

149TH Belmont Stakes

Saturday June 10, 2017

New York, New York

Robert LaPenta

Todd Pletcher

Aron Wellman

Jonathan Thomas

George Isaacs

THE MODERATOR: Ladies and gentlemen, the winner of the 149th Belmont Stakes presented by NYRABets, of course Tapwrit, and we're thrilled now to be joined by the winning connections from left to right up here we've got George Isaacs, the general manager of Bridlewood Farms, we have Todd Pletcher, we have Jonathan Thomas, who's the trainer at Bridlewood, and of course Robert LaPenta and Aron Wellman of Thoroughbred Partners. Thank you all for joining us.

Todd, I'd love start with you and just get your impressions of the race.

TODD PLETCHER: Well, it could not have unfolded any better. You know, we got exactly the position that we had talked about, which was 8, prior to the race, and it couldn't have worked out any better.

Q. Just your thoughts on managing to win two of the three Triple Crown races this year and after what happened in Baltimore, if that's any extra satisfaction today.

TODD PLETCHER: Well, I mean, I think each of these races individually stand on their own as major, major races and huge wins. You know, the Derby win was awesome, and the ebbs and flows of this game are well-documented, and the last five weeks has been the ultimate roller coaster for us. But we felt really good coming in actually that both horses were doing very well, and we felt like both horses suited the mile-and-a-half distance. They have the right running styles, they have the right disposition, right pedigrees, so we were just fortunate it fell into place.

Q. Aron, thoughts from you if you don't mind?

ARON WELLMAN: This is what we bought this horse for was to try to win a Classic, and to be able to execute that game plan, an ambitious game plan, like Todd said, we couldn't have drawn it up any better. I think we all had a very clear vision of how this race was going to be run today, and it was just a matter of execution. We thought it would play out kind of like a turf race and we were looking for a little bit of a turf trip today in that we wanted to just draft in right behind the leaders and cover him, where they keep him gathered.

He's an interesting horse because he actually prefers to be in the thick of things and have horses surrounding him. He doesn't mind taking dirt. The last two races he was sort of out in no-man's land and didn't seem to appreciate that too much. It all started at the draw. When we drew down low, we were pleased, and it's just been an incredible partnership starting with Mr. and Mrs. Malone at Bridlewood, George, who runs the show there, Jonathan. You know, it's incredible what a team effort this has been because it's just everybody has played a role here.

Jonathan, the head trainer at Bridlewood, as soon as we bought him went down to Bridlewood and Jonathan broke him, taught him his early lessons, and he's obviously a Todd Pletcher disciple, so the transition was very smooth, and we probably interfered a little bit too much because of the high pricetag leading up to his debut, and to say that that's how we drew it up, running dead last at Saratoga the first time out, probably wouldn't be true. But after that, we turned it over to Todd and let him do what he does best, which is train racehorses, and you see the results today.

Obviously Mr. LaPenta has been here before, so man, for a New Yorker to win the Belmont twice, that's pretty special.

Q. Mr. LaPenta, can we get some thoughts from you?

ROBERT LaPENTA: Thank you so much. What an incredible day. What an incredible ride. Somebody asked me on my way in how this one compared to the Da' Tara win. You know, this was much more difficult. When we had Da' Tara, he was 38-1. The morning before the race, Lenny wrote a great article this past week, and I must have gotten a thousand calls on it, and no one really thought he would win, but I told my wife that morning that I thought we had a chance to be second, and whatever happened happened, Big Run didn't run, and we ended up winning the race, but we had no expectations of winning.

Everything building up to this, you know, this whole family, all of my friends, hundreds of people love this horse, and it put a lot of pressure on everybody. I mean, every night the phone was ringing, 50 messages, and we all felt confident that he was going to run a good race. Todd did a phenomenal job.

You know, it's not easy for a horse to come back off of a race like the Blue Grass. What happened, what's wrong with this horse. A lot of the writers said he was no good, he's never been any good. He ran a phenomenal race in the Derby, didn't get enough credit for it. But this was a

wonderful win. Good for New York, good for me, good for my family, good for the whole team.

Q. Todd, can you talk a little bit about Derby and the progression since then?

TODD PLETCHER: Well, like I've said all along, I think he ran a very sneaky good race in the Derby, and there's a lot made about the trouble at the start. He got as much of that as anyone. Unfortunately at that post position draw, we also thought, man, we drew perfect, 16 is a great spot, it's been I think over the last decade or 20 years the most successful post position, and it turned out it was the worst position because Irish War Cry took a left leaving there, and then it was just a chain reaction from there.

ROBERT LaPENTA: We got him back today, though.

TODD PLETCHER: But despite that, he ran on pretty well. He was still close at the end of the Derby, and we felt like right after that five weeks and coming into the Belmont, preparing for the Belmont Stakes was going to be the right move.

Q. Todd, can you talk a little bit more about what the ultimate roller coaster was, how tough it was for everyone at the barn and then getting ready for this one?

TODD PLETCHER: I mean, it's the nature of this business. You very seldom just get to enjoy a win and not have a target right around the corner, especially with the Derby winner, there's, I think -- you know, the two-week turnaround between the Derby and the Preakness is a really short time for horses, but it's a pretty long 14 days for a horse trainer. Yeah, we really were hoping that Always Dreaming could take a shot coming in for a Triple Crown try, but that's every trainer's ultimate dream.

But the back of my mind I was thinking, man, if he wins, I'm worried about what we're going to do with Tapwrit. It's all good today.

Q. Todd, I know you'd like to win anywhere, but can you talk about what this place means to you, what Belmont is to your heart?

TODD PLETCHER: Well, I mean, this is our home base. This is where we live. This is where my children go to high school, and this is home. You know, it's extra special, and you know, I think for rags to riches to be our first American Classic win, it's a race that's been so good to us, and we've been very fortunate now to have won three and taken a couple of tough beats, too, but it seems for whatever reason to kind of suit our style well, and I think it's maybe just -- it's maybe the way we train, the foundation that most of these horses have over a long period of time, and we've found that the five weeks in between the Derby and the Belmont or the Kentucky Oaks and the Belmont is a good way to get into it.

Q. Todd, what are some of the reasons that Jose is such a good fit for this horse? What has he brought to the equation?

TODD PLETCHER: Well, I don't think there's any secret that José has been a rising star for the last few years, and he's just a phenomenal rider. But the one thing that I think he suits our style

of training and he suits Tapwrit is he's a pretty aggressive rider. He's good from the gate. He's good at getting horses in position, and generally that's the way most of our horses run is they want to be in attachable position, and he remained very confident in the horse even after the Blue Grass and after the tough trip in the Derby, and we felt like that he had done everything right on the horse and he deserved to stay with him, and he could not have ridden him any better today.

Q. Aron, could you please talk about what last year felt like at the Belmont and how this year is a little bit different?

ARON WELLMAN: Why you got to bring that up now? You know, nothing will take away the sting of that defeat. It's still a Classic and we came within a nose of winning this last year, so that stands on its own. I think Todd and I conversed after that race last year. It doesn't get any nastier a defeat than that was last year. 50 yards from the wire, I don't think anybody in the building thought there was any way that horse was getting beat, and he did.

But obviously to be back in this position, we feel incredibly fortunate, incredibly blessed. This is the type of horse, the caliber of horse that we're looking to buy, develop and manage for our partners, for the partnership company. This is the type of experience we want to provide. I read an incredible Q & A with D. Wayne Lukas this week and he talked about his Triple Crown record. Obviously unprecedented success in wins and has swung and missed a lot, too, and I think Todd got a really bad rap for his Derby record going in to this year the past few years, but I think it's underestimated the value of getting owners to the big dance, to the Classics. That's what a lot of people are in this for, and this is a dream. Walking past the Belmont Room and seeing all those winner's circle pictures over the years, great mentor of mine was Eddie Delahoussaye, and to see his picture up there and now know that we have some involvement in a horse that's going to be etched in history, that's what it's all about is making history and providing experiences for our partners. That's said, it was a nasty loss last year, but we feel incredibly fortunate to be back here this year victorious.

Growing up on the racetrack in Southern California, my parents are back here, they're the culprits for getting me involved in this crazy game. But it was friendship with my family and my dad Mike, my mom Cory and the Delahoussaye family when he came out from Louisiana originally that blossomed and Eddie D, just a gem of a guy called me last night and wished me luck. He really took me under his wing and obviously mentoring him was Bill Shoemaker, who was obviously very influential to me in my childhood, to be sitting here and talking about them is a credit and my parents' credit. Couldn't be doing this without my wife and family and of course all these amazing partners. My business partner Brian Spearman has been incredibly supportive the past several years, and to look at all these faces over here, our racing partners, it's just very special. This is really the pinnacle, and I'm very humbled and honored.

Q. George and Jonathan, maybe you can talk about Tapwrit's early days.

JONATHAN THOMAS: Yeah, this was a team effort from the start. That's what makes it special. I mean, we all basically ran into each other and loved this horse and figured out a way to get him bought, and luckily Mr. LaPenta came in and we had the ammunition to get it done. But

like Aron said, we're constantly trying to get these upper-tier horses and just get them right and turn them over to this guy and try to win these sort of races.

It's very gratifying for two reasons. One, this has been an incredible partnership. When things kind of went not quite how we planned it, no one freaked out or wanted to change the course of what we set out to do, and everything has been very organic. And then two, having worked for Todd, to be able to develop a horse like this is really meaningful.

Q. What was it about him?

JONATHAN THOMAS: Just his athleticism, just the frame and just presence, all those little nuances to picking a horse out. But it gives you a lot of confidence when someone -- Aron is an excellent judge of a horse. George is a very good judge of a horse, and when we all come together, unsolicited, it kind of gives us confidence to raise your hand for seven figures. These guys work hard for their money, but we had the confidence to step in there and get it done.

Q. George, is there anything you want to add to that?

GEORGE ISAACS: Well, there's really not a whole lot to add. He was a very good horse, great management, great trainers, and those are the keys to success. Mr. Malone promised Jonathan and I he'd give us the capital to do our job, that's what he does. He provides good working capital, excellent management for everyone to do their jobs.

JONATHAN THOMAS: I thought he ran great. I was just watching the replay there, and he was still closing at the end. I felt like having another race under his belt in the Derby was very helpful. We talked about how solidly he was bred for the mile and a half, and you've got to love a horse like that that has as much heart and character as he does, and he's deserving of a good finish in the race, and I think he's the kind of horse that will continue to improve.

Q. Todd, now that you've got the Derby winner, the Belmont winner, the third place finish in the Belmont --

TODD PLETCHER: Now everyone will start picking on my (indiscernible), right? We'll enjoy this for now and then we'll have -- I really hope I'm in a position where I have to make some decisions on where all these horses are going to run this summer and who's going to go to the Haskell and who's going to go to the Jim Dandy, and I think the Travers will be on everybody's mind, so yeah, it's a fortunate position to be in, and we'll have decisions to make this summer.

ROBERT LaPENTA: One thing that I just wanted to add if you don't mind, somebody that deserves some credit that hasn't been mentioned, actually Eddie Castro was instrumental in developing this horse. He broke his maiden down in Florida, won a stake on him at the end of his two-year-old year, and knowing that we were hoping to get into the Classic route, we all just sort of mutually agreed that we were going to get José at that time. But it shouldn't be overlooked what Eddie did for the horse in those two very important races to close out his two-year-old year, so he certainly deserves credit.

Jonathan spoke a little bit about nuance. One thing that won't be talked about today, but speaking of the team effort, after José worked Tapwrit last week, he came up with a really good suggestion to open up his blinkers a little bit, put some mold in there, so Todd toyed around with it, and I'm not sure if it made a difference today, but those little things might have been the difference between him sort of continuing to chase Irish War Cry as opposed to going by him. I think all those things deserve mentioning, as well.

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