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Dominguez dominates Belmont meet

By Bill Finley
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The biggest star, the biggest story, in New York racing this year has not been a horse but a jockey. In what may be the toughest riding colony in the world, Ramon Dominguez hasn't just won a lot of races or set records. He has shown on a daily basis that he has no equal.

"People were saying, 'Oh, he's not as good as everybody thinks,'" said NYRA racing analyst Andy Serling. "Those of us who watched him at Aqueduct knew he was actually better than everyone thought. He came to Belmont and dominated. I don't remember even Jerry Bailey dominating a meet here the way Ramon has."

Dominguez put an exclamation point at the end of the sentence Friday when he rode his 93rd winner of the meet. That broke a modern day record at Belmont for the spring meet, previously held by Hall of Famer Angel Cordero Jr., who had 92 winners at the spring 1982 meet.

Prior to the current meet, Dominguez, 32, had piled up a lot of New York winners but had done so mainly in the winter at Aqueduct. Just as the better jockeys were heading back from Florida, he shipped out to Delaware Park. That left him open to criticism that he had never proven himself against the best. It's a knock he will never hear again.

To put Dominguez's win total in perspective, consider this: he has more winners this meet than Hall of Famers Edgar Prado, Kent Desormeaux and future Hall of Famer John Velazquez combined. He's also more than 25 winners ahead of his closest pursuer in the standings -- a young gun named Rajiv Maragh.

"Coming into this meet, I was looking forward to a good meet, but I never envisioned I'd have this kind of meet," Dominguez said.

A native of Venezuela who rode his first U.S. winner in 1996, Dominguez has a lot of Jerry Bailey in him. Bailey probably wasn't the most gifted rider in the room during his heyday, but he was always the smartest and the most prepared. He would almost never make a mistake or get caught napping. His horses always got good trips, and he had an uncanny knack for saving ground while his rivals would take the overland route on the turns.

That's one of the reasons why Bailey won so many turf races. Dominguez is at his very best on the grass, where, at Belmont, he had won 41 races through July 24. His winning percentage is 27 percent on the grass, races that are typically harder to win because they draw big fields. On the dirt, he is winning at a 24 percent clip.

Saratoga will be tougher. A number of top riders come in from the Midwest and jockeys like



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Jockey Ramon Dominguez broke the record for winning rides at the Belmont Park spring meet.

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Velazquez and Prado ride more often because there are so many big races. Last year at Saratoga, Dominguez won 27 races, but was well behind meet leader Alan Garcia, who had 39 wins. The main problem for Dominguez was that he was viewed as an outsider by many trainers because he came in to town from Delaware and not Belmont. That won't be a problem this year.

"The one thing I can say about Saratoga is that I feel good about the momentum I've built up," Dominguez said. "I've been able to ride for pretty much everybody (at Belmont) and I feel like I can count on pretty much everyone's support at Saratoga. That should be a big asset."

Barring an injury, Dominguez will win the Saratoga riding title. The only question may be whether or not he will break John Velazquez's record for most wins at the meet, which is 65, set in 2004. It will be tough, but not impossible. For the hottest jockey in America, right now nothing is out of reach.

Upstart stable's owners aim high

The opening day card at Saratoga will feature the first New York starter from Thoroughbred Legends Racing Stable. The stable will send out first time starter Wildcat Nation, who is trained by Wayne Lukas, in the day's seventh race. The stable isn't exactly shy about its goal, which is, according to its website, "developing America's largest, most successful Thoroughbred racing stable." The stable has divided its horses up among Lukas, Bob Baffert and Nick Zito because the three have proven to be the best in the game when it comes to developing Kentucky Derby contenders.

Launched by Olin Gentry and Thomas Gaines, Legends has spent lavishly at the sales and supplied its trio of trainers with an impressive collection of 2-year-old talent. It has started just one horse so far, a filly named Rapport who finished up the track in her debut at Churchill.

Will Legends live up to the hype? Stay tuned.

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Two months ago Rene Douglas walked into the jockeys' room at Arlington Park, a full day of riding ahead. Hours later he was the victim of the most



Some trainers may have considered jockey Ramon Dominguez an outsider. Some racing experts may have called him overrated. Dominguez squashed



Preakness-winning filly Rachel Alexandra will face males again in her next start, in the \$1 million Haskell Invitational at Monmouth Park on



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