

A Winner's Circle Full of Firsts



Matthew Stockman/Getty Images

Animal Kingdom, left, leading Mucho Macho Man, center, who finished third, and the runner-up Nehro to the wire. Animal Kingdom's jockey, John Velazquez, won the Derby for the first time.

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LOUISVILLE, Ky. — Late Thursday night, John Velazquez didn't know what was worse, failing to get to the winner's circle of the [Kentucky Derby](#) in 12 previous tries or not even making the starting gate with a favorite, as he had for the third straight year. He had gotten the news that Uncle Mo, last year's Juvenile champion and racing's latest wonder horse, was still not himself after a stomach infection and would not run.



Last year, he had received a similar call about Eskendereya being unable to perform, and the year before that about Quality Road. He had also already lost his mount in Friday's Kentucky Oaks when his filly R Heat Lightning was injured earlier in the week. It had been a bad few days.

Velazquez's mood improved when he got a phone call from the trainer Graham Motion, who needed a rider for a colt named Animal Kingdom. Motion, an Englishman, was having a bad week as well. His big horse, the Wood Memorial champion Toby's Corner, had come up lame on Monday and was out of the Derby. On

Wednesday, Animal Kingdom's regular rider, Robby Albarado, broke his nose here when a horse bucked him off during a post parade, then kicked him in the face.

Did Johnny V., as Velazquez is known, want the mount? There were steeper obstacles to overcome, of course, beyond Animal Kingdom's 30-1 morning-line odds. (He wound up going off at closer to 20-1.)

For one, Animal Kingdom had never run on dirt. He was bred to be a turf horse, and had won the Spiral Stakes on a synthetic surface. But that was on March 26, and the last horse to win the Derby off such a long rest was Needles in 1956. Even more daunting, he was lightly raced, and the last horse to win here off only four lifetime races was Exterminator in 1918.



"This is a roller-coaster business, and I was more than happy to get the call," Velazquez said.

As the field of 19 gunned into the first turn led by the speedy Shackleford, Velazquez started to feel good about the colt he had previously watched only on video. Animal Kingdom was in tight quarters, and a record crowd of 164,858 let loose a deafening roar, but the colt was cruising along as if he were on a trail ride back at his home base in Elkton, Md.



"He was so relaxed," Velazquez said.

Ahead of him, Shackleford was loping the field through an easy half-mile in 48.36 seconds. Animal Kingdom was wide down the backstretch in 12th place, and Velazquez was starting to like his chances.

"It was meant to be," Velazquez said he thought to himself.

"Things happen for a reason."

Behind him, two of the major contenders were having problems. Dialed In, who was sent off as the 5-1 favorite, was struggling with the dirt being kicked in his face, and the rider on Archrarch, Jon Court, was having trouble staying in his saddle after breaking from the No. 1 hole.

"My saddle slipped coming out of the gate," Court said. "He never really was comfortable."

As they circled the far turn, Velazquez let Animal Kingdom find another gear, then veered him inside before angling him out. As they hit the mile pole, they were sitting fifth behind Shackleford, Nehro, Comma to the Top and Pants on Fire.

“When I asked him to run, it was amazing,” Velazquez said.

Velazquez scrubbed at Animal Kingdom’s neck, and the big colt took off. Pants on Fire, with Rosie Napravnik aboard, disappeared first. Corey Nakatani, aboard Nehro, got the first jump on Shackleford in the stretch and blasted past him in mid-track. Velazquez gave Animal Kingdom more reins, and pumped in rhythm atop him, coaxing out gigantic strides.

“I knew we were gone,” Velazquez said.

He shook his whip at Animal Kingdom to keep him interested, but did little more than tap him. They crossed the wire two and three-quarter lengths ahead of Nehro. The Louisiana Derby champion Mucho Macho Man closed for third place.



Velazquez’s tortured week had ended triumphantly: He and Animal Kingdom covered the mile and a quarter in 2:02.04, rewarding bettors with \$43.80 for a \$2 bet. With the \$1.4 million first-place check, Animal Kingdom, the son of Leroidesanimaux, plumped the bankroll of his owners, Team Valor International.

Both Velazquez and Motion had won their first Kentucky Derby with the wrong horse.

“Someone asked, ‘Are you surprised to win with a second-tier horse?’ ” Motion said. “I’m not sure we would categorize him as a second-tier horse.”

Not any longer, if he ever was. Animal Kingdom is now the 137th winner of the Derby.

Velazquez, too, was struck by how a week that started so badly ended with his throwing roses from the blanket of a horse he had just met in the winner’s circle on the first Saturday in May.

“It’s a little strange because one of our jockeys got hurt and that’s how I picked up the mount,” he said.

Earlier in the day, Velazquez had run into Albarado in the jockeys' room, acknowledged his colleague's misfortune and asked him what he should expect from Animal Kingdom.

"You're riding a very good horse," Velazquez said Albarado told him.

A very good horse, indeed.