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VISIONAIRE HEADED TO KENTUCKY DERBY AFTER WIN IN $250,000 GOTHAM,
GRAND SLAM COLT RALLIES FROM FAR BACK TO TAKE GRADE 3 ON LINE,
MICHAEL MATZ TRAINEE OVERCOMES SPEED BIAS ON VERY SLOPPY STRIP

Jose Lezcano drives Team Valor International's Visionare to victory in Grade 3 Gotham Stakes.

Visionaire overcame a pronounced bias against closers this afternoon over a sloppy surface on the speed-favoring Inner Dirt track at Aqueduct to punch his ticket for the Kentucky Derby by winning the $250,000 Gotham Stakes.

Jockey Jose Lezcano reverted to the riding style that accounted for the chestnut colt's allowance race at Gulfstream Park in January, when he took him back and closed with a rush to win so impressively that Team Valor International acquired a 51-percent interest in him from Vision Racing LLC.

The Kentucky-bred colt had opened as the lukewarm 3 to 1 favorite on the morning line at The Big A, but with speed horses and stalkers winning all day long and with the Team Valor color bearer stuck outside of 8 other sophomores, Visionaire drifted to odds of 9 to 2, making him the third choice behind West Point Thoroughbred's 8 to 5 favorite Saratoga Russell and unbeaten local choice Giant Moon.

Prior to the race, Barry Irwin spoke with Lezcano, saying "There should be some pace to run at in this race, not like last time. I know speed has been winning all day long, but it doesn't work with this guy, so don't worry about where you are. Let the colt place himself."

In his previous outing at Fair Grounds in the Grade 3 Risen Star Stakes, Visionaire found himself close up throughout from his inside post position behind a dawdling pace and he lacked a finish because he was taken out of his best style when running third to Kentucky Derby fancy Pyro.

When the gates sprung open for the Gotham, Visionaire was off last and he trailed the field as they went by the stands for the first time and rounded the turn, after which they disappeared into a fog bank that had settled over the Inner Dirt track immediately prior to the race.

Visionaire was said to be in last place early in the run down the backstretch by race caller John Imbriale, who was unable to pick up the horses again until they were in the homestretch. When the first runner became visible he was easy to identify him, as Todd Pletcher's colt Texas Wildcatter was light grey in color.

Stonerside Stable's Texas Wildcatter was at least 5 lengths clear when he emerged from the fog, with a mud-splattered chestnut revving up in second that eventually became recognizable as Visionaire. Defying a sinister bias against him, Visionaire had stayed inside, split horses at the top of the lane and had a full head of stream as he roared down the homestretch.

Visionaire came up alongside Texas Wildcatter in deep stretch and put his nose in front on the very last jump to win by the barest margin. His horsepower carried several lengths past the runner-up in the gallop out after the finish, suggesting that he would not be inconvenienced by a trip farther than the mile and a sixteenth of the Gotham, which he covered in 1:44.60.

All of the 3-year-olds carried 116 pounds except for stakes-winning Giant Moon, who finished last under 120 pounds. Saratoga Russell finished next to last and pulled up in some distress after possibly displacing his soft palate, according to his trainer. The favorite set a moderate initial quarter-mile fraction of :23.78, but was forced into a too-speedy :46.37 half. The three-quarters was reached in a reasonable 1:11.40 over the wet surface. Time was 1:37.71.

Jockey Lezcano, who was formerly a leading apprentice rider in New York, said "I felt I had a lot of horse coming off the turn. I think he showed how good a horse he was. He handled everything."

Irwin led in Captain Bodgit after Wood Memorial, but is leaning toward Blue Grass with Visionaire.

Andy Beyer assessed the effort with a speed figure of 98, an improvement of 8 points over Visionaire's previous best, earned when he won a one-turn allowance mile at Gulfstream Park in January.

Barry Irwin said "It will be interesting to see what Ragozin and ThoroGraph come up with for figures, as unless they have some sort of military technology available to them, they're not going to be able to compute ground loss, as the race was run in a dense fog.
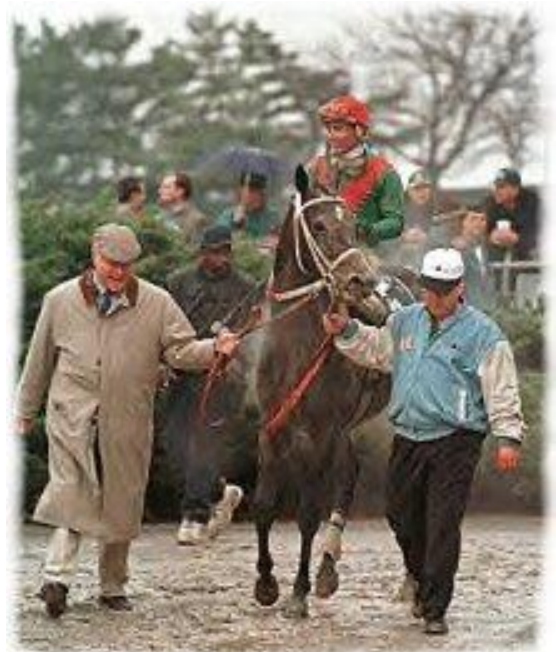
Visionaire now has Graded stakes earnings of $180,000, which should ensure him a place in the gate for the Kentucky Derby.

Team Valor and Michael Matz will come up with a game plan for the red colt's next start, which will be his only other outing prior to the first Saturday in May.

"I would lean toward running him on a synthetic track next," revealed Irwin, who tabbed the Gotham for the colt's latest race. "We know he's going to Louisville, so we have the luxury of picking a spot that will advance him to the Run for the Roses in the best order.

"Running Visionaire on a kind surface just in advance of the Kentucky Derby seems like the right thing to do. The Blue Grass Stakes would be my idea of a good spot for his last trial."

Visionaire has now won 3 of his 5 career outings for trainer Matz, who won the Kentucky Derby two years ago with the extraordinary but ill-fated Barbaro, in one of the most brilliant training jobs of the modern era.

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