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Irap early favorite for Grade III \$500,000 Indiana Derby at Indiana Grand Racing & Casino

Story and Photos By Jennie Rees, Eclipse Award-winning freelance writer
- Photos by John Engelhardt at Ohio Derby



SHELBYVILLE, Ind. (Wednesday, July 12, 2017) — California-based Irap has gone from the first previously winless horse to capture Keeneland's time-honored Blue Grass Stakes to the heavy favorite for Saturday's \$500,000, Grade 3 Indiana Derby.

If people thought his Blue Grass victory over the well-regarded McCracken, Practical Joke and J Boys Echo was a fluke, Irap bounced back from his 18th-place finish in the Kentucky Derby to capture the Grade 3 Ohio Derby by a nose over Louisiana Derby victor Girvin. Irap can further stamp himself as one of his 3-year-old generation's best horses with a victory in the 1 1/16-mile Indiana Derby.

"In the Blue Grass, Julien Leparoux got a perfect dream trip," trainer Doug O'Neill said by phone from California. "It was great. But the Ohio Derby, the pace wasn't that strong, from my knowledge, and here he is behind horses in traffic. I thought, 'Oh, no.' Because Irap at times has been a little bit immature mentally and overreacts to traffic trouble and stuff. I was just very impressed the way he navigated traffic and got it done the way he did. I think it really showed a move forward for him mentally."

Irap was installed as the 8-5 favorite after drawing post 2 in the field of eleven 3-year-olds entered Wednesday for the 23rd Indiana Derby. He had post 1 in the Ohio Derby.

"We're really happy about his ground-saving post," O'Neill said in a post-draw text.

The Blue Grass form has turned out very well, surely some consolation to Keeneland after the sting of having its marquee 3-year-old race demoted from a Grade 1 to Grade 2. Practical Joke, whom Irap



defeated by three-quarters of a length, bounced back from finishing fifth in the Kentucky Derby to impressively winning Belmont's Dwyer (G2). Blue Grass third McCracken was eighth in the Derby but then won Churchill Downs' Matt Winn (G3) with authority.

Jason Loutsch, co-owner of Albaugh Family Stables' Indiana Derby entrant Watch Me Whip, was fourth to Irap in the Blue Grass with J Boys Echo.

"I obviously respect the heck out of him," Loutsch said. "He's a Grade 2 winner and obviously the class of the field. Somebody is going to have to run a heck of a race to beat him."

Irap is not an avowed front-runner but figures to be in the thick of the pace. The post draw creates an interesting tactical situation. Society Beau, breaking on the rail, comes from off the pace. Wild Shot, who drew just outside Irap in post 3, also has speed but with the advantage of being to Irap's outside. So will Gutierrez be forced to do more early than he might want?

"Just off his last race, Irap showed where he doesn't have to be on the lead and he was able to run down Girvin," jockey Brian Hernandez, who will start from post 8 aboard Churchill Downs allowance winner Awesome Saturday, said when asked if the draw works in favor of Irap's opponents. "We're just going to have to go out there, trust our horse, let him put himself where he needs to be and let our horse do his own thing."

O'Neill also has one of the favorites for the Indiana Oaks in Mopotism, the Kentucky Oaks 10th-place finisher who in her last start narrowly lost Santa Anita's Grade 2 Summertime Oaks.

Irap and Mopotism actually have similar form, though the filly has yet to win a graded stakes. But both youngsters were Grade 1-placed before ever winning a race, Irap finishing second in the Los Alamitos Futurity last December and Mopotism third in the Los Alamitos Starlet the same afternoon.

Both 3-year-olds are owned by Paul and Zillah Reddam and will be ridden by the Reddams' go-to jockey Mario Gutierrez, with whom the owners and O'Neill won the 2012 Kentucky Derby with I'll Have Another and again last year with Nyquist.

"With Irap and Mopotism, we've been excited about both of them since pretty much their first breeze," O'Neill said. "Both showed they have some special talent. With all the money kind of being in the 2-year-old and 3-year-old season, the philosophy from Team Reddam is that if the horse is doing fine, you've got to put each horse in opportunities where they can succeed and do well against their own age group.

"It's evident that the straight maidens are no walkover. It's pretty ironic that Irap ran second in the Los Al Futurity and then comes back and runs fourth in a straight maiden."

Irap and Mopotism rebounded from drubbings at Churchill Downs to run very well in their next start.

"I think both in the Derby and the Oaks, Mario realized about mid-race that it wasn't the horse's day," O'Neill said. "He didn't beat them up. I think because of that, they both came out of it in great shape. The results prove that, too, with Irap coming back to win the Ohio Derby and Mopotism running a winning race in the Summertime Oaks."

Irap hitched along with the O'Neill team running last week at Prairie Meadows, where the stable won the Grade 3 Iowa Oaks with Shane's Girlfriend.

Irap worked five-eighths of a mile at the Iowa track in 59.87 seconds this past Friday before vaning onto Indiana the next day. Mopotism flew to Indianapolis via a FedEx cargo plane on Tuesday, accompanied by the O'Neill-trained Gangster, who runs in the \$100,000 Warrior Veterans on turf.

Though Irap is shortening up from the 1 1/8 miles of the Blue Grass and Ohio Derby, "I think the longer the distance the better," O'Neill said. "He just has a lot of staying power, has that high-cruising speed. As we look ahead, I think anything a mile and an eighth and farther will be right up his alley.

We're looking forward to both horses. Both have the kind of ability and form that looks like they're going to be better with racing." The source of Irap's name?

"As a young horse, he just had some immature legs so we sent him down to the farm to have IRAP therapy, which is a newer therapy that is very natural," O'Neill said. "The people at the farm didn't even know what it was. So when we sent him down there with those directions, we called about a week later, and they thought the horse's name was Irap. I told Paul that story, and he said, 'Oh, we've got to name him Irap.'"

Hall of Fame trainer Bob Baffert, for whom Cupid provided a record fourth Indiana Derby triumph since 2009, is not represented this year. O'Neill won the 2003 Indiana Derby with Excessivepleasure when the race was at Hoosier Park but doesn't recall ever running before at Indiana Grand. Now he hopes to keep up Californian dominance.

"Any race without Baffert is a good race for me," O'Neill quipped.

The 15th season of Thoroughbred and Quarter Horse racing continues through Saturday, Oct. 28. Racing is conducted Tuesday, Wednesday and Friday at 2:05 p.m. EST with Saturday racing beginning at 6:05 p.m. EST. Thursday racing will be held July 6 – Aug. 24 at 2:05 p.m. EST.

About Indiana Grand Racing & Casino: Indiana Grand Racing & Casino holds multiple awards from industry publications for customer service, entertainment, gaming and dining. Located in Shelbyville, Ind., Indiana Grand features 2,200 of the latest slots and electronic table games in addition to a one-mile dirt race course and a seven-eighths mile turf course offering live Thoroughbred and Quarter Horse racing each year. Simulcast wagering is also offered year-round at Winner's Circle Brewpub & OTB located on the casino floor as well as an off-track betting facility located in Clarksville, Ind. For more information, please visit www.IndianaGrand.com.