

Final Turn

MORE HERO, LESS GOAT By W. Cothran "Cot" Campbell

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The 2009 edition of the Triple Crown has been one of the most fascinating of recent times, although—with numerous high-profile scratches from the Kentucky Derby Presented by Yum! Brands (gr. I)—it did not start out to offer any special cachet. Calvin Borel emerged as the poster boy for the wonderful triad of races. After the Belmont Stakes (gr. I), however, I fear he is in some danger of being the goat, and I don't want him to be.

Calvin Borel has long been one of America's most underrated jockeys and one of our most endearing personalities. How could you not like Calvin, with that back-country smile, his heart-warming emotional outbursts, and such an obvious love of the animals he rides? He was the perfect pilot for the plain little gelding from New Mexico and his black-clad cowboy connections. Calvin just about literally rode the hair off Mine That Bird in the Derby, and it was thrilling. Great story.

Then Calvin jumped ship in a most honorable, up-front manner and won the Black-Berry Preakness (gr. I) with the beloved filly Rachel Alexandra. This was 11 days after she was bought and then supplemented to the race by Jess Jackson (and partner Harold McCormick), a man who is as "game as Dick Tracy." Rachel wisely passed the Belmont, and Calvin was reunited with Mine That Bird, thanks to the incredibly long-suffering patience of that gelding's connections.

Then the mistakes came. Calvin made the most ghastly blunder one can make in the sport of horse racing—or in any other field, for that matter. He guaranteed a victory. What an absolutely insane thing to do! First mistake.

Second mistake: Calvin spent the week before the Belmont becoming the media darling of the sports world. Wonderful for horse racing, but this media blitz should have made room for some familiarizing rides on the mile and a half, big sandy track of Belmont Park, a tricky venue with which the Midwest-based Calvin is not on intimate terms. He did not ride any horse anywhere that week, instead trekking from

studio to studio and enjoying the sights of Gotham. Not only that, but his agent did not line up a single mount in another dirt race for him on Belmont day itself. From a practical standpoint this was not smart, nor did it look good cosmetically. Calvin said he did not need that preparation, but still it did not look good.

Third and worst mistake was made at the three-eighths pole in the Belmont Stakes, when this fine jockey pushed the button. He asked Mine That Bird the big question, and he got the answer. The feisty little gelding went into overdrive, hit the front at the eighth pole, but began to struggle when he had gone a mile and seven-sixteenths. Calvin Borel—noted for his extraordinary patience and coolness in big races—uncharacteristically opted for an overland route and surely moved prematurely on a tricky racetrack with which he was not terribly familiar. He blew the Belmont, I believe.

I think this: If Calvin Borel, instead of Mike Smith, had ridden Mine That Bird in the Preakness, and if Mike Smith, instead of Calvin Borel, had ridden Mine that Bird in the Belmont, we would be celebrating the first Triple Crown winner in 31 years.

Calvin's post-race comments were as good as he could muster. But the award for grace and class under pressure should go to Chip Woolley, Mine That Bird's heretofore unheralded trainer. He showed enormous poise, patience, and character during the entire Triple Crown venture and deserves the respect and admiration he is now receiving. Except for one little glitch prior to the Preakness, so do his two owners—Mark Allen and Dr. Leonard Blach—good old boys from New Mexico.

Calvin Borel was about to earn his way into racing's Hall of Fame, but the Belmont may have slowed that movement down. I hope it will not derail his ultimate admission to the hallowed hall. It should not. He is a fine human being, a credit to racing, and a hell of a jockey. The Belmont experience simply did not find Calvin at his best. His horse's trainer and owners have seemingly excused this aberration from excellence. So should we all. In the meantime, racing needs more Calvin Borels and more hard-knocking geldings like Mine That Bird. 🐾



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