

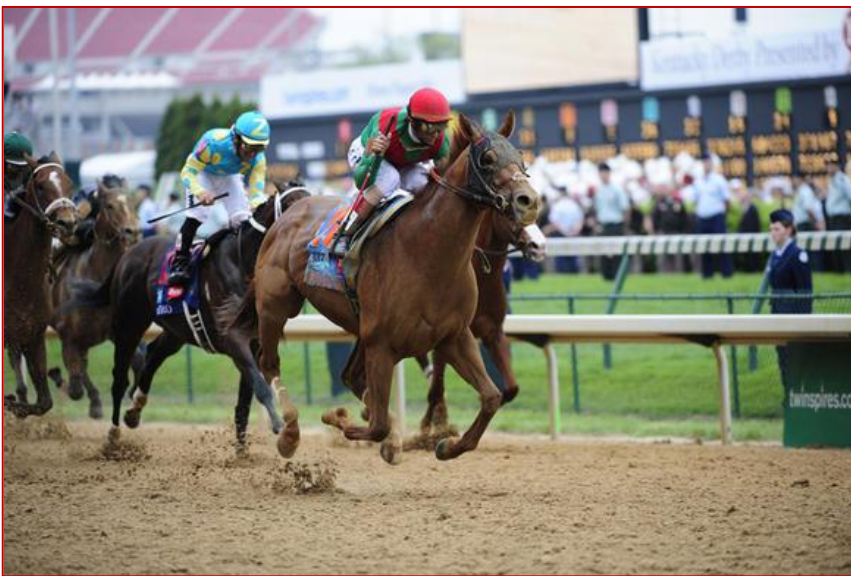
CHURCHILL EXEC, RESIDENT HISTORIAN SUPPORTS ANIMAL KINGDOM JOHN ASHER FEELS STRONGLY THAT TITLE BELONGS TO DERBY WINNER VETERAN OFFICIAL MAKES ELOQUENT CASE IN LOUISVILLE NEWSPAPER

From Louisville's weekly newspaper The Voice Tribune comes the following by Churchill Downs Vice President of Communications John Asher:

DESPITE LAYOFF, ANIMAL KINGDOM DESERVES ECLIPSE AWARD

The last two years of discussion regarding the Eclipse Awards that recognize the divisional champions of Thoroughbred racing have been miserable, venomous affairs because of overemotional debate surrounding the ultimate winner of Horse of the Year.

But 2011's championship debate is genteel because there are no dominant horses or clear front-runners.



Animal Kingdom made history as the first horse to win the Kentucky Derby in his first start on dirt.

That name is Animal Kingdom. Perhaps you've heard of him.

The surprise winner of the Kentucky Derby Presented by Yum! Brands was a meteor that streaked across the racing horizon in the first half of the year. He emerged with an emphatic win over Polytrack in the Lane's End Stakes at Turfway Park, then became America's most celebrated 3-year-old with stretch-running tour de force beneath the Twin Spires on Kentucky Derby Day.

No 3-year-old in America had a bigger performance in any stakes race involving members of the division, and it came on the biggest and brightest stage our sport can offer.

There is no arguing that his campaign was brief. He raced twice after the Derby and finished a fast-closing second to Shackleford, who was a well-beaten fourth in the Derby. His season ended in the Belmont Stakes, a race in which he suffered a season-ending injury in a rough break from the gate.

I like this year's more genteel discussion. All the past two years proved is that our society now believes we can talk to anyone and everyone like people who spend their lives on talk radio.

There is still much racing to be done, and let this serve as my annual reminder that two months of racing remain each year after the last race in the Breeders' Cup is run.

But I do have strong feelings on one potential champion, and his name should be familiar in a year that yielded no "household name" superstars.

Yes, Animal Kingdom had only two wins on the year. So did Caleb's Posse, who scored a pair of Grade I wins in the King's Bishop, where he beat the star-crossed Uncle Mo, and the Breeders' Cup Dirt Mile, where he whipped a solid field that included Shackleford and some accomplished older horses. And how about Stay Thirsty, who won the Jim Dandy and the Travers, the race known as the midsummer Derby?

Caleb's Posse is a wonderful horse – at one turn. He did run through the entire year, but was mostly invisible the first half of the year and was not a factor against top company at two turns.

You can make Stay Thirsty the top 3-year-old in New York, but not the nation. His three wins all came at New York tracks, but was never a factor in his two quality-check moments at Churchill Downs in the Kentucky Derby and Breeders' Cup Classic.

Shackleford? He had a wonderful year for trainer Dale Romans and provided the Louisville-born trainer with his first Triple Crown victory in the Preakness, but that was his only win of the year. He ran harder than any member of his class and almost always ran well, but he needed to win one or two more to earn serious Eclipse consideration.



It is an unusual year when the nation's top 3-year-old has only two wins on his résumé, but that's what we have in 2011. And when one of those wins is the Kentucky Derby, the vote should tip heavily in Animal Kingdom's direction.

The Derby is not like winning the King's Bishop, the Haskell Invitational, the Swaps, the Travers, Preakness or Belmont. All of those are wonderful races, but there is only one Kentucky Derby and Animal Kingdom won it on the square. He romped to an easy win in the biggest race on any level in the United States, a race that is on the short list of events in the discussion of greatest sports events in the world.

In this wide-open year, Animal Kingdom had a very solid – if unfortunately brief – campaign. No other horse assembled a body of work that could overcome a glance at the scoreboard.

Animal Kingdom won the Kentucky Derby.

Any other 3-year-old needed to win about three major races to get in the same discussion with him, given the Derby winner's victory in the Lane's End and his big run in the Preakness.

The voters will decide and I don't have a vote. But, for my money, you can start engraving that Eclipse Award that goes to the 3-year-old champion.