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Sparkman: Elsa's win in Grade 3 Jimmy Durante underscores versatility of sire Animal Kingdom

By [John P. Sparkman](#)



Benoit Photo

Elsa, a daughter of Animal Kingdom, wins the Grade 3 Jimmy Durante Stakes on Saturday at Del Mar.

The chasm between dirt and turf horses that opened to Grand Canyon dimensions in the early 21st century remains a conundrum for American commercial breeders. American buyers tend strongly toward pedigrees they view as dirt pedigrees, often balking even at outstanding yearlings by dirt sires out of turf mares, or vice versa. At the same time, though, commercial breeders are acutely aware that the biggest spenders remain the

Coolmores, Godolphins, and Al Shaqabs, who all focus first and foremost on turf horses.

In theory, then what could be better for American breeders than a horse who showed championship-level talent on both dirt and turf and won the Dubai World Cup on a synthetic surface as well? That horse, of course, is [Animal Kingdom](#), whose second-crop daughter Elsa won the Grade 3 Jimmy Durante Stakes at Del Mar last Saturday.

Bred in Kentucky by Barry Irwin's Team Valor, Animal Kingdom is by far the best son of Brazilian-bred turf male Eclipse Award winner Leroidesanimaux. Animal Kingdom's dam, Dalicia, by Acatenango, is a German-bred mare Team Valor acquired not long after she defeated German champion and future leading sire Soldier Hollow in the Group 3 Preis der Sparkassen Fananzgruppe. Acatenango was one of the greatest of German racehorses and sires, and Dalicia descends in female line from a high-class family resident in Germany and Eastern Europe since the early 1900s. Pedigrees do not get much more "turfy" than that.

Trained by Graham Motion, Animal Kingdom raced twice as a 2-year-old, both times on synthetic, running second at Arlington Park before breaking his maiden over nine furlongs at Keeneland. Second in a turf allowance at Gulfstream on his 3-year-old debut, Animal Kingdom then scored an easy victory in the Grade 3 Spiral Stakes over Turfway Park's Polytrack.

That made him a 20.90-1 shot in a Kentucky Derby made unusually wide open by the absence of champion juvenile Uncle Mo. In his first race on dirt he handled the kickback with aplomb, commenced

an eye-catching rally from mid-pack midway on the final turn and defeating front-runner Shackelford and Nehro for a 2 ¾-length victory.

Pimlico has always been viewed as friendlier to front-runners than Churchill Downs, and Animal Kingdom added to his degree of difficulty by breaking very slowly in the Preakness. He again unleashed a powerful finish but fell a half-length short of catching Shackelford.

Animal Kingdom suffered a hock injury at the start of a muddy Belmont Stakes, finishing sixth, and did not race again until winning a turf allowance at Gulfstream Park the following February, but suffered soreness in the same leg afterward. He did not run again until an audacious attempt at the Breeders' Cup Mile, and showed his tremendous turn of foot to finish second to Wise Dan.



He ran second to another brilliant turf horse, Point of Entry, in his first start at 5 in the Grade 1 Gulfstream Park Turf Handicap, and then showed he had not lost his affinity for synthetic with a comfortable victory in the Dubai World Cup. Australia's Arrowfield Farm and Sheikh Mohammed had bought an interest in Animal Kingdom before the World Cup, and with a view toward enhancing his appeal down under, he was sent to Royal Ascot, but showed signs of wanting to start his stud career too early before a disinterested 11th in the Group 1 Queen Anne Stakes.

Animal Kingdom began his shuttle career at Arrowfield that fall and stands at Darley in Kentucky. He has not made a fast start in either venue while showing promise in both. Best among his nine black-type winners is Untamed Domain (out of Ciao, by Lear Fan) who won the Grade 2 Summer Stakes at Woodbine before running second in the Grade 1 Breeders' Cup Juvenile Turf.

Elsa was bred by and races for Godolphin, and she is the fourth foal out of the winning Distorted Humor mare Abtasaamah, a half-sister to Godolphin's champion 2-year-old male Midshipman, by Unbridled's Song, and to Grade 2 winner Fast Cookie, by Deputy Minister. Fast Cookie is the dam of perhaps the best horse Godolphin has bred in America, Met Mile winner Frosted, by Tapit.

Midshipman, Fast Cookie, Abtasaamah, and their dam, multiple graded winner Fleet Lady, by Avenue of Flags, were among the horses Godolphin obtained when Sheikh Mohammed purchased all of the breeding stock of the late Bob McNair's Stonerside Stable shortly before [Midshipman's](#) Breeders' Cup Juvenile victory. Abtasaamah has since produced a filly by [Street Sense](#), a colt by [Tiznow](#), and was bred back to Honor Code.

Perhaps the biggest obstacle to Animal Kingdom's commercial appeal to American breeders is his exotic pedigree. American breeders who do not know quite what to make of sons of great stallions like Galileo and [Dubawi](#) have no use for a son of a Brazilian-bred stallion and a German mare. A paragon of versatility himself, it should be no surprise that there are two dirt stakes winners among Animal Kingdom's progeny.

The dirt/turf debate often becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy, but, given Animal Kingdom's history, pigeonholing him as a turf sire may yet prove unwise.