

# OSCAR'S 2008 TRAVERS GREEN SHEET

## *"IT'S A GRADE I STAKE, BUT WHERE'S THE BEEF?"*



The table is set (\$1 million place setting); the venue is outstanding (what could be better than the SPA in summer?). There's even a top class restaurant nearby (Siro's is only a sprint distance away), but as for the menu? To quote from the dearly departed octogenarian Sara Peller, "***Where's the beef?***"

Racing fans are always hungry for a good stake. The Travers usually satisfies our appetite by presenting a selection of the best 3 year-olds in the country.

This year, however, the menu contains a lot of Kentucky Derby leftovers. What would have been the prime choices are either passing the race (Big Brown), deceased (Eight Belles) or injured (Denis of Cork).

What's left on the menu is competitive in ability, if somewhat disappointing in talent. There is the Belmont winner Da'Tara, but the Belmont was his only win outside of his maiden score. There are the Derby also rans Pyro, Colonel John, Tale of Ekati, Cool Coal Man and Court Vision; none of whom whet the appetite the way they once did leading up to the Derby, and now more truly represent the Derby's sponsor Yum Brands – running more like fast food than the Galloping Gourmet!

What about some new ingredients to spice up this stake? Tizbig, Mambo in Seattle, Amped, Harlem Rocker, and Tres Borrachos? Actually they are more like salt and pepper than curry powder! Some additional flavoring but hardly Fra Diavolo.

Still one has to eat so let's see who has the proper ingredients for a Travers victory. Bear in mind that this will be the largest Travers field since 1990.

To handicap this race you need to return to the basic ingredients of handicapping. Ask yourself these questions:

- 1. Who is bred to get a mile and a quarter?**
- 2. Who has run or trained well at Saratoga?**
- 3. Whose running style is best suited to this race?**
- 4. Who may be sitting on a big race?**
- 5. In case of an off track, who is bred and/or performed well on off tracks?** (If it's anything like the conditions on August 8, I'd be willing to put up the late entry fee in order to run Michael Phelps! Oh that's right, he not a 3 year-old! Too bad, there are none faster with moisture on the track!)

Considering this summer's weather and the subject of this Green Sheet, it might be more appropriate to hold this years Travers at Emeril Downs!

Having studied the forecast for Saratoga between now and post time on Saturday, I will say with confidence that we can eliminate #5 as a factor.

Based on Oscar's secret formula, here are my top choices in order for the Travers:

1. Tie: **Macho Again and Mambo in Seattle**
2. **Colonel John**
3. **Harlem Rocker**

Good handicapping/common sense would have to say that you also have to include **Pyro**, who this year, outside of Big Brown, has run two of the most impressive races, albeit very early in the year. If he could repeat those performances, he's your winner.

### MACHO AGAIN- the last 3 Jim Dandy winners won this race.



Until he won the Jim Dandy, Macho Again had not won beyond 7 furlongs, but his second place finish in the Preakness, where he was steadied at the quarter pole and rallied five wide, was impressive and no doubt was overlooked in the wake of Big Brown's awesome performance. He returned in the Belmont where he clearly showed his dislike for the mile and one half distance. He was a very competitive second at the mile and a quarter mark behind the loose on the lead Da'Tara, but quickly thereafter spit the bit.

He was able to pull off the Jim Dandy when Da'Tara got caught up in a speed duel with Mint Lane, and backed up easily despite the fact that this was only a mile and one eighth. The shorter distance was just what the vet ordered for Macho Again, who displayed his courage by holding Pyro safe. Although Pyro had the momentum, he was not gaining on Macho Again in the final 50 yards.

Ok, there is no Big Brown in the Travers, and the addition of Tizbig guarantees no easy lead for Da'Tara. Macho Again, who always breaks well, should be able to tuck in behind the two speeds along the rail and save ground to the far turn, where he will launch his bid. I'd be more confident if this was a mile and an eighth, but he can get a mile and a quarter under the right conditions. He simply wasn't going to let Pyro by in the Jim Dandy, at a mile and an eighth. This race is an 1/8 of a mile further, but I don't think Pyro wants that extra 1/8 either, and there is a big advantage to Macho Again in the post position draw, as Pyro will break from post 11. They all carry 126 pounds of course.

One other thought that I'll throw in for good measure is that the last 3 winners of the Jim Dandy (Flower Alley, Bernardini, and Street Sense) were also victorious in the Travers. I don't usually put a lot of stock in something like that, however, it does illustrate that horses who have already won over this track quite often win this race.

## MAMBO IN SEATTLE – owns best last race Beyer (104), but will be tested for class



Mambo in Seattle has a three race win streak on the line. You could say that he has never appeared on "*Dancing with the Stars*", as this will be his first graded stake. Neil Howard tried desperately to get Cheryl Burke to ride, but she had other plans, so Robbie Albarado will be his partner for the big dance. Howard was also unsuccessful in trying to replace the NYRA racing stewards with Len Goodman, Carrie Anne Inaba and Bruno Tonioli. (Goodman especially refused to act as a judge. He insisted that this race should be run on grass, like "real racing is done in England"!)

Ok, back to business. He's bred to get the distance, has run well at Saratoga, and while he has not run consistently

faster than many of his rivals, he has not run consistently slower either. His stalking style fits the way I expect this race to unfold, with Da' Tara and Tizbig in a battle up front, followed closely by Tale of Ekati and maybe even Tres Borrachos.

The problem will be the class jump from a restricted \$90k race to a Grade I \$1 million race. (I know \$1 million does not fit John McCain's' definition of "rich", but it is a big jump up from a pauper's purse of \$90k) Why I believe he will have a chance is that I don't believe these are truly Grade I horses that he will face, and he looks like a horse who may be sitting on a big race.

## COLONEL JOHN – disappointed in Derby; was it the shipping or the surface?



The expectation was that Tiznow would sire late developing horses capable of getting a distance. Two of his top stakes horses; Tough Tiz's Sis and Bear Now, were certainly much better as their season progressed.

Tiznow set a new track record in winning the 1 ¼ mile Super Derby and is the only two-time winner of the 1 ¼ mile BC Classic. His progeny have an average winning distance of 7.5 furlongs.

On his bottom line, Colonel John is out of a dam sired by Turkoman, a winner of the 1-¼ mile Widner in 1:58 3/5. His progeny have an AWD of 8.1 furlongs. He is the broodmare sire of Point Given and last year's Derby runner up, Hard Spun.

Believe me, Colonel John will have absolutely no trouble staying 1-¼ miles. The question with him is how will he handle real dirt? One look at the Derby, his only try on a conventional dirt track where he finished an even but uninspiring 6<sup>th</sup> would seem to answer that question in the negative. The Derby was also his only race outside of California. Some horses just do not ship well. Some horses just do not like Churchill.

He was beaten in the Swaps last month. He finished 3<sup>rd</sup> but he beat only one horse. Even given the layoff since May, he should have won or at least given Tres Borrachos more of a battle. He has not worked at Saratoga, so it's really hard to tell how he will handle the track.

## HARLEM ROCKER



This son of Macho Uno is undefeated on dirt, winning his first two starts at Gulfstream Park, with his other wins coming in the Grade 3 Withers at Aqueduct and the Prince of Wales Stakes at Fort Erie. His only loss in 5 lifetime starts was an off the board 4<sup>th</sup> in the Plate Trial Stakes over Woodbine's synthetic surface.

His style is perfect for this race as he is a stalker who launches his best move down the stretch as he did in the Prince of Wales. The problem here is that these

are better horses than he has been facing. His work in: 59.3 (3/36) on Sunday signals that he might like the track where he also worked 1:00.1 (2/42) on August 3.

His Beyer of 106 in the Grade 3 Withers in April is tops in this field, and if he can repeat that performance he will take a lot of beating. Like Mambo in Seattle, the quality of the competition that he has faced is suspect. It's interesting to note that he is the only horse in this field that is not picking up weight off his last race. He carried 126 pounds in the Prince of Wales, a race that he won at nearly this distance. In such a closely matched field, it won't take much to tip the scales.

## PYRO – can't leave him out, but where's that Cajun spice that he used in his races in Louisiana?



Pyro's sire, Blue Grass winner Pulpit, looked like a winner entering the stretch of the 1997 Derby, before fading to finish fourth behind Silver Charm. Pulpit has sired 30 stakes winners, and most, including Wood winner Tapit, and BC Dirt Mile winner Corinthian showed their best from a mile to 1 1/8 miles. Pulpit would need to be bred to a very stout mare (think Roberto or Princequillo type family) to be able to get a classic distance horse.

Pyro's dam, Wild Vision, by Wild Again placed in a G3 sprint. Wild Again is a very

good sire, but his best offspring like Elmhurst and Wild Rush have been somewhat stamina challenged. So there is not much stamina help for Pyro from his bottom line, with the possible exception of the Axe II in his dam's 4<sup>th</sup> generation.

Based on pedigree, top and bottom, I thought Pyro would find it very difficult to win at 1 1/4 miles. That thought was validated when he finished 9<sup>th</sup> of 20 behind Big Brown in the Derby. On Saturday he will face only 11 others, not 19, and he's obviously matured as most 3 year-olds do by August. I think he could win this race with a clean trip at 1 1/8 miles, but I don't see him getting Top Chef at a mile and a quarter. He has ability and an awesome closing kick, but I don't think he can get the job done at 1-1/4 miles, especially from post 11. Plus value-wise he should be at least twice his morning line of 7-2.

## COURT VISION – Oscar's Bud Longshot



Court Vision is by Gulch, and is out of a Storm Bird mare. Sound familiar? Yep, that's right. That was 1995 Derby winner Thunder Gulch. Like Thunder Gulch, Court Vision won the Remsen, but he finished 3<sup>rd</sup> in the Fountain of Youth, a race that Thunder Gulch won. Thunder Gulch then went on to win the Florida Derby before finishing 4<sup>th</sup> in the Blue Grass. His next stop was the Derby where he won at 25-1.

Court Vision's bottom line is the most impressive of any starter this year. His dam, Weekend

Storm is out of Broodmare of the Year Weekend Surprise, making her a full to Summer Squall and a half to AP Indy. Weekend Storm is a granddaughter of two Derby winners – Northern Dancer and Secretariat.

Court Vision sputtered in the Derby where he finished 13<sup>th</sup>. We know that some horses just don't like Churchill. He ran well through a monsoon in a turf bog to finish a hard charging 4<sup>th</sup> in the Grade 3 Colonial Cup in June and followed that with one of his best performances, losing by a nose on firm turf to turf specialist Gio Ponti in the 1 ¼ mile Virginia Derby. So we know he can get a mile and a quarter....on grass!

I don't like post 12, but he certainly has the breeding and could spring forward going turf to dirt. Bill Mott is struggling at Saratoga this year where last year he couldn't lose. This horse is not exactly burning up the training track, but then that has never been his style. The morning line odds of 12-1 are fair, and based on his last race and his pedigree; he may be worth taking a shot with in a truly wide open race.

### HOW WILL THE RACE BE RUN?

I expect Da' Tara to go right to the front from post 3 with Tizbig breaking just to his outside. Tale of Ekati may also show some speed from the rail in order not to get shuffled back. Tres Borrachos could show some speed as well from post 10, but he doesn't want to get caught wide around the first turn.

Macho Again, Harlem Rocker, and Mambo in Seattle all are at their best when stalking and should settle nicely in the second / third flight, with Amped, Court Vision, and Pyro at the rear. Colonel John and Cool Coal Man are hard to figure. I think they will be in a stalking position, but maybe not as forwardly placed as the three stalkers.

I don't really expect much to change down the backstretch. The key will be how fast they are going up front and how soon they may begin to back up – and who is sitting right behind them when they do. In a competitive field like this, the perfect trip wins the race.

Around the far turn someone will make a move but honestly I can't say who between Colonel John, Macho Again, Harlem Rocker, and Mambo in Seattle. Whoever makes that first move will not be the winner, but he will take the lead entering the stretch and may look like a winner. Outside of the true closers, Pyro and Court Vision, Mambo in Seattle has the best late move, but he is untested for class. Macho Again won the Jim Dandy with a big late move and has faced better competition than Mambo in Seattle.

I think it comes down to those two horses with a fast closing Pyro and maybe, just maybe Court Vision if he can transfer his turf form to the Saratoga dirt.

### AND THE WINNER IS.....

**I honestly don't know!!** I wish I had the luxury of using John McCain's response when asked how many houses he owns – *"I'll have my staff get to you"*. But alas, I'm the only staff there is. So I guess I owe you an answer right now.

Ok, this may sound like a wavering politician's answer but at least it's honest – **BET THEM BOTH.**

I absolutely can't separate them. They are both capable of winning at this distance, they carry equal weight, they have the same running style, and both are winners over the track. It may come down the jockeys and that's where I'd give Robby Albarado on Mambo in Seattle a slight edge over Julien Leparoux on Macho Again. However, Macho Again has faced better

competition. So those two factors cancel each other out in my opinion, and we are back to even.

Macho Again is 6-1 and Mambo in Seattle is 5-1. I don't think the final odds will be a lot different. You can bet them both and still make money. Don't try to fool around with trifectas, or even exactas. You're safer playing with nitroglycerin. Anyone can hit the board in this race.

So in conclusion, this year's Travers is more like the Garden Buffet at the Saratoga Gaming and Raceway than a gourmet dinner an at Siros. There is a lot to choose from, but it's hardly Top Chef. However, there is still a lot in common. For instance in both cases after consuming each you are generally full, and eventually when fully digested, they both wind up going into the same place.

Hey, come to think about it, that's where some people have suggested my Green Sheets belongs as well!



**Good luck and Bon Appétit!**