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GRAHAM MOTION PROFILED BY STEVE HASKIN FOR *THE BLOOD-HORSE* “MAN IN MOTION” HIGHLIGHT OF TURF WRITER’S SUNDAY RACING BLOG

Kentucky Derby Trail: Man in Motion

by Steve Haskin



It takes great training skills, good fortune, and exceptional horses to propel a trainer up to the ranks of America’s elite. That rarified air is reserved for only a handful of horsemen. Graham Motion may not be up there with the likes of Pletcher, Baffert, Asmussen, Zito, and McLaughlin, but don’t be surprised if he reaches that plateau in the near future. We can’t think of any trainer whose stock is rising faster than the native of Cambridge, England.

The soft-spoken Motion has always had the stigma of “turf trainer” attached to him, with his biggest successes coming with Better Talk Now and Film Maker, who between them have a win, three seconds, and a third in the Breeders’ Cup Turf (gr. IT) and Filly & Mare Turf (gr. IT), respectively. But he made his mark on the dirt in 2009, winning the Whitney (gr. I) and Alysheba Stakes (gr. III) with Bullsbay, who also finished third in the Woodward (gr. I).

Synthetic tracks brought Motion on the Derby Trail in 2008 when the Lanes End Stakes (gr. II) with Adriano. He repeated this year, winning the same race, now called the Vinery Racing Spiral Stakes (gr. III), with Team Valor’s Animal Kingdom.

In addition to Animal Kingdom, Motion has Toby’s Corner (owned by Dianne Cotter), who won the Whirlaway Stakes on dirt and was third in the Gotham (gr. III), and the Team Valor-owned Crimson China, who finished a fast-closing second in the Rushaway Stakes and is scheduled to run in the Toyota Blue Grass Stakes (gr. I).

He also recently captured the grade II Mervyn Muniz Jr. Memorial Handicap at Fair Grounds for Augustin Stable, and we should see the son of Smart Strike on Derby Day in the Woodford Reserve Turf Classic (gr. IT).

Motion’s career received a major boost last fall when he took over all the Team Valor horses, including Animal Kingdom, Crimson China, and Breeders’ Cup Juvenile Turf (gr. IIT) winner Pluck. He also took over the training of one of the Kentucky Oaks (gr. I) favorites, Summer Soiree, after she was purchased recently by Team Valor. It is apparent owners are beginning to recognize Motion’s talents, not only with turf horses, but any kind of horse, and you can be sure more and more good ones will be heading his way.

We had a chance to visit with Motion at Fair Hill in 2009 and can’t recall seeing a better run operation and more people who loved what they were doing and happy to be where they were. No stress, no discord, just a tranquil atmosphere for both people and horses. Just watching the ageless Better Talk Now frolicking about in the round pen was worth the price of admission. And seeing Bullsbay walking down the picturesque horse paths that lead to and from the training track or through the woods gave one the feeling of being in Chantilly, and there is no greater place on Earth for horses than Chantilly.



Heather Craig has been working for Motion for nearly four years as a traveling assistant, taking all his best horses around the country. “Graham is the best boss I could ever have or want,” said Craig. “He’s so laid back, and the way he manages all his horses, everything always runs so smoothly. He is a great person to work for and a great horseman. Although we’ve had all these great opportunities that have been given to us recently, Graham still takes everything in stride. Everything is the same as it’s always been. Everyone gets treated equally. I can’t say enough times how wonderful it is to work for Graham. And he has so many knowledge horsemen working for him.”

Two of them are Adrian Rolls, who runs the Fair Hill barn and has been with Motion since they both worked for Jonathan Sheppard and then Bernie Bond, and Dave Rock, who is in charge at Palm Meadows and Keeneland and has been with Motion off and on from the beginning

“I met Graham at Cheltenham when he came over there to run Flatterer (in the 1987 Champion Hurdle) for Jonathan and we became friends,” Rolls said. “I came to America to work for Jonathan, and then we both went to work for Bernie Bond until Bernie died. Several of the owners wanted to leave the horses with Graham and that’s how he got started.

“Graham is very much like Jonathan. He’s a lot more hands-on than most trainers and he’s very conscientious and particular about everything that happens with the horses. He doesn’t leave too many stones unturned. He’s very alert. He just remembers everything about the horses. I don’t know how he does it. Guys like Graham and Jonathan think outside the box and I think it gives them an edge.”



Rock added, “Graham is very level headed and easy going. He doesn’t let anything get to him. Everybody thinks of him as a grass trainer, but he can train anything. He always does the right thing by the horse. He’ll never run one just for the sake of running.”

So, here is Motion on the Derby trail with three horses. Two still have to prove themselves on dirt and one still has to prove he’s fast enough and advanced enough to compete against the top horses. But all three are bred to run all day, and regardless of how they do in the Derby or whether they even make the Derby, they will be forces to reckon with when the distance stretch out. Crimson China actually was the more advanced of the two Team Valor horses and was supposed to be their starter in the \$500,000 Spiral Stakes, with Animal Kingdom heading to the Rushaway. But Animal Kingdom had slightly more earnings than his stablemate and made it into the field, while Crimson China was left out and had to take the low road and run in the non-graded Rushaway.

This actually may turn out to be the best thing for Crimson China, a horse we have been high on since he won an allowance race on grass at Gulfstream. Animal Kingdom, by running in the Spiral, now must go six weeks into the Derby, something that hasn't been accomplished since 1956, while having only four career starts. Crimson China, if he can pick up enough earnings in the Blue Grass, will go into the Derby off a more traditional three weeks. But as in the Spiral, he still has to get into the Blue Grass field.

Toby's Corner, meanwhile, will either take on Uncle Mo in the \$1 million Wood Memorial and attempt to pick up at least second-place money to qualify for the Derby, or head to the Illinois Derby, which would be much easier to win, but can on many occasions favor horses on or near the lead.



"It's pretty exciting stuff," Motion said. "We were never concerned about ability with Animal Kingdom. We just felt Crimson China might have been a little bit better prepared to step up at this time. Crimson China made up a lot of ground in the Rushaway. At the three-eighths pole I was concerned he wasn't going to get anything. Alan (Garcia) said he asked him down the backside just make sure had he had a lot of horse under him and he responded very well and made a nice run. I think both horses were taken out of their game to be honest. We had no intentions of being at the back with either one of them. It's just the way they broke and the way things set up.

"It was always our thought to run Crimson China in the Spiral because we knew he had more of a dirt pedigree behind him. Animal kingdom is a brilliant work horse, and has been working in company with Pluck all winter. He has really impressed me in the morning. Crimson China is a little more laid back, but I thought his race on the grass at Gulfstream was very impressive. I did breeze Crimson China once on the dirt right after he came here and after that I breezed him on the grass because we were planning on running him on the grass. But he seemed to handle the dirt fine.

Motion said of the decision he has to make regarding Toby's Corner, "Realistically, I'd like to run him in the Illinois Derby because I think that's a race he can win. And I have no desire to run against Uncle Mo. But if you consider the earnings, he would pick up more for finishing second in the Wood Memorial than he would if he won the Illinois Derby. That's what makes it more confusing. The Wood is a lot closer to home and it will be very tempting to run him there. Wherever I run him I'm going to put blinkers on to get him a little more focused. He's been galloping in blinkers and will work with them on Monday (April 4).

Animal Kingdom and Crimson China have been shipped to Keeneland and will remain there until close to the Derby. Animal Kingdom will breeze once at Keeneland, probably the weekend of the Blue Grass, and then will work twice at Churchill Downs. Motion may just van him over for the works and keep him and Crimson China at Keeneland, but he will play that by ear. If Toby's Corner runs in the Illinois Derby and runs well, he probably will ship to Keeneland. If he goes in the Wood, he likely will be sent back to Fair Hill.

It is an exciting time for the Motion team, as they see their world expanding. With three Kentucky Derby hopefuls and a leading Kentucky Oaks contender to go with their already plentiful supply of stakes horses, Motion is starting to get a good whiff of that rarified air.