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Riding The Paint St. Martinville: My '50-To-1' Shot At Churchill Downs

by **Charlie Newton** Oct 27, 2012

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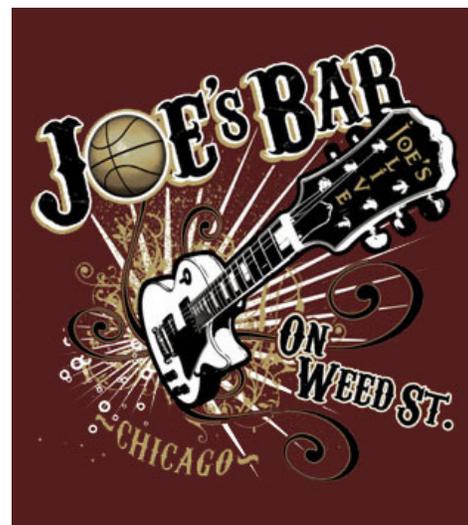
I'll spare you the fifteen adjectives NBC uses every year; Churchill Downs is a combination of Arlington after the fire and Sportsman's before Bidwell thought NASCAR was a good fit for horseracing. Tomorrow, the fall meet at Churchill opens big; we're six months till the 2013 Derby and counting. That's how the money guys on the backside tell time. They have the two-year-olds. What the rest of us have is last May's losing tickets, hangovers from being over-served in Louisville's Bardstown last night, and a connection to the upcoming movie "50-to-1," the story of one of the biggest upsets in Derby history starring Skeet Ulrich.

Wind and bits of rain blow through the twin spires of the grandstand. I'm standing at the three-quarter pole with a dapper Laffit Pincay III. We both have parts in the movie. His part matters; mine is a bucket-list gift from my pal, Her Assistant-Directorness Kaaren "KO" Ochoa. While Laffit and I wait for hair-and-makeup (Laffit), I mention that I knew his dad, that he cost me the \$300 back in '93, gave Jerry Baily the corner at Del Mar; we get beat by a head bob. Laffit adds another inch to his smile then pats my shoulder with the parental sympathy one can only learn at a racetrack or a Cub's game.

Fine, he's the better man and has a real job. I'm taller.

They shoot the scene, it's the 2009 Kentucky Derby pre-race walk to the paddock. For the horses, this is the walk to the ring. For the connections, it's horseracing's red carpet into the Oscars. The owners and trainers do a showboat entrance to the world's cameras and 150,000 partiers on the grounds. The scene will run from the Lukas Gap in the barns out onto the track, then along the outer rail past the crowd of decked-out extras in Derby hats, mint julep glasses, etc., and into the paddock.

The track is muddy; the crowd is jacked. Nineteen horses and their connections are strung out in a five-wide perp-walk parade. Mid-parade is No. 16, the smart-money favorite, Pioneerof the Nile. In the colt's entourage is his trainer Bob Baffert and... Whoa, baby. The woman playing Mrs. Bob is at **Pioneerof the Nile's** shoulder, moving with the colt's prerace rhythm not the dainty slog of the



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patrician money all around her. The colt is sixteen hands of dead-serious business and glows when a spare sun ray hits him. So does Mrs. Bob, sleek and fit, just the right amount of wrong in a fitted couture dress and three-inch heels, walking the mud like it was ring canvas. I ask. I'm told she's a New Mexico actress. I decide we will live in Miami but won't have kids. She locks hazel eyes with mine. I swell to go full Carey Grant. She's looking at Laffit.

The tan and talented finish being talented and then break to reset for the next scene. My substantial movie-making capabilities are not required so I walk backstretch muck to the Lukas Gap and into the backside barns. The barns are a Gypsy camp of small people, exercise riders, grooms, and trainers moving in and out of the stalls and shedrows. The air is animal sweat, steam, hay, horseshit, and Spanish. The horses whose back legs you better watch aren't the docile types, they're the rocket ships, the ones who made it to the races.

With me is Cecil Bernis, brother to Tee Red Bernis. These boys is Cajun, as are some of the best jocks ever to ride, all from the same back-bayou town of St. Martinville, Louisiana, population 1,722 families. Cecil slides into a combination Emeril Lagasse/Julia Child-on-Quaaludes accent, says it's the food, "Coonass cookin'," then explains bush-track match racing where he and Tee Red got their start at age six, tied to their daddy's horses for the rent money. Tee Red went on to become the nation's leading apprentice rider.

The guy in the golf cart who stops to not splash Cecil and me is the one and only Jerry Hassim—black ball cap, black shirt, pants, and shoes. If Jerry didn't have the three Kentucky Derby rings on his right hand you'd make him a movie producer or the road manager for the Stones. What Jerry is, is a jockey's agent, a West Virginia coal miner Jew with more history at America's racetracks than Sinatra had in Vegas. By law, a jockey's agent can only represent two riders. Jerry has Gabriel Saez and Calvin Borel. Saez may grow into one of the greats, he's got all the tools, but Calvin Borel is already there, 115 pounds of cold-deck, bet-it-all St. Martinville gunfighter.

Tee Red Bernis raised and schooled Calvin's brother, trainer Cecil Borel, on how a gunfighter rides the paint. Cecil schooled his little brother Calvin, and the pedigree shows. Calvin is about to win his 5,000th race. He won most of those races on the inside riding the paint. Guys die riding the paint. And on any given day, Calvin might. He's at peace with that and the forty broken bones, the missing spleen, and the plastic ribs. If you're in the starting gate expecting to ride the winner against him, that's the kind of hand you'll have to play. Calvin's won three of the last five Kentucky Derbies on horses who were not favored to do so, the last one at 50 to 1, and that's why he's the star of our movie.

Between scenes, Calvin and I and Tee Red Bernis talk from both sides of the winner's circle rail. I'm standing on the mud side because the St. Martinville boys only take risks they're paid to take. Calvin drinks his eleventh can of Red Bull and shrugs off my questions about risks and never-ending weight control—the fun stuff. Tee Red says, "Riders who want families and careers and color commentator jobs when the riding's over don't go down there where Calvin is," Tee Red nods across the track to the inside rail. "The St. Martinville boys ride in de stones (tombstones)." Calvin smiles, shy with the attention. Tee Red squeezes his shoulder. "There was forty-two thoroughbreds started the 2009 triple crown races, Calvin rode inside all of 'em but two. Won the Derby and the Preakness on two different horses that year. Never been done before; rode that filly Rachel Alexandra outta the thirteen hole and right down their throats."

Re-enter Mrs. Bob, Chandleresque, femme fatale, a woman who after a day at the track is probably ready for a trip through my side of town. I figure to hold the corner and ride the paint—I got people in St. Martinville. I introduce myself and she shakes hands. Serious grip, squared shoulders, eye contact. Definite interest. Pheromones. She slides her hand into her purse the way you'd hope she'd put it in your front pocket, parts her lips as she extracts a camera and says, "Is that really Tee

Red Bernis?"

CHARLIE NEWTON

Chicago novelist Charlie Newton is the author of "Calumet City," and "Start Shooting," out this week in paperback.

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