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WILD SHOT AIMS FOR WIN IN INDIANA DERBY AT INDIANA GRAND RACING & CASINO

Story By Jennie Rees, Eclipse Award-winning freelance writer



Photo by Coady Photography

SHELBYVILLE, Ind. (Friday, July 14, 2017) — Wild Shot is no wild shot in Saturday's \$500,000 Indiana Derby at Indiana Grand. Never mind his seventh-place finish in his last start, when he lost Belmont Park's Grade 2 Woody Stephens by 16 lengths.

Trainer Rusty Arnold is not predicting that Calumet Farm's son of Trappe Shot will win the 23rd running of Indiana's richest Thoroughbred horse race. But he thinks Wild Shot has an outstanding chance if he replicates his four-length victory in the Grade 3 Pat Day Mile on the Kentucky Derby undercard. Wild Shot went off at 8-1 that day, the same as his morning-line odds for the Indiana Derby.

"He's got a lot of talent," the Keeneland-based Arnold said by phone. "We're not sure of his distance limitations yet. His two races as a 2-year-old that maybe made you think he didn't want a distance, heck, he got beat by the champion 2-year-old (Classic Empire) in Breeders' Futurity and then McCracken beat him at Churchill. He beat everybody but them."

Wild Shot started his 3-year-old career in Tampa, "and I'm not sure he liked Tampa," Arnold said of the surface. "He didn't show his speed down there. He came out there and was a little bit flat. I know we'd been trying to get him to relax and stretch out, and maybe it was our mistake. Then the Blue Grass was just a disaster."

But even at Tampa, Wild Shot finished fourth in the Grade 3 Sam Davis won by McCracken and third in the Grade 2 Tampa Bay Derby won by eventual Belmont Stakes winner Tapwrit. Keeneland's Toyota Blue Grass, in which the plan was to go to the lead and make everyone catch him, didn't work out, as he didn't have the lead very long.

However, the Blue Grass, downgraded this year from Grade 1 to 2, has proven a key prep. Indiana Derby favorite Irap became the first maiden to win the stakes in prevailing at 31-1 odds. But runner-up Practical Joke was impressive in taking Belmont's Dwyer recently; third-place McCracken won Churchill Downs' Matt Winn and Tapwrit, a terrible fifth in the Blue Grass, of course captured the Belmont Stakes after finishing a respectable sixth in the Derby.

"We don't know what happened," Arnold said of Wild Shot's seventh-place Blue Grass finish. "He came out of that race so good; his work was so good. And his Pat Day Mile race was fabulous. We went to Belmont, and he didn't pick his feet up. I'm not telling you he was going to beat Bob Baffert's horse (American Anthem), but he didn't run his race. He came back good again, had a couple of works that were really good and this race was the right timing. It's a mile and a sixteenth, and I'm pretty sure we can get him to go that far. Wish it would rain, because I do think wet track helps him quite a bit."

In that regard, Arnold's misfortune is the crowd's gain: The forecast calls for spectacular weather, with a high of 81 degrees.

"We haven't ducked anybody. His races have mostly been good," Arnold said. "I'm looking for a good race out of him.... It's not like he has to have it his own way. He's laid off horses in the past. I don't really have an exact answer on why he didn't show up a couple of times."

Arnold has great respect for 8-5 Indiana Derby winner Irap, who even though winless before the Blue Grass had run big races in California, including finishing second in the Grade 1 Los Alamitos Futurity to the super-impressive Mastery, who might have been the Kentucky Derby favorite if not injured.

"If you didn't know Irap was a maiden — obviously he was a very good maiden," you wouldn't be surprised at his Blue Grass victory," Arnold said. "Tapwrit didn't show up that day, like my horse. He didn't run at all. Then he wins the Belmont."

Arnold loves Wild Shot's post: No. 3, with Irap just to his inside. Those two horses figure to establish the pace. Corey Lanerie, aboard for Wild Shot's past three races as well as his second in the Grade 2 Kentucky Jockey Club last fall, has the mount.

Arnold is high on his other two stakes horses running Saturday night: Awestruck in the \$200,000, Grade 3 Indiana Oaks and Improv in the \$100,000 Mari Hulman George.

In her third attempt, Awestruck, a \$525,000 Keeneland yearling purchase by owner G. Watts Humphrey, won by seven lengths at Keeneland on her third attempt, then was a respectable fourth in a Churchill Downs allowance race. She's not only a daughter of super-stallion Tapit, but her female family includes Evil Elaine, the mom of 1997 Horse of the Year Favorite Trick.

"I love this filly," he said of Awestruck, who is 8-1 in the morning line. "She's had little bitty issues coming and going. Didn't get the race I wanted at Churchill, but I think I know why. She's trained really, really good since then. I think she's a live horse."

Improv was second by a neck at 28-1 in Churchill Downs' Grade 3 Arlington Matron. She's another beautifully bred filly owned by Humphrey, this one a homebred who was sired by Distorted Humor and out of the mare One Caroline, whom Arnold considers the best filly he's ever trained, though with her career was compromised by injury. The 5-year-old Improv is seeking her first stakes victory, which with the graded-placing earned in her last start would greatly enhance her value, given her pedigree.

"We've liked this filly from Day One," Arnold said. "She's huge. Just about 17 hands, and it's hurt her career. Thanks to Mr. Humphrey — not many people would do it — but she's back as a 5-year-old and it's really paid off. We think she's going to have a big year."

The 15th season of Thoroughbred and Quarter Horse racing continues through Saturday, Oct. 28. Racing is conducted Tuesday, Wednesday and Friday at 2:05 p.m. EST with Saturday racing beginning at 6:05 p.m. EST. Thursday racing will be held July 6 – Aug. 24 at 2:05 p.m. EST.

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