

Spanish Mission heads European trifecta in Saturday's inaugural Jockey Club Derby Invitational

by Brian Bohl, NYRA.com



Adam Coglianese / NYRA Photo

Team Valor International and Earle Mack's **Spanish Mission** dueled with 38-1 longshot Pedro Cara in deep stretch and gained supremacy in the final jumps to win the inaugural running of Saturday's \$1 million Jockey Club Derby Invitational, the final jewel of the Turf Trinity for sophomores, at Belmont Park.

Spanish Mission, a group stakes winner in England, won his North American debut for trainer David Simcock, garnering an automatic entry to the Breeders' Cup Longines Turf in November at Santa Anita Park while concluding the final leg of the New York Racing Association's newly implemented Turf Triple series.

A Thread of Blue, who won the Turf Trinity's second leg in the Saratoga Derby Invitational last month, broke on top and led the nine-horse field through the opening quarter-mile in 25.23 seconds and the half in 50.77 on the Widener turf course labeled good.

Jockey Jamie Spencer rated Spanish Mission, who was last on the backstretch before being tipped out wide out of the final turn. Entering the stretch, A Thread of Blue maintained the advantage to the inside before the French-bred Pedro Cara, under jockey Tony Piccone, overtook him from the outside. Spanish Mission, under a drive, continued to make up ground from the far outside, and the two linked up for a thrilling stretch drive before he edged his fellow European shipper by a nose, completing 1 ½ miles in 2:27.58.

Spanish Mission, the 2-1 favorite, returned \$6.20 on a \$2 win wager. The Noble Mission colt went 2-1-2 in his first six starts in England, including a victory in the Group 3 Bahrain in July at Newcastle.

“He’s a good horse. I think he’ll get better with age,” said Barry Irwin, founder of co-winning owner Team Valor. “When I bought him, the plan was to leave him in Europe this year and then bring him to America next year. Halfway through the season, I realized this is strictly a European horse and I told my guys, ‘He’s never coming home, but I’ll bring him for this race.’”

“We’re looking at the Melbourne Cup [in the future] with this horse. Earle [Mack, co-owner] would rather win that race than anything, and I’d like to win it as well.”

Added Spencer: “He didn’t break that well but I wasn’t too concerned. I was happy he was relaxed and found his rhythm coming along the backside.

“Going into the final turn he was giving me all he had. *I dropped my right rein* and even though I was using the crop, when you drop your reins in a race, it typically signals to the horse that the race is over. I would’ve been mad with myself had we lost but he got back on his game and finished strong. He was a very game horse today.”

Simcock won his sixth North American graded stakes and first on U.S. soil since I’m A Dreamer won the 2012 Grade 1 Beverly D. at Arlington. In the process, Spanish Mission more than tripled his career bankroll to \$710,246.

“As the race developed, it was just beautiful to watch,” said Ian Russell, assistant to Simcock. “The further he went, the better he got into it and he just gets his head down. Jamie dropped his rein, but the horse stayed on and

kept to his job. He knows his job and the further he goes, the better he's going to be. He's a lovely horse for the future.”

Pedro Cara, a Mauricio Delcher trainee who entered off back-to-back wins in Spain and his native country, respectively, finished 3 ½ lengths clear of the Irish-bred San Huberto for second as part of a European trifecta.

“We had a very good race, but just couldn’t get there at the end. It’s disappointing not to win, but a good effort,” said Pedro Cara jockey Tony Piccone.

Completing the order of finish was A Thread of Blue, followed by Henley’s Joy, the winner of the opening Turf Trinity leg in the Grade 1 Belmont Derby, Current, Kadar, Digital Age and Tone Broke.

Live racing will resume Sunday with a 9-race card that features the \$100,000 Allied Forces for 3-year-olds in Race 8. First post is set for 1 p.m. Eastern.