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09/25/2010 6:04PM

Morning Line battles back in Pennsylvania Derby

By David Grening

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Alyssa Spakowski/EQUI-PHOTO
Morning Line (right) fights back to beat First Dude (left) and A Little Warm (center) by a neck in the Grade 2 Pennsylvania Derby.

BENSALEM, Pa. – After a spring and summer of agonizing defeats in major races for 3-year-olds, trainer Nick Zito finally got to taste the thrill of victory in Saturday's \$1 million Pennsylvania Derby at Parx Racing.

Passed by A Little Warm at the quarter pole and still a neck behind at the sixteenth pole, Morning Line - making his stakes debut - battled back along the rail under John Velazquez to win the Grade 2 Pennsylvania Derby by a neck. First Dude, another who has endured his share of heartaches in major races, got up for second by a nose over A Little Warm.

It was eight lengths back to Exhi in fourth. He was followed by Afleet Again and Severe Weather. Friend or Foe scratched.

The win in the Pennsylvania Derby - the third for Zito since 2005 - came after a spring in which Zito finished second in the Kentucky Derby with Ice Box, third in the Preakness with Jackson Bend, and second in the Belmont Stakes with Fly Down. Most recently, Fly Down lost a nose decision to Afleet Express in the Travers.

"It's just gratifying," Zito said in the winner's circle. "I'm human . . . You got to be content, I tried to be content, but when you're in a sport and you're competitive, it hurts. But I'm extremely blessed this year to be in every single big 3-year-old race. . . . I'm very, very gratified to win the Pennsylvania Derby for a third time."

Zito, who won the race in 2005 with Sun King and 2008 with Anak Nakal, tied Woody Stephens for the most wins by a trainer in this race.

The win not only was huge for Zito, it was the biggest win to date for Thoroughbred Legends Stable, which spent more than \$15 million at the 2008 yearling sales but had little to show for it. Morning Line, a son of Tiznow, cost \$700,000 at the 2008 Keeneland September yearling sale.

"It means we got a really nice horse," said Olin Gentry, president of Legends. "It sort of validates what Nick's been thinking all along; he thought he was a top horse from Day 1, so we're really excited."

Bothered by shins at 2, Morning Line had a win and second from four starts this year, including an 11-length victory in a first-level allowance at Saratoga. That race was the impetus for Zito to put him in the Pennsylvania Derby.

Under Velazquez, Morning Line went to the front and maintained a length lead over First Dude through fractions of 23.47 seconds, 47.29, and 1:10.84. A Little Warm, under Garret Gomez, made a three-wide bid around the turn and put a neck in front at the quarter pole.

A Little Warm maintained a neck advantage until inside the sixteenth pole, when Morning Line battled back and put his neck in front in the final 50 yards. Morning Line covered the 1 1/8 miles in 1:47.85 and returned \$9.60 to win.

Velazquez said Morning Line was moving fine until the quarter pole when for some reason he began to slow down, perhaps from the shadow of the grandstand.

"The other horses came to him, put almost a neck in front, and I said 'Oh man, I don't know if I'm going to come back now,'" Velazquez said. "I got after him, he kept digging, he found a little bit more, and he put in a good

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fight. It was impressive. Not a lot of horses can come back and do that."

Zito said Morning Line showed the same grit his father Tiznow did winning the 2000 Breeders' Cup Classic at Churchill Downs by a neck and the 2001 Breeders' Cup at Belmont by a nose.

Zito said he would consider Morning Line for the Classic this year at Churchill Downs on Nov. 6.

A Little Warm, who only joined the field at the last minute, looked like a winner in the stretch but couldn't finish the job. Trainer Tony Dutrow didn't think the loss was a result of not being pointed to this race.

"I don't think so," Dutrow said. "Did we make the wrong decision? Well, I don't know, we didn't win the race. There was opportunity here; it was a million bucks, short field, we were competitive. Our horse ran great again today."

First Dude, who backed up to third at the quarter pole, re-rallied to get second. He has now finished second or third in the Preakness, Belmont, Haskell, Travers, and Pennsylvania Derby.

Turf Amazon: Rose Catherine heads Pletcher 1-2

Rose Catherine remained perfect in turf sprints, winning a three-way speed duel early and then holding off stablemate West Ocean late to win the \$200,000 Turf Amazon by 1 3/4 lengths.

It was the fourth consecutive victory for Rose Catherine and her sixth victory in as many tries sprinting on the turf. It was her first win at five furlongs, the distance of this year's Breeders' Cup Turf Sprint at Churchill Downs on Nov. 6. Owner Paul Pompa Jr. and trainer Todd Pletcher will have to contemplate whether or not to run a 3-year-old filly against the boys.

"I don't know if they'll need too much convincing," assistant trainer Jonathan Thomas said.

In the Turf Amazon, Rose Catherine, under Javier Castellano, broke a step slow but soon joined Ashton Girl and Lady Rizzi through an opening quarter in 22.97 seconds. Rose Catherine cut the corner beautifully turning for home and easily held off West Ocean, who got second by 2 1/4 lengths over Canadian Ballet, last year's Turf Amazon winner.

Rose Catherine, a daughter of Speightstown, covered the five furlongs over firm turf in 57.46 seconds and returned \$3.20.

"She took a stutter-step a little bit out of the gate, but after the first jump she put me in a good spot right away and she got to the lead nice and easy," Castellano said. "She enjoyed the track today, she galloped easy on the lead, she enjoyed the trip, and when I asked her, she took off very well."

Overall, Rose Catherine has won 6 of 11 starts.

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