



# THE LONG RIDE

## *Patience helps jockeys navigate the Belmont Stakes' 12 furlongs*

BY PAUL VOLPONI

**THE GRADE 1 BELMONT STAKES** has been dubbed “The Test of the Champion,” and for good reason. Not only is it the final jewel of the Triple Crown, but along with the Brooklyn Invitational Stakes (G2), run the same day, it is the only 1½-mile dirt race of any major consequence in the U.S. The 12 furlongs unfold around one full circuit of the Taj Mahal of racing, Belmont Park, known for its immense, sweeping turns. There is little doubt it takes an ultra-talented Thoroughbred to prove victorious.

But how do riders prepare and race-plan for this uniquely competitive contest staged at a distance that is as unusual to them as it is to their 3-year-old equine counterparts?

“You have to do your homework. You have to know where all the poles are. Make sure at all times during the race you know your position,” said Hall of Fame jockey John Velazquez. “The track is so big; it can be very deceiving. At a normal racetrack you enter the backstretch and you’ve got three-quarters of a mile remaining. When you hit the backstretch at Belmont Park, you’re a mile from home.”

Hall of Fame rider Braulio Baeza won the Belmont Stakes three times, over three different surfaces—at the old Belmont Park with Sherluck in 1961, at Aq-



The Belmont Stakes, one trip around the track, is a test of horse and rider



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JEFFREY SNYDER

Brulio Baeza and Arts and Letters win the Belmont in 1969; right, John Velazquez aboard Rags to Riches (outside) in 2007

ueduct (while Belmont Park was being rebuilt) with Chateaugay in 1963, and at the current Belmont Park aboard Arts and Letters in 1969.

“First of all, you need to have a horse that can go a mile and a half. That’s the most important thing; otherwise, you’ll be dead,” said Baeza. “You have to get position and conserve your horse; that’s also very important. But you might need to be a little lucky too.”

Those two elements—conservation of energy and luck (mixed with tremendous skill in the saddle)—can be seen in the pair of Belmont Stakes victories recorded by Velazquez—Rags to Riches (one of three fillies to win the Belmont) in 2007 and Union Rags in 2012.

Rags to Riches nearly fell to her face when the gates opened. Only Velazquez’ balance kept him aloft.

“All our (positioning) plans went out

the window after the start,” he said. “So I grabbed her. I wanted to keep her clean (from any kickback of dirt) so she wouldn’t get discouraged. I put her in the four-path all the way around. Then I waited and waited to make sure I’d have horse down the lane.”

Velazquez and Rags to Riches narrowly outran Curlin to the wire.

Even though Union Rags had a dream trip at the rail, saving every inch of ground



SKIP DICKSTEIN

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—EDDIE MAPLE



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—CHRIS McCARRON



ANNE M. EBERHARDT

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—JEREMY ROSE

throughout, good judgment mixed with racing luck was still needed before Velazquez, who was stuck behind Mike Smith aboard Paynter until very late in the contest, could call upon that reserve of energy in the final stages.

“I had the position where I wanted to be. I waited as long as I could,” he said. “I was hoping that Mike (Smith) would see the horse next to him (the onrushing My Adonis); that he’d try to get out and discourage him a little bit. That happened at the eighth pole. Once Mike did that, it was my opportunity to pass on the inside.”

Hall of Fame jockey Eddie Maple began his career at smaller-circumference racetracks in Ohio and West Virginia. Upon arriving on the New York circuit in 1971, winning the Belmont became one of his goals.

“Coming up as a young rider, I watched (Eddie) Arcaro and (Bill) Shoemaker. But I was really influenced by the ride that John Rotz gave to High Echelon in winning the 1970 Belmont Stakes,” recalled Maple, who today manages an equestrian center near Bluffton, S.C. “I never saw a jockey sit so quiet for so long. That ride became a template for me on how that race should be won. I had it in my mind that none of the horses in that race had ever gone that far before, so I should save the horse for as long as I can.”

Hall of Famer “Gentleman” John Rotz, who at the age of 83 is currently a farmer in Warrensburg, Ill., concurs with Maple’s assessment.

“Coming down the stretch, you must have some horse,” said Rotz, who worked for years as a racing steward in New York after his riding career ended. “You must map out the first quarter-mile. Do you want to be up near the pace or take back? High Echelon was dead last early on. But not too far back. He was always within shouting distance and moved up on the (far) turn.”

Maple went on to win the Belmont Stakes twice—aboard Temperence Hill (1980), who did his best running through the final sixteenth of a mile to surge to the fore and then draw clear at 53-1, and Crème Fraiche (1985), who cruised up to the leaders under a hand-ride coming off the turn before being asked for his best nearing the eighth pole, giving trainer Woody Stephens his fourth consecutive Bel-

mont Stakes winner en route to his record five straight.

Jockey Chris McCarron, who at the time hung his tack in California, piloted Stephens’ record-setting fifth winner Danzig Connection in the 1986 edition of the Belmont. His ride upon that sophomore colt serves as a prime example of patience.

“Woody told me, ‘He’s got speed; either be in front or lie close (to the pace). Don’t move on him until you’ve got to,’” recalled McCarron.

The Hall of Famer took to the track and remained a relaxed passenger in the saddle for almost 11 furlongs.

“I didn’t ask Danzig Connection to run until we’d passed the three-sixteenths pole. I could hear Ferdinand (the Kentucky Derby, G1, winner with Shoemaker aboard) coming. Then I chirped to my horse and he responded.”

More than a decade later McCarron used that experience seemingly to outstrategize his rivals in getting Touch Gold into the Belmont Stakes winner’s circle in 1997.

Coming off the first turn, Touch Gold rode the rail to the lead entering the backstretch.

“When we made the lead, his ears pricked and he relaxed. The other riders (Gary Stevens aboard Silver Charm, who was looking to capture the Triple Crown; Kent Desormeaux on Free House; and Jerry Bailey aboard Wild Rush) sensed the pace slowing down. They didn’t like that and began to accelerate,” said McCarron. “I communicated to Touch Gold that it wasn’t time to go yet. I didn’t allow him to accelerate (with the others).”

As a result Touch Gold had enough in reserve to make the last move in the stretch, outside of runners, registering a stirring three-quarter-length victory.

Why are jockeys so focused on not moving too soon in the Belmont Stakes?

The enormity of the racetrack can influence a rider’s perceptions, especially one from out of town.

“I’d tell a young rider (coming to Belmont Park for the first time) to watch a lot of tape,” noted McCarron. “It’s easy to get fooled by the configuration with those sweeping turns. You ask your horse for run and you might be farther from home than you think. I believe that’s what confused (jockey) Ronnie Franklin (aboard Spectacular Bid in his failed at-



Maple aboard 53-1 Temperence Hill in 1980

tempt to win the Triple Crown in 1979). He asked his horse on the backstretch and still had a mile to go.”

Current racing analyst and former jockey Richard Migliore, a longtime veteran of the New York Racing Association circuit, explained, “Riding is so instinctual. You ride in stages. Heading into the second turn (when you’re used to a smaller oval), your hands and body language are trained to give the horse its cue. You open your knees and lower your seat (asking your horse to pick it up). The problem is (at Belmont Park) you’re not three furlongs from home at that point. You’re probably four and a half furlongs from the wire. And once you give the horse that cue, you can’t take it back. These are horses, not cars.”

Heading into the 2005 Belmont, jockey Jeremy Rose, who had ridden mostly at Mid-Atlantic tracks, was set to rein the Preakness winner Afleet Alex.

“I remember doing a media session up in the grandstand and looking down at the racetrack,” said Rose, who was 26 at the time. “It was enormous, so much bigger than I thought at first. I was a little nervous about it. So I talked to Jerry Bailey (who’d won the race in 2003 on Empire Maker and in 1991 aboard Hansel). He cautioned me that moving into the

second turn I’d still be about five-eighths of a mile from the finish, with a lot of racetrack in front of me.”

Rose entered the Belmont intent on not moving too soon with Afleet Alex. The pair lingered in eighth position, some 10 lengths from the lead down the backstretch. Then, moving for the far turn, Afleet Alex began to gather serious momentum on his own with Rose still riding in reserve.

“I’d normally think about pulling the trigger approaching the quarter pole, but this time I just sat,” said Rose.

After making a deft inside/out move on the latter portion of the turn, Afleet Alex dragged his rider to the front before Rose had even asked him for run. Rose began to ride in earnest in upper stretch. The response was immediate and Afleet Alex drew off from his competition, posting a compelling seven-length victory.

“In some ways it’s easier to ride in the Belmont than in the Derby or Preakness,” said Rose, “because the horses that can’t get the distance are all backing up and getting out of your way. In the Derby and Preakness, coming off the turn, most of the horses are still running.”

What instructions would a trainer pass along to a rider pre-Belmont?

“Don’t make it too complicated. And

don’t change the (running) style of your horse,” said Christophe Clement, who saddled Tonalist to victory in 2014. “You want your horse to be as fit as possible; that’s obvious. Tonalist loved Belmont Park. He trained very well here. We trained him for the Belmont the same way we did for the Peter Pan (G2, the traditional nine-furlong stepping-stone to the Belmont). So we were sure that he was going to get the distance. It gets easier for a trainer when you have a jockey like (Joel Rosario). But you tell him, no extremes.”

Does any particular running style fare best in this marathon event?

Deep closers have had little success in reaching the Belmont Stakes winner’s circle. In the last 85 editions of the race, 61 (71.7%) of the eventual winners held the lead turning into the stretch (it’s important to note that when going 11/2 miles at Belmont Park, the chart’s “stretch” designation is closer to the three-sixteenths pole than the quarter pole). Those who were racing in second position won 15 (17.6%) of those races, including Birdstone in 2004, who gave the appearance of being a deep closer but rallied into contention on the turn before running down Triple Crown hopeful Smarty Jones.

Horses racing in third-position rallied for the victory on six (7%) occasions. Only three (3.5%) winners were not racing either 1-2-3 at the chart’s “stretch” call. They include Hurryoff in 1933, Summer Bird in 2009, and Creator in 2016 (the chart call has him closer but is clearly wrong).

“I always felt good horses run anywhere, at any distance,” said Stephens moments after securing his fifth straight Belmont Stakes victory.

However, it should go without saying—what a jockey does with that horse in negotiating a full circuit of Belmont Park’s immense main oval has an enormous amount to do with the final outcome. **BH**

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