



Mine That Bird's *Triple Crown journey*

By Pete Herrera

When partners Mark Allen and Leonard Blach were toying with the idea of running their gelding Mine That Bird, in the Kentucky Derby, they didn't touch base with some of the heavyweights in the business. The been-there, done-that crowd.

They didn't call up Bob Baffert. They didn't bring in D. Wayne Lukas. They didn't E-mail Nick Zito.

What Allen and Dr. Blach did do was bring an old friend to the table. One they had obviously learned to trust in times that called for touchy decisions.

Thus, in a span of an hour or so, Don Julio, arguably the best tequila made in Mexico, became part of the decision-making process that would transform an obscure horse from New Mexico into America's latest icon in horse racing.

"Mark and I sat down and with the help of Don Julio, decided to go to the derby and just have fun," says Blach.

"It took about two or three shots," said Allen of how much of Don Julio's company he and

Blach enjoyed before deciding to challenge the monumental odds they faced at Churchill Downs. "It didn't take long. The idea come up, we thought about it maybe an hour tops."

A decision that would take Mine That Bird, Allen, Blach, trainer Chip Woolley and horse racing fans from coast-to-coast on a storybook ride down Triple Crown road.

Make no mistake. Nobody saw it coming.

Not even Tom Durkin, the noted Kentucky Derby announcer who missed Mine That Bird's spectacular rail run from last to first through the mud. By the time Durkin finally realized the 50-to-1 shot was on his way to the second biggest upset in derby history, the gelding was three lengths in front. An obviously stunned Durkin was left to proclaim it was "an impossible result" moments after Mine That Bird hit the wire 6 3/4 lengths in front of runner-up Pioneer of the Nile.

Durkin had plenty of company in his disbelief of what he and the



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rest of America had just witnessed.

"None of us, Mark, myself and all of our families, we had no idea that was going to happen," says Blach. "We went into the derby looking at just having fun. I told Mark, 'we can beat one horse, let's go.' It won't be too embarrassing."

Blach, Allen and Woolley figured going to the derby would be a good learning experience.

"I thought we could run fifth or sixth and get some of our money back," said Allen.

The trio set the bar no higher than that.

So off they went – three red-neck cowboys from New Mexico in black hats. And even with a horse in the biggest of all horse races, they quickly got lost in the pre-race circus that's derby week.

The media rarely visited Mine That Bird and Woolley in Barn 42. When they did, the storyline that caught their fancy was how Woolley and Birdie got to Churchill Downs – Woolley, with a broken right leg, driving a pickup and pulling a trailer with Mine That Bird in it.

"Before the derby, we had little or no attention," said Blach. "An occasional reporter would come by, but I don't think we ever had any cameras."

The New Mexicans didn't mind. They were living a dream and appreciated the perks that came with it. Like sharing Barn 42 with trainer Larry Jones, who

had saddled Eight Belles and Hard Spun, the second place finishers in the derby in 2008 and 2007.

"We got to meet a lot of people and they could not have been more gracious to us," said Blach. "Even when we were 50-to-1."

That 50-to-1 morning line seemed dead on when the gates opened and the derby field went by the grandstand. By the time the main pack reached the first turn, Mine That Bird was 10 lengths back and looking every bit out of place.

"When they went into the first turn," recalls Allen, "I was thinking, please Lord, let him outrun one horse."

Aware that Mine That Bird liked to come from off the pace, Blach was a little more optimistic.

"I wasn't really worried because I knew we could catch that crowd and that's all Mark and I were hoping for," says Blach. "We'd get in that bunch and we'd run 12th, 8th or 15th. In the derby, that's respectable."


Blach kept track of the horses down the backside, occasionally glancing behind the main pack and saw only one horse.

"I knew it would be Birdie," he says.

By the time the field hit the top of the stretch, Birdie was no longer the straggler. He was now the hunter.

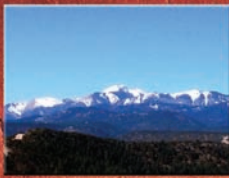
"I saw him coming through on

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Chip, Mark and Doc after the Kentucky Derby

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the rail,” said Blach. “He disappeared behind a horse and I wasn’t sure that was him, but I knew he was making a move. When he came out of that bunch, with maybe three quarters of a furlong to go, I was trying to find him again. Next time I spotted him, he was two lengths in front. We started slapping and hugging everybody. I told Mark, ‘we’re going to win this thing.’ I didn’t even see the horse cross the finish line. I knew he was

going to make it and we were too busy screaming and hollering and hugging.”

It had taken Woolley more than 24 hours to get Mine That Bird from Sunland Park to Louisville. It took Mine That Bird and jockey Calvin Borel 2 minutes, 2 seconds and change to score what may end up being the biggest stunner in sports this year.

If the Kentucky Derby brought euphoria to Birdie’s barn, the Preakness provided an opportunity to prove his stunning win was no fluke. And the second leg of the Triple Crown brought with it a touch of controversy.

Allen was caught in the middle of it.

In the days leading up to the Preakness, reports surfaced that Allen and the owner of another horse would try to keep the filly Rachel Alexandria from getting into the field by entering additional horses.

Only 14 horses are allowed to run in the Preakness and since Rachel Alexandria had to be supplemented to the field, she would have been bumped if other horses that had been nominated were entered because of a Preakness policy that says original nominees are given preference.

Allen says the idea of trying to keep Rachel Alexandria out of the Preakness didn’t originate with him. Allen said Kelly Dennington, the general manager of Allen’s Double Eagle Ranch, was contacted by one of the connections to another horse in the Preakness field. Through Dennington, Allen was asked to contact the owner of that other horse.

Allen, who wouldn’t name names, says when he called, the other owner told him, “We want to keep that filly out of the race because we don’t think she should run in the Preakness.”

“They made it seem like I approached them,” said Allen. “They kind of threw me under the bus. They came to me. I’m not smart

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At left, Mark and Doc in Churchill Downs stable area, "Preakness? Why not!"; at right, Mine That Bird before the Preakness Stakes

enough to think something like that up."

Allen said he considered entering one of his other horses, Indy Express, but ultimately decided against it because Indy Express was a maiden.

"If he'd been an allowance or graded stakes horse, I'd have put him in to keep her out. But keeping the filly out with a maiden wasn't the right thing to do."

Allen said there was another reason why he didn't want to see Rachel Alexandria in the Preakness.

"They had my jockey (Borel) and I wanted him back," he said.

Borel rode the filly to victory in the Preakness and Allen said he had no regrets, especially since Mine That Bird nearly delivered a sequel to his derby win.

"If we'd have had a clean go and 30 more yards, we'd have had her," said Allen.

Ridden by Mike Smith, Mine That Bird was momentarily caught in traffic down the stretch and that, according to Smith, likely cost the gelding a couple of lengths and the win.

"We don't blame Mike at all," said Blach. "He did a wonderful job of riding. He just got in a trap and couldn't get out. He had to check him a little bit. That's horse racing."

By the time the Belmont rolled

around, Mine That Bird was the even-money favorite to capture the third leg of the Triple Crown. Mine That Bird had become in Blach's words, "America's horse." With Borel back in the irons, Mine That Bird staged another stretch run, took the lead briefly in a duel with Dunkirk, but neither could hold off Summer Bird.

As is always the case when a favorite loses, there's plenty of second-guessing. Did the Triple Crown series – three races in a span of five weeks – take too much out of Mine That Bird, like it did to Big Brown last year and so many other Kentucky Derby and Preakness winners who came up short in the 1 ½ mile Belmont? Did Borel make his move too soon?

The answer might well be that Mine That Bird's competitive spirit did him in.

Borel, said Blach, kept Mine That Bird under a tight hold through the first mile of the Belmont, but once they hit the mile mark, the gelding was fighting the bit and wanting to run faster.

"He couldn't hold him back anymore," says Blach. "Calvin said if he continued to do that, he was going to use up too much energy. He went to the front and got a little wobbly legged in the stretch. We started a little too quick there, but it was a judgment thing on Cal-

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After the Preakness, Pimlico Stable area

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vin's part and it was the right thing to do. If he (Mine That Bird) had kept fighting him, he was going to use it all up and we might have run sixth, seventh or eighth."

In horse racing, there's always another window of opportunity and that was the case for Allen on the day Mine

That Bird ran third in the Belmont. Back home in New Mexico and about an hour after the Belmont, two of Allen's Quarter Horses, Time for a Cigar and Shaboomator ran one-two in the \$308,267 Ruidoso Derby.

"That made my day," says Allen. "That's the biggest Quarter Horse race I've ever won."

Now here's the kicker. While Mine That Bird made Allen an in-

stant celebrity in racing circles, his roots are in Quarter Horse racing and that's where his heart is even after all that's happened.

"I'm a Quarter Horse man if the truth be known," said Allen.

Besides being one heck of a racehorse, Mine That Bird apparently is smart enough to know when he's been beaten.

"After the Preakness and the Belmont, he was mad," says Blach, noting that after the Preakness, Mine That Bird wanted to nip at visitors to his stall.

"After the Belmont it was worse," Blach said. "He'd go back to his stall, stand in the back and all of a sudden, he'd kick the wall. He knew he lost those races."

In the end, the little gelding who came out of New Mexico accomplished what Big Brown did a year earlier. He captured the attention and admiration of thousands of racing fans, from the hardcore handicappers to the once-a-year \$2 bettors.

"I think it's had a great impact on (horse racing) everywhere," said Blach of Mine That Bird's first, second and third place finishes on Thoroughbred racing's biggest stage. "It was a shot in the arm to help the whole industry, not only in New Mexico, but everywhere."

Mine That Bird came out of the Triple Crown in great shape, according to Blach, a noted veterinarian who has been working with racehorses for more than 40 years. The gelding is scheduled to run in the Grade 2 West Virginia Derby in early August and in the Grade 1 Travers Stakes in late August. Also on the radar is the Breeders Cup later this year.

And what about beyond this year? Since Mine That Bird is a gelding, there won't be a stud career waiting.

"As easy as he is on himself running—he only runs hard the last 3/8ths—that's where he really does his running. I don't know how long

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Mine That Bird, Belmont Park saddling paddock; above, Doc and Calvin Borel - Belmont Park

this horse can run, but he don't have a pimple on him right now," said Allen.

So has it all sunk in yet?

"I wake up at night and say, 'Man, I won the Kentucky Derby,'" says the 50-year-old Allen. "It just shows that if you have a dream, even a New Mexico horse can win it."

So is Allen ready to take some time off? Maybe book a vacation.

"Naw. It doesn't get any better than this," he says, laughing.

Blach, 74, has another take on what happened to the Don Julio partners.

"It was on our bucket list," he said. "We reached down there and pulled it out." ♦

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