



Belmont post positions

	Jockey	Trainer	Odds
1 Medal Count	R. Albarado	D. Romans	20-1
2 California Chrome	V. Espinoza	A. Sherman	3-5
3 Matterhorn	J. Bravo	T. Pletcher	30-1
4 Commanding Curve	S. Bridgmohan	D. Stewart	15-1
5 Ride on Curlin	J. Velazquez	B. Gowan	12-1
6 Matuszak	M. Smith	B. Mott	30-1
7 Samraat	J. Ortiz	R. Violette	20-1
8 Commissioner	J. Castellano	T. Pletcher	20-1
9 Wicked Strong	R. Maragh	J. Jerkens	6-1
10 General A Rod	R. Napravnik	M. Maker	20-1
11 Tonalist	J. Rosario	C. Clement	8-1

Source: Belmont Park

McClatchy Tribune graphic

La. trainers like their horses' chances at upset

BY ANNE LANG

Special to the Advocate

The eyes of the horse racing world are on California Chrome as he attempts to become racing's first Triple Crown winner in 36 years in Saturday's Belmont Stakes.

But often overlooked in the "Chrome" frenzy are the two horses who respectively challenged the West Coast colt most closely in the first two legs of the series.

One of those horses — Kentucky Derby runner-up Commanding Curve, or Preakness Stakes runner-up Ride On Curlin — just might end up joining the long list of spoilers that have emerged through the decades in the series finale.

And each will be saddled for Saturday's climactic event at Belmont Park by longtime Louisiana trainers, Dallas Stewart of New Orleans and Billy Gowan of Winnsboro.

Both Stewart (Commanding Curve) and Gowan (Ride on Curlin) are confident their horses have a genuine shot at beating California Chrome and the rest of the field in the

Belmont, contested over a 1½-mile distance that none of the 3-year-old contenders has ever tackled in a race.

"California Chrome is the biggest one to beat, for sure," Gowan said. "But there are a couple more in there, too. 'Wicked Strong is a nice horse, and so is Commanding Curve. But nobody just gives a horse a win; they have to earn it."

As for which horses Stewart predicts will be the toughest rivals in the field of 11, he simply said: "All of 'em."

Commanding Curve, owned by West Point Thoroughbreds, has one win in seven career starts. But he's had five weeks off from racing since the Derby (having skipped the Preakness on May 17), which might give him an edge over some rivals who haven't had as much time to rest and prepare.

"His fitness level seems to be where it needs to be," said Stewart. "We're happy with his condition and the way he's feeling and training coming into the race. I think he's peaking right now."

The Belmont must seem like déjà vu to Stewart, who also saddled last year's Derby runner-up Golden Soul. Although that horse skipped the Preakness, he finished a disappointing ninth in the Belmont.

Commanding Curve's chances for a win are boosted by having Shaun Bridgmohan aboard. Bridgmohan, the fifth-leading rider at the Fair Grounds last season, has ridden the horse in several races, including the Derby.

"Shaun is a very confident, strong and quiet rider," Stewart said. "He wants to win one of these big races just as much as I do."

Stewart has a short answer when asked what circumstances would be ideal for winning the Belmont with Commanding Curve, who drew the No. 4 post position Wednesday and was 15-1 on the morning line.

"Basically, he's just going to have to run faster than the rest of 'em," he said. "And not get into trouble. When he sets down for the drive, I'm hoping he'll be free and clear. It's all business. We need to win. We can deal with any celebrating later, but in the meantime, we just need to get the job done."

While Stewart has racked up numerous graded stakes wins and success in the Triple Crown and Breeders' Cup series, Gowan is at the center of a true Cinderella story.

Until Ride on Curlin, Gowan's best horse (and only stakes winner) in his 20-year training career was Starspangled Gator.

Two years ago, Gowan's stable at the Fair Grounds was down to two horses. That number fell to zero when one horse retired because of an injury and the other was claimed for \$5,000. For a while, Gowan returned fulltime to his farm in Shepherdsville, Kentucky.

Then along came the 2012 Keeneland Yearling Sale that changed his life.

Accompanied by Louisville furniture dealer Dan Dougherty, Gowan arrived at the sale with a modest budget. On Day 9 of the 11-day sale, when all the deep-pocketed buyers had long since departed, a pigeon-toed bay colt with crooked knees caught his attention.

Despite the conformation flaws, "he was very athletic-looking," Gowan said. "I liked that. Then I saw his pedigree (sired by two-time Horse of the Year Curlin and out of

"He's just as fast as those others. He's got a pretty high energy level, and his pedigree's definitely going to help him get to a mile and a half."

BILLY GOWAN, trainer for Ride on Curlin

Storm Cat mare Magical Ride) and was really impressed. I always look at the horse first, and then its pedigree.

"After that, I said to Dan: 'We sure need to try to buy him.' But when we got him for only \$25,000 (with no prepurchase veterinary exam and no jogging), I got a little nervous and thought: 'I wonder what's wrong with him?' I had a vet look at him afterward, and he couldn't find a fault anywhere. So I guess I got a little lucky, too."

Ride on Curlin proved he was worth the gamble.

"I had him turned out at my farm, and when he ran across the pasture you could tell he was quick," Gowan said. "It's hard to get to races like the Kentucky Derby, because these horses are so fragile.

"But Ride on Curlin has stayed together. He's just a tough horse."

Including the Preakness, Ride on Curlin has finished among the top three in nine of 11 career starts. On Wednesday, he was 12-1 on the morning line for the Belmont.

Gowan refers to designated jockey John Velazquez, 42, as "a king of Belmont" for having finished in the top three six times in the Belmont Stakes.

Ride on Curlin drew the No. 5 gate for the Belmont.

"I'd love to be right next to California Chrome (post position No. 2), jump on him early and just follow him around the track," Gowan said. "But I think our horse will do fine.

"He's just as fast as those others. He's got a pretty high energy level, and his pedigree's definitely going to help him get to a mile and a half."

California Chrome is a 3-5 morning line favorite for Saturday. But since Affirmed swept the Triple Crown in 1978, 12 Kentucky Derby/Preakness winners have faltered at the longer distance.