

Best of Ohio Recap

by Bob Roberts

WHO'S 2008 OHIO HORSE OF THE YEAR, PAY THE MAN, OR VETERAN CATLAUNCH?

If handicapping the races placed before you at Thistledown, River Downs, and Beulah Park isn't enough of a challenge, Buckeye racing fans who chose to participate in the post-season balloting for Ohio Horse of the Year are really in for a difficult choice.

What makes it so in 2008 are the results from Saturday's 22nd running of the Best of Ohio races, particularly the centerpiece races, the Distaff and Endurance, both carrying \$100,000 purses. The front-running score by Pay The Man in the Distaff, and Catlaunch's brave decision in the Endurance, gave each Buckeye-bred their fourth added-money scores of the year, making them the leading candidates for Horse of the Year honors.

Here's a look at the five Best of Ohio races: GALBREATH MEMORIAL ---- Jockey Otto Thorwarth told trainer Bill Napier all summer that a juvenile filly in his barn was going to be better when the race distances stretched out. Thorwarth was right, even though the bettors dismissed his handicapping at odds of nearly 40-1.

Raymond Buse Jr. and Rolf Obrecht's High Pin (\$81.60), outdueling the previously undefeated Slides Choice, prevailed by a head. It was 10 lengths back to Pyrite Score in third place. "That's called luck, isn't it?" said trainer Napier. "Actually, we wanted the added distance for her." Said Thorwarth, "When I hit her left-handed, she went into another gear."

Slides Choice, the ultra-heavy 1-5 favorite, was very brave in suffering her first career defeat after back-to-back stakes scores. She dueled from the start with Pyrite Ore (who finished sixth) before shaking loose at the 5/16th pole. The advantage was a brief one. High Pin rushed around the failing Pyrite Ore to challenge for the lead at the quarter pole and quickly opened a length lead.

Slides Choice wasn't done. She rallied on the rail and regained the lead at the eighth pole. The two hooked up again at the sixteenth pole with High Pin sticking her head out at the finish line for her first stakes victory. The roan Ten Pins filly had finished third in the July 13th Hoover at River Downs as a maiden, but needed an Aug. 30 score at the Cincinnati track to get into the win column for the first time in seven career starts. The Galbreath lost its morning line favorite when Yankee Cruz, runner-up in the Miss Ohio Stakes, was scratched after flipping in the paddock.

SPRINT --- Longshot I Cant Refuse (\$71.40), who had won just one race -- an Aug. 27 prep for this race -- since winning the 2006 Best of Ohio Sprint, hung on for a neck decision over another outsider, the 22-1 D's Dessert. It was just a half-length back to Royal Nemesis in third. Defending champion Dooze faded from a quick beginning and finished seventh. The wire-to-wire I Cant Refuse is owned by trainer Arthur (Cricket) Bosley and is half of his two-horse stable.

"(I Cant Refuse) He missed last year because he had chips in a knee," said Bosley. "We sent him to Ohio State and had them taken out. We laid him up in July. Was I worried late in the stretch? Certainly, you better believe it. This is a heck of a race to win. Very sweet."

Said winning jockey Victor Urieta: "Yes, I was worried, too. But I'm very happy. " The Sprint score represents the second Best of Ohio victory for both Bosley and Urieta.

JUVENILE --- Utilizing a mild rally, Pyrite Stable's Bold Captain took command at the top of the stretch, then moved off to a convincing 2 1/4-length score in the 1 1/16 mile test for Buckeye babies. The favored Raise the Reward scrambled from the back to the pack to grab runner-up honors, a neck before Halmi.

"He's a nice little two-year-old, he's coming around " said Miguel Feliciano, the trainer of Bold Captain, a half-brother to another Best of Ohio star, Pay The Man, both out of the Magesterial mare, Pyrite Captain. Bold Captain, after failing to win in his first three career starts, was treated with Lasix for a Sept. 20 maiden special weight race. He responded by winning off by 10 3/4 lengths, an effort that preceded his Best of Ohio score. "I had a good trip," said winning jockey Deshawn Parker. "I was on the outside all the way. When I asked him to run, he gave me all he had. He tries hard."

DISTAFF --- Pyrite Stable's Pay The Man closed out a perfect four-for-four Ohio stakes campaign at Thistledown in 2008 by winning the Distaff as much the best, a 6 1/4-length victory over last year's Distaff winner, Cryptoquip. Trained by Miguel Feliciano, the four-year-old Bernstein filly began the year by winning the May 2 Angenora. She then added the June 21 Petro and Aug. 30 Rose DeBartolo Memorial before the Distaff triumph. "She is truly amazing," said regular rider Andrew Ramgeet. "I work as a team with Miguel and we couldn't be happier with how this filly runs. Today, I didn't want to go to the quarter in 22 (seconds). I tried to break and sit and take it from there. She did the rest."

Pay The Man has won six Ohio Fund stakes at Thistledown. She has never been beaten by another filly and mare in an added-money race in Cleveland. Her lone defeat in a Thistledown stakes came in last year's Cleveland Gold Cup when she finished second to stablemate Pyrite Personal. "I know Catlaunch is a very good horse, but I think our filly should be Horse of the Year," said Feliciano.

ENDURANCE --- In one of the bravest efforts in Ohio stakes history, Scioto Farm's Catlaunch, who has gotten better with age, won this 1 1/4-mile by a head after dueling from start to finish with a wave of different rivals. At the wire, it was long shot Allsarott who came within a stride of defeating Catlaunch, who, like Pay The Man, was winning for the fourth time this season in added-money company.

"(Trainer) Ivan (Vaquez) told me to let him break on his own, then give him the reins," said winning jockey Luis Martinez, Jr. "I just never quit on him. He seems to have a second gear. He just keeps going."

Said Vasquez, "When he was a three year old he wasn't this good. He loves his job. He's not too old to run again next year, but we've got a few spots left this year at Beulah Park. We'll probably sprint him at Beulah."

Catlaunch, a winner of 25 of 62 career starts and \$317,055, was winless in his first five Ohio Fund Stakes races in 2004 and 2005. He came to life in 2006 and has won six of his last 10 added-money outings.