

Three New York-Breds to Run in this Year's Kentucky Derby

By Bill Heller

New York-breds keep raising the bar.

Last year, two New York-breds walked into the starting gate for the Kentucky Derby on the first Saturday in May. Samraat finished fifth by $5\frac{3}{4}$ lengths, beaten only a nose for fourth by Wicked Strong, and Uncle Sigh was 14th in the field of 19.

This year, there will be three: Ken and Sarah Ramsey's International Star, bred by long-time partners Katy Voss and Bob Manfuso; Phil Birsh's homebred Tencendur; and Ralph Evans' Upstart, bred by Joanne Nielsen.

"This is our moment," Birsh said. "New York should be proud. There have been two starters in the Derby before, but never three. This is the most."

Nielsen, whose late husband Gerald was the president of the New York Thoroughbred Breeders, Inc., is elated. "Isn't that great?" she said. "It's like we all dream about. It's what I do: try to better the breed."

The fact that Voss and Manfuso, whose Chanceland Farm is located in Howard County, Maryland, bred their mare in New York speaks volumes about the quality of the New York Thoroughbred breeding program. "I think it's great," said Voss, a long-time Maryland trainer who helped found the Maryland Thoroughbred Horsemen's Association in 1987. "Once they started getting the casino revenue in New York, it had a phenomenal impact. New York has been evolving. It used to be inferior. Now there are breeders up there getting better dams. Obviously, New York is in front of Maryland. We thought a New York-bred Fusaichi Pegasus yearling would be more valuable than a Maryland-bred Fusaichi Pegasus."

Here's how this trio of New York-breds punched their tickets to the Kentucky Derby. International Star swept the Fair Grounds' three Kentucky Derby preps: the Grade 3 Lecomte, the Grade 2 Risen Star and the Grade 2 Louisiana Derby. Tencendur led late and finished second in the Grade 1 Wood Memorial at Aqueduct. At Gulfstream Park, Upstart won the Grade 2 Holy Bull Stakes, finished first but was disqualified and placed second in the Grade 2 Fountain of Youth, and finished a clear second in the Grade 1 Florida Derby.

Think about it: out of a foal crop of more than 22,000, these three New York-breds earned three of only 20 berths available in the starting gate of the 2015 Kentucky Derby. That they did so at three different tracks makes it all the more impressive.

Now they have the opportunity to join 2003 Kentucky Derby winner Funny Cide as the only New York-breds to win the Run for the Roses. Funny Cide, of course, added the 2003 Preakness to his resume, solidifying New York-breds' presence at the highest level of Thoroughbred racing.

Gerald Nielsen knew how important those victories were to the New York breeding program and how it was perceived throughout the racing industry. "He was there for Funny Cide," Joanne said. "He was so proud of New York."

A dozen years later, the connections of International Star, Tencendur and Upstart will be hoping that their NY-breds can replicate Funny Cide's Kentucky Derby success story. International Star is a son of Fusaichi Pegasus out Parlez by French Deputy, Tencendur is by Warrior's Reward out of Still Secret by Hennessy, and Upstart is by Flatter out of Party Silks by Touch Gold.

Even Birsh is amazed how Tencendur has blossomed. "How many owners have an \$18,000 mare that they breed to a \$15,000 first-year, unproven stallion and get a Derby horse?" he said. "How crazy is that?"

Birsh has never felt better about his twenty-plus-year involvement in the New York breeding program. "I immediately understood the advantages," he said. "I saw it as an excellent way to participate in racing at a level I could compete at and enjoy. It has paid off for me amazingly.

"It's not easy to produce a horse that can compete in open or New York races. To have a choice gives New York owners a huge economic advantage over every other owner who's not a New Yorker. I think it's an excellent program. It has borne tremendous fruit in economic impact for the state, a huge number of farms and thousands of important jobs."

Birsh, who has been the president and CEO of Playbill, the magazine of American theater, since 1993, has a 90-acre farm in Galway in Saratoga County. "We have six broodmares and a number of offspring," Birsh said. "Generally, we have six foals a year. We keep some and we sell some. Sometimes we keep the wrong ones, sometimes the right ones. We sold Tencendur's sister, Mother Russia, who made a lot of money (more than half a million dollars off seven victories from 17 starts) and produced one of the top three-year-olds in Japan, Golden Barrows, who finished third in the Dubai (UAE) Derby. That's a good example of how the New York breeding program made it easy to sell Mother Russia. The stallion awards (and) breeder awards were a tremendous boost for our farm like it is for a hundred-plus farms."

Birsh said he would be thrilled to stand Tencendur in New York when his racing career is over. Birsh's last stallion in New York was Mayakovsky, the sire of Mother Russia. "I would be overjoyed to be able to stand another stallion in New York," he said. "Mayakovsky was a brilliantly fast horse and beautiful."

So is Upstart, who was foaled at Nielsen's Sunnyfield Farm near Bedford, New York, which she and her husband opened in 1974. They were voted New York Breeders of the Year in 2002. "We've got some nice horses coming along. I'm convinced that our grass might be better than some others," she laughed. "We do enjoy fertile soil."

Nielsen said she has 22 to 24 horses now of a great variety, including some that have been retired and are pursuing a second career. "The goal is always eight babies," she said. "For some reason, without concerning ourselves about the economics, we do eight. You're going to have disappointments and you're going to have some success."

Nielsen credits her and her husband's success to one of their dear friends, the late John Hettinger, the breeder and Akindale Farm owner who led the industry in its efforts to end horse slaughter in the United States. There hasn't been a horse slaughtered in America since 2007. Along those

lines, Nielsen repeated something she'd heard from a horsewoman in Kentucky: "We who breed horses are invested in caring for them."

Caring for horses comes naturally to Bob Manfuso and Katy Voss, fixtures in Maryland racing who revealed that International Star's dam, Parlez, is back in foal to Fusaichi Pegasus. "No question, every now and then the good Lord blesses you," Manfuso said.

He is certainly appreciative of the effort it takes to produce a top horse, and he was happy to see that happen in New York. International Star was foaled at Doug Koch's Berkshire Stud. "I do have a lot of faith in New York-breds," Manfuso said. "That particular year, we sent a couple mares up to Doug Koch at Berkshire Stud. We thought New York-breds would have a lot more value than Maryland-breds. I kid Doug all the time, but he and his crew deserve a great deal of credit. I think sometimes people tend to overlook the fact that to develop a horse like International Star takes multiple tasks. The first task is to get the foal on the ground. When it comes to foal time, you have your fingers and everything else crossed."

That was just a warmup for crossing fingers on the first Saturday in May, when three New York-breds will chase immortality in the greatest horse race in the world.