

Fierro Article 5: Archive Link

The Second Rubaiyat By Robert D. Fierro

One day in the Fall of 1982 I was at Belmont Park where the Bette Karlinsky stable had entered two juvenile fillies in a maiden race for New York-breds. They were very high on one of them while the other was sent out to set the pace. That latter, named Behind the Groove, didn't have the speed and coming out of the turn clipped heels, almost went down but got up and kept going to finish the race. The other filly finished in the money. Ironically the two were entered again a few weeks later and the exact same thing happened but this time Behind the Groove got a few bumps and bruises and the partnership decided to retire her.

By then I'd come to admire this somewhat rangy but very plain daughter of the partnership's home stallion, Nehoc's Bullet (by Sword Dancer). She was produced by a daughter of Belmont Stakes winner Quadrangle which the stable had bred from a mare purchased in England named Red Harmony, who was by Epsom Derby winner Hard Ridden. I kept looking and found that Red Harmony's dam, Red Infiltration, was produced by a daughter of Solario named Red Sunset.

I stopped right there because while most pedigree pundits would have noted that Red Sunset went on to produce Crepuscule (by Mieux) who subsequently produced the Derby winner Crepello, I knew Red Sunset was also the dam of a fleet footed son of Derby winner Owen Tudor by name of Rasper II.

A foal of 1952, Rasper II was imported to New Jersey by Sally Bierer who absolutely loved him and was responsible for getting enough people to breed to him that he established a pretty significant regional sire line through Rambunctious in New Jersey, Rock Talk in Maryland and eventually Talc in New York, who was always among the state's leading sires.

I was crazy about this sire line and had written several articles about it and became friendly with Mrs. Bierer over the years as she was a sharp judge of horses as well as a hoot personality. I could not believe a mare from this family was under my nose so I concluded a two-year lease with Ray and Arthur and sent her to Blue Sky Farm where, as it happened, the partnership had just retired sire prospects Ray purchased on a trip to England. One of them, Ardaluan (Ire), a son of Prince Tenderfoot (Ire), actually raced in this country and I saw the race and was impressed so I booked a season to him. At the time I thought the other, Weth Nan, a son of Sir Gaylord's undefeated grey speedball Drone, though a Group 3 winner and unbeaten in three starts at two, had not raced here.

Then Nature intervened. Behind the Groove came up empty to Ardaluan and I did a pedigree match with her and Weth Nan and discovered that the resulting foal would have at least seven crosses pretty close-up of Lady Josephine through Mumtaz Mahal, Mumtaz Begum, Mah Mahal, Mah Irani and Sun Princess and immediately switch her to Weth Nan. The result was a gangly grey colt born a week or so before At the Threshold finished third in the Kentucky Derby. He was not pretty but he was spirited and I immediately tried to figure out what I was going to do with him—but he needed a name first.

Problem #1 was trying to figure out what Weth Nan meant. No one associated with the Karlinsky stable had a clue, except that I found out surreptitiously that his owner had been a businessman from Bahrain. I phoned the Bahrain embassy to the United Nations and asked for the librarian, and when I told her that I wanted to know if she understood what Weth Nan meant she immediately started to giggle. "Uh, oh," I thought, "this will be good." As it turned out it was good, very good indeed because she replied, "It means the hump on a camel's back." I started to giggle as well, and then realized it was a very clever name because the horse was very high in the withers.

And so was his son.

By then I'd decided to try my hand at putting together a little partnership to race him, but he needed a name first. I filled out The Jockey Club form with, IMHO, six very clever names beginning with Casablanca—all of which were rejected for the weirdest reasons. "Casablanca is the name of a movie," was the reason for the top choice being rejected, to which I replied, "It's a city in Morocco!" You don't want to know the rest.

In December I happened to be on Park Avenue in Manhattan where The Jockey Club headquarters was located at the time, so I schlepped up to the reception where I was greeted skeptically by the lady behind the desk. I told her I wanted to name a yearling and she deigned to give me a form with six spaces for names, which I filled out and she gave to the people in the back room.

All six were rejected, including Ozymandias, which I thought was quite cool.

They gave me another form just as the door opened and in walked the wife of a member of The Jockey Club whom I sort of recognized but the receptionist sealed by welcoming her by name. “You’re here to name your yearlings, correct?” she said far more pleasantly than she had asked me what I wanted. They chatted for a while, and she got a form and started to fill it out as I was writing more names down on mine. I got five of them down and then remembered that when I was a kid following racing I always fantasized that I would own a horse one day, a grey one, and that I would name him Omar Khayyam because, well, even though a horse by that name had won the Kentucky Derby in 1917, why not? So, I put it down in the sixth slot and handed it in.

Meanwhile the lady across the room looked up and asked me what I thought of a name she had selected for a filly of hers, and I thought it was extremely clever and told her so just as the lady from the back room came out and handed me my form with Omar Khayyam circled.

“What does that mean?” I asked her.

“You can have that name,” she replied.

Stunned I began to babble. “Yes, please, I’ll take it,” and she went back to add it to his foaling certificate as I wandered across the room to my new pal and showed the form to her.

“Is *that* the name they approved?” she asked. I nodded.

“Do you know who he was?”

I nodded. “He won the Derby in the 1900’s.”

She looked up with a wrinkled nose. “Are you going to take that name?”

This was someone who could squash it all, I imagined, but answered, “Yes, ma’am.”

She looked at me with a twinkle in her eye and proclaimed, “*Good for you!*”

(The Kentucky Derby winner was bred in England and Weatherby’s, their keeper of records, and The Jockey Club, had not yet organized a way to exchange names that should not be duplicated).

Six months later I invited a group of acquaintances including Charlie Hayward and a couple of his friends, and Leo Veitch to Blue Sky Farm to offer 10% shares in Omar Khayyam for \$500 each plus expenses. They all signed up even after Leo had declared, colloquially, that he needed more hip. Leo had been a steeplechase rider in his day and when all was done had him shipped to a farm in North Carolina where he trudged up and down the hills every day and, indeed, got that hip.

When he came up to Belmont Park in June the next year, Leo called and said he was going to work Omar the next day. He got him in “35 and change” in his first official breeze and turned to me and said, “That is my Belmont Stakes horse.”

It turned out Omar Khayyam was more a sprinter-miler, but he did finish fourth to Leo Castelli and Gone West in the Grade 2 Peter Pan and third as favorite in the Colin, ironically on the day of the Belmont Stakes, both races at nine furlongs. He may not have made it to the Belmont Stakes, of course, but he was named New York-Bred Champion Sprinter as a 3-year-old, won, or placed in 16 of 29 starts and earned a check in 24 of them. He tickled the fancy of lots of people and—though not in four-line stanzas—he wrote his own rubaiyat along the way.