

CERRO PREVAILS BY A HEAD IN PIMLICO'S CANONERO II S. SATURDAY HOMETOWN WIN FOR PARTNERS MICHAEL PHELPS AND BOB BOWMAN SOPHOMORE COLT ALSO POSTS RICK METTEE'S 1ST WIN AS TVI'S TRAINER

Cerro nailed down a popular and determined victory in the Listed Canonero II Stakes at Pimlico on Saturday, prevailing by a head as the 3 to 5 favorite for Rick Mettee's first win as Team Valor's private trainer. Mettee, a Maryland native, grew up attending the races at the Baltimore track.

Cerro also delivered a hometown win for 18-time Olympic champion Michael Phelps and his former coach, Bob Bowman, members of the Team Valor partnership that owns the 3-year-old Irish-bred colt. Ironically, Mettee and Phelps both went to Towson High School.



Cerro battles back to get up in the final strides in the Canonero II. Jim McCue/MJC photo

The son of Mr. Greeley was at various times considered for all 3 legs of the Triple Crown, but Team Valor pulled back after he finished fourth in the Grade 3 Lexington Stakes at Keeneland on April 20. He turned for home in front that day but lost focus in the stretch, gawking at the grandstand and even trying to take a bite out of the eventual winner. Instead of pushing him into the Belmont Stakes, Team Valor opted for the 9-furlong Canonero II for the delicate balance of adding blinkers on a horse who naturally runs on or close to the lead.

Jockey Alan Garcia traveled in from Louisville for the mount and had his hands full, as the saddle slipped early while Cerro jumped out to the lead in a field of 5 on a balmy day in Baltimore, with temperatures in the low 90s. Cerro set a reasonable pace as Garcia kept him away from the inside after noticing a dead rail. He told Mettee in the paddock that "No one will beat me up the inside."

Dynamic Strike sure tested that resolve, shooting through to engage Cerro going into the far turn, and the two colts dueled through the last 3 furlongs. Dynamic Strike took a narrow lead in deep stretch but Cerro and Garcia battled back to get up in the final strides. The top 2 finishers hit the wire 12 $\frac{3}{4}$ lengths clear of the third-place horse and 20 lengths clear of fourth.

"It is nice to get off to a great start. Stakes wins are hard to come by," said Mettee, who now has a win and 2 seconds from 3 starters for Team Valor. "Things are going well. Fair Hill is a wonderful place to train."

Interviewed in the winner's circle for the simulcast feed, Mettee admitted he almost dropped the phone when Barry Irwin offered him the Team Valor job in early April.

“I was out in California and it was early there, I had just woken up, and I wasn’t expecting to hear that,” said Mettee, who previously oversaw the U.S. roster for the Godolphin Racing stable of Dubai Ruler Sheikh Mohammed bin Rashid al Maktoum. “I did train for Barry a little bit years ago and apparently didn’t burn any bridges.”

Cerro won a 9-furlong allowance race at Gulfstream Park this winter for trainer Graham Motion in his first start after Phelps and Bowman joined the partnership. An Irish-bred, Cerro began his career with a debut win in Italy and was purchased privately by Team Valor last summer and imported to the U.S. He has 3 wins in 8 career starts and has earned \$109,125.

Cerro is the fourth stakes winner of the nine 3-year-old colts on the Team Valor roster, joining Rushaway Stakes winner Crop Report, French Group 3 winner Triple Threat and Irish Group 2 winner First Cornerstone, who runs tomorrow in the Group 1 Prix du Jockey Club (French Derby) at Chantilly.

From Pimlico comes the following:

Cerro Nips Dynamic Strike In Canonero II

Odds-on favorite Cerro (IRE) led to the far turn, allowed Dynamic Strike to move to his inside and battled that one the rest of the way to win the \$75,000 Canonero II Stakes for 3-year olds at Pimlico Race Course Saturday afternoon.

Cerro, who is owned by Team Valor International, is trained by Rick Mettee and was ridden Alan Garcia. The ownership partnership includes Olympic swimming legend Michael Phelps, a Baltimore native, his longtime coach Bob Bowman and former VISA USA chief executive Carl Pascarella.

Cerro won by a nose, with Dynamic Strike finishing second. The winner covered the 1-1/8th distance in 1:51.81 and paid \$3.20. Dreaming of Jazz was a distant third, 12-3/4 lengths behind the first two.

“We knew on paper this was a closer race than what the odds said,” Mettee said. “We knew it was going to be a tough race and he got the head bob. I think those first two are pretty solid horses.”

“He ran very well,” said Forest Boyce, who was aboard Dynamic Strike. “He runs better when he is in striking distance. I had to move early because the other horse was getting his own way early on. I am very proud of the effort and he is just going to get better and better.”

Cerro is now three-for-eight lifetime and improved his career earnings to \$109,125. After breaking his maiden in Italy last summer, the son of Mr. Greeley raced at Gulfstream Park and Keeneland earlier this year under the tutelage of Graham Motion and posted a sixth place finish behind Kentucky Derby winner Orb in the Fountain of Youth (G2) and a fourth place finish in the Lexington Stakes (G3).

This was the first official win as a trainer since 2001 for Mettee, who like Phelps is a Towson High School graduate. Mettee, who spent many years running Godolphin's U.S. division for the Dubai royal family, began his new job at the Fair Hill Training Center on May 1.



Rick Mettee interviewed by Gabby Gaudet after the Canonero II. Mike Gathagan/MJC photo