

Dominating Dominguez

by Terry Conway

The Kentucky Derby buzz right now belongs to Old Fashioned.

As the regular rider of the ghostly gray Old Fashioned, Ramon Dominguez plans to cement his reputation as one of country's best. Old Fashioned, a son of Unbridled's Song, lived up to the hype of being the country's top 3-year old with a solid score in the \$250,000 Southwest Stakes on Feb. 16 at Oaklawn Park.

Trained by Larry Jones and owned by Wilmington's Rick Porter, unbeaten Old Fashioned (four-for-four) wore down runner-up Silver City in the stretch and steadily accelerated to a comfortable 3 1/4-length win over the one-mile course. Porter paid \$800,000 for the colt at the Keeneland September yearling sale.

The race unfolded exactly the way Jones envisioned, with the speedy Silver City controlling the pace ripping off swift early fractions of 22.47 seconds and 45.98 for the opening half-mile. Running about two lengths off the pace, Old Fashioned took the lead approaching the top of the stretch and gradually pulled away in the final sixteenth of a mile.

Aware of the stout pace, Dominguez backed off, not looking to get into a speed duel with Silver City.

"When I caught up to the leader at the top of the stretch, he dug in and finished strong," Dominguez said. "I hope that stretch run did my colt some good. I was very pleased with his response down the lane and very impressed with the way that he galloped out. After the race I didn't hear him blowing like I might have expected after those fractions and a hard first effort of the year."

Old Fashioned hadn't raced since a 7 3/4-length victory in the \$200,000 Grade II Remsen Stakes on Nov. 29 at Aqueduct in New York. Plans call for the colt to race next in the Rebel Stakes (1 1/16 miles) on March 14, followed by the \$1 million Arkansas Derby (1 1/8 miles) on April 11.

Not all went as smoothly for Dominguez as his mount's trip in the Southwest Stakes. Flying from Philly with a change of planes in Charlotte, N. C. then on to Little Rock, Ark., Dominguez arrived, but not his gear. The jockey borrowed riding equipment from a trio of regular Oaklawn Park riders.

The Venezuela born jockey moved his tack to New York this winter where he'll race year around after spending a decade at Delaware Park. The fact Delaware Park has cut its 2009 racing meet back 19 days and eliminated 12 stakes races this year played into the decision by the jockey and his agent, Steve Rushing, to move to New York permanently.

Dominguez's success speaks for itself. Through Feb.22 Dominguez ranked as the second leading jockey in wins (64) and third in purse money won (just over \$2 million). The leading rider at Aqueduct's inner-track meet the past two winters, Dominguez has racked up 62 victories at the meet through Feb. 22.

Last winter Dominguez ran away with jockey title at Aqueduct, winning 95 races. But when the track's dark days arrived each week he hopped into his car and drove three hours down I-95 to his home in Fair Hill, Md. He lived on his 14-acre farm just down the road from the Fair Hill Training Center with his wife Sharon and two young sons, Matthew and Alex.

“The reason I stayed (at Delaware Park) the past few years was the quality of life,” Dominguez said. “It’s very settled, very laid-back. My oldest son Matthew is crazy about horses and my wife and I ride pleasure horses. Hey, it’s nice to get on a horse with no expectations.”

Sharon is the daughter of standard-bred owner and trainer Bobby Wyatt of Frederica, Del. She met the jockey at Delaware Park, where she galloped horses in the mornings for Graham Motion and other trainers, and worked as a pony rider in the afternoons.

Dominguez grew up in Cagua, in the countryside an hour outside Caracas. As a sideline his father operated a “Pick 6” betting machine that he toted to the local racetrack on weekends. Ramon tagged along.

“I wanted to be a jockey,” Dominguez noted. “My parents got me into a show jumping school, hoping I would get it out of my system. Within a couple of months I was slipping over to a nearby training center. My father wasn’t happy, but eventually he relented.”

By age 18, Dominguez was riding full-time at La Rinconada racetrack. Through a friend he found an agent in Miami in 1995 and began riding at Hialeah in 1996.

Today, he’s on the short list of many of the country’s elite trainers. Todd Pletcher has tabbed Dominguez to ride Court Vision in the upcoming \$1 million Santa Anita Handicap. The jockey has been a favorite rider for Tony Dutrow over the years at Philadelphia Park and Delaware Park.

“Ramon is very patient and a skillful rider,” said Tony Dutrow, who first teamed up with the jockey in 1998. “He is cool, calm and collected. He rides with a tremendous amount of confidence, and ultimately the horses run for him. He’s moving on to the top levels of racing. I wish him the best.”