

Inside Horse Racing

by Tim Layden

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STATEMENT Bandini, with John Velazquez aboard, dominated a strong field at Keeneland.



Track Meet

Todd Pletcher and Nick Zito took different routes to the Derby, but both will arrive with strong contenders

NICK ZITO is overdue to win the Kentucky Derby again. Todd Pletcher is overdue to win his first Derby. So it is only appropriate that both trainers will saddle live contenders at Churchill Downs on May 7. Zito has twice won the most important horse race in America but has been chasing number 3 for more than a decade. Pletcher has been the hottest trainer in the country for three years but is winless with nine Derby starters, dating back to 2000.

Their paths to Louisville could not have been more different. Pletcher nominated 34 3-year-olds for the Triple Crown, more than twice as many as any other trainer. Yet when the sun rose last Saturday, Pletcher had no guaranteed Derby starter, no

horse that had done enough on the racetrack (or earned enough money) to qualify. By the time the sun had set, he had two.

In front of a record crowd of 33,261 at Keeneland Race Course in Lexington, Ky., Pletcher's Bandini won the Blue Grass Stakes—against the deepest field in any Derby prep race—by a commanding six lengths.

"I was cautiously optimistic that this could happen," Pletcher said afterward. "We had a little hiccup with this horse [he missed the Florida Derby with a bruised foot], but we're fortunate that it was five weeks out from the Derby." Half an hour later his Flower Alley finished

second, eight lengths behind the impressive Afleet Alex in the Arkansas Derby but close enough to warrant a Derby start.



RIDING HIGH Afleet Alex gave Jeremy Rose reason to celebrate.

Pletcher, 37, remains unhurried in his quest to win a Derby. "You're dealing with living, breathing creatures and working on a calendar that you can't alter," he says. "You just have to hope the racing gods are in your favor."

The racing gods have been extraordinarily kind to Zito this year. A remarkable five of the 14 horses he nominated will probably start in the Derby, including Bellamy Road, whose 17½-length win in the Wood on April 9 is likely to make him the favorite. Florida Derby winner High Fly, who beat Bandini in the Fountain of Youth on March 5, will also be a popular betting choice. "This race, that race, it's a streak; things are going great," says Zito, who won the Derby with Strike the Gold in 1991 and Go for Gin in '94. Only D. Wayne Lukas, in '96, has had five starters in a Derby; he won with Grindstone.

"I'm probably guilty of over-nominating horses," says Pletcher. "But you would hate to make a mistake and leave out a horse who develops late." This is a fair point: It cost only \$600 to nominate a three-year-old early (this year, by Jan. 22). From Jan. 23 to March 26 the price rose to \$6,000, and after March 23 it cost \$200,000 to supplement a horse to the Derby. B. Wayne Hughes, owner of Illinois Derby winner Greeley's Galaxy, paid the \$200,000, but Greeley's Galaxy, though 14th in stakes earnings, will make the Derby field only if fewer than 20 early nominees enter.

It is a measure of Zito's remarkable spring that last weekend's results, while perfectly respectable, were the trainer's worst of the spring. Sun King, who had won the Tampa Bay Derby, finished fourth as one of the favorites in the Blue Grass, and Andromeda's Hero was third in the Arkansas Derby. Zito said that both will go to Churchill Downs.

Zito will be a daily media attraction in Louisville. "I've got to find a way not to get sidetracked," he says. "A race like the Derby, you make a mistake training these horses, these other guys will make you pay for it." □

Derby Picks

FOUR FAVORITES

Bellamy Road: His run in the Wood Memorial was beyond scary. And trainer Nick Zito says it took nothing out of him. Odds: even

High Fly: According to rival trainer Bob Baffert, this "tough little horse" was better than Bandini in March. Odds: 3-1

Afleet Alex: The Arkansas Derby prep route was good enough for Smarty Jones last year, good enough for Alex this year. Odds: 7-2

Bandini: Beat a good field in the Blue Grass, but he was the only contender who needed to win. Odds: 9-2

LONG SHOT

Rockport Harbor: Sick and injured much of the prep season, this immensely talented colt needs to get back on track in this Saturday's Lexington Stakes. Odds: 15-1.

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Track Meet

Choose the best possible answer for the following multiple choice questions.

1. How many times has Nick Zito 's horse won the Derby?
A.) 1 B.) 3 C.) 2 D.) 4
2. How many times has Todd Pletcher's horse won the Derby?
A.) 1 B.) 0 C.) 3 D.) 2
3. Who is Nick Zito's top horse in the Derby?
A.) Bellamy Road B.) High Fly C.) Afleet Alex D.) Greeley Galaxy
4. Which horse won the Blue Grass Stakes?
A.) Bellamy Road B.) High Fly C.) Bandini D.) Rockport Harbor
5. Which team won the Arkansas Derby?
A.) Bellamy Road B.) Afleet Alex C.) High Fly D.) Bandini
6. What is the original cost to enter the Derby?
A.) 1,000 B.) 20,000 C.) 600 D.) 200,000
7. How many horses does Nick Zito have in the Derby this year?
A.) 10 B.) 7 C.) 2 D.) 5
8. What is Todd Pletcher's age?
A.) 37 B.) 40 C.) 25 D.) 52
9. Who is the jockey for Afleet Alex?
A.) Nick Zito B.) Jeremy Rose C.) Wayne Lukas D.) Smarty Jones
10. Which horse won the Wood Memorial?
A.) High Fly B.) Bandini C.) Afleet Alex D.) Bellamy Road