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Drosselmeyer, with Mike Smith aboard, beats Fly Down to the finish line in the 143d Belmont.

Drosselmeyer puts it together

Long shot earns win at Belmont

By Joe Drape
NEW YORK TIMES

NEW YORK — Horses rarely blast away from their rivals in the Belmont Stakes — unless their name is Secretariat — they endure the mile-and-a-half marathon. The third leg of the Triple Crown is much like the city of New York: grueling but rewarding, gritty but great.

When a heretofore undistinguished colt named Drosselmeyer went five wide into the stretch, you could not be blamed for thinking that there was no way the burly chestnut was going to pass the horses inside of him. There were a couple of duds, as in First Dude and swiftly improving Game On Dude.

Behind him, the highly regarded Fly Down was ready for take off. Mike Smith was riding Drosselmeyer for the first time.

"Keep pedaling, keep pedaling," Smith said he thought to himself, "and he kept trying."

Smith was no stranger here. He made his reputation at Belmont Park in the 1990s and had won every big race on this circuit except this one — 12 times he came here, without success.

In the grandstand, another horseman, trainer Bill Mott, was watching Smith, his new rider and old friend, grind Drosselmeyer down the stretch. Mott, who trained the great Cigar, had never won a Triple Crown race.

Suddenly, he was on his tiptoes. Mott had believed Drosselmeyer was better than his hard-luck finishes in the Dwyer Stakes here four weeks ago, in the Louisiana Derby, and the Risen Star earlier this spring. The colt and his then-rider, Kent Desormeaux, had found traffic in those efforts.

Mott and owner WinStar Farm had decided to change their luck and give Smith the mount. WinStar had already won a Triple Crown race this year when Super Saver won the Kentucky Derby.

Belmont Stakes chart

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Now, here was Drosselmeyer grinding away at his challengers and causing Mott's heartbeat to quicken. Smith and the colt had a long way to go, but the 45,243 people in the stands were on their feet and seeing the same thing Mott was.

"Mike had him in great rhythm," Mott said.

The Dudes were staggering. Game On Dude peeled back first. First Dude lost steam next.

"We just couldn't hold it together right there at the end," First Dude's trainer, Dale Romans, said. "No excuses."

Smith peeked beneath his shoulder, expecting to see Ice Box, the Derby runner-up with the monster late kick who was sent out as the 9-5 favorite. But Ice Box was nowhere — he was loping far back en route to a disappointing finish.

Instead, he saw John Velazquez had Fly Down in full flight. Velazquez was trying to zoom Fly Down between him, First Dude, and Game on Dude. Smith made Drosselmeyer stand his ground.

"He kept me there when I tried to ride my horse in between horses," Velazquez said of Smith. "My horse was a little intimidated."

Velazquez had to yank Fly Down to the outside. It was too late. "Once I had him out in the clear," Smith said of Drosselmeyer, "he showed his heart."

Drosselmeyer had outlasted all challengers. It took him a wearying 2 minutes 31.57 seconds, and it rewarded those who believed in him $28 for a $2 bet.

But better than that, the colt's victory united a couple of New Yorkers in the winners' circle. Smith had the one race that had eluded him, and Mott his first Triple Crown victory.

"Billy and I have come full circle," Smith said. "It feels good."

At Suffolk, jockey enjoying the ride

By Mark Blandschun
GLOBE STAFF

For Winston Thompson, 45, yesterday was just another day at the office. But when you have been the winning jockey in more than 3,000 races, when a weigh-in each day can determine whether you can actually do your job, and when you are one misstep away from suffering a life-threatening injury each time you mount a horse, the job is anything but routine.

And when you are riding on a day in which the running of the Belmont Stakes in New York concludes the 2010 Triple Crown season, it's easy to let your mind wander, wondering about the might-have-beens of a career that began 27 years ago in Kingston, Jamaica.

While riders such as Calvin Borel and Garrett Gomez and John Velazquez were doing their jobs in the glare of a Triple Crown race, Thompson — as he has done for the past 23 years — was at Suffolk Downs, preparing for a day of racing that has brought neither fame nor fortune, but provided him with a living.

Thompson arrived at Suffolk Downs yesterday shortly after 5 a.m., and made his round of the barns. "Checked on my horses [the five he was scheduled to ride] and checked the track, just routine stuff," said Thompson, who lives in Methuen, talking about a routine that has been part of his life for the past 25 years.

Thompson's racing heritage dates to his days as a teenager in Jamaica, when he went to jockey training school for two years and then learned his trade as an apprentice jockey at Kingston's Caymanas Park.

"You have to learn from the bottom up,' said Thompson, relaxing in the jockey's lounge at Suffolk. "You do everything, learn about the business. What you learn is to be part of the horse. You have to be able to read a horse like a mechanic can read a car and know what condition it is in. With a horse, it's the same thing."

Thompson's first ride as an apprentice in 1984 at Caymanas Park was on a horse called Salesman. "I didn't win," he said with a laugh. "I think I finished fourth or fifth. My first winner was on a horse named Jimmy Connors."

Thompson came to the United States a few years later, starting his racing career in Tampa before taking a brief run at tracks in New York and New Jersey.

"I didn't get in [in the mix]," said Thompson. "I wasn't ready."

He arrived at Rockingham Park in New Hampshire and became a fixture in New England in a career that has produced five riding titles at Suffolk, including a highlight day five years ago when he saddled six winners in one afternoon. But he has never quite made it to the next plateau, riding in Triple Crown races.

The five races Thompson rode in yesterday had a combined purse total of $54,400, which was less than the average purse of one race on yesterday's card at Belmont.

"Sure, it's something you dream about," said Thompson, when asked if he ever projected himself at a higher level. "I think every jockey thinks about that. But you have to be lucky. Maybe you can get a diamond in the rough, you never know."

Thompson's horses yesterday were a mixture of coal and diamonds. Thompson began with a win in the second race, guiding a 4-year-old filly named Lovely Lashes to a victory over fast-closing Oliva the Rocket in a $7,100 6-furlong claiming race.

"One down," said Thompson afterward with a smile when he was reminded of his six-win day at Suffolk.

Things got tougher in the fourth race when Thompson, riding the post-time favorite, Capulet, was a well-beaten fourth.

He rebounded in the seventh race, coming off the pace with the second betting choice, Primal Baby, to get his second win. The trend reversed in the eighth race when Thompson, riding even-money favorite I'm It Wayne, contended for the lead early, but faded to eighth and last place.

That left the final race for Thompson to put a punctuation mark on his day, with a ride aboard 5-year-old filly Hot Brew.

Hot Brew came from off the pace and coasted to a three-length victory. Five races, three wins.

"You couldn't have come on a better day," said Thompson. "I didn't want to go too early. It worked out just right."

With a 10 percent payout for each win, Thompson's day at the office wasn't bad at all. "About $20,000," he said as he headed for the showers.

Two hundred and fifty miles to the south, Thompson's brethren were getting ready for the 143d running of the Belmont Stakes, in which Drosselmeyer, a 13-1 shot ridden by Mike Smith, gained the win in the final leg of the Triple Crown.

"When does the Belmont go off?" asked Thompson. When told 40 minutes, Thompson shook his head. "I'm meeting someone for dinner," he said. "I'll watch it on tape later."

Not a bad day at all.

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Apprentice jockey Jorge Fuller Vargas, son of former New England jockeys Abby Fuller and Jorge Vargas, recorded his first career win yesterday at Suffolk. In the third race of the day, Vargas rode Morgan, a 3-year-old filly, to a 3-length win in 1:44:46.