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"Danno" wins in Saratoga again

by Bill Finley

The good news was plenty for the New Jersey-bred star Book'em Danno at Saratoga June 6. Not only did he win the Grade 3 True North Stakes for the second straight year in what may have been his best race ever, but it was learned afterward that he would be coming home to make his next start at Monmouth Park on the day before the Haskell.

The True North was far from an easy spot. Book'em Danno had to face last year's Breeders' Cup Sprint-G1 winner Bentornato, as well as the Bob Baffert-trained Imagination, winner

of this year's Riyadh Dirt Sprint-G2 in Saudi Arabia.

Book'em Danno was coming in off a second-place finish in the Grade 2 Carter, but trainer Derek Ryan was confident that he was sending out a better horse this time.

"That was the best race of his career," Ryan said. "I honed on him for this race and I didn't hone on him for the Carter. I said he wasn't 100 percent for that race. He still should have won the last one, but that's OK. It's part of the game. When I knew Bentornato was going to be in



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there I had to have him extra, extra sharp. You could see from his works. I've never been that hard on a horse coming into a race. I worked him in 59, 59, 36. That's not my style. I just knew I had to have him at 100 percent to beat Bentornato."

At the mid-stretch point, it looked like Danno might be in trouble as Bentornato still had a clear lead on him, and the longshot Listenupshance was still hanging in there. But under Paco Lopez, Book'em Danno found another gear and went by Bentornato with surprising ease to win by three-quarters of a length. The move prompted race announcer Frank Mirahmadi to say he won "with condescending ease."

"He didn't know he had something to prove," said Jay Briscione, who heads the Atlantic Six Racing partnership that owns the horse. "But he went up against Bentornato and Imagination, formidable opposition. On top of that the racetrack was insanely speed favoring, so he was up against it. But he was coming into the race so good, so I was expecting a huge race."

"But that doesn't always happen in racing. But he came through with the performance I was expecting from him. He won against a stellar field and overcame a speed bias."

That he beat Bentornato was a big part of the story. Despite not running in the Breeders' Cup Sprint, Book'em Danno edged out his rival to win the Eclipse Award for top sprinter. Not everyone agreed with what was a close and controversial vote. But Danno put that to rest with his True North win.

"So now we've beaten him twice, in the Saudi Derby and yesterday," Ryan said. "He's 2-0 against him. Like with Mike Tyson or Muhammad Ali, when you're 2-0 against another fighter you've proven you're the best. We won the Eclipse Award because of our body of work, which was unbelievable. And we proved it yesterday."

Book'em Danno, the best horse the New Jersey-breeding program has produced in decades, returned to the Garden State for the July 17 Mr. Prospector Stakes at Monmouth (full coverage of that result will appear in next month's newsletter). The race was run the day before the Grade 1 Haskell Stakes and the purse was increased from \$100,000 to \$200,000.

It will be Book'em Danno's first start in New Jersey since he won the July 19, 2024, Jersey Shore Stakes at Monmouth.

"This has been in the works for a long time," said Dennis Drazin, who heads the management team that operates the track. "We first discussed it as a team with them at the Eclipse Awards. Jay Briscione has been terrific in trying to get us to showcase an Eclipse champion at Monmouth who is a New Jersey-bred. We anticipate we will increase the purse for the Mr. Prospector to \$200,000, and he's going to run with us. We're excited about it. We're going to turn it into a Book'em Danno day. We are going to give free admission to Oceanport residents and we're going to try to do some special things to promote the horse. Book'em Danno is the best Jersey-bred in modern times and we're excited to do everything we can to promote the horse. This should be a great prelude to Haskell Day."

Ryan said he is pleased to give something back to New Jersey.

"We're going to run him in Jersey," he said. "The owners are all local guys and Dennis Drazin has been very accommodating and wants to have a Book'em Danno day before the Haskell. It's fitting because he's a Jersey bred and the owners are all from around here. Dennis been very good to us. We think that running him at Monmouth is doing the right thing. Everyone will bring their family and friends."

"I think this will be a wonderful thing for everybody, for the track and the community," Briscione said. "It could be a big party-like atmosphere and a lead in to the Haskell. We're willing to put Danno in the spotlight and do whatever we can to help promote Jersey racing and help get a casino. Use us an example that a Jersey-bred can compete with the best horses in racing."

Book'em Danno is now 5-for-6 at Saratoga, but Ryan said that "you have to run your ass off to win up there." He's hoping the Monmouth race won't be that tough.

"I need to get an easy race into him, though I shouldn't say that because some son of a bitch will come in there and make us run," he said. "That's usually how it happens. You think you're getting an easy race into a horse and along comes some longshot to bust your ass."

Ryan said he wasn't sure where Book'em Danno would run after the Mr. Prospector, but said a return engagement in the (Aug. 29) Grade 1 Forego Stakes at Saratoga was a possibility.

Jewel of the Ocean goes gate-to-wire to win Jersey Girl Handicap

Monmouth Park Racetrack Press Release

Trainer Chuck Spina was already disappointed before the start of the \$80,250 Jersey Girl Handicap at Monmouth Park June 27 because the two things he wanted most to happen – the race coming off the grass because of rain and Mia's

Crusade having a chance at a record seventh state-bred stakes win – never materialized.

But when you have a "back-up" plan as speedy as Jewel of the Ocean it can mitigate a lot of disappointment, including the late vet scratch of Mia's Crusade.



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Given a master-class front-end ride by jockey Charlie Marquez, Jewel of the Ocean went gate to wire in the one-mile grass race for Jersey-bred fillies and mares, 3 and up, having plenty in reserve for a three-quarters length victory over Summer's Comin after setting moderate fractions throughout.

It marked the first stakes win for the 4-year-old daughter of Sea Wizard, who is owned by Prancing Horse Farm (Joe and Gayle Ioia).

The winning time for the 8 furlongs over a firm turf course was 1:37.16.

"I was actually hoping this race came off the grass because I told Joe [Ioia] he could bet his mansion on her, that she would go wire to wire on the dirt," said Spina. "She did that on the turf instead. The one turf race she ran before this was the last day of the meet last year [finishing sixth]. But as soon as she broke out of the gate the way she did today I knew it was over.

"She's a fast horse. She barely got beat [1 length] in the Spruce Fir Handicap last time out. The modest fractions were exactly what we wanted, too."



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Marquez essentially put the field to sleep with front end fractions of :24.14, :49.05 and 1:12.70 for 6 furlongs. Favorite Riding Pretty was never able to get into the race because of that, finishing fourth.

"The game plan was to break out of there with intention and then slow it down the best I could. It went exactly as we hoped it would," said Marquez. "I could tell the way she was travelling that she was comfortable and we were going moderately. The way we were going she was well within herself.

"She broke with so much speed on the dirt in her last race so on the grass going long there was no question she was going to be that sharp. It was just a matter of whether someone else would go with

us and hook us. Luckily we were able to break out of there in the first two jumps and establish the lead right away."

Eazy Whirled, also owned by Prancing Horse Farm but trained by Sergio Rabadan, finished third, a half-length behind Summer's Comin, who won the Spruce Fir by a length in gate to wire fashion in her last start. But she took a quick right turn out of the gate that compromised her chances to make the lead.

Jewel of the Ocean paid \$10.80 to win in the field of seven, reduced by two scratches.

"I'm extremely disappointed that Mia's Crusade was a vet scratch. She would have run good, too," said Spina.

Though Jewel of the Ocean earned \$111,200 from six starts last year, there was uncertainty about whether she would take to the turf. That uncertainty is gone now after she posted her third win (with three seconds) from eight career starts.

"The one time she ran on the turf she didn't love it but she didn't hate it," said Spina. "Now we know she likes turf as well."

Rising star Cairo Surprise rolls in John J. Reilly Handicap

Monmouth Park Racetrack Press Release

A day after booting home Book'em Dano in the Grade 3 True North handicap at Saratoga, jockey Paco Lopez found himself aboard what could be the next Jersey-bred star.

It's a far way off yet for Cairo Surprise – Book'em Danno has won nine stakes races, two Grade 1s – but the 3-year-old gelding is off to the type of career start that hints at something special.

Hooked briefly at the outset of the 6-furlong \$81,000 John J. Reilly Handicap at Monmouth Park by three-time

Reilly winner Speaking, Cairo Surprise shrugged off that challenge and cruised to a 6¼-length win over his older rivals.

The winning time was 1:10.84, and Cairo Surprise, the 1-10 favorite, did that wrapped for the final sixteenth.

"I was impressed with his race today because coming in it looked like a pretty tough race," said Lopez, who won four races on the eight-race card and is well on his way to a record-tying 13th Monmouth Park riding title. "I know a lot of those horses he was running against. There were some good Jersey-breds in this race.

"I really just let him go. He did it by himself. I don't know [if he is the next Book'em Danno] but he tries every time if you look at his races. He really has not done anything wrong in his career. He did it easy today."

With Speaking on his flanks for the opening quarter in :22.49, Cairo Surprise left the veteran gelding in his wake as he powered to the half in :45.53, opening up a wide margin as he did so.

Trained by Cal Lynch, Cairo Surprise was bred and is owned by Hope Haskell Jones, a daughter of Amory L. Haskell, the former president and chairman of the



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board at Monmouth Park for whom the Haskell is named.

Boardwalk Jack was second, 2½ lengths ahead of stablemate Great Navigator. The latter two are trained by Eddie Owens Jr.

Cairo Surprise returned \$2.20 to win.

"This was not unexpected," Lynch said. "He has been consistently good his whole career. We gelded him last year and then gave him a break and trained him lightly through the winter, looking to pick a spot or two – which we did – and have him ready to go for this race fit and tight. He's still developing. He does everything straightforward.

"The really good ones are easy to train and ride."



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A son of Cairo Prince, Cairo Surprise now has four wins and four seconds from eight career starts, with the Reilly being his first stakes win.

"For 26 years I've wanted to win the John J. Reilly," said Lynch. "I've won

almost every other Jersey-bred stakes but for 26 years I could not win the Reilly. So I'm glad to finally get it."

Cairo Surprise crossed the line first in his fourth straight race. One of those was a 5½-furlong turf sprint at Laurel in April (although he was DQ'd to second).

"There's definitely turf in his future," Lynch said. "We breezed him a few times at Fair Hill on the turf and he won on the turf at Laurel to start this year. I think he may be as good on the turf, if not better. He can run either way. He's just a cool horse. I wish I had a barn full like him.

"We'll stay in Jersey with him and race him at Monmouth. He's eligible for a few of those Jersey-bred turf races, so we'll see."

Summer's Comin fends off Jewel of the Ocean in the Spruce Fir

Monmouth Park Racetrack Press Release

Trainer Mike Dini says the plans for Summer's Comin after this year are for the 5-year-old mare to be bred, but after her last two performances it's something he may have to reconsider.

Hooked in a duel with Jewel of the Ocean until midstretch of the \$75,000 Spruce Fir Handicap at Monmouth Park June 6, Summer's Comin drew away for a 1-length victory for her second career stakes win.

Coming in off a win at Tampa Bay Downs in a \$100,000 optional claimer in April, Summer's Comin maintained her form, winning for the ninth time in 33 career starts.

Sent off the favorite, she returned \$6 to win in the field of 10 fillies and mares, 3 and up.

The winning time for the six furlongs was 1:11.24.

"Being in an outside post made the difference," said Dini. "They couldn't slow her down. She doesn't like being inside too many horses. That's when she gets in trouble. But she was clear the whole race. [Jewel of the Ocean] was the only



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one outside of her so she was able to run freely. I didn't expect that kind of pressure and I thought a couple of other horses would be coming running at her late, but they never did."

From the outset, the race was entirely between Summer's Comin and 22-1 Jewel of the Ocean, with the two clearing off by 8 lengths at one point through early fractions of :22.35 and :45.38 to half.

Summer's Comin edged clear in midstretch from the Chuck Spina-trained Jewel of the Ocean.

My Two Sophia's was another 4¼ lengths back in third.

"I'm 3-for-3 with her," said winning rider Francisco Martinez. "We get along great. She's more mature as a 5-year-old. She is handling things so well now. She just gets a little shy when she is inside horses. So I tried to keep her clear.

"She broke so well we really only had to worry about one other horse. At the three-eighths pole she was already on the bit and [Jewel of the Ocean's rider Charlie Marquez] was already smooching on his horse.

"I gave her a little breather going into the turn and then when I asked her coming out of the turn she responded. I know what she can give so I was never really worried. On the turn, when I felt the other horse's presence and she was hanging around, I smooched at her and she gave me her kick."

Dini, who also owns Summer's Comin, said his plan is to race the daughter of Summer Front, who was bred by Helen and Joseph Barbazon, up to three more times in Jersey-bred stakes company before sending her to be bred.

The victory pushed Summer's Comin's career bankroll to \$418,591.



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