. They’re all in. The starters wait. They wait a moment more. They yell to each other. I fix on the eight and eleven posts — Barbaro’s and Sweetnorthernstaint’s. Then the bell rings, the gates blast open and twenty horses bump and angle down the homestretch for the clubhouse turn. Sinister Minister bounds for the lead with Sharp Humor, Bluegrass Cat, and Keyed Entry pushing the early pace with him. The stampede tromps by the grandstand and nears the clubhouse turn running by the finish line for the first time. On the lead Keyed Entry duels with Sinister Minister.

This is interesting — Keyed Entry is setting the pace, I think. “Where’s Sweetnorthernstaint?” I say to Pete. I already lose sight of him. Barbaro is fine. “He’s down back toward the rail,” Pete answers, trying to follow the television.

The jockeys settle their rides into position as they approach the backstretch. Sharp Humor is third, Barbaro is fifth in between horses, Lawyer Ron is sixth, Seaside Retreat is seventh, and Bluegrass Cat is down on the inside. Brother Derek, swinging way outside, is ninth, and A.P. Warrior is tenth, Point Determined is eleventh, the favorite Sweetnorthernstaint is twelfth and he moves his way through the pack below Kent Desormeaux.

“He’s too far back,” I say under my breath. I need to see the fractions to better determine if the speed horses can hold the pace or if it will be too grueling and the raters and closers will swallow the speed up in the final quarter of a mile. The half-mile fraction pops on the screen: a grueling forty-six seconds set by Keyed Entry, not Sinister Minister. They hold the lead as the field rallies down the backstretch. This is fast and there’s Barbaro in the three-path just outside the leaders, two lengths back. To my right I hear the pounding of eighty hooves shooting up dirt and there is Desormeaux putting in a run on the rail. Making up for a nasty early trip, Sweetnorthernstaint moves up with the leaders. Barbaro is in the clear, poised, three wide with Showing Up and Bluegrass Cat pushing the early pace setters. Our two horses have fifteen horses beat, but Desormeaux’s move is dangerous and his ride will tire for sure. The attention shifts.

“You see Barbaro! He’s sitting back perfect on the outside,” Pete says. “He’s clear. C’mon, Barbaro!”

“Let’s go, Barbaro! C’mon, Barbaro!” I yell as they approach the far turn. If we’re going to win this Pick-4, it’ll have to be Barbaro. It’s either him or nothing, and he has a clear alley to make his move. The field sweeps around the far turn and at the top of the stretch, Keyed Entry and Sinister Minister tire. My heart races while I wait for Edgar Prado to do something, anything, aboard Barbaro. Garret Gomez, above Sinister Minister, takes him in hand and jockeys him to the front, running three quarters of a mile in 1:10 four-fifths seconds. Seeing this move, Prado lets the undefeated Barbaro loose at the top of the stretch and simply shows him the whip.

That's all Barbaro needs to see.

Pete pounds my right shoulder and we scream as Barbaro turns it on, leaving the herd in a wake of Louisville dirt. His stable-mate Showing Up is second at the top of the stretch, Bluegrass Cat is a closing third and Brother Derek puts in a late run in the center of the track. With every claw of the dirt, Barbaro gains ground and widens the gap. He's flying now and we can celebrate for hitting the pick 4. Up on the screen it is clear: there is too much Barbaro in what NBC's race caller, Tom Durkin, terms as a "sublime" performance. No one will catch him and he wins by six and a half lengths. Bluegrass Cat is second and Steppenwolver puts in a late run for third. Brother Derek and Jazil finish in a dead heat for fourth. "This was a no doubt about it winner," Durkin calls.

Our throats, now hoarse from yelling for Barbaro, burn. "Now I'll slap you five, yeah!" Pete says to the kid.

"What? Did you guys win?"

"Yeah."

"How much?"

"\$800," I blurt.

"Damn. Congratulations."

At this point, the interest of everyone but the true horse fans wanes, and we revel in our victory. The grass on the infield is flat and pounded into the mud. Beer cans and lost t-shirts litter the grounds. Plastic bags and chairs are left behind. Losing tickets scatter and tile the infield with muddy footprints.

As the race officials drape the son of Dynaformer with a blanket of roses, we reflect on the race. The horse is the first to win off a five-week layoff in sixty years. After the Derby, horses start pulling out of the Preakness, not wanting to run and be humiliated by him. Barbaro's Derby sets him apart from every other three-year-old. He's igniting interest similar to that of Smarty Jones in 2004. Could he go on to win the Preakness Stakes and Belmont Stakes and be the first winner of the Triple Crown in twenty-eight years? No horse can beat him this year. You get the feeling that after his Derby romp, the only thing that could beat a horse that good, that fresh, that scary, is himself.

Two weeks following the Derby, breaking from Post 6 in the Preakness, Barbaro smashed through the gate prior to the bell. Edgar Prado gathered the horse and trotted him back to the gate where Barbaro was cleared to run by the vets. They broke cleanly from the gates and Alex Solis tucked Brother Derek in behind Barbaro. Two hundred yards in Solis heard a crack. It was Barbaro's right hind leg. The field wheeled around the clubhouse turn behind the pace-setting Like Now while Prado eased up the massive Barbaro.

"Barbaro, I believe he's being pulled up! Barbaro is being pulled up! An astonishing development here! Barbaro is being pulled up by Edgar Prado! He is out of the race and out of the Triple Crown! He appears to have injured his right, rear leg. His right hind leg appears to be substantially injured. In the meantime the Preakness field carries on," Durkin yelled.

Barbaro shattered his pastern, sesamoid, and cannon bones as he kicked in pain before being vanned off to the hospital.

So Bernardini won the Preakness and Jazil won the Belmont Stakes — but in weeks and months following, it wouldn't be those performances we remembered. It would be how poor Barbaro broke down two hundred yards into the run for the black-eyed Susans, and how the scariest horse we'd seen in years beat himself when racing truly needed a hero.

I always thought that if he lived he still would be that hero. But after his struggle, after he lifted the spirits of thousands of people — not just racing fans — I thought even if he does lose the battle, he still would be that hero. When he was allowed to go to sleep he remained every bit a champion, every bit a hero: certainly after the way he ran in Kentucky, and especially after the way he fought

for the two hundred and fifty-four days following the Preakness.

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