

148th Preakness Stakes Media Conference

Saturday, May 20, 2023
Baltimore, Maryland, USA
Pimlico Race Course

Bob Baffert

John Velazquez

Jack Wolf

Barbara Banke

Bat Masterson

Sol Kumin

Tom Ryan

Media Conference

THE MODERATOR: I'll quickly make the introductions here: Tom Ryan, SF Racing; Sol Kumin; you have Bat Masterson; of course, winning trainer Bob Baffert; Stonestreet Stables Barbara Banke; winning rider John Velazquez; and Starlight Racing Jack Wolf. Very pleased to be joined by everyone.

I'm going to start with the winning rider, John Velazquez. I'd love to hear your thoughts on the race, but let's start with the fact that this is your first Preakness victory on your 13th Preakness ride. How pleased are you?

JOHN VELAZQUEZ: What a moment. All I can say, when you ride your best and you try to ride your best and the horse responds to everything you want to do, that's all it takes, the horse giving you everything they can, and that's what you hope for, and he did.

Everything I asked him to do, got a good break, pumped it outside a little bit, just like the other ones, think what I'm going to do, and got to the turn and went to the inside, saved some ground and got to the backstretch. Saved some ground on the second turn, and when Irad started moving in the 3/8 pole, I stayed in there. But came to the quarter pole and made sure I put a little pressure on him.

And he fought the whole way. From the 3/16 pole home, he put in a really good fight. He did not want to let that horse pass. And that's what champions do. He got it done for me.



Q. Being in front, was that the game plan?

JOHN VELAZQUEZ: Well, it wasn't really a plan, but like I said, I want to get him a really good rhythm, and I knew it wasn't a lot of speed, but I saw Irad warming up his horse, and I knew he was going to put pressure to the other horse with a little bit of speed. And that's why when I broke okay and I went towards the middle of the track to make sure I put him over there and if they want to go any faster, let them go in front. Just a little strategy. If it works, it works. And it worked today.

Q. As a rider when you're engaged in a stretch battle like that, were you always confident you might get there in the end?

JOHN VELAZQUEZ: No, I'll tell you what, like I said, when it came to him, he put a good fight the whole way. He was not letting that horse go by. And then again, he galloped out, he managed to gallop out. That's when he had to pull him up.

It was a really good fight from the 3/16 pole to the wire, and after that he galloped out incredible. So very proud for everything he did and take me out of my slump from the Preakness.

Q. Of course you're a Hall of Fame rider, and we mentioned it's your first Preakness win. Is your family here with you?

JOHN VELAZQUEZ: They're all here. They're all here. It's my father-in-law's birthday today, too, so that's the cherry on top of the cake. So happy birthday to Leo, and the Irish luck was there today.

Q. As we move along quickly to the winning trainer, Bob, we know you applied the blinkers on this horse. You said you were trying to figure him out a little bit still. Have we figured him out?

BOB BAFFERT: Well, he's a horse that he's always been -- he won early, and he showed us there he was a nice horse, but we knew that he needed distance.



It just took him a while. He hasn't really filled out into his frame, but we could tell he's been working -- his last few works were really strong, and he was working like a really good horse.

The work before, he went 7/8 in ridiculous time, and he came back and worked beautifully. We shipped here early to make sure -- the shipping has been so difficult now. I don't want to get in too close to the race and give him a chance to settle in.

I give Johnny credit; he got him out of the gate beautifully. His tactics were -- that's why he's in the Hall of Fame. I always feel confident when Johnny is on my horse.

And so, to me, this means more for Johnny getting his Preakness win. I know it was --

JOHN VELAZQUEZ: Tell him what you said to me early, though. He said, "Your window is closing, so you'd better win this one."

BOB BAFFERT: I told him his expiration date is getting a little bit close. He's a great rider, just like him, Mike Smith, all the top guys, you never heard of guys riding at this age. When you're great, it's like anything, you stay great. And Johnny has always been a great rider.

It was nice to see his buddy Javier Castellano get a Derby win this year.

JOHN VELAZQUEZ: Absolutely.

BOB BAFFERT: We've always been together at Jeff Ruby's the night before, and poor Javier could never tell a Derby story. So we're all in this club now.

But you can't do it without the group of owners that I have that have stuck by me through all this negative, this bad stuff that's happened to me in the last few years, and they're loyal, they stuck with me, and I give them all the credit. They give me the ammo.

We've got a great team. Tom Ryan, who started this, we've got everybody, Barbara -- it's fun. We have fun. The thing is to win these races.

We went dry -- we spoiled ourselves without panic, but we're back in and we've got another good group coming --

Q. What has it been like managing this horse, and what was it you saw from him that made you want to bring him here?

BOB BAFFERT: Well, we thought his Santa Anita Derby race, it was okay, but you could tell he was still green, figuring it out. So I talked to Johnny. I said, "I want to put a set of blinkers on him," and he thought it would be a good idea, keep him a little bit more focused. So leaving there, he wasn't really getting into the groove, and so -- and he missed some time there.

Tim Yakteen had him, and he couldn't run him in prep, so he missed some time. So Tim thought he would be a little short. So he probably needed the Santa Anita Derby. Because when I got him from Tim, he was in great condition.

I just went along with it and just -- we always thought -- we were hoping for something like this. I know -- I didn't want to be the spoiler. I've been in this position before. But I'm just happy that we've been through -- this game, you just get -- we take a lot of knocks. You've got to be tough to stay in this game and go through a lot of ups and downs.

But this is why we work so hard, work seven days. We love these horses. And when you see one of your horses, it's like one of your kids winning. That's the excitement of it.

Q. On a personal note, you already mentioned how special it is for Johnny to win this. Now with your eighth win in the Preakness, you're the all-time winning-most trainer in the Preakness. What does that mean to you?

BOB BAFFERT: Well, I have a great team. We've got Jimmy Barnes, you all know; my assistant, Pascual Rivera; all my grooms. They're the ones that do all the hard work. I delegate a lot of this, and we're a good team. They know what's expected of them.

To win eight -- right now I'm just -- I'm not thinking about the eight because hopefully I want to come back here and add to that. But I'm happy for just this horse doing what he did today. I mean, this horse brought us all out of just a horrible moment today, and I'm just grateful to that horse.

Q. You mentioned to me before that you don't think much about records, but are you thinking about it now?

BOB BAFFERT: You know, I've never been a record-type keeper because I stay so -- you've got to stay focused with your horses. Maybe 10 years from now, I'll think about it, but right now, I just focus on -- as a trainer, we have a lot of responsibilities. We have families that work -- employees, the families to take care of, the horses, horse welfare, the jockeys, keep them safe.

There's so many -- the owners, keep them happy. There's so much that a trainer deals with. That's why I have white hair and three stents in my heart.

But it's a lot of pressure, but it's pressure that we all -- we know it's pressure, but we do it because we love the horses. We're horse crazy, and if we didn't love them -- why do you keep doing this? Because we just love showing up and looking at those horses. When they perform like today, just forget about all that.

Q. I'm going to work my way towards me, I'm going to start with Starlight Racing's founder, Jack Wolf. What does a victory like this mean to you as well as the Starlight Racing family?

JACK WOLF: Thank God for Johnny. We've been working with Johnny for 20 years. He's won some great races for us. I'm so happy he was on this horse and he got to win his first Preakness and Bob won his, what, 19th -- or what was it? Eighth.

But credit goes to Johnny and Bob and Jimmy Barnes and Tom Ryan for putting this group together. I couldn't be happier for this guy (hugging Johnny Velazquez.)

Q. We also have Stonestreet Stables' Barbara Banke joining us. You are an incredible proponent of the industry, large investments. What does it mean to sit here and see this pay off like this?

BARBARA BANKE: This is wonderful, and it's no more than we all deserve. But it's so exciting to be here. The Preakness is always my most fun experience in the Triple Crown, and it's wonderful to win here. Good group of friends and with John, who got his first victory, and it's well-deserved.

Of course, since I'm the chair of the Breeders' Cup, I'm hoping we have a really great Breeders' Cup this year with a lot of these horses, including National Treasure. I'm hoping for that and some of the other runners, as well, and that our industry will prosper over the year.

Q. I feel like that's a question for trainer Bob Baffert as well. Do we know where we'd like to head next?

BOB BAFFERT: Well, I mean, right now we're just going to see how he comes out of it. I like Johnny's comments; he said we had trouble pulling him up. I hope he didn't take too much out of him by letting him so far out. But we'll see how hard of a toll it takes.

We've got a couple days to think about it because the

plane leaves on Tuesday, and if we were going to go to Belmont, we'd probably have to ship straight up there. I wouldn't want to take him back to California. It would be too hard on him.

We've got the next 24 hours to -- we'll let the horse tell us how he came out of it. He looked great after the race, so he didn't look like it was really taxing on him.

That's another thing, too, about Baltimore. The way they treat us, the management, they treat us -- everybody, it's a great treatment here. We come here, they bend over backwards for you. It's fun, enjoying -- I love the stakes barn and everybody back there. They feed the grooms. It's happy. Win, lose or draw you always leave here with a good feeling about the place.

Q. Bat Masterson, co-owner. I can see the smile on your face. Where were you watching it from?

BAT MASTERSON: I was watching it with all these guys. And I was very fortunate that Tom Ryan invited me to be part of this group, and it's been a great group to be part of.

I've always raced fillies, and they said we're going to race colts, and I said, I love that. And I've known Bob for a long time and all the people here, and it's just really an honor to be a part of this group, and I'm so happy we won this race, especially being a Maryland grad.

Q. Bat, what were your instructions?

BAT MASTERSON: I always tell Johnny: Just win.

Q. You're part of this ownership group as well with Madaket Stables. I know you're exuberant in your celebrations. How were the emotions after?

SOL KUMIN: It's great. This is my favorite race of the year. I went to college here in Baltimore, and first time I ever went to racetrack was Preakness Day, sneaking into the infield in college.

This is always my favorite day of the year, and obviously I'm really happy for this group. It's a great group. In this sport, there's lots of ups and downs.

And to be part of Johnny's first win is special. To be part of Bob's record-breaking win is great. And just to be part of this whole crew, I feel really happy to be here.

Q. Finally, Tom Ryan, SF Racing. Tell me about when you first came across National Treasure.

TOM RYAN: We discovered National Treasure in



Saratoga last year. It was Fasig-Tipton. He was hit 13, as Sol said earlier. And Donato loved the horse. John Moynihan loved the horse. He was a horse that met all the criteria immediately. It was interesting, we brought Bob to see the horse, and he literally took one glance and walked away.

I was like, "He doesn't like him." And we walked around the corner, and he said, "I love him."

We were very fortunate to buy the horse. Very happy.

Look, the same breeder that bred Authentic bred this horse, and we got beat in the Preakness with Authentic, and we won today.

Q. Johnny, you had an amazing get-out off of the gate. Obviously at the end you had a little bit of pressure there. What's going through your mind when you see the other horse coming up right on you?

JOHN VELAZQUEZ: Well, like I said earlier, it's like when the other horse got to him, he put in every bit of effort to fight the horse off, so it was definitely -- on the aid of the horse and you ask him for everything he's got, and he's giving it to me. And you can see getting to the wire he started getting away from the horse. You can't ask for anything else when the horse is giving you everything. Absolutely.

Q. Bob, you mentioned there's been negativity recently and you've been through some bad stuff. In light of what you've gone through to get to today, is it vindication? How do you feel? What does it mean to be back in the winner's circle after the bad stuff?

BOB BAFFERT: Well, I couldn't have done it without my beautiful wife Jill's support and my family and my friends. We've been through a tough go. But we knew we would get through this, and the thing -- I just focus. Like I said, it's the love of the horse that just keeps me focused and keeps me going, and I just kept the noise out.

I had a lot of professional sports people telling me: You've got to keep the noise out. Just keep doing what you're doing, get through it, and everything will be fine.

It was tough. We had some tough -- we've had some tough moments. But it's days like this that it's not really vindication. It's just the -- I feel like we have a moment where we can enjoy it. We have a moment where we enjoy what we do. We get rewarded for how hard everybody in my team works.

To me, that's mainly what it's about.

Q. Similar question to the ownership group. Bob said obviously you guys stuck by him through this. What was the thinking, and how are you guys feeling today out there on the winner's circle?

SOL KUMIN: Yeah, Bob, we've just always had his back. He's been doing this for a long time. He's been treated really unfairly. There's never been any wavering from anybody in this group. Obviously especially led by Tom. He's our guy, and will continue to be so.

Q. Bob, if you can talk us through the highs and lows of the day, of course what happened with Arabian Line, as well, as well as your other winners and the Preakness winner here.

BOB BAFFERT: We started out yesterday, I really thought Faiza could win the Black-Eyed Susan. She ran third, she got beat, and we were a little disappointed with that.

And then Arabian Line, he ran a great race. Looks like he's the horse we thought he was going to be. He's developing.

Then we came to Havnameltdown, we thought now we're on a roll, we're just going to get in a groove, and has that bad luck, gets bumped leaving the gate. I don't know if that contributed, but the horse -- when he got hurt, it's just the most sickening feeling a trainer can have.

My concern was is the jockey all right, and contact with his agent, and as soon as I knew he was okay and sized, he called me up told me everything was fine, the horse -- he didn't know what happened. He felt good and all that. You're just going through in your mind what -- it sort of put a damper on the afternoon.

Then I was just hoping that this horse could win for the group and for Johnny. When he hit the wire, I think my emotions were -- and my wife, what we've been through, for the day been through, it would have been so nice without that happening. But we grieve.

I'm still grieving about it. We're still sad about that horse, and we will be for a while.

It just put a little moment of spark into our lives.

Q. Along those lines, Bob, I'm wondering as you're going through the emotions of it, was it difficult to kind of wrap your head around -- you've been in a lot of winner's circles and a lot of wins. Is this the most surreal, strange process you've been through of a day as far as the highs and the lows?

BOB BAFFERT: I've been doing this for 43 years, and I've been hit -- every year there's a thousand things that go wrong, and you just get hit as a trainer when you've done it as long as I have, you know you can't get too excited because just right around the corner you're going to get a punch in the gut. It was a gut punch.

The main concern, the jockey, is fine. It was one of those things where you're just scratching your head.

At the same time, you still got to take care of your other horses and stay focused. It's like -- but as a trainer, that's what we go through. The life of a trainer is not as glamorous as people think. Right now we might be on top of the world, but for me, it's just -- I just feel relieved that the horse ran to its potential, and everybody here is happy.

But still, when I go back to the barn, seeing that empty stall, it's sad.

Q. What time are we getting in the barn tomorrow?

BOB BAFFERT: I'll probably be there around -- what time are we going to be there, honey? We'll be there at 8:30.

Q. 8:30 would be a good time for everyone to come and see the Preakness winner?

BOB BAFFERT: Sure.

Q. John, Bob addressed the difficulty of seeing a horse go down as he did. As a rider, when you see a horse go down and a fellow jock go down and you still have work to do, how does it impact you when you see that, and how does it impact your day?

JOHN VELAZQUEZ: Truthfully, I'll tell you, like a knife to my heart when I saw it. It's devastating when you see it, no matter what, when a horse suffers something like this and a jockey on top of it, for both of them you feel the pain. You start thinking, why. Just things that happen in racing.

But you have to stay focused, try to do your job. That's our job, it brings us to do. Hopefully with the work that we're doing and all the stuff that's happening, things like that doesn't happen anymore.

But yeah, it's hard. It's hard to stay focused and to keep going, though. Yeah.

THE MODERATOR: Congratulations, everyone.

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