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by rob whiteley

LET'S HEAR IT FOR MAY FOALS!

As a populist horseman, it makes me smile when a relatively obscure horse comes out of the hinterlands and beats up on a bunch of fashionably bred horses who are sired by generally over-priced, over-hyped, and over-bred stallions. And it turns my smile into a broad grin to observe that *Mine That Bird is a mid-May foal*.

To be fair, the valiant runner-up, Pioneerof the Nile, is regally bred and fully deserving of his cost of production. His bloodlines and hefty stud fee came through in a brave display of talent and determination, and those who played him unsuccessfully in the exotics only have themselves to blame for not taking home a big piece of the track. Like the item we look past in the front of the refrigerator, it was right there to see. *Pioneerof the Nile is also a May foal*, and if you had played a May foal exacta, you would have received \$2,074.80 for a \$2 exacta box.

(Ed. Note: A \$2 exacta box with all of the May foals in the Derby would've cost \$40. Atomic Rain (Smart Strike), Regal Ransom (Distorted Humor) and third-place finisher Musket Man (Yonaguska) are all May foals as well. A \$1 triple box on the quintet would've set you back just \$60, and returned \$20,750.30)

In light of the continuous racing success achieved by May foals year after year, I am at a loss to rationally understand how that success fails to translate into the sales scene where May foals, as a group, bring approximately 35 percent less than their counterparts. For some in-grained reason, rooted in hearsay and perpetuated by the typical word of mouth momentum that spreads other horse industry falsehoods and myths, May foals get a bad rap at the sales, and are often discounted accordingly in the ring. This is such nonsense. The stigma on May foals that floats around on the winds of ignorance has no basis in fact.

It can even be persuasively argued that May foals actually have a slight advantage over other foals, as May foals are born according to a horse's innate and natural spring-time predispositions, and with the most favorable environmental conditions.

Savvy buyers who keep up with the details of racing know that May foals, as a group, race as successfully as foals born in other months, and better than foals born in January. And the sharpest horsemen and pinhookers know that a few days or even weeks generally make little difference in a horse's early development.

The most important factors in a horse's ability to perform early involve genetically based precocity, balance, athleticism, and mental maturity, not date of birth. Each horse has its own genetically wound clock, and horses have wide-ranging differences in the rate that they develop, no matter which month they might be born in. Like foals born in January or February or any month, some May foals may be forward enough to zip along at two-year-old sales, while others may not be mature enough to race effectively until the middle of their three-year-old years, or later. Horses, like humans and other mammals, follow their own genetic blueprint.

When it is their time to perform, however, May foals truly hold their own, even as two-year-olds.

Except for the month of January, the fewest number of foals are born in May, yet they account for 10 percent of Breeders' Cup Juvenile colt and filly champions. Furthermore, as May foals mature, their success rate in certain top level venues can be jaw-dropping. May foals have won a stunning 50 percent of the last 10 Breeders' Cup Distaffs (including, Azeri, Round Pond, Spain, and Escena). And May foals have won over 25 percent of all Breeders' Cup Mile races.

Despite the impressive frequency with which May foals find the winner's circle in big races, however, a May foal may not win the Preakness this year. Instead, a magnificent January foal named Rachel Alexandra may be brilliant enough to outrun the boys, no matter when they were born (if she can adjust to a new groom, a new trainer, and new routines). But the Belmont, please take note, is entirely a different matter because of the extraordinary potency of *the May foal factor*.

The May foal factor is the strongest available predictor of Belmont success--far stronger than the most sophisticated figs or Beyer numbers--because *May foals, incredibly, have won nearly 40 percent of the last 15 runnings of the Belmont* (including, Afleet Alex, Lemon Drop Kid, Thunder Gulch, Touch Gold, Victory Gallop, and Mine That Bird's own daddy, Birdstone). Therefore, given the historical dominance by May foals in this mile-and-a-half event, and given the Bird's paternal family connection and the probable presence of steadfast Pioneerof the Nile, we could even be looking at the same May foal quinella we witnessed in the Derby. In any event, it is time we give May foals the respect they deserve, at the sales and on the track.

For more on May foals (and other sales myths and useful information), please read the "Plain and Simple" educational booklets available through the CBA, by going to www.consignorsandbreeders.com.

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