

# KING OF THE DERBY

In a thirty-year riding career, Matz had ridden in countless nerve-rattling jump offs, competed in three Olympic games, carried the American flag in the closing ceremonies, and survived a plane crash. Now he was preparing to run a horse in the Kentucky Derby. Not just any horse. A horse he knew had enough talent and class to win the greatest race in the world. The night before, he had gone through the race fifty times, the questions relentlessly rolling through his head. What if Barbaro gets caught in traffic? What if he's dull? ... What if he's sharp? ... Have I done enough? ... Have I done too much?

The same questions repeated themselves rapid-fire through Matz' brain as he ran the gauntlet of Derby Day. Family had to be situated, passes needed to be obtained, a reunion with the Roth children was wedged in the already tight schedule. The media hovered, documenting his every move. Still, Matz couldn't stop going over decisions he had made in the months and days leading up to this moment. His biggest moment in racing.

Finally, the time approached for the trainer to settle down to the business of getting his horse ready to run. Matz made his way through the crowd and onto the tightly packed main track to join Barbaro and Brette, who were waiting back at the barn. Though by himself and preoccupied by his thoughts, Matz was surrounded by a crush of owners, trainers, writers, and eager spectators, all trekking to the stable area to prepare for the Kentucky Derby walk.

About halfway around the Churchill Downs' clubhouse turn, Matz, perfectly pressed in a dark suit, stopped. He knew he had made a mistake. He waffled, visibly stressed for the first time all week, as he gazed back toward the grandstand. Then he started walking that direction — away from the barn and against the crowd.

A friend asked him where he was going. Matz shook his head with a tinge of exasperation.

"My son, Alex, wanted to walk over with me, and I told him no; I just thought there would be too much going on for him," Matz said. "Then as I was walking, I got to thinking, 'I might not ever get here again.' My first Olympics, I didn't even go to the opening ceremonies, I said, 'Oh, I'll be here every year.' It took me sixteen years to get back. After that, I was the first guy on the bus."

Nine-year-old Alex Matz neatly attired in a khaki suit, spotted his father and ducked under the rail and grabbed his dad's hand. The smile on Alex's face was worth a thousand Derbies. Father and son, hero and son, walked back to the barn where Barbaro awaited.

As Matz finally got to his horse, the Jacksons were dividing to separate barns. Roy Jackson headed right to Tony Reinstedler's barn where Showing Up was stabled, and Gretchen Jackson took a left to barn 42 where Barbaro had been stabled for the week. The Jacksons had come to Churchill for the 132nd Kentucky Derby with two guns blazing. Along with Barbaro, came undefeated Showing Up, who had shown up late with a lively effort, in Keeneland's Lexington Stakes, just two weeks before the Derby. Trainer Barclay Tagg, conservative to the point of stubbornness, was impressed enough with Showing Up's development to give the Jacksons a second horse to root for in the Derby. Gretchen had first pick, so she chose to walk with Barbaro while Roy accompanied Showing Up.

"We're just trying to enjoy it. This is a lifelong dream; then, to have two horses ..." Roy Jackson said, moments before walking over with Showing Up. "It goes by so fast. Someone said it's like a wedding. We're just trying to soak it in and enjoy it. I had never seen a race here. When I was in baseball, I snuck in here one day to see it [the track], when it was dark, that's all."

It had already been a big day for the Jacksons, who earlier that morning, in their hotel lobby, had watched homebred George Washington win the Two Thousand Guineas, first leg of the English Triple Crown. The Jacksons had sold George Washington to world giant Coolmore, for \$2 million.

But George Washington wasn't in their silks and, certainly to an American, the Two Thousand Guineas is not the Kentucky Derby. The big one they wanted was nearly here.

The announcement, "Bring your horses over for the tenth race. Bring your horses over for the Kentucky Derby," calling the twenty Derby horses to the paddock sent a shiver through Matz and all the other Derby participants. Idle anticipation

finally breached to tense activity; at least there was something to do instead of checking equipment and worrying about decisions long since made.

The Barbaro team marched from their barn, Peter Brette, clasping his arms behind his back, leading the way, with Barbaro, in a pair of bell boots to protect his front feet and a set of hind run-down bandages, following about ten yards behind. Matz took his son by the hand and Gretchen Jackson fell into formation. Finally, action.

Barbaro strolled out of the barn like it was his world; free and easy, just like every morning — and every afternoon — in his dynamic career. The prodigy was finally at the place where everyone around him knew he'd be: Churchill Downs for the Kentucky Derby. All those plans, all those decisions, now it was down to minutes to see if they could come to fruition.

The individual Derby horses departed their barns and converged in the mile chute at Churchill Downs where they waited for the next call to the paddock. Matz, his son, and Gretchen Jackson, still surrounded by press, waited, nothing more to say at this point, just stunted small talk in an attempt to quell the nerves.

Every year, this is the first moment when you see all the Derby horses together for the first time. They've prepped in various races around the country, they've brought hopes and dreams of people from around the world, and now here they are, all in one place, circling, waiting. Out of the 37,000 foals in the 2003 crop, here are the best twenty on the first Saturday in May.

"Who wants to be first? Step up to the plate. Okay, come on, amigo," the guard at the edge of the chute begged for the first horse to start the walk. Alex clutched his dad's hand (or was it the other way around?) as the twenty-horse brigade began to make the three-furlong walk toward the paddock. Peter Brette walked with Barbaro, eyeing everything around him as if he were an undercover bodyguard.

Barbaro did the Derby walk like he did every other walk, in his own world, nothing bothering him, just strolling to do a job, ready for what lay ahead. This is how he handled everything in his career. Turf, slop, dirt? No problem. Kentucky Derby; 150,000 fans; mile and a quarter? Let me at it.

The Derby horses make the walk alongside the crowd, which has ratcheted up its energy in anticipation. Derby fans, many well imbibed by now, form an amphitheater of noise, waving their arms, pumping their fists, and screaming for their choices, thinking the encouragement will help them run faster. The skittish Thoroughbreds somehow handle the chaos and energy.

Late-running Steppenwolver, with his tongue tied down and nose turned up; Showing Up, like he had run thirty races not just three; Lawyer Ron, tensing up as he entered the tunnel to the paddock; and Barbaro, the composed and confident Barbaro.

Matz followed about ten yards behind Barbaro. Nervous. The twenty horses finished the long, drawn-out procession and entered the paddock. Horses still on simmer, with the paddock and its five-deep crowd, well past boil, ready to see the horses. By this time the paddock was choked with people — owners, trainers, a few celebrities, hangers-on — anticipating the race they had been waiting for all day. And for a few, all their lives.

Matz faced Barbaro toward the back wall of saddling stall number eight. He cinched the girth, and Barbaro replayed his Florida Derby antics, thrusting into the air and unleashing a restrained buck, but ever mindful of the back wall. No problem, just showing who's boss. Barbaro spun around and barged out of the stall before taking a short turn and getting back to his old self.

When he tightened the overgirth around Barbaro's stout barrel and the horse took a turn of the paddock, Matz finally let go of the nerves or at least stowed them somewhere. As an Olympic athlete, Matz had learned how to channel his nerves into something positive, something that would make him ride better. Back then he would walk the course, count the strides, warm his horse up, and enter the ring. The outcome was his responsibility, dependent on his actions, his thoughts. As a Derby trainer, though, the outcome was out of his hands. The outcome was up to Prado — and Barbaro. Matz was still the head coach but he didn't even have a clipboard, a playbook, or a headset, he had nothing but a set of binoculars and the hands of his two small children, Alex and Lucy. For Matz the difference between the Olympics and the Derby was extreme — the simple realization that the Derby was out of his hands while an Olympic show-jumping round

was in his hands all the way to the moment Grande or Heisman or Rhum touched down after the last fence. When Matz realized this, his nerves were gone. The great pitcher, Cy Young, once said about pitching, "The ball has left my hand."

And now it was in Prado's capable hands. The jockey was at ease; he had never been so confident for such a big race in his life. This horse made him feel invincible. For a jockey, there is no better feeling in the world than knowing you are on a perfectly prepared rocket ship of a horse. Knowing that he's sound, he's sane, and he has all the tools. It's like knowing you're going to be dealt a handful of aces before you sit down at the table; sure, there's work to be done, but it's a hell of a lot easier when you're holding the right cards. For jockeys riding in the Derby, it's all about putting your nerves somewhere so they can help you, instead of allowing them to alter your natural decision-making.

Barbaro emerged from his paddock stall, and Brette gave Prado a leg up. With Prado in the saddle, Barbaro settled down after that one instance of nervousness in the paddock (Phil Serpe said he got it from his mother, La Ville Rouge, who used to do the same thing) and joined in the post parade without a fuss. Led by the scrappy Jazil, the field headed out of the Churchill Downs paddock, which was a mosh pit of hats, suits, and dangling credentials. The anticipation was palpable, the day having slowly built to the crescendo of the Derby.

As the horses stepped onto the main track the first notes of "My Old Kentucky Home" played and 157,536 people rose to their feet to sing this sentimental state anthem. The applause at the end of the song unnerved Sweetnorthernst and Point Determined, who momentarily skidded out of the post parade but then re-joined the walk.

Barbaro continued to handle everything that came his way in front of the madding, dizzying crowd. He was still at ease with his place as his nineteen rivals warmed up around him.

Barbaro loaded into the gate and stood four square in the dirt while the rest of the field filed into line. As Flashy Bull made it an even twenty in the gate, Barbaro lifted his right front hoof off the ground. The gate sprang open; he stumbled for a moment and then was off and running, easing into his powerful stride. Showing Up and Barbaro converged for a stride, forcing Wood Memorial winner Bob and John out of the spot and giving the Jacksons one place to watch. Their undefeated pair raced side by side as the field went under the wire the first time.

Keyed Entry yanked jockey Pat Valenzuela to the lead, and Blue Grass winner Sinister Minister rattled fractions too. Sharp Humor broke sharply but stayed wide to avoid a three-way duel on the front end. Prado eased Barbaro into fourth behind the runaway speed of Keyed Entry and Sinister Minister. Showing Up found a cozy spot inside Barbaro as the field went around the first turn. Brother Derek, for one, was already in big trouble, throwing a front shoe and never finding a seam to save ground around the first turn. The rest of the field volleyed in and out of their own snags and crevices, just like in every other Derby, while the horse with the biggest engine, Barbaro, made his own trip.

Prado focused on getting Barbaro comfortable as he had done in the past. With a twenty-horse field it was paramount to get Barbaro in the same position he had enjoyed in his previous races, just off the lead, relaxed and in a cocoon. Prado didn't want to rush Barbaro, but he also didn't want to fade into the middle of the pack where he would be at the mercy of racing luck. When the speedy Sharp Humor stayed outside, it left a big gap, allowing Barbaro to sit in the exact spot Prado wanted. Horse was happy and so was jockey.

Just as Matz had said in the days leading to the Derby, Barbaro got himself in the race with ease and staked out a spot — once again the eye of the storm. Somehow, in race after race, Barbaro solidified a position moments after the break, forcing the rest of the field to hover around him. For a big, deliberate-striding, stamina-laden turf horse, he had gears to spare.

"He stumbled a little bit, so I didn't rush him, just let him do his own thing. He started to position himself, easy," Prado said. "I took up my position where I wanted to be; I saved a lot of ground going into the first turn. On the backside, I eased him out to try to avoid as much dirt as possible. You don't want to take that dirt if you don't have to; I was going to go two or three wide anyway. Everything worked out beautiful. He was push button, acceleration then relaxed, acceleration then relaxed."

When Kent Desormeaux sent Sweetnorthernst through horses on the backside, Barbaro and Prado never flinched, the jockey pulling his first pair of goggles down and barely reacting to the favorite's dramatic move. Barbaro lobbed along,

just off the pace setters and in front of the closers, waiting for the final turn.

“At the half-mile pole, I knew he was going to be really tough; I thought he was going to win for sure,” Prado said. “If somebody beats this horse today, he’s a super horse, out of this planet. I looked around. I looked inside. I saw Kent rushing with that horse. If he went by me and opened up five, I knew I had him. All I had to do was smooch, and he grabbed the bit and wanted to go, I said, ‘Oh, OK, just hold on; we’ve got three-eighths to go, don’t worry about it.’ In the Derby? That was exciting.”

Just as he had done in his previous five races, Barbaro launched into the race on the turn. Prado snuck a look to his left as Barbaro inhaled Sinister Minister, his jockey Victor Espinoza gawking at Prado, flabbergasted by the quickness of Barbaro’s move. Just like his breeze earlier in the week, Barbaro launched into gear and in a way Brette was right. It looked as though he went down the stretch in three strides. The high knee action that was once criticized, ever present, would never be questioned again. Barbaro was gone.

At the eighth pole Prado turned his whip over and snuck a quick look under his right shoulder. He liked what he saw. With whip at the ready, Prado waved it in rhythm with Barbaro’s beat, flicking it for peace of mind more than anything else. It wasn’t needed. Barbaro won by six and a half lengths, blitzing the last quarter of a mile faster than any other Derby winner since Secretariat.

Matz, stunned, hugged his daughter Michelle, his son Michael, his wife, his son Alex, his daughter Lucy. Prado pumped his fist once, not in ecstasy but more in confirmation, at the wire and then gave Barbaro a congratulatory slap on the neck, the horse’s ears flipping up and back, acknowledging the gesture. Prado couldn’t believe he never had to hit the horse, still couldn’t believe the gap he saw as he looked under his right arm and saw nothing but fading colors. As Barbaro lowered his landing gear and eased to a walk, Prado looked up at the sky and saluted his mother. The last six months had been tough for a son. On the way back he pumped both fists and pointed at Barbaro, imploring the crowd to cheer on the champ. The big, undefeated colt still had his ears up, looking like he had just gone for a twenty-minute hack up the Goat Hill at Fair Hill.

On the turf course Prado jumped off Barbaro and looked at the almost dumbfounded Matz who stood in amazement at the sight of his first Derby winner.

“Give me a hug,” Prado said to Matz.

Trainer and jockey hugged in celebration of their first Derby victory, exactly what Matz had in mind when he said to Prado in the paddock, “Go win our first Derby.” It was Prado’s seventh try, Matz’ first.

In what was billed as a wide-open affair, Barbaro dominated the Derby. Bluegrass Cat erased his Blue Grass debacle with a decent effort to collect second. Steppenwolver galloped steadily to the line to pick up third. Brother Derek circled what he could and finished in a dead heat with stretch-running Jazil for fourth. Sweetnorthern saint emptied out from his mid-race surge to finish seventh. Lawyer Ron was never in the hunt, winding up twelfth and coming out of the race with a bum ankle.

Prado, the Jacksons, the Matzes (and a gaggle of children and grandchildren) joined Tom Meeker, retiring president of Churchill Downs; David Novak, CEO of Derby sponsor Yum! Brands; and Kentucky Governor Ernie Fletcher in the winner’s circle. No fly-by-night owners who whoop and scream, the whole group graciously accepted the trophy for Barbaro, looking as if they knew they belonged there. NBC’s Bob Costas had to worm his way through children to interview Matz, who remained humbled by his role in this incredible horse story. Matz continued to thank his staff at home at Fair Hill and Delaware Park while Prado’s thoughts had already moved to the Triple Crown. So had the thoughts of millions of Americans, who longed to see this superhorse assume his place in history. It was apparent that Barbaro was a horse who loved to run, who loved competition, who functioned like a pro at every level on the racetrack. With his unbeaten record, sheer animal charisma, and compelling trainer with a story, Barbaro had become a superstar.

After the race Brette jubilantly walked back to the barn with Barbaro, who was barely blowing from his effort.

A scattered but determined chant began along the outside rail.

“Still undefeated.”

“Still undefeated,” Brette said in return.

Barbaro walked away from the winner’s circle with a purpose. The same purpose he showed in his first fledgling steps at Sanborn Chase, through lessons at Stephens Training Center, in his five victorious prep races, in those glorious Keeneland gallops, in that sizzling Churchill breeze and finally through the supposed-to-be formidable mile and a quarter of the Derby.

Brette looked at Barbaro in awe. Asked if he was surprised, Brette scoffed.

“No,” Brette said. “Not at all, actually.

“He’s the best I’ve sat on and I’ve been lucky enough to sit on some nice horses,” he added. “He’s a horse Sheikh Mohammed dreams about; he’s his type of horse. I hoped he was as good as I thought he was. I still think he’s as good on turf. The world is his oyster; he’s that good. And he’s still going to strengthen up. You get some horses that are just freaks. He’s not just a freak; he’s made in all the right ways. He’s become a professional now.”

As Barbaro walked into the test barn, for post race drug testing, Brette paused at the corner of the barn and tried to sum up the horse. “He’s so, so talented. So talented,” Brette said.

“And the best is yet to come.”

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