

Lunch time

Pinhook score Humble And Hungry tackles turf stakes for Sagamore Farm

BY KATIE BO WILLIAMS

Brandon Rice and Alexandra de Meric stood outside of the first stall in Barn 17 and caught up with the horse that put them on the map. Humble And Hungry, who runs in today's Grade II Hall Of Fame, dove eyeball deep into his bedding and paid minimal attention to his visitors: he's big-time now.

"Good boy, son," Rice said, leaning against the frame. "You remember me?"

Two years ago, Rice and de Meric bought the son of Limehouse for \$7,000 at Fasig-Tipton October, spent the winter coaxing along the lot sum of their combined worth, and watched Bob Feld put his hand up for Sagamore Farm – to the tune of \$200,000 at OBS April. Rice was 26 and de Meric was 24.

At the time Humble And Hungry was going through his prep work, de Meric was finishing school and Rice was running the Overbrook barn at Scanlon Training Center and dreaming of autonomy.

"The Overbrook job was swamping me," Rice said. "It was a highly demanding job with a lot of information flowing, so it was nice to have your own two horses at the end of the shedrow. It was like therapy: These are mine. I get to take care of them the way I want."

HALL OF FAME STAKES PREVIEW

Named after the internal motto of Under Armor, whose founder Kevin Plank owns Sagamore Farm in Maryland, Humble And Hungry has lived up to his moniker. The bay colt opened his career with a couple of close-but-no maiden tries at Laurel before breaking through in his first start on the turf at Belmont. Trainer Ignacio Correas sent the colt to the Breeders' Cup Juvenile Turf at Churchill, where he finished just 3 lengths adrift, albeit in eighth place. The colt has finished no worse than third in three starts this year, including the Grade III Hill Prince most recently, where he was third to today's rival Street Game.

Humble And Hungry and Street Game are two of seven 3-year-olds entered in the \$150,000 stakes at 1 1/16 miles on the inner turf. The feature goes as the seventh race today.

"When they run on and be successful, it's the most rewarding thing," de Meric said. "It's like, 'I did something right. They learned something when they were with me.' When you see them doing stuff like weav-



Connie Bush

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Humble And Hungry comes off back-to-back stakes placings.



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Stakes —

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ing in and out of traffic, you're going, 'Yes. Good job. Go, don't be scared.' ”

Rice and de Meric, who now rent a section of Rice's father Bryan's Woodside Ranch in Ocala, Fla., didn't make it to the Breeders' Cup to watch their charge. They were too immersed in duties at home.

“We knew that we would take this money, get re-invested, try to find the next Humble And Hungry and present him at sale,” Rice said. “For a debut consignment, he was more horse than anybody could ask for. He trained like a freight train. We had our brand-new shirts, brand-new hats, business cards and here we are with a star horse. It was awesome.”

Humble And Hungry still looks like a star — well-muscled and gleaming, systematically eating his bedding while de Meric worried over the status of his hay net. Old habits die hard. It may be the off-season for Rice and de Meric, but the status of their operation is never far from the mind of either.

“Last year we had three client horses and six of our own,” Rice said. “We had to hold down jobs to support that. It's almost nice to be the small tidy, dozen head so that we can ride them, feed them, develop your system how exactly you want things done.”

Humble And Hungry pulled his nose out of his bedding, a few flakes dropping from his lips. de Meric picked the whisks off the Sagamore stall guard and called him a baby face.

“That's what we called him all season, little baby face,” Rice said. “He had this little head and this ginormous body. He was such a chilled out, easy keeper, we had him in a barn full of 11 fillies and we were kind of worried about it, we got this one colt sitting there and, no problem at all. He liked the little girlfriends that were surrounding him.”

Jose Lezcano will take the reins of the 5-1 shot, who adds blinkers for the first time today.

If Correias enters a horse that was a star from the beginning, Chad Brown enters a colt that caught him by surprise — no mean feat considering the trainer is currently hitting at 22 percent on the turf. Big Blue Kitten, a Ramsey Farm homebred, has started five times and found the winner's circle after four.

Brown, who thought the horse showed “average” ability in the mornings, started the colt in the maiden claiming ranks at Gulfstream and has duly moved him through his conditions as the son of Kitten's Joy continued to string together wins.

“He's gotten a lot better as we've started running him,” Brown said. “He really has the will to win. He's gradually stepped up in competition and every time I'm curious to see what he does, and he keeps winning. I think he deserves a shot at the stake. He really tries hard, that horse.”

Accordingly, the 3-year-old is the 4-1 second choice on the morning line. John Velazquez gets the call and the pair will break from the 6-hole.

Flying Zee Stable and Phil Serpe

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Benergy exits a disappointing try in the Virginia Derby.

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enter Humble And Hungry's old rival Street Game, a son of Street Cry. The chestnut colt strung together three victories at Belmont this summer. The streak started with a 10-length score in a maiden in May and culminated in a 7-length tally in the Hill Prince.

"He ran a couple of times down in Florida, we added blinkers and after that he won three races in a row, including his stakes win down at Belmont," Serpe said. "We saw the talent in the horse for sure. We didn't realize that he was going to win his first stakes race so easily."

The front-runner enters the race on the back of a disappointing fifth last out in the Virginia Derby.

"He was in a speed duel with another horse and I think that took its toll," Serpe said. "No horse in that race had ever gone a mile and a quarter before and that was certainly the question of the day, who was going to go a mile and a quarter. I think between the distance and the horse getting used up on the front end took its toll later in the race."

Serpe, who planned the mating for Nustar Breeding, enlists Ryan Curatolo to ride the 8-5 favorite.

Zayat Stables' Benergy also enters the Hall Of Fame on the back of a Virginia Derby start. The Dale Romans trainee was second to Banned in the Grade III Jefferson Cup June 18, but could do no better than ninth at Colonial Downs.

"He never really seemed to be into the race and I don't know what the reason was, we can't make much excuse," Romans said. "That's why we're going to go ahead and try him again against top horses. Hopefully we'll just throw that race out and go on."

The gray colt started his career with an all-weather start for Bob Baffert in California before making the pilgrimage east. Two more failed dirt starts and Romans started thinking turf for the light-on-his-feet colt.

"He trained really well and we thought he should be running better than he was," Romans said.

The Gainesway-bred immediately broke his maiden going a mile at Churchill. Then the Jefferson — further validation — then the Virginia Derby.

Kent Desormeaux, who piloted Benergy to his maiden win, will take the reins once more.

Other entries include Graham Motion's Virginia Derby seventh Crimson China, winner of the \$70,000 Lamplighter May 28 at Monmouth for Team Valor. Neil Howard enters the Jefferson Cup third Perregaux. The son of Distorted Humor opened his career in a pair of maidens here last year, a respective third and a fourth, but caught a lot of eyes for being green but talented. The Courtland Farm homebred has won twice since. Bill Mott sends over Rustler Hustler, winner of the \$80,000 Gnome's Gold in October of last year. Paul Pompa's Ecton Park 3-year-old has gone through the stables of a variety of trainers and makes his second start for Mott.

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