



Photo by Reed Palmer Photography

BLIND LUCK, A FILLY WHO MARK CORNETT RECOGNIZED FOR HER TALENT VERY EARLY, SCORES A GAME VICTORY IN THE KENTUCKY OAKS (G1) AT CHURCHILL DOWNS.

## AN EYE FOR STAKES WINNERS

**MARK CORNETT'S FOCUSED APPROACH HAS YIELDED POSITIVE RESULTS OVER THE PAST 10 YEARS. MOST RECENTLY WITH KENTUCKY OAKS WINNER BLIND LUCK**

Perhaps even more so than in other pursuits, it really helps to have a little luck in horse racing. The sport's history is peppered with amazing stories of luck, but that will only get you so far. Luck might get you a big stakes winner, maybe even a few, but to succeed over the long run you need a keen eye for horseflesh and the gut instinct to strike just at the right moment. Over the past decade, Mark Cornett has quickly risen to the upper echelon of racing, and remained there. His most recent find, ironically enough, came with Blind Luck, who captured the \$584,300 Kentucky Oaks (G1) at Churchill Downs on April 30. But despite her name, her road to stardom didn't have much to do with luck.

### A forgotten filly

Prior to making her first start, Blind Luck never really attracted much attention. The daughter of Pollard's Vision sold for \$11,000 as a yearling and the bidding didn't even get that high when she was entered in a 2-year-old sale. That changed when she made her debut at Calder Race Course in Florida in a \$40,000 maiden claiming race and ran off to win by 13 <sup>1</sup>/<sub>4</sub> lengths.

While it may seem obvious that a horse who breaks her maiden by more than a dozen lengths has potential, there are plenty of young horses who win their first race in impressive fashion and never visit the winner's circle again, much less at Churchill Downs after the sport's most prestigious race for 3-year-old fillies. After all, it's a long way from a maiden claiming race to the Kentucky Oaks. Even so, Cornett quickly saw that Blind Luck was special, and he moved quickly to broker a sale after that race last June.

“I called Juvenal Diaz (the owner) and negotiated a price within 24 hours of her running,” said Cornett, who beat several other potential buyers to the punch. “I then called Jerry Hollendorfer and told him I found what I thought was a future Grade 1 winner, and she should be bought and pointed to the Darley Debutante (G1) at Del Mar. Jerry then looked her over and said that he and Mark Dedemenico would take a piece of her. I then sent the information to Peter Abruzzo in Chicago who got John Carver to take the rest of her. Peter and I worked real close last year on trying to purchase Summer Bird after he had shown some early ability at Oaklawn Park. It took us both a while to get over not buying him. We were not going to let this one get away.”



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While some racing deals can take weeks to put together, Cornett knew he didn't have that luxury with this horse.

“I then called my vet, Dr. Jonathan Allen at Calder Race Course, to do the pre-purchase exam,” Cornett added. “Everything was good and we closed on her the next day.”

The rest is history, and although Cornett was not quite right about her winning the Darley Debutante (she finished a strong second in the race), Blind Luck has more than proven his instincts were correct as she rolled to victories in three Grade 1 races – the Oak Leaf, Hollywood Starlet and Las Virgenes. Blind Luck also won the Grade 2 Fantasy Stakes at Oaklawn Park and finished third in the Breeders' Cup Juvenile Fillies (G1) and Santa Anita Oaks (G1). As if that wasn't enough, she scored a gutsy victory in the Kentucky Oaks in front of a record crowd of 116,046 and then won the Delaware Oaks (G2) and the historic Alabama Stakes (G1) at Saratoga Race Course. All told, the filly who hardly anyone wanted has banked more than \$1.8 million while winning nine of 13 starts, and she figures to be a big favorite to take an Eclipse Award as champion 3-year-old filly.

## A decade of success

Since launching Turf Express in 2001, Cornett has posted some

staggering numbers for himself and his clients. Without spending recklessly or campaigning a huge stable like some others, Cornett and his clients has compiled 59 stakes wins with horses that were purchased privately. That breaks down to five Grade I wins, four Grade II wins and five Grade III wins along with a total of 38 graded stakes placings. Those private purchases have won more than 100 races with total earnings in excess of \$8.1 million.

While some stables would literally need hundreds of horses to put together those kinds of numbers, those results are from only 27 horses. That means Cornett has been right far more often than he's been wrong, despite the fact that he moves as fast as anyone in the industry when he sees a horse he likes.

“The key to buying horses privately is moving quickly and decisively or you will lose them,” he said.

Cornett generally focuses on fillies and mares that can be acquired for between the \$75,000 - \$250,000 range. So if he sees a \$1 million yearling that wins impressively, then he's probably not interested because the price is going to be too high and there's no value in a purchase like that.

One example of Cornett's technique came with Somethinaboutlaura, who he purchased for \$90,000 after an impressive starter allowance win in California. The filly then earned more than \$150,000 for him while running against top stakes company and was later sold for \$375,000 at auction to turn a handsome profit. She then went on to win over \$1 million for her new owners.

Cornett also hit it big with Tamweel, who he purchased in



**JERRY HOLLENDORFER (LEFT) AND MARK CORNETT (RIGHT) WAIT FOR PHOTO FINISH RESULTS TO BE POSTED IN THE KENTUCKY OAKS.**

partnership early in her career for \$200,000. The filly went on to place in the Grade 1 Spinster Stakes and finished a good fourth in the Breeders' Cup Distaff (G1) while earning back her purchase price and then some. With those accomplish-

ments on her résumé, Cornett was able to sell the filly privately for a reported price of \$1 million.

The very best handicappers only pick a winner about one-third of the time, and there are certainly no “sure things” in racing (even Secretariat lost five times in his career). But by sticking with a strategy that works and having the confidence to pull the trigger when others might hesitate, Cornett has managed to tilt the odds in his favor.