



U. S. S. VALOR SWEEPS CLEAR TO DOMINANT G1 CHAMPAGNE VICTORY

JON FORBES • Oct 3 2026



U. S. S. Valor uncorked a powerful stretch run to win the Grade 1, \$500,000 Champagne, a one-turn mile for 2-year-olds, in eye-catching fashion on Saturday at Belmont Park.

Heavily favored off a 13 1/4-length second-out maiden victory on September 5 at Saratoga Race Course, U. S. S. Valor broke a step slowly in the Champagne but quickly recovered to race 1 1/4 lengths behind the leaders, Gaudreau, Johnny Hockey and Club Reign, in fifth as the tightly-packed field traveled in two tandems of three through an opening quarter-mile 23.19 seconds and a half in 46.08 over the fast dirt.

The Team Valor Kentucky homebred continued to wait behind horses on the far turn through three quarters in 1:10.18 before he was angled outside by jockey Manny Franco, bumping with Earth Song before lengthening his stride and striking to the front nearing the eighth pole en route to a 6 1/2-length triumph over second choice Gaudreau, who contested the early pace and ultimately finished two lengths ahead of third-place finisher Club Reign.

U. S. S. Valor, the 1-4 favorite in the field of six, returned \$2.74 for a \$2 win wager and stopped the clock in 1:34.84.

“The way he did it, being behind horses; he was on the bridle, but the right way,” said Franco. “We were bunched up. As soon as he got to the half a mile, I had a chance to drop my hands, and he stayed there for me. When I called him again, he just took off again. He just exploded. He has a lot of talent.”

With the Champagne victory, U. S. S. Valor earned \$275,000, a free entry into the Grade 1 Breeders’ Cup Juvenile as part of the “Win and You’re In” program, and 10 points in the Road to the Kentucky Derby standings. Kentucky Derby points were awarded on a 10-5-3-2-1 basis to the top-five finishers.

It was the fourth Champagne triumph for Hall of Fame trainer Shug McGaughey, who previously won the race with Polish Navy [1986], Easy Goer [1988], and Adjudicating [1989].

The Champagne was a rematch of a 6 1/2-furlong maiden special weight contested August 8 at Saratoga won by Gaudreau by a half-length. U. S. S. Valor, ridden that day by Tyler Gaffalione, was carried inward at the start before steadily working his way through the field to finish a diminishing three-quarters of a length behind the winner in third. U. S. S. Valor had smooth sailing when going seven furlongs September 5, vying for early supremacy and drawing clear in the stretch while being geared down late by Franco.

“Manny is a great rider, and [in the Champagne] he got him where he wanted him to be – got in a little trouble at the head of the stretch, but he was able to [overcome] that,” said McGaughey. “I think when they get an education like he got in his first race, it helps down the line. The second race was perfect, but Manny and I talked in the paddock and I [thought] for him to learn and to be a good horse, he’s going to need a target, and he got one today.

“I think Manny has turned into an outstanding rider,” McGaughey added. “That was why when it came down to it, I was anxious to get him on him. Tyler was going to be out of town [September 5], so I was glad I worked with [Franco's] agent [John Panagot], and [that I] was able to get him back today. I have all the

confidence in him and I think he's a top rider and will continue to get even better."

McGaughey said he and Team Valor president Barry Irwin will see how U. S. S. Valor exits the Champagne before they decide the colt's next start. The trainer said U. S. S. Valor has been "more forward" than 2015 Grade 1 Metropolitan Handicap and Grade 1 Whitney winner Honor Code and 2019 Grade 1 Travers and Grade 1 Jockey Club Gold Cup victor Code of Honor. Both Honor Code and Code of Honor were second in the Champagne.

"Code of Honor when he ran in [the Champagne] had the outside and he broke bad – he was able to finish," said McGaughey. "Honor Code had only run the one time and he was still a little bit [green] and had to come from way back and finish. This horse is just not that way. He's been forward with me the whole time I've had him and I think he showed it today."

Irwin said U. S. S. Valor's Champagne victory ranks highly among the accomplishments of Team Valor colorbearers.

"We have never really won a top 2-year-old race like this," said Irwin. "I mean we won the Breeders' Cup Juvenile Turf, we won the Spinaway, I've won a couple of good ones in Europe, but this is the best, for me.

"I've never had a horse anywhere near this quality before, and I've had some good horses," Irwin continued. "He is just beyond words. I can't believe I bred him, I can't believe I own him."

U. S. S. Valor is a bay son of 2019 Grade 1 Preakness winner War of Will.

Trainer Chad Brown, who saddled Gaudreau, said his colt was "no match" for the winner.

"I thought I got a great trip," said Brown. "He broke maybe just a step [slow] and he [Flavien Prat] used him a bit to get up there, but from then on I had a great trip. I was just a little disappointed today when they turned for home that I didn't shake free from that Club Reign, who was kind of asked a little bit turning for home. Off a 46 half, I think my horse is able to do that in-hand, and I started to be a little concerned that he had to ask him. He did respond when he asked him, but today, much different than the debut of these two horses [Gaudreau and U.S.S. Valor] – now there's a gap between them today. The winner was clearly much the best today and rolled right by us... I've got to go back to the drawing board as a trainer and figure out what happened there and why is this gap between them now?"

Edgard Zayas, rider aboard third-place finisher Club Reign, said he expects his Whit Beckman-trained mount to continue to be a factor in major races.

“I think [Club Reign] ran a huge race,” said Zayas. “He’s definitely a horse who can get better with experience. It was just his second race. The winner is a really nice horse, but I know Club Reign is very classy and has some great wins in his future, for sure. The way he broke out of the gate super sharp and then just got into cruise control and relaxed was impressive. The winner just had a different kick.”

Earth Song finished fourth and was followed home by Johnny Hockey and Raku.