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Big Lew, little brother and one more

Catching up: Stakes races first, plenty of them; other races next, even more of them -- the weekend's replays go round and round, mesmerizing and stupefying, until Big Lew turns into the stretch at Hollywood Park.


"Holy Moly, who's that?" Rewind, replay. Rewind again, replay again. "Holy Moly" again. Big Lew becomes more impressive with each viewing. And it's easy to see how he got his name, which is actually Alicindor. That's the kind of name that could become embarrassingly ironic, or -- well, it could invite some brazen metaphors.

Lew Alcindor, the dominating center who changed his name to Kareem Abdul-Jabbar and became a six-time MVP in the NBA, stood 7 ft.-2 in. And like his remarkable namesake, this Alcindor isn't just huge; he can move, too, gracefully and quickly.

Rewind yet again and replay one more time: Alcindor, aka Big Lew, leaves the gate running from post position No. 1; without encouragement he stalks the rapid pace (44.15 seconds for the opening half-mile) set by Cee's Pryme, who quickly retreats when he gets an eyeful of the big guy. Alcindor easily moves to the lead in the turn. Nextdoorneighbor, who's highly regarded, tries to rally, but Alcindor spurts away, slam dunk, to win by more than seven lengths, completing the seven furlongs in 1:21.67 despite being taken in hand in the final yards. Holy Moly.

Some perspective: On Sunday, when Alcindor won for the second time in as many starts, the Hollywood surface was typically fast and rather kind to early speed. Still, in the context of the day's races, Alcindor's performance stands out as exceptional. Four races earlier, Rummysecret War, who's a mid-level but very useful older claimer,

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also won at seven furlongs, stopping the teletimer at 1:22.88, or about six lengths slower than Alicindor's clocking. But what sparkles in retrospect about the 3-year-old's performance is that 44.15 split. The second-fastest half-mile split on the main track that day was 45.92, turned in by the very capable Derrick Do. Alcindor ran about eight lengths faster for a half-mile, and he continued running. Not many horses could have done that, only a good one, in fact, or a potentially good one, for Alcindor really hasn't accomplished anything yet. But he's a jaw-dropping mover, the sort who flows over the ground and who looks like he'll go on and who seems tractable: So just let the imagination drive down the road, let it picture Alcindor strolling along on an easy lead in 48 for the opening half-mile, or picture him stalking Twirling Candy, say, who's zipping headlong through a 47 half, and imagine how strongly he'll finish and how far he'll run after such pedestrian fractions, and there you have the image of a monster of a horse who could roar in the coming months.

Some history: A \$1.15 million yearling, Alcindor is a full-brother to Half Ours (Unbridled's Song out of Zing), who won the first five races of his career, including two stakes, before finishing second (to Wanderin Boy, but ahead of Student Council and Perfect Drift) in the 2007 Alysheba Stakes over 1 1/16 miles at Churchill. In his final start before injury forced his retirement, Half Ours finished seventh in the Metropolitan Handicap.

Rewinds, replays -- they leave an impression, lead to a conclusion. What the first viewing suggested becomes increasingly obvious, and it's hard not to think that this is just the first chapter in what could be a tall tale, that this Alcindor, aka Big Lew, could become a big-time racehorse, especially in a thin handicap division, and that, given his grace, he could be even better on the real stuff than he is on synthetics. So where's the phone, where's the Santa Anita sage?

"He's such a big horse we've been taking our time with him," says his trainer, Bob Baffert, explaining why Alcindor has raced only twice. "He's a big grand-looking horse. He's big, long and fast. He's exciting. He looks like he has a lot of star power."

If all goes well, Alcindor will make his next start, Baffert says, in the Malibu, on opening day, Dec. 26, at Santa Anita. That says plenty. The Hall of Fame trainer thinks so highly of Big Lew that he'll put the colt in the Malibu, against Twirling Candy et al, in only his third start. The sage says it'll be a great race. And that says plenty, too.

More replays. On Churchill's "Stars of the Future" program, two of the potentially brightest stars didn't run in the day's stakes races. Just look at this Brethren, for example, this half-brother to Kentucky Derby winner Super Saver. Brethren doesn't just flash his potential; he sends up a flare. He had shown such speed in his debut at Belmont -- a half in 45.53, three-quarters in 1:08.88 -- but here, after instinctively jumping to the front, he accepts the priorities of his rider. Brethren allows himself to be taken in hand -- well, allows

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it after a moment of, what is that, drifting doubt.

Rewind, replay. He looks like a winner almost every step of the way, too, or at least every step after drifting out awkwardly at the break from his No. 12 post position. A few lengths off the leaders, he settles into a high cruising speed while dragging jockey Garrett Gomez towards the leaders, and the handsome colt seems to be moving easily as he approaches the most important moment -- and, make no mistake, this is the most important moment of this race if it's really about the future, for this is where the Kentucky Derby is usually won, right here, with a move around this turn -- "Make your move at the track kitchen," D. Wayne Lukas often tells riders, referring to the backside kitchen that overlooks the three-and-a-half marker (7/16-of-a-mile pole) -- because if a horse waits much longer, waits until the quarter pole, relying on the long stretch, then he has waited too long. And in this crucial moment, despite running four-to-five wide, Brethren continues to advance and then powers to the lead, running the third quarter-mile in 24.77 seconds. A horse who can run the turn like that could be, just maybe, especially given the accomplishments of his big brother, a Derby contender, and then Brethren confirms it, winning by nearly two lengths over a strong field, completing the mile in 1:36.78.

One more replay, one more horse to watch and to keep watching. In the final race Saturday at Churchill, Tapizar, a son of Tapit, stalks, moves, romps and wins by 10 1/2 lengths. Rewind, replay. He looks like a Mississippi River sort of a horse; he just keeps rolling. He runs the first quarter in 24.10 seconds and the fourth quarter in 24.82. Most important, he runs the 1 1/16 miles in 1:44.19.

Some perspective: A race earlier, Santiva won the Kentucky Jockey Club Stakes in 1:45.31. And a few races prior to that, Kathmanblu won the Golden Rod in 1:44.48.

Yes, from this day at Churchill and from this perspective, the potentially brightest stars of the future to emerge are Brethren and Tapizar. And so they join Big Lew, a supernova of potential, as horses to watch. And watch some more, and keep watching.

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