

## **AMERICA'S BEST RACING MARVELS AT ANIMAL KINGDOM'S COMEBACK STORY INCLUDES A SLIDESHOW OF PHOTOS FROM COLT'S ENTIRE CAREER**

From Mike Curry of *America's Best Racing* comes the following story with a photo slideshow that can be viewed [here](#):

### **Is Animal Kingdom Still Improving?**

Animal Kingdom was an elite racehorse in 2011 when he took home the Eclipse Award as champion 3-year-old male. Although "great" is an overused adjective in horse racing, it's safe to qualify Animal Kingdom's 2011 Kentucky Derby (G1)-winning performance with that moniker.

Unfortunately, since the 2011 Triple Crown races, racing fans and Animal Kingdom's connections have seen far too little of the Leroidesanimaux colt on the racetrack. His runner-up finish in the Breeders' Cup Mile (G1) served as a reminder of what we've been missing.

In the 2011 Kentucky Derby, Animal Kingdom overwhelmed 18 of the finest 3-year-olds of his class to win by 2  $\frac{3}{4}$  lengths in his first career start on a dirt track.

The Team Valor International homebred has not won a stakes race since the Kentucky Derby, largely because he has twice been sidelined for at least eight months with injuries, yet crazy as it might sound Animal Kingdom might be even better now than when he streaked past the finish line under the Twin Spires in the Derby. Much better, in fact.



In his first race in 8  $\frac{1}{2}$  months, Animal Kingdom's Breeders' Cup Mile runner-up finish to leading Horse of the Year candidate Wise Dan was impressive both visually and by the numbers.

It was easy to see how fast Animal Kingdom was finishing in the Mile once he found running room in the stretch. Blocked at the eighth pole, he accelerated explosively late in the Mile to finish 1  $\frac{1}{2}$  lengths behind the winner. He posted a new 21-point career-top Equibase Speed Figure with a 126. Three times previously, including the Derby, he posted 105 Equibase figures.

"I think he is very athletic and I think the Mile really showed that," trainer Graham Motion said. "We often label the Derby winners as plodders, and he ain't no plodder."

No, he is not. According to Trakus data he owned the fastest final quarter-mile and final eighth of a mile in the 2012 Breeders' Cup Mile. That's no small feat in a race that was historically fast, establishing a new Breeders' Cup record time for the Mile as well as a turf course record for one mile at Santa Anita Park with a smoking final time of 1:31.78.

“It was definitely very gratifying that he ran such a good race,” Motion said. “But I guess, ultimately, I wasn’t as surprised as some people were because I wouldn’t have [run him in the Mile] if I didn’t think he was capable of that. I always thought he would be competitive, and I certainly was thrilled with the way he ran, but there’s always that slight bit of thinking what might have been if he had a better trip.



*Wise Dan had the Breeders’ Cup Mile wrapped up by the time Animal Kingdom found running room in deep stretch.*

“Selfishly, I wanted to see him come back and race at that level because I wanted him to prove to people that it wasn’t a fluke that he won the Derby and that he really was the horse that we built him up to be. I felt that very strongly, and it was great to have the opportunity to prove that to people, even though he didn’t win. He certainly caught a lot of people’s attention and they realized that he’s a very serious horse and the Derby wasn’t just a flash in the pan. That’s the horse I’ve always thought he was, but I’m sure there were skeptics since he was on the shelf for so long.”

Motion appreciates how lucky he is to even have Animal Kingdom in his barn at Fair Hill Training Center in Cecil County, Maryland. After he finished a game second in the 2011 Preakness Stakes (G1), Animal Kingdom was bumped hard at the start of the Belmont Stakes (G1), nearly unseating his rider. He came out of the race with a slab fracture to his left hind leg.

Animal Kingdom returned with a brilliant win on the turf at Gulfstream on February 18, only to subsequently develop a hairline fracture in the pelvis that again sent him to the sidelines and forced him to miss a planned start in the Dubai World Cup (UAE-G1).

Motion said, referring to Team Valor Chief Executive Officer Barry Irwin. “I mean, within hours of him getting injured last spring, and we realized he couldn’t make the Dubai World Cup, Barry said, ‘Well, let’s go for the Dubai World Cup in 2013.’ That’s extraordinarily optimistic, and I am very lucky to be a part of that.”

**“How lucky am I that I have an owner that wants to keep him in training. I don’t think that happens very often, that’s for sure.”**

**—Graham Motion**

Now the quest for Motion and Irwin will be to get Animal Kingdom to Dubai for the this year’s World Cup and a chance to add another signature win to his resume. Team Valor said he will next target the \$300,000 Gulfstream Park Turf Handicap (G1) on Feb. 9, a grass prep race for the World Cup, which is held on a synthetic surface.



Animal Kingdom's final Derby prep, the Spiral Stakes, also came on a synthetic surface. The switch back to grass/synthetics is, in fact, one reason why Motion thinks the best could be yet to come for Animal Kingdom. He's from a German family that has produced multiple high-class turf runners, including his dam (mother) Dalicia, a group stakes winner on grass.

Animal Kingdom also has two wins and a second from three starts on synthetic surfaces and one win and two seconds from three races on grass.

"I think he's really bred to be a grass horse, so it's not that much of a surprise that he would be even superior on the grass," Motion said. "It made me laugh a little bit [that] people leading up to the [Breeders' Cup Mile] were saying he hadn't even proven anything on the grass. To me, he won the Derby despite that fact that the race was on the dirt. I think that's just a measure of how good he is. I think it is possible that he's even better now."



Maturity, physically and especially mentally, is another reason Motion thinks Animal Kingdom could be a better horse now that he was when he won the Derby.

*Animal Kingdom will race on a synthetic surface in the Dubai World Cup for the first time since his victory on Polytrack in the Spiral Stakes at Turfway Park.*

"I think he's matured; he's a stronger horse," Motion said. "He is an exceptionally large, very imposing but very athletic horse. And I think mentally, he's just really grown up."

"The thing that impressed me so much about the Breeders' Cup was: here's a horse who hadn't run since February, we shipped him all the way across the country and he walked around the paddock like an old steeplechase horse. He's just got that remarkable disposition, just handling things so well, and I think that's a big part of what makes him so great."

The beauty of Animal Kingdom from a trainer's perspective is that Motion never knows when he'll do something that will leave him amazed. A perfect example is when Motion was watching one of his final preps for the Breeders' Cup Mile at Fair Hill Training Center with friend Joe Clancy and Animal Kingdom charged up the three-quarters of a mile inclined steeplechase course in a dazzling time.

"He's certainly done things that I've never seen horses do before, in the morning," Motion said. "It's a great thing to have him there, and it's great to remember what you did with him, but it's even better to have him back on the track."

"There was nothing more frustrating than to have him cooped up for so much of the year with injuries. That was what was as exciting to me as anything was just to have him back in action. Forget the fact that it was the Breeders' Cup, but to just have him back racing was so exciting."