



Brian Hernandez Jr. celebrates after riding Mystik Dan to victory in the 150th running of the Kentucky Derby on Saturday.

How Mystik Dan won 150th Kentucky Derby

The people and the moments that helped make a champion.

By DANA O'NEIL

Louisville, Ky. — The thing about a life-changing event that takes two minutes to finish, every move, every decision, even every non-decision matters. Except it's not just the moves, the decisions and the non-decisions made in those two minutes that matter; it's a lifetime of split-second choices that combine to create a life and, in one case on a muddy Saturday evening, make history.

To upstage the story of Kentucky Derby winner Mystik Dan's historic run along the rail and into the record books requires far more than a reward around the Churchill Downs track. It includes a decision to not bail on a dinner date 30-plus years ago and a hunt for college library information in the basement of a bloodstock library years before even that. It necessitates a commitment to a would-be-son retired mare and a father convincing his son to fall in love with horse racing. It requires one jockey to study another rail-rider and, a partnership between a collection of people who compete with the big names but intentionally never cared about being one of them.

On the historic 150th running of this race, Mystik Dan delivered a breath-taking finish, beating second-place Sierra Leone and third-place Forever Young in the first three-horse photo finish since 1947. So close was the finish, not even winning jockey Brian Hernandez Jr. was certain what happened, asking on outside as he eased Mystik Dan if he'd won the Kentucky Derby.

It took an agonizing five minutes for the answer to arrive, as the 156,730 spectators on hand going from euphoria as the three horses neared the wire to near-stunned silence as they, like the jockey, awaited the decision.

Finally, Mystik Dan's name flashed on the big board, the crowd in the stands whooping in joy, the outcries sharing the news with Hernandez. "It took about two minutes, and then finally when they said, 'Yeah, you've just won the Kentucky Derby,' I was like, 'Oh wow, that's a long two minutes. That was the longest two minutes in sports — from the fastest two minutes to the longest by far.'"

Perhaps the only person not surprised was trainer Ken McPeck. The Kentucky-based trainer practically made like Babe Ruth and called his shot all week. On Friday, when he sat at a press conference to celebrate his Kentucky Oaks winner Thorpeo Anna, it was suggested that perhaps he'd return for another winning presser the next day. "Count on it," he said. When the promise was delivered, McPeck celebrated on the

track, holding his daughter Annie's hand tight.

By combining the winning ride with that of herpido Anna, McPeck became the first trainer since Ben Jones in 1952 to win the Kentucky Oaks-Kentucky Derby double, and Hernandez the first jockey to do so since Calvin Borel in 2009.

It is fitting that Hernandez matched Borel. In the longer view of this race, the one that makes more like "It's a Wonderful Life" and considers how even the most inconsequential of decisions lead to an epic life, it was Borel that Hernandez cued up on the video to study. Borel was known around the track as Calvin Bo-Rail for his love and comfort with riding along the rail, a spot plenty of jockeys would prefer to avoid. When Mystik Dan drew post position three, Hernandez and McPeck started talking about how they might be able to turn what plenty envisioned as a disadvantage into an advantage. Hernandez discovered the secret space in the recesses of Borel's rides.

In the immediate here and now, in the 2:03.34 it took Mystik Dan to cover the 1 1/4 miles, the race was won because Hernandez Jr. steered the horse on a brilliant ride. He followed Track Phantom along the rail, and when the lead horse gave him a half-step's worth of room, he squeezed Mystik Dan through the narrow space that opened like the sliver of light beneath a doorframe, holding on to the finish line to win by a nose. Favorite Fierceness finished 15th.

But this race was won long before Hernandez cued up the video. It was won some 40 years ago when a young McPeck buried himself in the University of Kentucky agriculture library to educate himself on Blood-Horse and thoroughbred records. Taken to Keeneland by his grandfather, McPeck never saw himself doing much else other than horse racing. He jokes that his ag library basement studies might have resulted in better grades than his normal coursework, but it's only because it fed a passion.

All that studying and poking around, though, created a sort of respect for every creature. He prefers to teach every last of horse racing and is respected as much as a bloodstock agent as a trainer. He even created an app — *Horses Now* — for replays. He's a big believer in the industry, well-liked and well-respected among his peers for his loyalty and decency and his willingness to keep things simple. Horse racing is a big business, and an expensive one, the animals of stud owned by conglomerates over individuals. McPeck has purposefully tried to eschew that approach. "I think what I'm most proud of is, we didn't do with Calumet Farm horses," he said, citing the big-breeding

conglomerate in Lexington. "We did it with working-class horses."

McPeck trained Mystik Dan's mare, Ma'am, and when she heard retirement, he convinced Lance, Brent and Sharilyn Gasaway not to retire her but to breed her with Goldencents, a 2013 Derby entrant. That they agreed goes to the trust the owners put in McPeck, but also back to their own horse-racing roots and their little moments that led them to a small-ish racehorse with the biggest of wins.

Lance Gasaway, you might argue, is the Mystik Dan of college football. That is to say, perhaps a tad overlooked. A record holder and Hall of Famer, he starred not at Arkansas but at Arkansas-Monticello, where he was an NAIA All-American for the Boll Weevils. He got into horse racing at the urging of his dad, Clint, the two partnering at Oaklawn, their home track. Their biggest and best shot at the limelight came with Wells Bayou, who won the Louisiana Derby and was targeted for the Kentucky Derby until COVID struck and moved the race to September.

Clint died about a year ago, and as Lance sat on the dais, he got more than a little choked up when he recalled his father's influence. "To me, this is for him," he said. "Dad would have loved it. He loved the game." But a few years ago, back when Ma'am was about to be retired, Clint decided he was getting too old to get into breeding horses. Lance opted to bring in his first cousin, Brent.

Thirty-five years ago, Brent was meant to meet his now-wife Sharilyn for a date, but he was late. And then later. Turns out he was at the track, still at the races. Sharilyn was less than thrilled — at least until Brent that night popped the question. When Sharilyn quit her full-time job, the couple opted to get into horse racing full-time, about the same time that Clint and Lance got into the game. When Lance needed a new partner for breeding and, eventually, in the ownership of Mystik Dan, Sharilyn and Brent made perfect sense.

Sitting side-by-side, sandwiched between McPeck and Hernandez, Lance and Sharilyn both seemed a bit wide-eyed and happily dazed. Asked how they might celebrate, Lance deadpanned, "I don't know. I never won the Derby before."

Neither had McPeck. But now, with his own Triple Crown — he won the Preakness in 2020 with Swiss Sky-driver and the Belmont in 2002 with Sarqva — he at least had an inkling. "I'm going to go back to the barn and hug all the staff and all the family," he said. "And then my horse is wide open if anyone wants to come over."

Mystik Dan may have won the Derby in two minutes of maneuvering, but it took a million smaller moments to create the masterpiece.

BRIDGE

Phillip Alder



How do you start dummy's trumps?

Confucius said, "There are three methods to gaining wisdom. The first is reflection, which is the highest. The second is imitation, which is the easiest. The third is experience, which is the bitterest."

Reflection — analysis — is the best way to find the answer to a deal. But we should not wish to limit our knowledge. And experience can make life easier, although, it is true, gaining it can be painful.

What in your wisdom — opinion — is the right play of the trump suit in this four-heart contract? West leads the club queen. South loses the first three tricks, then wins the fourth with his spade ace.

This was a good deal for Stayman, since three no-trump fails. (Declarer,

North 65-49-24	
♠ 7 3 1	♥ 9 5 3 2
♦ 11	♣ K 10 3
West	
♠ J 8 6 2	♥ 10 9
♦ 4	♣ K 8 3 2
♠ 10 9 8 2	♥ Q 2 J 9
♦ Q J 10 5	♣ A 10 4
South	
♠ A K Q	♥ A J 10 8
♦ A K 5	♣ A K 5
♠ 7 5 2	♥ 7 5 2
Dealer: South	
Deal: South	East
NT	Pass
1♥	Pass
Opening lead: ♦ Q	

unable to get to dummy to take the heart finesse, should end with only three spades, three hearts and two diamonds.) Use Stayman when you have minimum game points and a low doubleton (or singleton or void), as the North hand does here.

South must first get into the dummy by ruffing the third diamond. Then, since the trump finesse might need to be repeated, he must call specifically for the heart nine.

When that holds, he continues with the heart queen. Here, assuming East does not cover, Declarer then plays dummy's last heart to his jack, cashes the ace, and draws trumps.

Note that if South starts with dummy's heart queen, unblocking his 10 or jack, East should duck the first round. South can cover nine-continuation to guarantee himself a trump trick.

When you need to repeat a finesse, first lead the lowest card that can hold the trick if the finesse is working.

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Jury orders USTA to pay \$9M to player in sexual assault case

THE ATHLETIC

A federal jury on Monday ordered the United States Tennis Association to pay \$9 million to a once-rising tennis prospect who said the organization failed to protect her from being sexually assaulted by a coach at theUSTA Training center.

Kylie McKenzie, a 25-year-old player from Arizona who is trying to revive her career, sued the USTA in 2022 after the U.S. Center for SafeSport found it "more likely than not" that she had been assaulted by her coach when she was 19 and he was 34.

The coach, Anibal Aranda, has denied touching McKenzie inappropriately in 2018. He was suspended and then fired by the USTA, and as the organization investigated McKenzie's claims, a USTA employee reported for the first time that she had been groped by the coach years earlier.

After a weeklong trial in U.S. District Court in Orlando, the jury deliberated for just 2 1/2 hours before awarding McKenzie \$5 million in compensatory damages in the first phase of its verdict.

In its second phase, the jury awarded \$6 million in punitive damages, determining there was a conscious disregard for the rights and safety of others, given in part attempts by the USTA to keep McKenzie's case quiet.

"I feel validated," McKenzie said Monday evening from Florida. "It was very hard, but I feel now that it was all worth it. I hope I can be an example for other girls to speak out even when it's hard."

In a statement, USTA spokesman Chris Widmaier said the organization would

"pursue all avenues of appeal," even though it was sympathetic to what McKenzie endured.

Through two years of litigation, the USTA has insisted it handled McKenzie's case appropriately after she quickly reported to friends, relatives, USTA officials and law enforcement that Aranda had placed a hand between her thighs after an escalation of physical contact.

The police took a statement from McKenzie, stated there was probable cause for a charge of battery and then turned over the evidence to local prosecutors, who opted not to pursue a criminal case. When McKenzie returned to the training center days later, a coach told her to tell others she had been ill.

During depositions, a lawyer for the USTA asked McKenzie about how many sexual partners she had before the incident, about medications she had taken to treat anxiety and depression, and about the nature of her association with her coach.

The lawyer asked the player's mother, Kathleen McKenzie, whether she knew her daughter had taken birth control pills and a morning-after pill. During the trial, lawyers suggested McKenzie exaggerated the anxiety and depression she experienced following the incident.

The types of questions and accusations, though common in lawsuits centered on sexual abuse, have been widely criticized by advocates for victims, who say they discourage women from coming forward when they are abused.

"Their entire defense seemed to be based on victim-shaming," said Amy Adkins, the lead trial attorney for McKenzie. "It backfired."