

U. S. S. Valor makes statement with impressive Champagne victory

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U. S. S. Valor takes a 6 1/2-length victory in the Champagne Stakes at Belmont Park on Saturday.

ELMONT, N.Y. - The 2-year-old **U. S. S. Valor** confirmed that he is indeed racing's newest superstar on Saturday, validating his monster maiden victory at Saratoga last month with an extremely impressive 6 1/2-length victory in the Grade 1, \$500,000 Champagne Stakes at Belmont Park.

Stuck between horses down the backside and then lacking room when behind horses turning into the stretch, U. S. S. Valor, under Manny Franco, bulled his way out for room turning for home, then closed rapidly to sail by Gaudreau and Club Reign to win going away. Gaudreau, who beat U. S. S. Valor when the two debuted at Saratoga on Aug. 8, finished second by two lengths over Club Reign.

Earth Song, Johnny Hockey and Raku completed the order of finish.

While the Champagne gives U. S. S. Valor a fees-paid berth into the \$2 million Breeders' Cup Juvenile at Keeneland on Oct. 30, owner Barry Irwin cast doubt on whether U. S. S. Valor would run in that race.

"I'll think about the Breeders' Cup, but I'm not real enamored with the idea," said Irwin, who heads the Team Valor International partnership.

U. S. S. Valor is trained by Shug McGaughey, who won his fourth Champagne, first since Adjudicating in 1989. McGaughey hasn't run a horse in the Juvenile since Saarland in 2001. He said he would leave this Breeders' Cup decision up to Irwin.

"If he's going to be a champion, he's going to have to win the Breeders' Cup," McGaughey said. "I think they are really interested in having a horse for the winter and the [Kentucky] Derby, but that's a long way down the road, too."

One can't blame U. S. S. Valor's connections for dreaming about the Derby after watching his last two races. After finishing a troubled third behind Gaudreau on Aug. 8, U. S. S. Valor came back to win his maiden on Sept. 5 by 13 1/4 lengths. Mystik Bayou, third in that race, won his maiden by 4 1/4 lengths earlier on Saturday's card.

In the Champagne, U. S. S. Valor didn't break that sharp and was in between horses down the backside while sitting behind Gaudreau, Johnny Hockey and Club Reign, who went a half-mile in 46.08 seconds. Gaudreau and Club Reign continued through six furlongs in 1:10.18.

Meanwhile, Earth Song was right to U. S. S. Valor's outside and attempted to keep him boxed in. But inside the quarter pole, Franco used U. S. S. Valor to bump Earth Song to make some room. Once clear, U. S. S. Valor lengthened his stride and motored past Gaudreau and Club Reign at the eighth pole and drew clear impressively.

U. S. S. Valor, a son of War of Will, covered the mile in 1:34.84 (95 Beyer Speed Figure) and returned \$2.74 as the 1-5 favorite.

"Manny's a great rider, he got him where he wanted to be, got into a little trouble at the head of the stretch, he was able to get over that," McGaughey said. "I think when they get an education like he got in his first race it helps down the line. Manny and I both talked in the paddock; for him to learn and to be a good horse he's going to need a target and he got one today."

Gaudreau was making his first start since his maiden win on Aug. 8. Trainer Chad Brown felt Flavien Prat had to ask Gaudreau sooner than he thought he would have to and while he was able to outfinish Club Reign, he was no match for the winner.

"I'm a little concerned that turning for home he was starting to be asked a little bit," Brown said. "He should have been asked a little deeper into the stretch than there; he did respond like he did in his debut. Twice now, when he had a horse next to him, he fights back and he gets his head down first, and he did beat that horse who was on the outside of him. The problem is there's a horse better than him that was in the center of the track that left him."

Brown said he would see how his horse comes out of the Champagne and see if he feels he can get the necessary improvement out of the horse before deciding whether or not to go to the Breeders' Cup.

Since Shanghai Bobby (2012) became the fifth horse to win the Champagne and Breeders' Cup Juvenile, Champagne winners are 0 for 9 in the Juvenile. Good Magic, second in the 2017 Champagne and trained by Brown, came back to win the BC Juvenile as a maiden.