



Blame The Rider Back On Dirt As O'Neill Pursues Third Indiana Derby Win At Indiana Grand

Story by Jennie Rees, Eclipse Award winning turf writer

SHELBYVILLE, Ind.; July 12, 2018 — Doug O'Neill will try to keep up his lofty stats in graded stakes at Indiana Grand. The California-based trainer had never run a horse here when he finished a close second in last year's Indiana Oaks with Mopotism and immediately afterward won the Indiana Derby with Irap.

Now the two-time Kentucky Derby-winning trainer is back for Saturday night's \$500,000, Grade 3 Indiana Derby with Blame the Rider, who like Mopotism and Irap is owned by Paul and Zillah Reddam. Like Irap, Blame the Rider will break from post 2 as O'Neill goes for his third Indiana Derby triumph, the first being at Hoosier Park in 2003 with Excessivepleasure before Indiana Grand existed.

Blame the Rider went 0 for 5 on dirt to start off his career, albeit one of those starts was the Grade 3 Robert B. Lewis. Moved to the turf, his form has been very good, ripping off victories in a maiden race and Sara Anita's mile Singletary Stakes and then second in that track's 1 1/8-mile Rainbow Stakes a month ago. In those grass races, he showed speed that was largely missing on the dirt, and O'Neill is candid that he'd be delighted to have Blame the Rider on the lead in the colt's return to the main track.



"He's always displayed a lot of talent in the mornings, and we just did not see any of it in the afternoon on the dirt," O'Neill said by phone. "I think a lot of it was maybe the game was too quick for him, and on the turf, everything slowed down a little bit. So now we're hoping he's mentally ready to try the better dirt horses. It is an experiment. But the purse is huge, he's doing great and we thought we'd take a chance."

"He's in great form. The big question mark is can he continue on going back to the dirt? We think he can, but the race is going to tell us a ton. I have a pretty good feeling, am pretty optimistic that he's got the talent to compete with those horses. It's just a matter if he has to have a specific type of surface."

Blame the Rider actually also was a supplemental entry into Delaware Park's \$200,000 Kent Stakes on grass right before Saturday's \$750,000 Delaware Handicap, where the stable is running Mopotism.

"We thought about it," O'Neill said. "But we thought, 'Gosh, there are so many opportunities for the dirt horses,' and the horse continues to train on the dirt like a good horse. So that was our feeling."

Such a feeling paid off big time earlier this year for O'Neill with Blended Citizen. Non-competitive on dirt, his form greatly improved on turf and then synthetic surfaces, including winning Turfway's Grade 3 Jeff Ruby Steaks. Returning to the dirt for Keeneland's Blue Grass, Blended Citizen had a horrible trip in finishing a fast-flying fifth, then won Belmont's Grade 3 Peter Pan.

Kentucky mainstay Julien Leparoux picks up the mount on Blame the Rider, with the Reddams' main rider Mario Gutierrez, with whom O'Neill and Reddam won Kentucky Derbys with I'll Have Another and Nyquist, riding Mopotism at Delaware. Leparoux's most famous pinch-hit role for O'Neill came with Irap last year in Keeneland's \$1 million Toyota Blue Grass, winning at 31-1 odds. Leparoux also won last year's Grade 3 Ohio Derby with Irap, but his first stakes victory for O'Neill came in Arlington Park's Grade 1 Secretariat on Shamdan back in 2007, the year after he earned the apprentice jockey Eclipse Award.

"Julien has been able to bring home some really nice victories for Paul and Zillah Reddam," O'Neill said. "We're excited to have him. He's been such a good friend to our barn. He adds a lot of value to us, and of course the Blue Grass victory we'll never forget."

The Indiana Derby's field of nine 3-year-olds is headlined by the Dale Romans-trained 6-5 favorite King Zachary, winner of Churchill Downs' Grade 3 Matt Winn and who breaks from post 9.

"He's obviously in tremendous form, great connections," O'Neill said. "He's the legitimate odds-on favorite. I like where we drew, because of our thought that we're going to be forwardly placed, and Dale is kind of hung out on the outside. If we get a good clean trip away from there, I like where we're at. That will be the goal with Julien: to send. Hopefully we make the lead and we're not on some suicide mission early. But our guy is a free-running, high-cruising speed kind of horse."

As with I'll Have Another and Irap, there's a story behind Blame the Rider's name.

"Paul primarily uses Mario Gutierrez," O'Neill said. "So often times when we lose, which is a lot, between me and some of Paul's other trainers, we'd say something about 'Mario this, Mario that.' He said, 'It's always blame the rider.' That's how that came up — Paul making fun of his trainers blaming the jocks."

Asked if he'd get worried should Reddam name a horse Blame the Trainer, O'Neill quipped, "We want to stay away from that. We'll tell Paul the name is already taken."

The 16th season of Thoroughbred and Quarter Horse racing continues through Wednesday, Nov. 7. 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 19 and Sept. 6 at 2:05 p.m. EST.

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