



## U. S. S. Valor Sails to Easy Champagne Victory

*Despite the win, Breeders' Cup Juvenile (G1) is no guarantee for War of Will colt.*

By Sean Collins X | Saturday, 4:57 PM

Expectations were high for Team Valor International's **U. S. S. Valor** off a 13 1/4-length maiden victory Sept. 5 at Saratoga Race Course, and they paid off immensely Oct. 3 as he became a Grade 1 winner with an impressive performance in the \$500,000 Champagne Stakes (G1) at Belmont Park.

In the process, the 2-year-old colt popped the champagne for 2019 Preakness Stakes (G1) winner and Rockridge Stud stallion War of Will, who picked up his first Grade 1 winner as a sire.

A veteran of the New York circuit, it had surprisingly been a long time since Shug McGaughey had won the Champagne. His last triumph came with Adjudicating in 1989, completing three wins in a four-year span for the Hall of Famer that also included Easy Goer's triumph in 1988. In the winner's circle, the 75-year-old was grateful to be back with a star juvenile.

"It's pretty exciting. It's been a while," McGaughey told FOX Sports' Megan Burgess. "You get a 2-year-old that looks like he's as talented as this, it sure gives you a lot of hope going down the line. The Champagne has always been a special race for me, and I'm excited for myself and my people, too, they've been really good. We'll see where he takes us."

In his victory, U. S. S. Valor showed an ability to overcome adversity as he broke slowly from the gate with Manny Franco aboard. Longshot **Johnny Hockey** and **Gaudreau**, who defeated U. S. S. Valor in their debuts Aug. 8 at Saratoga, set the pace early with **Club Reign** in pursuit. Franco got U. S. S. Valor into contention and racing behind the leaders in the tight six-horse pack behind fractions of :23.19 and :46.08.

As they entered the stretch, U. S. S. Valor came out and bumped with **Earth Song**, creating an opening to the outside of Gaudreau and Club Reign. From there, the deal was done as he cruised alongside those two and shot away to victory, drawing off to win by 6 1/2 lengths while completing a mile in 1:34.84 on a fast track. Gaudreau held second and Club Reign was third.

"He was kind of on the bridle since the start, so I was trying to get him to relax and teach him something today," Franco told Burgess. "He's got a long way, good future ahead of him, and every race is different. I'm glad that he listened to me. I just put him behind horses, and he was there for me every step of the way. I was just happy the way he was going."



Manny Franco celebrates a Champagne Stakes win with U. S. S. Valor

That future is of top concern as connections appear to have one of the leading 2-year-olds. For his victory, U. S. S. Valor gained two important designations: an automatic, fees-paid berth to the \$2 million Breeders' Cup Juvenile (G1) at Keeneland through the Breeders' Cup Challenge Series: Win and You're In, and 10 qualifying points for the 2027 Kentucky Derby (G1), with second through fifth receiving points on a 5-3-2-1 scale.

However, the Derby is the main goal for Team Valor's Barry Irwin, who expressed apprehension in the winner's circle of going on to the Oct. 30 Breeders' Cup. Since the Breeders' Cup began in 1984, only Street Sense (2006-07) and Nyquist (2015-16) have gone on to win the Derby after

taking the Juvenile. Team Valor previously won the Derby in 2011 with Animal Kingdom.

"I've never had a horse anywhere near this one, and I've had some good ones," Irwin said. "I do (have apprehension), because of the history of it. I want to win the Derby again, and the Breeders' Cup is not going to help me win the Derby."

McGaughey said he will leave the decision up to Team Valor, but if he were to skip the Breeders' Cup, U. S. S. Valor would likely target the 1 1/8-mile Remsen Stakes (G2) Dec. 5 at Belmont Park.

U. S. S. Valor is a homebred for Team Valor out of the winning Tiz Wonderful mare Spangled Banner. At the time of the breeding, War of Will, a grade 1 winner on both dirt and turf, stood at Claiborne Farm. He moved to Rockridge Stud near Hudson, N.Y., for the 2026 season and stood for a \$5,000 fee.

With his victory, U. S. S. Valor now has a record of 2-0-1 from three starts for earnings of \$352,050.

*Bob Ehalt contributed to this report.*