

**ANIMAL KINGDOM'S COMEBACK PROGRESS MONITORED AT FAIR HILL  
WRITER JOE CLANCY CHRONICLES MID-ATLANTIC TRAINING REGIMEN  
*STEEPLECHASE TIMES* COVERS TRAINER GRAHAM MOTION'S DERBY HERO**

***Outside Rail***

**ANIMAL KINGDOM PROGRESSING TOWARD RETURN**

By Joe Clancy



***Animal Kingdom breezes in company with Meistersinger on the main dirt track at Fair Hill last week, as the Kentucky Derby winner readies for a comeback race in November. Photo taken by Maggie Kimmit.***

“Twelve and two . . . twelve and two . . . twelve even . . .” Graham Motion called the splits into his walkie-talkie as two horses worked a half-mile on the dirt at Fair Hill Training Center Wednesday morning. The sky was blue and high, the breeze was cool and even, the air crisp and clean. And the work was perfect. Last year’s Kentucky Derby winner Animal Kingdom continued his progression toward a return to the races with a breeze in company with Meistersinger – getting a half-mile in 48 seconds and officially galloping out 5 furlongs in 1:01 2/5.

The Team Valor International homebred looked smooth and controlled. He could have gone faster, but didn’t need to. Motion called the work part of a plan without aiming for a specific race, though the goal looms.

“He’s going to be ready to run by November . . . and there are some big races in November,” Motion said with a smile while walking from the track Wednesday. “I just want to see, there’s been no pressure at all, we have no agenda.”

The return from a hairline fracture near his pelvis is nothing like the return from an injury to his hock after the Belmont Stakes in 2011. That injury required surgery, stall rest a longer break from training. The return also targeted a specific goal, this spring’s Dubai World Cup, half a world away. Idle since the Belmont in June, Animal Kingdom needed a race to finalize his fitness and set up the trip to take on the world’s best in Dubai. He got his race, a powerful turf win at Gulfstream Park in February. He shrugged off an eight-month layoff with a 2-length win. He came out of that race and was putting the finishing touches for Dubai when the injury to his ilium (the largest bone of the pelvis) was diagnosed. The determination did not mean surgery, and helped Motion and Team Valor’s Barry Irwin plan a return. Animal Kingdom was able to leave his stall, graze, walk, keep moving. He missed three months of training and has been back in morning action since June, all at Motion’s base at Fair Hill. He’s been working steadily, stepping up the distances from 3 furlongs to a half-mile to Wednesday’s 5 furlongs.

Without the Dubai race looming, Motion can concentrate on getting his horse fit without relocating to Florida, without worrying (too much) about the weather, without thinking (again too much) about the competition. Where to run him can wait, though any racing fan can figure out November's key dates – the Breeders' Cup chief among them.



“We had to get a race into him to go to Dubai, this time it’s a different deal,” Motion said. “He’s going to come back in a nice race, whatever that may be. I’m not going to go looking for a nice, easy overnight spot as long as he’s doing well and if he’s not doing well we won’t be running anyway. We have every option under the sun.”

The son of Leroidesanimaux has won on dirt, turf and synthetic so Motion’s right about that assessment, and the trainer has all three surfaces to work with at Fair Hill – with a potential turf work at the Fair Hill steeplechase course (no jumps) on Animal Kingdom’s schedule.

*Graham Motion is training Animal Kingdom with no set game plan in place, although he says the horse should be ready to race early in November.*

The Kentucky-bred is already taking full advantage of all Fair Hill has to offer with a daily turnout session before training. Animal Kingdom spends an hour in a large paddock every morning – soaking up the sun, breezes and atmosphere. He’s got a nice view of Route 273 (feel free to wave), the deer, the early sets heading to and from the tracks.

“At this time of year it’s just the best, he’s so much more relaxed when he can do that,” said Motion. “I always wanted to do it with him before, but I was afraid to bite the bullet and the schedule just didn’t work out. He hasn’t gotten difficult, he’s mellowed if anything. He’s got such an amazing attitude, he takes everything so much in stride, he hasn’t got a care in the world. That’s got to be half the reason he’s as good as he is. It’s a huge asset to have.”

Wednesday, he strolled easily to the track with a big set from the Team Valor barn and another group from Motion’s main barn. The chestnut jogged halfway around the wrong way, galloped once around (while eyeing the humans on the outside rail) and put in his work. Outside of Meistersinger, Animal Kingdom took big strides through the stretch – reaching and pushing without getting any encouragement. Afterward, it was more of the same – an easy walk back with his workmate (also on the comeback trail) with a brief pause for Motion to remove tongue ties and pat his charges on the neck. Both horses puffed big breaths, looked like they did some work. But they were fresh, bright, fit.

“He’s toned up fairly quickly,” Motion said. “The biggest thing is getting him fit enough to do more. He’s always heavy and I don’t want to do too much too soon. That’s my biggest worry because he will do that. I feel like he’ll be able to step up and do a little more now. There’s a fine line between getting something out of it and overdoing it.”

Animal Kingdom has run eight times, with four wins, three seconds and two pauses for injuries. Like all Thoroughbreds, all athletes really, he balances ability and reality.

“He’s just a big powerful horse and he is so fast. It’s a tough combination. He’s as athletic as a smaller horse. When you look at Better Talk Now, who was so agile and a completely different type of horse. There’s a reason he stayed sound until he was 10. This horse is built more like a linebacker than a cross-country runner where Better Talk Now was more like the cross-country runner.”