

HORSE RACING

Essential Quality wins Belmont Stakes

BY STEPHEN WHYNO

Associated Press

NEW YORK — Brad Cox picked up his first Triple Crown victory with Essential Quality's romp to victory in the Belmont Stakes on Saturday while waiting to see if he'll be awarded another from the Kentucky Derby.

Cox could be a Derby winner with Mandaloun if Bob Baffert-trained Medina Spirit is disqualified. But Cox was able to enjoy this one with Essential Quality beating Hot Rod Charlie by 1 1/4 lengths.

Essential Quality, who went off as the 6-5 favorite, passed early leader Hot Rod Charlie around the final turn and held on to win the 1 1/2-mile \$1 million race. He paid \$4.60 to win, \$3 to place and \$2.60 to show.

"That was a long way around there a mile a half but it was exciting," Cox said. "It looked like the horse on the inside, he still had run left. I knew it was going to be a battle down the lane."

Preakness winner Romabauer was third and Known Agenda fourth.

Essential Quality, a striking gray colt, finished fourth as a beaten favorite in the Kentucky Derby because of a rough trip. Essential Quality showed in the Belmont why he has long been considered one of the top 3-year-olds in the country.

"In the Kentucky Derby we were so confident that we're



John Minchillo/AP

Essential Quality, with jockey Luis Saez, crosses the finish line to win the Belmont Stakes on Saturday in Elmont, New York.

gonna win that race," said jockey Luis Saez, who won a Triple Crown race for the first time. "He was ready for the race. But we have a little unlucky start. ... Today the main thing was try to break clean and the rest I know he's gonna do it."

Backdoor his way to becoming the first Louisville-born trainer to win the Kentucky Derby wouldn't allow Cox the same joy of victory as the Belmont, which the up-and-coming star will likely remember as his first true Triple Crown triumph.

And Cox saw this coming. He predicted last summer that Essential Quality would be his horse for the Belmont, and that proved true in beating a tough field of seven other horses.

It was something of re-

demption for Saez, who thought he had his first Triple Crown win finishing first in the 2019 Derby with Maximum Security. But Maximum Security was disqualified for impeding other horses.

There was no DQ this time. "Hot Rod Charlie ran a tremendous race and I thought (with) the hot pace we were in a good spot where they would come back," Cox said. "Luis did a fantastic job of getting him in position turning for home and he was able to really show his stamina late," Cox said.

Saez said Belmont was his "second home," adding, "This was the race I wanted to win."

United Arab Emirates ruler Sheik Mohammed bin Rashid Al Maktoum owns Essential Quality. Cox made it a point to mention him moments af-

ter the Belmont.

"Sheik Mohammed, he's been supporting us the last two years and this is a tremendous organization, world-class organization and we wouldn't be here obviously without this horse and his support, so I just wanted to really thank him," Cox said.

Sheik Mohammed faces scrutiny of human rights issues after a judge in England ruled that he orchestrated the abductions of two of his adult daughters.

The race was run without a horse trained by Baffert, who was banned by the New York Racing Association after Medina Spirit failed a post-Derby drug test for the presence of a steroid. Churchill Downs suspended Baffert for two years after an second sample from the Derby came back positive for betamethasone, which is prohibited at any level on race day in Kentucky, Maryland and New York.

Normalcy returned to the Belmont after a topsy-turvy 2020 that featured the race leading off the Triple Crown at a nontraditional 1 1/4-mile distance at an empty race-track. The race was back in its traditional spot as the third leg of the Triple Crown five weeks after the Derby and three after the Preakness, was back to its "test of the champion" distance and had thousands of mostly maskless fans roaming the vast grandstand at Belmont Park.

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Nell Redmond/AP

Car owner Rick Hendrick, right, congratulates Kyle Larson in victory lane after Larson won the NASCAR Cup Series race at Charlotte Motor Speedway in Concord, North Carolina, on May 30.

Hendrick train rolls into Sonoma seeking its 4th straight victory

BY JENNA FRYER

AP Auto Racing Writer

The Hendrick Motorsports train rolls into Sonoma Raceway on a three-race winning streak that pushed it past Petty Enterprises as NASCAR's win-nest organization.

Think the juggernaut will be stopped Sunday at NASCAR's first visit to California in nearly two years?

It's going to be tough.

Sure, Martin Truex Jr. is the two-time defending race winner dating to 2019, the final time before the pandemic that NASCAR stopped at the picturesque rolling road course in wine country. In the time since, though, reigning Cup champion Chase Elliott has become king of the road and the four Hendrick cars have hit a different dimension.

"I think we all look at them as being a really strong team and having really strong race cars consistently," Truex said. "I think across the board they've been strong, all their teams, all their drivers at different tracks have been strong and winning races."

Truex is the last non-Hendrick driver to win a race, nearly a month ago at Darlington Raceway. Since then it has been all Hendrick Motorsports, starting with an Alex Bowman-led 1-2-3-4 sweep at Dover. Elliott then got the win at Circuit of the Americas in Texas over teammate Kyle Larson when the race was called for rain, and Larson last Sunday beat Elliott at Charlotte to give Rick Hendrick his 269th Cup win — one more than Richard Petty-owned cars.

Out in wine country, Elliott will be seeking his first career victory at Sonoma. But six of his 12 career wins are on road courses, including five of the last six stops. Those six wins tie him for third on NASCAR's all-time road course win list with Bobby Allison, Richard Petty, Ricky Rudd and Rusty Wallace. Sonoma was not good to him in four previous visits, with a fourth-place finish in 2018 Elliott's best result. He led the first three laps of his career at Sonoma in 2019 but dropped out of the race 30 laps short of the finish with an engine issue.

"Sonoma is a place that I haven't done a very good job in the past," Elliott said. "It's been a pretty big challenge for me. It's been a couple of years since we've been there, so it's been a while. When we were there in 2019, I felt like we were doing

a great job and in a good position before we had our mechanical issue, so I'm looking forward to getting back and having another shot at it."

Around the carousel

NASCAR has raced at Sonoma 31 times since its inaugural 1989 event on two different configurations of the track.

The famous Carousel was eliminated in 1998 in favor of a chute that shortened the track to 1.949 miles, but Speedway Motorsports scrapped that after the 2018 race. Now the Carousel is back and the multi-elevational layout is 12 turns over 2.52 miles with several high-speed sections.

NASCAR used a higher downforce package when it raced Sonoma last in 2019, and it returns with lower downforce and no practice or qualifying because of pandemic precautions. The Carousel goes down from Turn 4 through Turns 5 and 6 before leading into the course's longest straightaway and the Turn 7 hairpin.

Truex went to the Toyota simulator earlier this week "just to kind of reacclimate myself to the track," but drivers aren't sure what to expect with this downforce package and the Carousel.

"I think it's just a really awkward corner, and it doesn't feel like a corner a race car should be going through," said Cole Custer, who has only run a K&N Pro Series West race on the configuration.

"It's really tight, really downhill, off camber. It's just a really tough corner, and it's something that you never go through there and feel like you did it right. It never feels natural, so it's one of those things you just kind of have to hit your marks and make sure you don't overdo it through there."

Odds and ends

Elliott is the 11-5 favorite to win Sunday, according to FanDuel Sportsbook. ... Truck Series regular Ben Rhodes will make his Cup Series debut driving for Spire Motorsports in the No. 77 Chevrolet. He won the truck race on the Daytona Road Course earlier this year and is the fifth different driver to pilot the No. 77 for Spire this season. ... There are five California natives in the field, including Cole Custer from Ladera Ranch and Tyler Reddick from Corning, both making their Sonoma debuts.

Mountain View

Continued from B1

The rhythm of the athletic year has been thrown off several beats by the COVID-19 pandemic. As the year reaches its final weeks, there is now a unique wrinkle — seniors out of school across the state who are still going to suit up for their high school team.

Keeping a team together while parts of the team are no longer in school is just adding to the growing new reality that competing and coaching the past 15 months has brought.

But for the players who have put in the time and bought into the culture the team has been building, Mountain View coach Megan Dickerson does not see much changing in the final weeks of the season.

"It is a matter of checking in with them and making sure they are engaged when they are out of school but still have to come to practice," said Dickerson. "Their daily routine is off but they still have to show up and perform."

Having the seniors continue to play has been important for a program seeking its first postseason appearance since 2011.

Bowles and the senior class have been extensions of the coaching staff on the court and at practice, which helped lay a foundation for future seasons, Dickerson said.

"It is vital that they stick it out for our younger kids because they are such a help to them and have helped a young group grow very quickly in this very, very short season,"



Ryan Brennecke/The Bulletin

Mountain View High School's Liliana Overcash (24) drives to the basket to score during the first half against Redmond High School on Friday night in Redmond.

said Dickerson.

Mountain View is starting to see its efforts pay off. Seven games into the season, the Cougars have won five, including handing Ridgeview its first loss Thursday, beating the reigning Intermountain Conference champs 49-48 on their home court.

"They are embracing the culture and getting an under-

standing of what they need to do to be successful," said Overcash on the team's development. "That was a big win for us and I think it will help us moving forward."

There is still work to be done. With five games left on the regular season schedule, Mountain View sees its program rounding in form with five games left, four of which

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— Megan Dickerson, Mountain View girls hoops coach

are against rivals Summit and Bend High.

"This team has good chemistry," said Dickerson. "When we are shooting the three ball well and shooting free throws better than we ever have. Scoring is happening which is great, but we are still finding out what kind of defensive team we want to be."

Waiting has been common practice for high school athletes in the past year. Waiting a couple more weeks to finally feel done with high school only seems appropriate.

"It hasn't hit yet," said Overcash. "It is just weird because we have games, but maybe it will hit that we are finally done after the season."

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NFL

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Players are seeking those changes because they believe the quality of play in 2020 was as good as ever despite no in-person work last offseason because of the pandemic.

"I think teams have done a good job of working it out between coaches and players," agent Ron Slavin said.

Case in point, the Lions. They were among roughly two-thirds of NFL teams to issue statements through the union in April saying they planned to skip in-person work during formal offseason practices known as organized team activities.

By the time those dates arrived in late May, most players were attending. In other cities, the issue of staying away wasn't even a dominant part of virtual interviews with players

and reporters.

Campbell said he was talking to players about the offseason program before the coordinated effort by the union, and he wanted the conversation to be about the needs of players — and coaches.

"All I can say is this is the first step," Campbell said last month as offseason practices were starting. "These guys were willing to take the first step, and to me, that speaks volumes. So, this leadership and these players, they wanted to do this. They wanted to be here and they're here."

Sure, there are some big names staying away from offseason work at team facilities, Tampa Bay's Tom Brady and Aaron Rodgers of Green Bay among them. But some, like Rodgers and his showdown with the front office, are unrelated to issues of offseason requirements.

"I mean obviously we talked to some of the NFLPA reps just on what those meetings are about. But as far as these guys and this locker room, didn't really have much conversations about guys not showing up."

— Dak Prescott, Dallas Cowboys quarterback

Contracts are also playing a role in whether players show up. The union didn't ask members to stay away if they had workout bonuses, or provisions for reduced pay if they don't show up in the offseason, known as de-escalators.

Dallas tight end Dalton Schultz, the team's player representative, said at least 20 veterans on his team have contracts with compensation tied to off-season work with the Cowboys.

"I think a lot of guys were in that mindset anyway of, 'I'm going in to save the money that's in my contract,'" Schultz said. "It started there and once

we realized there's going to be a lot of guys there, I don't think there was any hesitation about going in, at least from a personal perspective. If there's going to be 20 guys, it's like, 'I'm going to be there too.'"

Something else was at work as well.

Quarterback Dak Prescott missed the rest of the 2020 season after his horrific ankle injury in Week 5. He's gearing up for a return after signing a \$160 million, four-year contract, and the Cowboys believed the virtual-only offseason was a huge issue that sidetracked coach Mike McCarthy's first season.

"Believe it or not there wasn't many conversations about not showing up," Prescott said. "Coming from me and coming from the guys and a lot of leaders, I mean obviously we talked to some of the NFLPA reps just on what those meetings are about. But as far as these guys and this locker room, didn't really have much conversations about guys not showing up."

Washington was among a few teams that shortened the schedule for voluntary workouts and moved up minicamp. There were plenty of teams that didn't use all available practice dates, and some that said the schedule was flexible.

Indianapolis made a dramatic change, scrapping minicamp after two weeks of light, voluntary works followed by a two-month break before training camp. The traditional amount of time off is about six weeks.

"We're all pros and I think the coaches, they put the trust in you to during offseason to put the work in, whether it's at the facility or not," New England running back James White said. "It's up to you to put the work in and make sure you're prepared. Taking care of your body. So I think that's what's most important."

Like most teams, the two-time defending AFC champion Kansas City Chiefs planned no changes to their minicamp schedule, and the biggest name among them participated in earlier offseason work.

"I think the biggest thing is you get to experiment a little bit more," quarterback Patrick Mahomes said. "I know they're voluntary, but we're able to experiment and not go extremely hard and still get some good work in, get the guys together and build that chemistry, be a part of the team."