

Santa Anita Derby Write-Up

Our local track, Turf Paradise in Phoenix is a nice enough place to take in an afternoon horse race. It's always sunny, and the palm trees and ponds in the infield that give way to lookout mountain in the background lend the place a pleasant appearance. That being said, the stream of \$2000 claimers that marches through the paddock at post time typically defies handicapping and leaves one wanting for a horse race featuring a horse or two that have actually won a race. Any race.

In search of some better competition, and looking forward to a preview of some of the big boys aimed at the Kentucky Derby, Chopper and I saddled up the yellow sled, and pushed her West down I-10. About 360 miles West down the 10 lies Santa Anita Park, possibly the nicest and most prestigious track West of the Mississippi. Saturday was Derby day at Santa Anita, and I was anxious to take a look at the favorites headed for Louisville the first weekend in May. Some of the finest horses around would be here for their final tune-up before the Triple Crown.

What Ziggy Marley has to do with horse racing I am not quite sure, but he was at Santa Anita as well. I had seen him play 10 years ago in Panama City during spring break at some club or other. Evidently Ziggy has moved up from the Spring Break circuit, and now tailors his act to the horse racing crowd. So check your local OTB, Ziggy might be playing there next weekend.

Before the first races of the day, Ziggy and the boys were cranking up the tunes just beyond the statue of Seabiscuit that resides in the walking ring. A handicapping class was going on nearby, and seasoned vets scanned their Daily Racing Forms. Chopper and I took a walk through the infield checking out the park, and then settled into a spot in the grandstand.

For the Kentucky Derby, we sit in the infield, but for a change, we thought it would be nice to actually see the race. We typically arrive at the Kentucky Derby before the gates open so we can rush to a spot near the fence in turn 3. For our trouble we are rewarded with a 5 second view of the horses as they power by. Here would be able to watch each race unfold.

We had called ahead to see if some of our friends could meet us at the track for some libations and spirited wagering. Nick Lee and some of his adventurous friends made the trek north from Huntington Beach for the day. Nick, Matt & his Dad, Dan, and Rich arrived in just in time to catch the first race. It did not occur to me at the time, but with a name like Rich, you cannot help but win all the money at the race track. Next time I am betting whatever that guy tells me.

Notorious social magnate Mookie Lewinsky also put in an appearance a little later on before he had to shuttle off to a birthday party somewhere. It seems that every time I talk to Mookie, he is off to a birthday party. I guess that's what they do in L.A. Go to birthday parties.

The lure of the prestigious race horses, some Ziggy Marley tunes, and a free t-shirt was slowly starting to fill the stands. Before it was all said and done over 36,000 people would pass through the gates, not a bad turnout for a Derby Prep race.

The 7th race, the Santa Anita Derby, was choc full of Triple Crown contenders. The prettiest horse in the land, St. Averil went off as the favorite, despite being the 4th favorite according to the morning line. The smart money was evidently swayed by Avie's stunning good looks, charming personality, and possibly by his last performance. St. Averil had really smoked down the home stretch in his last race, despite being given a bum trip by his Jockey Tyler Baze. Perhaps I need to qualify "bum trip." I weigh about as much as two jockeys. I would probably get thrown from the horse before I got to the starting gate – even if I was glued to the saddle. Basically, I have absolutely no business critiquing these guys. Keeping that in mind, the mathematician in me still

wants to say that taking both turns 4-wide strikes me as a rather inefficient manner to negotiate a race-course. Baze had done just that the last time out, forcing St. Avie to run farther than all the other horses. Fortunately, Baze still had enough horse to explode down the stretch and come within a bob of the head of a win. I reconed that this time St. Averil was going to have his way with these horseys and that daddy was going to win enough money to buy a new pair of shoes. Really nice shoes. Like Air Jordans nice.

Also in the Derby field was Rock Hard Ten, a powerful veteran of only two races, both of which he had won convincingly. Now most people say that three races is not enough experience to win the Kentucky Derby. But I am stupider than most people, so I put down a \$10 Kentucky Derby Future wager for the Ten anyway. Then I put even more money on him to win this race. He had turned in some very fine training times, and was sent off as the second or third favorite, I forget which. I put him in a nice trifecta with St. Averil and some of the other steeds. Louisiana Derby Winner Wimbledon was another favorite, as was Imperialism, a horse that has had consistent results this year. Quintons Gold Rush, Lucky Pulpit, and Irish turf horse Castledale rounded out the field. Castledale had not looked sharp in his only other start on dirt, but as I am learning, don't count out those wily Irish, or their horses.

St. Averil got a slow start, and never wanted to run. Perhaps it was the Ziggy Marley. I have it on good authority that St. Averil really prefers listening to Snoop Dogg before a race to get psyched up. Horses are creatures of habit, and having Ziggy there must have really messed with his routine, because he didn't run a lick. It's a good thing that Lucky Pulpit went out so darn fast that he slowed to a crawl in the home stretch, or my pretty horse St. Averil would have finished dead last.

So as I was saying, Lucky Pulpit went to the front, and set a pretty quick pace for the first quarter and half mile splits. Quinton's stayed with him, with Rock Hard Ten just behind in third. The other horses trailed slightly while St. Averil loped along in the back, apparently trying to decide whether or not he had remembered to shut the stall door on his way out. By the turn for home, Lucky Pulpit was fading, and Wimbledon and Imperialism were picking up steam for their big rally in the home stretch. Rock Hard Ten still looked strong and St. Averil looked as though he was about ready for a beer and some potato skins.

Wimbledon, Castledale, and Imperialism powered into the home stretch, with Wimbledon doing his best Charles Barkley impersonation – the bull in the china shop crashing for home. Or maybe the race horse in the china shop. Either way you're out some china. This day it was not to be, as Wimbledon fell back, and Imperialism and Castledale made a charge for Rock Hard Ten who had assumed the lead. Castledale caught up midway through the stretch, and the two horses hooked up in a dual to the wire, bumping Imperialism aside. The wily Irish turf horse that people had cared little enough about to send off as 30-1 nosed out Ten for the win, prompting just about the entire crowd to exclaim "damn it six!" and rip up their tickets in disgust. Then these people started picking up their ticket pieces as the board flashed that there was a Steward's inquiry.

The inquiry took quite some time, as the stewards debated what to do about Rock Hard Ten and his damned cheating ways. After about 7 minutes of deliberation, they moved Imperialism up to second, and Ten down to third. Everyone threw their ticket pieces back to the ground. It was at about then that St. Averil finally crossed the finish line.

At this point my Dad called to remind me what a super-awesome horse handicapper I am.

I think this is also when Matt's Dad recommended St. Averil race with a lantern next time out so he could see the finish line when he finally crossed.

And the guy named Rich nailed the \$315 exacta with Castledale and Imperialism.

I often employ different betting strategies. Sometimes I bet the overlay (When a horse has much higher odds than he did at post time). Sometimes I bet the favorites, sometimes I bet the long shots. Sometimes in a Trifecta, sometimes across the board. Sometimes I bet on a horse because it has a cool name. Sometimes I just close my eyes and point at the racing form. I have had mixed success with just about all of these methods. At Santa Anita, Matt and his dad had been betting on the gray horses all day. (And they were winning). On this day, I decided to employ a combination of all my betting methods. That turned into a real disaster. When I should have bet the overlay, I bet the favorites in a Trifecta Key. When I should have taken the favorites, I took the long shots. But that's only part of it. I learned a valuable lesson from Santa Anita that day.

Always bet with the guy named "Rich."

Or Uncle Moneybags, if he's around.