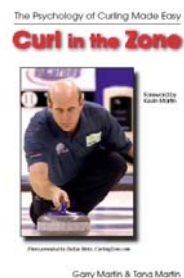


OSCAR'S 2007 BELMONT GREEN SHEET

"HOW TO PLAY CURLIN"



As I was deep in thought trying to handicap the Belmont late one night this week, my telephone rang. It startled me so much that I propped and wheeled, knocking my papers to the floor. It was my cousin Daisy-Jean. Her husband, Billy-Bob had just called her from Toronto where he had gone on a business trip. He said that he just **had** to call right away and tell her that he had met a Canadian fellow who was very excited about Curlin, but there were a few things he said that just didn't make sense, and he wanted her to give me a call and ask for my thoughts.

"When I heard that he loved Curlin, I perked up quicker than Old Blue does when he spots a jack rabbit racin' across the yard," Billy-Bob told Daisy-Jean, "I just had to call y'all as soon as I got back to the hotel."

I said, "Daisy-Jean, Billy-Bob, had to call you at this hour to tell you that you that he met a Canadian who loves Curlin? What's so unusual about that? His sire is Smart Strike who is out of Classy n' Smart, the 1991 Canadian Broodmare of the year. His dam is by Deputy Minister, his maternal grandsire is Vice Regent, and his maternal great grandsire is Northern Dancer! Despite being foaled in Kentucky, he couldn't be any more Canadian if he was baptized in Molson! No wonder the Canadian gentleman loves him!"

Daisy-Jean then said, "Yeah, but Billy-Bob said that this guy kept talking about how great Curlin was in the 2006 Winter Olympics in Torino, Italy. Billy said that Curlin didn't even race in 2006, Italy's major tracks are in Rome and Milan, not Torino, and since when did horseracing become an Olympic sport anyway?"

I thought about that for just a moment, and then trying not to show my annoyance, I replied, "Daisy-Jean, he wasn't talking about Curlin, he talking about Curling".

To which Daisy-Jean said, "Yeah, I know, that's what I've been trying to tell y'all he told Billy-Bob that Curlin was great! Wait a minute, did you say C-u-r-l-i-n-g? Who is Curling, another horse? I've never heard of him. Billy-Bob is going to want to know his breeding."

Well that iced it for me. I said my goodnights, returned to my desk, swept my papers up from the floor, and went back to trying to figure out who would win the 2007 Belmont Stakes!

Here's what I came up with:



CURLIN – Skated along on the outside down the Preakness backstretch, and iced the win with a big stretch move.

In the Derby, Curlin, the undefeated morning line favorite who prefers to stalk, was taken completely out of his game when forced to steady during the first 1/8 mile, getting shuffled back to 13th. He was actually running 14th after 6 furlongs and further from the lead than he had ever been at that point in any of his previous races.

From there, he came running, closing to 8th after a mile and to 6th as they entered the stretch. He finished 3rd, beaten eight lengths by Street Sense, and five and 3/4 lengths by Hard Spun.

I think he made a nice (although not a winning) move during the Derby, and simply hit a brick wall in the last 1/8 mile. This often happens to horses who are short on seasoning. (No folks, not that type of seasoning. I'm not talking about the Galloping Gourmet!) I'm talking about Curlin needing more racing experience not more paprika!

There were many Derby "elimination factors" that have gotten scratched over the last few years, but two that will continue to go into the gate as co-favorites are that for a horse to win the Derby, he must have raced as a 2 year-old, and he must have raced at least 5 times. With his first start in 2007, and only 3 lifetime races prior to the Derby, Curlin had about as much chance to win as Graham Kerr had of burning a casserole!

How many times have you seen a horse who is short on seasoning make a big middle move, flatten out in the stretch, and come back and win his next race? Whether it's a stakes race or a \$5,000 claimer, that scenario happens somewhere every day. Basically what happened here, albeit unintentionally, is that Curlin used the Derby as a prep for the Preakness. Going into the Preakness he was much more fit physically and a lot more mature mentally, and it showed!

Stumbling at the start, he quickly recovered to race unhurried but four wide down the backstretch. On the far turn he circled the field, going five wide entering the stretch and was making a big move when he was suddenly passed on his inside by a rallying Street Sense. The Derby winner split horses like the parting of the Red Sea, and quickly cleared both Curlin to his outside and Hard Spun to his inside and established a clear and seemingly insurmountable lead down the stretch.

Just as I was reaching for my directions to Belmont Park for Street Sense's Triple Crown try, Curlin changed leads and sprang forward like a Quarter Horse breaking from the gate. Out ahead of him, Street Sense, as he had done before in the Blue Grass and Breeder's Futurity was thinking, "mission accomplished". He never really slowed down, but for a fraction of a second he lost his intensity, and that was all it took for Curlin to nail him at the wire and create another Triple Crown dead end STREET.

As much as I love Street Sense, I have to say that Curlin deserved to win this race, and in so doing really impressed me for the first time in his career.



HARD SPUN – Swept aside by Street Sense and Curlin down the Preakness stretch, he may do some sweeping of his own in the Belmont if allowed to skate on the lead.

If you ignored the color of the horses and the color of the silks you would swear from watching the stretch runs of first two legs of this year's Triple Crown that it was 1997 and you were watching a battle between Silver Charm, Captain Bodgit, and Free House. Déjà vu? Well, ok, you would also have to ignore the price of today's gasoline, which was \$1.20 a gallon in 1997! (Talk about the good old days!).



Of course the other difference was that Silver Charm never lost his focus and absolutely refused to let either Captain Bodgit or Free House pass him. I think Street Sense may actually be a more talented colt athletically than Silver Charm, but he lacks the intensity and focus that propelled Silver Charm to his victories in the first two legs of the 1997 Triple Crown.

After watching the Derby and Preakness I must say that Hard Spun, while a very talented colt, is definitely third best when racing against Street Sense and Curlin. He had a perfect trip in the Derby where he enjoyed an uncontested lead, but offered no challenge to Street Sense down the Derby stretch.

In the Preakness, he was racing in a perfect stalking position behind two kamikaze leaders when he suddenly made a premature move down the backstretch and blew by them. Once again he had no answer when challenged in the stretch, although he finished a strong 3rd.

Pino said that he had to make that move because he didn't want to get boxed in behind the tiring leaders ahead of him, and C P West ranging up on his outside. My thought is that Pino knew that Street Sense and Curlin would be closing and tried to steal the race going into the far turn before they could make their moves.

Either way, Pino is being replaced by Garrett Gomez for the Belmont. That is probably a good decision, but remember folks, it's the horse that does the running. Speaking of running, the way the Belmont is setting up, this horse's style of running could be very dangerous.

The Derby was a perfect setup for him as he established an uncontested lead that he failed to hold. But the only horse that beat him was Street Sense, and given the way Street Sense had been training, his affinity for Churchill Downs, his unimpeded ground saving trip, and his trainer's expertise at pointing a horse for a particular race, it would have taken Invasor to beat him on that day.

In the Preakness Hard Spun, who was running just behind some of the fastest early fractions in Preakness history, made a premature middle move, and offered no challenge to Street Sense and Curlin. He did finish a solid 3rd, although the horses finishing behind him were not of the same quality as many of those who finished behind him in the Derby.

The Belmont will be run very differently from the Preakness. Hard Spun could be loose on an uncontested lead and that would be a very dangerous scenario. You would think that with a short field, the closers would have an advantage as their chances for a clean trip, while not eliminated, are greatly reduced.

However, in short fields, closers often race closer to the leader than they do in a larger field, and they generally run faster during the early and middle portions of the race than they normally prefer. Consequently they tap into some of that energy that they usually reserve for their trademark closing kick. If they are chasing a leader who is bred for stamina, and running relaxed on an uncontested lead, it will take a superior effort to run him down.



RAGS TO RICHES – This Ice Princess is Oscar’s Bud Longshot

There’s a girl running against the boys. She is successful, powerful, self-confident, and she comes off a win in her last race.

No folks, I am not talking about Hillary Clinton! If you look closely you will notice that there are some very distinct differences. This girl is more consistent, easier to train, and better looking for starters. In addition, Rage to Riches is accomplished at changing leads and generally does so without question when asked. Hillary, on the other hand, appears incapable of changing leads, preferring to run continually on her left lead.

About the only similarity that I can think of between these two “runners” is that when Rags to Riches meets the man of her choice, he will not remain faithful to her. Ah, finally they will have something in common!

While we are on the subject of the ladies, it would certainly be a major strike for the ERA if after 28 tries in the Classics; Todd Pletcher finally breaks his jinx with a filly! Actually Pletcher considered running her in the Derby, but thought better of it because of the size of the field. This field size is much more reasonable.

There have been 21 fillies that have tried the Belmont with only 2 success stories, and you have to go back to Tanya in 1905 to find the last one (Ruthless won the inaugural event in 1867). The last filly to run in the Belmont was Silverbulletday who finished 7th in 1999.

The Belmont distance will certainly not be an issue for her. By A.P. Indy, she is out the Deputy Minister mare who also dropped last year’s Belmont winner, Jazil. Sired by a Belmont winner

(who is by Triple Crown winner Seattle Slew), and being a half to another Belmont winner is just about as good as it gets pedigree-wise for this race.

She definitely has the talent as well as the breeding to finish in the money, although either Curlin or Hard Spun would have to regress a bit for her to become part of the exacta. Because both Curlin and Hard Spun will be such heavy favorites, she will represent some value at the windows, and if she does finish 2nd, splitting these two, it would make a nice trifecta.

Her running style also fits as she is capable of stalking and pouncing as she did in the Kentucky Oaks. She does not need the lead, and she does not drop way out of it like Tiago and Imawildandcrazyguy. She will race in the garden spot.

In addition, unlike Curlin and Hard Spun, she is coming off a relatively easy race, and as a filly, she will be getting a break in the weights. Garrett Gomez, who has ridden her to 4 victories, has to honor his commitment to ride Hard Spun, but his replacement, John Velasquez is not exactly a bug boy on his first mount. If there is a horse in this field capable of upsetting the two favorites, it is this lady.



TIAGO – Skating on thin ice because of the expected pace.

Horses who competed in the Derby, passed the Preakness, and returned for the Belmont have a pretty good track record. Three of the last four Belmont winners had this in common (Empire Maker, Birdstone, and Jazil). Tiago fits this description, however, what he gains with this factor is counterbalanced by what he loses by being a “from the clouds closer”, because with a few notable exceptions, those types of horses have a very poor track record in this race.

So what do we do with Giacomo’s baby brother? For Tiago to have a really good chance in the Belmont he would need the kind of pace we saw in the Preakness with very fast early fractions, and that is highly unlikely in this field. Slew’s Tizzy will probably set the pace, attended to from a respectable distance by Hard Spun. It is also possible that if Slew’s Tizzy is going too slow or wants to take back, Hard Spun will take the lead. Either way, the fractions will be considerably slower than in the Preakness.

This will make it much harder on the closers like Tiago, and to some extent, Curlin. The difference is that Tiago is like a Cadillac, he is slow to work up to speed, but once he does, he has a high motoring speed. Curlin, on the other hand, is more of a push button horse who can accelerate quickly when asked.

So Tiago will be at a disadvantage with either of two likely scenarios. If Hard Spun is allowed to set slow fractions, Tiago's late run will never catch him. The other scenario is that whether or not Hard Spun is cruising on the lead, Curlin will make his move before Tiago, and I don't think Tiago is good enough to catch him.

Tiago may take some "smart" money because many people will see how strongly he galloped out around the turn after the Derby and figure that the extra quarter of a mile will be just what he needs. That may or may not be true, but what he does absolutely need is a fast pace, and that he will not get.

More money going on him will mean higher odds on Rags to Riches, who I think is a very strong 3rd choice.



SLEW'S TIZZY – Speed skater with some stamina breeding, but he will need more than a Zamboni to give him his best racing surface.

Slew's Tizzy comes into the Belmont off two impressive stakes victories, including a 40-1 upset in the Grade 2 Lexington. However, that was on the all weather track at Keeneland. The other victory, the Lone Star Derby, was on a sloppy track at Lone Star. His only other win was in a MSW on the all weather track at Turfway. In his 3 races on a fast dirt track, he has finished 7th twice and dumped his jockey when he clipped heels in his only other try.

In his three victories, he was able to set relatively slow fractions while facing horses who cannot compare in quality to Curlin and Hard Spun. It is hard to say whether or not he will go to the lead in the Belmont, but if he does, you can bet that Hard Spun will not be far behind.

If Hard Spun takes the lead, this guy will assume a stalking position. Unfortunately he is just not good enough on a fast track to run down Hard Spun **and** hold off Curlin. If he takes the lead, he will get caught by Hard Spun or Curlin – probably both. Either leading or stalking, his early efforts will leave him empty down the Belmont Stretch.

So in summary, he has little chance if the track is fast. He is 3 for 3 when racing either on an all weather track or in the mud and 0 for 2 when racing on a fast dirt track (I'm not counting the race where he clipped heels.) He comes into this race in the best form of his career; he has the breeding (by a BC Classic winner and is bred 4 X 3 to Seattle Slew), but I just don't think he is at his best on a fast dirt track. Mud of course would move him up some, but I really think rounding out a superfecta is about the very best finish he can hope for.



IMAWILDANDCRAZYGUY – Breeding says his chances are ice cold

This son of Wild Event has a running style similar to Tiago, but that's about where the similarity ends. With a dosage of 6.00, this winner of 2 of his 12 starts has little chance in this race. I will give him some credit, as his 4th place effort in the Derby was outstanding! Racing last after 6 furlongs, he raced 10 wide into the stretch and finished only a half-length behind Curlin.

I was honestly amazed, and I give trainer Bill Kaplan a lot of credit. This horse had won only his maiden and an optional claiming race, and he almost caught a horse who returned to win one of the fastest runnings of the Preakness.

If I thought that a mile and a quarter was beyond his scope, what about a mile and a half? While I remain impressed with his Derby performance, like Tiago, he needs a fast pace to set him up, and he will not get it. However, his Derby performance did impress me, and his odds will be very generous in this race. You could do a lot worse than to throw him into your superfecta and maybe even trifecta bets. Even with Curlin and Hard Spun filling out the top two spots, if this horse should finish 3rd, the trifecta would be more than petty cash.



C P WEST – After thought = also ran in big races. Skating on thin ice in deep water.

One handicapping axiom that I always consider in big races is that you don't play afterthoughts – horses entered at the last minute that were not specifically pointed to the race. Sometimes it works, sometimes it

doesn't. Most of the times when it doesn't, it involves a horse who is truly either the class of the field, or will have an angle to assist him, like being the lone speed.

C P West, who finished a solid 4th in the Preakness was entered at the last minute by Nick Zito, but does not fit my exception pattern.

You might want to compare him to Rags to Riches who was entered just a bit earlier by Todd Pletcher, but there is a big difference. Pletcher had been training the filly all along like he was pointing her for this race. He would probably not have run her if Street Sense had not dropped out, but she was prepared nevertheless.

Although his breeding says that he can get the distance, C P West had not been pointed for this race. He is not the class of the field, and while his stalking style is an advantage in this race, he is facing a better horse with this style in the filly, plus having to deal with Curlin and Hard Spun.

Believe me, this horse is not an empty stall, but he's not the right horse at the right time for the right race. He could get 4th again, but I don't think he hits the board. By Came Home, out of a Dynaformer mare; look for him to improve a bit on turf. (His dam placed in the 1-½ mile Dowager on turf.)

HOW THE RACE WILL BE RUN

I say this on nearly every Green Sheet, but it bears repeating: ***When handicapping a race, you have to assume that every horse will run his or her usual race.*** It doesn't always happen that way, but that's the only way you can continue to handicap the races and still stay sane. So assuming that everyone runs his/her usual race, this is what should happen.

One of two scenarios will take place at the beginning:

1. Slew's Tizzy, who will break just to the inside of Hard Spun, will go to the lead with Hard Spun racing about $\frac{3}{4}$ - 1 $\frac{1}{2}$ lengths behind and just to the outside of him. They will continue that way for about 7 furlongs. **or**
2. Hard Spun will take the lead shortly after the start either by design or more probably because Slew's Tizzy is just going too slow. (Look at their past races, Hard Spun is simply a naturally faster horse.)

Either way, I believe that Hard Spun will have an uncontested lead after setting honest fractions going into and around the far turn, and will enter the stretch about 3 lengths in front.

At this point, Rags to Riches will be beginning to roll and C P West will be doing his best to keep up. Curlin will be about 2-4 lengths behind them, and towards the rear Tiago and Imawildandcrazyguy will be asked to pick it up.

As they come to the sixteenth pole, Hard Spun will still have about a length lead on Rags to Riches, but the filly will be gaining with every stride. Curlin will be cruising down the center of the track, easily blowing by a tiring CP West.

Inside the sixteenth pole Rags to Riches will briefly take the lead, but as they approach the wire, Curlin will surge past her, winning by about a little over a length. It will be very close for 3rd between Hard Spun, Tiago, and Imawildandcrazyguy.

There is only one other scenario that I can think of, and it is the one that Todd Pletcher is afraid of as well. It is possible, though not probable, that Hard Spun could steal this race. If Slew's Tizzy does not break well, and Hard Spun finds himself on an easy lead where he is able to set ridiculously slow fractions, he might not get caught.

I really don't think either Velasquez or Gomez will let that happen, but if each one is waiting for the other one to keep a "loose on the lead" Hard Spun honest, it could happen. Hard Spun is the only horse with the ability, breeding, **and** running style to steal this race **if** he is allowed to do so.

Just as I was wrapping up this Green Sheet, my telephone rang again. (I was starting to get a little weary of these Phone Tricks!) It was Daisy-Jean again and she was very excited.

"Hey Oscar, I just had a great idea and I couldn't wait to tell y'all about it", she said. "Ya know how I just graduated from hairdressing school? Well I'm gonna open up my own place with the money that I'm fixin' to win on the Belmont, and guess what I'm gonna call it?"

"Well, Daisy-Jean", I said, "I don't really know, but knowing how fast you work sometimes, how about, ***The Tortoise and the Hair?***"

"No silly", replied Daisy-Jean, apparently not offended at my sarcasm, "I'm gonna call it **Curlin's**, and my business cards will read: ***Curlin's -Pony Tails Our Specialty!***"

Post Script – Playing 'Curlin' can lead to gold

The only ice that Daisy-Jean is familiar with has been in her drinks, and while she at least has heard of hockey, she didn't realize that there is another major sport played on ice called curling. (Well, ok, it's a major sport if you live in Canada; it's a much more marginal sport in the U.S.)

So when she called me that last time and asked me how to play Curlin I told her "Play him win only; he won't pay anything to place or show".

"No, no," she said, "I want to know how y'all play C-u-r-l-i-n-g?"

Well, I took a deep breath and tried to explain the game as simply as I could (which is pretty simple because it's not a game that I am very familiar with). I thought you might be curious also, so here goes:

Curling is a team sport played on a rectangular sheet of ice. Teams consist of four players who alternate turns sliding heavy polished granite stones (would you say that they were Hard Spun?) from one end of the ice toward a target area called a "house" at the other end. Two sweepers with brooms accompany each stone on its journey, helping the stones along to their destination.

Each player slides two stones, alternating with an opponent. After all eight players have taken their turns an inning is complete. A team scores one point for the stone that is the closest to the house. Consequently, only one team can score in any given end. If there are no stones in the "house", there is no scoring for that end. (Please note that if they actually hit the house, it is not referred to as a Housebuster!)

Curling is a game of etiquette. At the beginning and end of the game the teams shake hands and say "Good Curling". I'm sure that "Good Curlin" is also pretty close to what Robby Albarado said after the Preakness!

The Gold Medal for Curling in the 2006 Winter Olympics was won by Canada. Below is a picture of the 'Curlin' winners that Billy-Bob's Canadian friend referred to as "great":



The question is, will Curlin get HIS picture taken again on Saturday?

