

Oleksandra plays final hand perfectly in Poker

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Oleksandra edges out Raging Bull to win the Poker Stakes at Belmont Park (Susie Raisher/Coglianese Photos)

In foal to leading sire Into Mischief, **OLEKSANDRA** bowed out on a high note by springing a 17-1 upset of odds-on favorite Raging Bull in Sunday's \$250,000 [Poker S. \(G3\)](#) at Belmont Park. The Team Valor International homebred has spent her career as a turf sprinter, but proved effective on the stretch-out to deny a top miler at his own game.

The Poker was not the original target for either Oleksandra or Raging Bull, both of whom intended to defend Grade 1 titles. Raging Bull's bid for another Shoemaker Mile (G1) on Memorial Day was scuttled by travel problems. Oleksandra was going for a repeat in the Jaipur S. (G1) on Belmont Day, until a rain-affected course prompted her withdrawal. Their forced change of plans put them on a collision course in the Poker.

Trained by Hall of Famer Neil Drysdale and piloted by Joel Rosario, Oleksandra broke a beat slow, and inward, and lagged behind in her typical fashion. But the hot pace played right into the hands of the Australian-bred by Animal Kingdom and out of Team Valor's South African Group 2 star Alexandra Rose.

Get Smokin lived up to his name by reeling off fractions of :22.52 and :44.60 on the firm Widener turf, prompted by Raased and Tell Your Daddy. French import Veronesi, slowly away in his U.S. debut for Chad Brown, rushed up to attend before dropping back.

Meanwhile, Brown's 0.65-1 favorite Raging Bull was cruising on the rail just behind the leaders as Get Smokin reached the six-furlong mark in 1:08.38. With enough room on the inside, Raging Bull sneaked through to challenge Get Smokin in the stretch, and stablemate Front Run the Fed pounced on the outside.

By that point, Oleksandra was in full flight wider out. Blowing past the shifting scene to her inside, the seven-year-old mare looked on her way to a clear victory. Raging Bull was just beginning to quicken himself, however, and he took off to prevent Oleksandra from opening up. Although he got to her throat-latch, she would not let him by, and her head stayed in front at the wire.

Oleksandra completed the mile in a sprightly 1:32.11 and returned \$36.80 to win.

"She ran a really tremendous race," Rosario said. "She was really relaxed. The pace was fast and she was there for me. It was very impressive. We started picking up a little bit after three furlongs and she got her momentum with that stride that she has. At one point, I just decided to try going out a little bit. I didn't want to get stuck."

Raging Bull, who was attempting to give Brown his 100th Belmont graded stakes win, drew three lengths clear of Front Run the Fed. Sanctuary City rallied for fourth, followed by Get Smokin, Penalty, Tell Your Daddy, Raased, and Veronesi.

Oleksandra heads to the paddocks with a career record of 20-8-4-3, \$705,748. Placed in three starts in her native Australia, the bay broke her maiden first out stateside for Drysdale. Aside from her signature win over males in last summer's Breeders' Cup "Win and You're In" Jaipur, Oleksandra captured the 2019 Franklin County S. (G3) at Keeneland and the Smart N Fancy S. at Saratoga. Her placings include the 2019 Royal North S. (G2) and Ladies Sprint (G3) at Kentucky Downs as well as the 2020 Monrovia S. (G2) and Feb. 15 Wishing Well at Santa Anita. She was most recently fifth in the April 29 Unbridled Sidney S. at a rain-affected Churchill Downs.

If not for bad luck, Oleksandra might have added to her credits. She sustained an injury in her Jaipur victory that compromised her road to the Breeders' Cup Turf Sprint (G1). Although Oleksandra was ready in time to line up at Keeneland, she wound up ninth. In her next race, the Jan. 9 Las Cienegas S. (G3), she was hampered early, clipped heels, and lost her rider.

"Things haven't gone exactly smooth this year for her," Drysdale said. "We ran in Kentucky and realized she doesn't like the soft going. So, then we decided not to run here (in the Jaipur) because it was raining a lot here too at the time."

"Since she's more relaxed this year, we decided to try her at a mile hoping she could get the distance, and she did. She's pregnant, so this was her swan song. She'll go out on a high note."