



145th Longines Kentucky Oaks

Post-Race News Conference
Friday, May 3, 2019
Churchill Downs



JIM MULVIHILL: All right, everyone. As we await the winning connections, very quickly we're going to bring up Dr. Al Ruggles. He is the AAEP on-call vet, the American Association of Equine Practitioners, the on-call vet today to give us an update on Positive Spirit who unseated Manny Franco at the start. Dr. Ruggles, can you just tell us what happened there?

DR. RUGGLES: Sure. So as you saw in the race -- early in the race -- their jockey was unseated, and ostensibly because of a grabbing of the quarter, meaning the hindfoot grabbed the front foot and caused, you know, abnormality of the gait, and then the horse got -- the rider got unseated. Now, fortunately, once he was unseated, then, of course, ran off at the beginning of the race, and the outriders did a tremendous job. I mean, that's hard to do, tremendous job pulling her up and without incident.

And then she was able to walk back to her barn. She's back in her barn under her own power. No ambulance was required. And so they'll evaluate once she's back in her barn, her private veterinarians will examine her and see if there's any more significant injury. But from what we understand at this point, it's likely a soft-tissue injury. Sometimes there can be a little bit of skin lacerations. Sometimes it's just losing a little bit of hair. But that will all be evaluated. But the good news is there didn't appear to be any significant problems with her, and all the reports, as she walked off the track, were very positive.

JIM MULVIHILL: That's a pretty comprehensive update. Thank you, Dr. Ruggles. Do we have any questions?

Q. Is there any kind of automatic state or track oversight of the subsequent examination or is this all done privately?

DR. RUGGLES: It's all done privately to my knowledge. I don't think Churchill or any jurisdiction -- racing jurisdiction, to my knowledge, would then examine her independently, if you would.

Now, there is a database of injury. So if a horse is injured in a race and has an injury that's serious, then it gets registered in the database. And that's a national database with most racetracks. So that would be the oversight I would think you might be referring to.

JIM MULVIHILL: Before she's allowed to race again, what kind of examinations will she get from whatever regulatory body?

DR. RUGGLES: Well -- yeah, in any -- she'll get a pre-race examination. I mean, it's hard to say that this could be anything that's particularly important. But every racehorse or every horse that is registered -- that is entered for a race will get a careful preoperative examination. So whether she goes on a, in quote, "vet's list" or not, I don't know that for sure in the jurisdiction here. Dr. Scollay or one of the regulatory veterinarians would



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be able to answer that. But if she does go on a vet's list, then they would examine her prior to approving her to race again.

JIM MULVIHILL: Any other questions? Dr. Ruggles, thanks for the update.

DR. RUGGLES: Okay. Thank you very much.

JIM MULVIHILL: We are delighted, of course, to be joined by the winning connections, the owner, trainer and jockey of Serengeti Empress. From the far side of the stage towards me, we have winning trainer Tom Amoss. (Applause)

JOEL POLITI: How about that? How about that, guys? (Cheers and applause) How about that?

JIM MULVIHILL: Winning owner, Joel Politi. (Applause)

JIM MULVIHILL: And winning jockey Jose Ortiz, and this is the first Kentucky Oaks victory for all three of these gentlemen. Congratulations! (Cheers and applause)

Tom, I would like to start with you. It's been an amazing few weeks for this filly, and we will get to that back story, but first I'd just like to hear your reaction to her performance today.

TOM AMOSS: Well, I have never won a race this big in my entire life, and I have been training since 1987. I've won a lot of races, but not one like this. And I have heard it said that when it happens, it's just a different experience.

Today for me, it was a rush of emotions. I thought about my mom and dad who are 93 and 94. They're at home watching. I know they saw this today. I can't wait to call them and speak to them. My extended family. I've got five brothers and their families. My wife and kids are here. Colleen, my wife; Ashley, my oldest daughter; and Hayley, my youngest daughter, are here.

I think as a team, us four, have seen quite a bit, as every trainer has, in terms of sacrifices and getting up early and moving around a lot. But don't separate me from anyone else. That's the life of a trainer. They put up with a lot, and I think today was just one of those days where it just -- I thought about the people that taught me along the way, too.

I just had so many emotions and they were going through my head so fast. As you can tell from the way I'm talking, I'm usually not at a loss for words, but my head is spinning right now.



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JIM MULVIHILL: Well, let me help you out. I know you were not pleased with the post draw. You were further outside than you would have liked, but Jose ended up in a perfect position. How did you see the trip?

TOM AMOSS: So I liked what I saw after the first hundred yards. I saw a horse go down. I did not look at my horse anymore. I was looking at that horse. I saw she got up and she was okay, and the rider got up. And then I put my focus back on my horse.

At that point, I could see that Jose was riding to try to make the lead, which we discussed. And we made the lead before going to the turn and was able to save ground around the first turn. I felt comfortable with that. Down the backside, when they put up a very fast opening half mile, my wife turned to me and said, "That's too quick." I said, "Not for her it's not" because when my filly's good, she's really good, and that's really what we should be talking about.

She's a great athlete, and I'm so blessed to have her. So, yeah, I guess the focus is on us three. But if we could put her in that fourth chair right there, I'd love to do it because she would tell you "I'm the man." (Laughter)

JIM MULVIHILL: Jose, I'd love to hear it in your words. You must have been a little bit surprised to get the lead as easily as you did and then be all alone. Just describe the trip for us.

JOSE ORTIZ: Well, I appreciate the confidence, first of all. Thank you, both of you, for giving me the opportunity to ride her. Tom gave me a lot of confidence in her. I had never been on her, and he told me, "Ride her like you own her." And that's what I did. I went out of there, I know her best races are in the lead, and I just tried to get her comfortable. I don't care if I was going a little bit too fast. As long as she was comfortable, I was comfortable with it.

JIM MULVIHILL: And then can you tell us about, say the last eighth of a mile, when Liora was coming to you and what she gave you there.

JOSE ORTIZ: When we passed the quarter pole, I went -- started riding her, and she respond really well. When she put her head down and took off, I said, "Man, she's going to run big today." Past the 1/8 pole, I hit her left-handed. She gave me that second gear, and from that point on, I know I had her. That filly was never going to go by her. She pinned her ears down, and she was going to keep going.

JOEL POLITI: Jose, there she goes right there.

JOSE ORTIZ: Yep. That's what I'm looking at. Man, I'm so excited to be in this position. But, I got to say when I see Tyler working the filly the other day, I said, "Jimmy" -- Jimmy is my agent -- "why I'm not working the filly if I'm going to ride her?" I was a little worried. He said, "No, don't worry about it. Tyler [Gaffalione] probably is going to ride her if the other filly draws in the race." I say okay.



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I was a little nervous until I see the entry came off. But I knew she was very life because last time she had some issues on the Fair Grounds Oaks. And I knew Tom was going to have her ready with that, 50A, and she did everything right just like he wanted. He was very happy with her, and I was very happy. He had a lot of confidence, and he passed it to me.

Like, I love to ride for owners -- a trainer that tells me that just do your thing, you know. I love it.

JIM MULVIHILL: Tom did, indeed, have her ready, despite leading in the Fair Grounds Oaks. Joel, can you just talk about since that race and everything that you've been through getting her ready after a disastrous performance in New Orleans.

JOEL POLITI: Well, the getting her ready is all Tom. So credit here goes to Tom. I mean, you've heard him say he's won a lot of races. I think Tom is the greatest trainer in the world, and I'm ecstatic that he won this race.

So what we've been through emotionally in the last six weeks is a lot of things because, to us, she's a really special horse. And so the first thing that we talked about repetitively was the day after the Oaks, Tom and I stood in the barn and said we're not under any pressure to run in the Oaks. We were very both resolute in that we were not going to run in the Oaks today under any press or push just to run in this race.

And we took it day by day. And she's an incredible athlete, and she showed it every day in the morning. And Tom and I have talked on the phone and texted to the point where we've got a direct line -- right? T1 direct communication. And she told us that she was fine repetitively along the way. And if she wasn't, the both of us were very committed to not running. And, again, every day she showed us that she was fine. And that last work -- if you haven't watched the replay, it's on YouTube. It's an eye popper. You don't really need to watch the replay because you get to watch this one, but she gave us a lot of confidence.

JIM MULVIHILL: Tom, you were cautiously optimistic after that stiff work. Can you follow up about the last six weeks --

TOM AMOSS: Sure.

JIM MULVIHILL: -- and especially the work you put into her to confirm she was good.

TOM AMOSS: We got up here after the Fairgrounds Oaks and she had bled in the Fairgrounds Oaks and bled significantly. She bled outwardly, and they gave her a precautionary ride back to the barn area on the horse ambulance for the bleeding.



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And when I got up here, I thought to myself, I'm reading all these comments that she's hurt, and she was never hurt, obviously. But I finally decided one day that I was going to bring her out to the racetrack. This was in early April when we just got here, and I was just going to take a film clip of her to put on social media because we were being very transparent with her.

And I'd also decided at that time that I did not think we were going to run in the Kentucky Oaks. And when we made that decision, when we announced it, I was concerned people would again think that she was hurt from the Fairgrounds Oaks.

So I told my exercise rider to back her up to the 7/8 pole, which is literally 3/8 of a mile, and then gallop her behind me so I can film her on my phone at the half-mile point, just pull her up. So we are talking about sending her to the track and going 5/8 of a mile in gallop, which no one ever does. But I just did it because I wanted to get video of her so people could see that I wasn't hiding anything from anybody about her health.

And I took the video and I sat up there, and all of a sudden she came around again. And he misunderstood my instructions and went an extra mile. And when she came around the second mile, she -- her ears were doing this (indicating). It was fate, you know?

Look, horses talk. And she talked to me that morning and said, you know, "I'm going to be okay." And if he hadn't have made that mistake that day -- if my exercise rider hadn't made that mistake that day, I was getting ready to call Joel and say, "Let's just leave the race alone." But when she came back around and looked as good as she did, I went back to the barn and I changed my mind, and we took it day to day from there.

We tried to be very transparent in everything we did. It's all on social media.

The work Jose is talking about was work with another horse. Again, she spoke to us that day when she worked. It was -- I called it that morning after the work a "wow" work. And most importantly on that particular day, we treated her therapeutically just as we were going to treat her for the Kentucky Oaks.

So it was important that not only she worked well but that she didn't have a bleeding episode. So we scoped her afterwards and she was clean. For those of you who were at the barn, Dr. Dunlavy who scoped her, spoke to you guys and said, "She looks perfect." And I called Joel and I said, "We're a go. We're going to go in the race."

So when I watched her today out of the gate, it looked a lot like the Pocahontas last year. She made the lead out of the gate down the back side just like in the Pocahontas last year as a 2-year-old right here on this track. She went very, very quick. But the ears tell the tale. And when the ears are doing this (indicating), you know you've got something underneath you.



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I watched it on TV, and I wasn't concerned about how fast she was going. I knew Jose had horse, and that was sweet. Very sweet.

Q. Tom, can you just describe for me a little bit about -- you picked this horse out of the Keeneland September yearling sale, \$70,000 alternation. Tell me what you liked about her and whether or not the fact she's by alternation given you any trepidation?

TOM AMOSS: So she sold fairly late in the Keeneland sale, as I recall, but still the averages are very high still, probably in the \$150 to \$175, I would guess.

JOEL POLITI: Yeah, over \$100.

TOM AMOSS: Joel was with us, and I brought Joel to look at the horse. And she was extremely athletic looking. If you looked at her today, you know what I'm talking about. I think the fact that she was by a relatively unknown sire, a sire that never even won a Grade I, people got off of her. But we were looking for an athlete, and she's some athlete.

Q. Tom, you had, as of the last time I looked, you had the highest winning percentage of all time of the top 50 trainers. Why has it taken you till today for this breakthrough?

TOM AMOSS: So I think part of that is that my label, maybe even up until today, has been he's a great claiming trainer. He knows how to work with horses well and do that, but I've never been known as someone that's a developer of horses, although I think I've developed quite a few. Certainly not the likes of one like this.

And about four, five years ago, I made a committed effort to start going to the yearling sales and trying to change that and trying to be a trainer that people wouldn't just say, "Hey, he's just a claiming trainer."

So she is one of maybe the second or third season we've done this, to go to the sale and actively buy, say, ten horses, which I've never done. I usually get two or three a year and that's it.

And it just was the right move.

JOEL POLITI: We may buy a few more this year. (Laughter)

Q. Tom, you've always known she was royalty. I mean, what about now? Everybody else knows it, too?



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TOM AMOSS: Yeah. Danny, you and I talked a little bit. I mean, look, all the signs were there. I mean, she came in the paddock, you can't tell me one of them looked better than her in the paddock. She was shiny and good. She looked great. Her workouts were great. They were there for everyone to see. We felt we were on the right track with everything we had done with her management-wise.

Look, I didn't bet a penny on her. Let me just get that straight. But I could have bet a million dollars on her and I wouldn't be more happy than I am right now. It went right. It just went really right.

Q. Joel, Tom just talked about he's had that reputation as a claiming trainer. What, as an owner, gave you the faith to say, hey, this guy, he can train at the very top levels of the sport?

JOEL POLITI: So I've known for a long, long time -- I already said it -- I think Tom is -- you know, the best is a very subjective thing. Tom is amongst the elite in getting horses ready.

And then he went to the sale and bought Mo Tom a few years ago. Anybody remember Mo Tom? He went to the sale and bought Lone Sailor a few years ago? Anybody remember Lone Sailor, right?

So I talk to Tom all the time. One of my favorite things to do is go to the barn and look at all of his horses for fun. You can see what he's got, and he has got an eye and he has proven it repetitively. And she is the empress of proving it, right?

JIM MULVIHILL: Jose, I have seen you eyeballing the replay. What have you seen just in the past few minutes as you watch it a few more times?

JOSE ORTIZ: I can't believe it. (Laughter) Just amazing. The filly, she fought hard. She was ready. Tom did a great job.

Q. Jose, did the track, as you were watching races today and taking part in races today, did you find it was going to be really good for your filly because it was so kind to speed?

JOSE ORTIZ: When the track seem speedy, but my plan was to go to a lead even if the track was slow because I think that's the best path for her. She's happy there, and that was my plan "A."

Q. It is so very impressive to be able to pick horses with all the competition there at Keeneland and Fasig-Tipton. What do you think helped to develop the eye for picking good horses?



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TOM AMOSS: Well, my first job at the racetrack was when I was 15 years old in high school working Christmas holidays. I'm 57. I never stopped working at the track. When I got done with high school, I was ready to go to the racetrack. My parents wouldn't allow it. There's nobody in my family that's involved in racing. They said you got to get a college education.

And so I worked summers at the racetrack when I wasn't in school at LSU. I graduated, and I went straight to the track and I worked my way up. I've worked all aspects of it from hot walker to groom to assistant trainer to vet assistant. I've done a lot. I have always tried to work hard, and I have always tried to follow the golden rule, which is you got to be there. You know, that means in the mornings, you got to be there. That means in the afternoons on a Monday or Tuesday, you've got to be there. Your horses talk to you 24/7. So I try to be a hands-on guy that's around the barn a lot.

And I'm not unique. There's a lot of other trainers that do the same thing. But that served me well. And I think it served me well in terms of picking out horses.

JIM MULVIHILL: Joel, your dad owned horses, correct? Can you tell us a little bit more about your background and how you ended up in the racing game?

JOEL POLITI: My dad -- my parents are both immigrants. I'm first-generation. My dad grew up in Egypt, loved going to the track. They migrated through Europe to wind up getting over here. He was a physician, and once he got settled, he went to the track, and we had some \$1,500 claimers at Waterford Park and that's how he got going. And I was at the track all the time. And we bred and he built a barn in the backyard, a 12-horse barn. And we got 25 cents a day to feed them in the morning, and we were out there all the time, and on the weekends, we went to the track.

So it was a passion of my dad's that I loved, and so it was a joy, a treat for me to go to the track. I have been going since forever, and here we are.

Q. Tom, if you can amplify on the idea of going from claimers to more expensive horses and the leap, I guess you have to have, of confidence to spend that kind of money. Where did you develop that? And when did you feel comfortable at that level playing in that game?

TOM AMOSS: Well, I think it goes back to, you know, what the jobs I had before I ever trained a horse. My first win was a filly at Sportsman's Park in 1987 named Prize Dream. When I started training in 1987, I wasn't afraid. I knew I could train a horse. So I was ready.

And as far as the opportunities I've had at the sales, buying young horses, you would still say probably that I'm a bit player at the sales. I don't buy the \$500,000 horse, but I get to participate And I'm excited to do it. And I'm looking forward to doing it some more.



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I do want to say one thing. If we don't mention it, it's going to -- we're going to regret it and that's how this filly was named. I'm going to let Joel tell you how the filly was named. And also I'll add something to the end of that.

Joel, the stage is yours.

JOEL POLITI: So I have four daughters, four lovely daughters. Three of them are sitting right here, and one is taking her final exams at Virginia right now. And they're all really good singers. They are, really, seriously.

And they -- my number 3 daughter, Annie, right there, latched on to the song "Africa" by Toto. This was two years ago before the Wheezer remake and it became popular. She played it and killed it and sang it. We have a cabin that we kind of retreat to and we went there and they sang that thing one night blasting it for an hour over and over. And it's a great song.

We kind of embraced it, and we had just bought Serengeti Empress. And so we went through the lyrics and in it, it says Kilimanjaro rises like Olympus over the Serengeti. So we named her Serengeti Empress. Really for me, it's really a tribute to my family is what it is. (Applause)

TOM AMOSS: Just to add to that, my youngest daughter who is in social media, Hayley, reached out to the band. When they found out she was named after the song that they had wrote and sang, they became big fans. They're now followers of Serengeti Empress.

JIM MULVIHILL: Somehow it always comes back to Toto. (Laughter) (Applause)

Tom, Jose mentioned he was a little nervous until he saw the overnight come out, that he was actually getting the mount. Can you tell us a little bit, I mean, when an Eclipse Award winner is open, you get them. But why Jose for this filly?

TOM AMOSS: Look, Jose as well as his brother, Irad, they are the two best riders in the country. I get to go up to Saratoga ever year. I don't participate in a lot of those big races. I get to watch that jock colony ride a lot, and that's a fabulous jock colony up there. Those guys are as good as they come. They are consummate pros. Their life is all around horse racing and they are studying all the time.

When we worked her here, Jose wasn't even in town. But we worked her and he was our backup plan because he was saying that Chad Brown had a horse in the also-eligibles in this race. If that horse had gotten in, he was riding Chad Brown's horse.

So I explained that to Tyler Gaffalione, who is a very good rider in his own right. And Tyler said I'd love to



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work her and if the horse of Chad Brown's gets in the race and you are going to give me the mount, he said I would appreciate it. I said, That's the deal. If Chad Brown's horse gets in the race, it's your mount. If Chad Brown's horse does not get in the race, it's Jose's mount. And Chad Brown's horse did not draw in.

JIM MULVIHILL: He might be doing double duty on Alabama Day at Saratoga this summer. Can you tell us what happens going forward with this filly.

TOM AMOSS: I always say after some of my other wins that don't -- in stature probably don't compare to this, I always say, we're just going to enjoy it, right? So right now, I don't think there's any plan other than to really have a big night.

Anybody got any Tylenol? (Laughter)

Q. Tom, I think maybe part of the problem that you may have had in the past was that some of your owners have given you horses that couldn't outrun you or the owners.

TOM AMOSS: Are you speaking in the first person, Bill? (Laughter)

Q. I am. I just wanted to ask you, you ran her at the Fair Grounds. I know you are in New Orleans.

TOM AMOSS: I am.

Q. We have often thought because of the shape of the ovals and the length of the home stretch that the Fair Grounds is really the ideal place to prepare a horse for Churchill Downs. Would you agree with that?

TOM AMOSS: So, yeah, I think the Fair Grounds is a super safe surface. I think that's a great developmental place for any horse. I'm not the only one that does things that that. [Steve] Asmussen got Gun Runner ready there. He used that track. It's a kind, kind surface.

So, look, you are trying to put a foundation in your horses, particularly when they're going from II to III, which is when we get down there. We get down there November of the 2-year-old year for the horses. It's a great place to lay a foundation.

We ran the Breeders' Cup last year with Serengeti Empress. She didn't run well. She got blocked in the first turn and it just wasn't her day. We gave her four to five weeks off.

Quit looking at that. I'm talking.



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JOEL POLITI: I can't help it. (Laughter)

TOM AMOSS: We gave her four to five weeks off and then we brought her to the Fair Grounds and we got started. That's what we did. We got her ready down there.

JOEL POLITI: I think Liora was second. Is that right? So Fair Grounds 1, 2, right?

Q. Why was it so important for you to document her progress on social media? Why did you make that point of emphasis?

TOM AMOSS: Look, it's no secret that our industry is facing at least what I consider a moment, a big moment, that can go one of two ways. And as far as I'm concerned with my horses and the racing public as well as the general public, I want to give as much information as I can out there. I want everyone to know what I'm doing, why I'm doing it.

And certainly there were some naysayers after the Fairgrounds Oaks that thought Serengeti Empress shouldn't run in the Kentucky Oaks after a bleeding episode. So I thought it was very important to document everything that we did.

And I think that's the new world of racing. I think that we're going to see more and more of that. There's nothing wrong with being transparent. I'm all for it.

JIM MULVIHILL: The winner of the Kentucky Oaks, Serengeti Empress! (Applause)

TOM AMOSS: She gets all the credit. She was the athlete. She did it. I put the saddle on her. But man, oh, man, what an athlete.