

## The Circumstances behind Circumstance

By

Bill “The Book” Richardson

I have been sitting here going through several pages of scrap material from my articles on conditioning. Yes, for everything I write there is a lot of scrap material. Sure, you might be of the opinion that I have been scrapping the wrong half, but maybe that means that I have some really good stuff on tap for later on.

Anyway, I was perusing this information when I came across a reference to the now famous horse, Smarty Jones. With all of the glorification going on about winning, I have decided to bring the subject of circumstance to the forefront, and Smarty Jones is a great example of this type of hype.

Mauricio Jemal and I have turned Smarty into something of a hobby. You see, Mauricio loves a winner, and so do I when it truly is a winner. However, he loves to support winners in the making, but, in my cynical outlook, a winner isn't a winner until it has proven that it is a winner. I guess I should be living in Missouri so I could say, “Show me!”

### **Detour**

To get to Smarty, we are going to have to take one of my infamous circuitous routes that will somehow lead us to the famous basketball player, Michael Jordan. In Michael's first three or four seasons, he showed all the potential in the world, but there were no championships to show for it. He had everything necessary to be a winner; he just wasn't a winner. Instead, he was just another high-scoring one-man show on a bad team. True, as one-man shows go, he did produce as many wins as anyone with the exception of maybe Wilt Chamberlain, but when we skip to the bottom line, they were both just super-scoring machines. There have been many great players who have reached this level but never gone on to win.

However, in the second half of Michael's career, the team obtained more talent, and, while he was still the star of the team, he adjusted his game from a scorer to a better all-around player, a leader, and a winner. In so doing, he proved that he was a winner and that he had been a victim of circumstance in earlier seasons.

Just as there are circumstances that can keep an athlete from winning, there are circumstances that can make him a winner when he shouldn't be. The best example of this in a sports figure is probably going to be Kobe Bryant of the Los Angeles Lakers. He is clearly a Michael-Jordan-type talent, and even though he has been involved in three championships, he had the help of maybe the greatest center ever (Shaquille O'Neal). However, that duo is now broken up so we will see if Kobe is another Michael Jordan or just another scoring machine. I will lay my money on the second.

### **Return to Smarty**

There are far more winners built around circumstance than around true success, and we can't be too quick to guess which one we are currently looking at. Let's take Smarty Jones as a case in point. Mauricio loved him from the start, but I didn't like his small size. At the Kentucky Derby he ran on a very sloppy track which in my mind favors lighter horses. Conditions were almost identical at the Preakness as well. By the time the Belmont rolled around, he was sitting on two wins and looked like a horse that could possibly win the Triple Crown. Was this circumstantial?

In my discussions with Mauricio, he strongly favored Smarty for the Belmont, but as I wrote to him, "This is a totally different race. It goes on within the horse and has little to do with its competition, and the race itself is far less likely to be swayed by circumstances." The horse must be in condition; from there, it either has the distance or it doesn't. A horse is not going to win the Belmont on heart alone!

As I mentioned in my last article, neither pigeons nor horses have any real idea of the length of the race when they are standing at the starting line, so they tend to do what they do best. If that is sprint, then they sprint; if that is pace, then they pace.

### **Centering and Range**

Like pigeons, the horse centers its best effort around its best distance, and that is what makes the Triple Crown so special. Centering is based on the horse's (or pigeon's) best distance, and range is the distance that a horse (or pigeon) can win on either side of that center point. Shorter-distance horses have more opportunity to be in position to win the Triple Crown simply because they have the best opportunity to win the first two races. They are in their element and they should have an advantage. In the end, at the Belmont, their successes boil down to distance and heart.

Horses that can go the distance are often at a disadvantage in the short races, and the question for them is whether they can win at all. If there is a great mid-distance horse in the field, and he finishes mainly on heart, he will be in the running, whereas a distance horse may never get going. For a distance horse to win the Derby, he must have great range, heart, and a whole lot of luck. Much of this luck revolves around the quality of the competition. It is almost impossible for a distance horse to beat a sprinter of super quality if the sprinter is in condition.

Trust me, as in pigeon racing or any other sport, there is always gamesmanship going on. In billiards, they call it playing a safety. If I don't have a horse that is going to win the Crown, and I think you do, I am going to enter a horse that best counters your chances. The horse that eventually won the Belmont was owned by a stable that had always placed very high at Belmont. In general, this stable has a far better chance to play the spoiler simply because they have horses that can compete on the distance races. They are no real threat to the Derby, but they are a real threat at the mile and a half.

To win the Triple Crown, you have to win the Derby, Preakness, and Belmont. Winning one race takes the right horse for the right distance and condition. Winning the Triple Crown takes a horse with superior quality that is generally centered around the distance of the Preakness. This horse must also have Derby range on the low end and Belmont range on the high end.

By definition, sprint horses usually run under a mile-and-a-quarter, so they learn early to never hold back. Ordinarily, their owners would never risk breaking them at a distance that they are not comfortable with, because once broken they will never be the same horse. Distance horses are harder to break, but, at the same time, it is also tougher to get a great performance out of them. Of the two, sprint horses are generally the more motivated. However, because of the money involved, both come together at the Triple Crown, and, in my opinion, the jewel of that crown is the Belmont.

The idea behind the Triple Crown is that one horse reigns supreme at all distances; for this to happen, three things must occur. First, a horse must prove itself dominant at the short distance; second, that horse must have enough distance to make the Belmont; and third, there is no dominant distance horse in the Belmont field. A fourth event that can affect the race is crossover. When competing in an event where different distances are involved, someone is always coming on when someone else is dropping off. "Being in contention" at the Triple Crown means that you have won the first two races. The crossover point will generally occur at the mile-and-a-quarter of the Belmont when the sprint horses are faltering and the distance horses are coming on. Sometimes the distance horses don't have to "come on"; they just have to keep pace, but the result will be the same.

In the Triple Crown, what makes a horse great is the range he has from his own center point. If that range encompasses all three races of the Triple Crown, then he has a real chance of winning. If his range encompasses two of the races, and he has heart, he still will have a good chance, but it will be more dependent on circumstance and who is competing against him.

### **Pigeons, Centering, and Range**

Most pigeons can win under the right circumstances, but for the most part they still have their best distance or center point. Pigeons have center points that change over time. As a young bird, a pigeon's center point will be very close to 100 miles less than it will be when the pigeon is old. In other words, maturity and strength will give the pigeon an extra 100 miles as an old bird that it didn't have as a young bird. The second factor in the equation is the range of the pigeon. The range of a young bird is different than that of an old bird. Young birds have a range of 50 miles on either side of the center point; old birds have a range of 100 miles.

To illustrate this, let's say that a young bird has a center point of 300 miles. Based on this formula, he has a range of 250 to 350 miles. This same pigeon as an old bird will have a center point of 400 miles and a range of 300 to 500 miles. When I was twelve years old, my teacher told me to center my breeding at 400 miles because then I could

control the majority of races on any course. Being me, I had to ask, “Well, what about the 600?” He responded, “One good pair of super distance pigeons will keep you in that one race.”

There are always circumstantial exceptions. For instance, my HOF hen not only won the 400, 500, and 600 all in the same season, but she was also an equal first at the 125. However, I caught my competition flatfooted in the first week, and took the first eight or so places, so, as you can see, the group was out front and she happened to be part of the group. This is a circumstance that makes her true range appear greater than it really was. She was a pure 400- through 600-mile pigeon.

Going the other way, I had the hen that won the 300, 400, and 500. Before her young bird season, I placed her center point at 250. You might be asking yourself if there is anything that this guy doesn't look at? Well, this exercise happens to be very important to me, because it has a lot to do with planning which birds are shipped to which races throughout the season. This particular hen happened to dominate the 200- to 300-mile races since she had five top-ten finishes in that range including a win at the 250.

As an old bird, her center point moved to 350 miles, with a range from 250 to 450 miles. As mentioned, she won the 300 and the 400 miles. She also won the 500-mile race, which falls outside that range. However, she won on a fast and easy day with cloud cover and she was with another pigeon. Given the speed, which was in the high 1300s, she really flew a 400 with the help of the other pigeon. Going back to my teacher's comments about centering on the 400-mile race, this hen was in the top ten nine times in ten races before she was two years old. Sure, she had to prove herself, but she also had more races within her range in which to compete.

### **Returning to Smarty Yet Again**

Going back to Smarty, it is my opinion that he would have had trouble on the Preakness if the race track had been dry. However, circumstances masked what might have been a far different story, and he appeared far stronger than he might actually have been. At the Belmont, he became a victim of the third possibility mentioned above. As a sprinter, he was clearly out of his range at the Belmont. As he was falling apart, the eventual winner, Birdstone, was maintaining a distance pace. (In my opinion, maintaining pace doesn't speak that highly of Birdstone either.)

Let me make several observations. First, in the last quarter mile, a gap opened up between the two horses. It is my opinion that Smarty was faltering and his competitor was remaining constant. This could have gone a number of ways. If Birdstone had been a great horse with great range, he would have opened the gap. (However, if this had been the case, he would have also shown up better in the first two races). If there had only been shorter distance horses within the field, we might have gotten the appearance of a real horse race and Smarty would have had a real chance to win the race, but then we would have been brought down to earth by the track times. As Mauricio later said, “When I went back and looked at the times, they just didn't hold up.” This shows that Birdstone only held pace. To be honest, I listened to Birdstone's trainer after the race,

and while he was happy to have won, I think he was far more pleased with what he kept from happening.

We couldn't really tell much from the times of the first two races, because the track was sloppy. In my opinion, enough luck came together at one time that a questionable horse in a number of questionable situations almost won something that hadn't been won in over 25 years! Pay attention to circumstance!

From the horse's point of view, he won the first race because he was within his range and possibly because of circumstances. He won the second race for about the same reasons. However, unfortunately for him, from the starting line, the third race looked the same as the first two races. He had no idea how far he was from the finish line, so he ran the first two races over again, and suddenly he was out of gas and still a quarter mile from the finish line. He wasn't beat by his competitor; he was beat by his own range. If the other horse had been gaining, I might be of the opinion that he lost to a better horse, but since he was leading at the mile and quarter, and the other horse only maintained, I must conclude that Smarty simply ran out of range.

You can have a pigeon that is in the right race and in top condition and still lose to a pigeon that is of better quality and is in the right race and in top condition. You can have a top quality pigeon that isn't in condition and lose in any race. You can lose with a well conditioned top quality pigeon on the wrong race. Therefore, the pigeon that is the best quality, the best condition, and is in the right race has the best chance to win. However, remember that he doesn't enter himself into the wrong race, you enter him!

What we tend to forget is that in the creation of every winner, there were circumstances involved that brought the winner to the forefront. At the same time, there was a set of circumstances that forced the other pigeons into the background.

I have several friends that live at the front end of the San Fernando Valley in Southern California. One of them lives on the side of a mountain overlooking the entrance to the valley. He says that on race day he often sees 300 pigeons hit the valley at once, yet, on the race sheet, there is only one winner. I guarantee you that whoever owns that winner will consider it for stock simply because it is a "winner," yet where do the other 299 fit in?

### **Greener Pastures**

Going back to Smarty Jones, we have a horse that won twice under what were possibly circumstantial conditions and that faltered at the distance. Is the cup half full or half empty? I say half empty because the first two were unusual and the third was a meltdown by Smarty because he was out of his range. Yet with all these questions, Smarty already has 48 million in stud fees! That is about one dollar for every blade of grass in his pasture. In fact, right after the race, the trainer said it was "an off day for Smarty and Smarty will get a chance to prove that it was an off day over at least the next year of racing."

After hearing this, I told Mauricio that while Smarty might run again (not likely in my opinion), it would never be at the mile and a half. Anyone with any sense could see that he was out of his range, and, for all the talk, the trainer was no exception. Then the stud fees started piling in and suddenly Smarty had this hoof problem. Just as suddenly Smarty was retired. He is small in stature with two wins under questionable conditions and a falter in his last race. I have to ask you, given the circumstances, would you want this horse to be the stud behind your breeding farm? Well, the chances are very good that most of you are basing your lofts around similar circumstances!

Until next time!

This article is copyrighted by Bill Richardson. Articles cannot be reproduced without the permission of the author.