

Imperial Council a new type for McGaughey

By David Grening

OZONE PARK, N.Y. - For the last 23 years and counting, trainer Shug McGaughey's success in Thoroughbred racing has been directly linked with the Phipps family. But if McGaughey is to make a return to the Kentucky Derby for the first time in seven years, his best chance appears to be with a colt owned by an old friend who has started a new venture.

Imperial Council, a classically bred 3-year-old, will attempt to jump on the Triple Crown trail in earnest Saturday when he makes his stakes debut in the Grade 3, \$250,000 Gotham at Aqueduct. The 1 1/16-mile Gotham will be Imperial Council's first start around two turns.

Imperial Council is owned by Sequoia Racing, a partnership group started in 2007 by longtime horseman Reynolds Bell Jr., whose relationship with McGaughey goes back 35 years. Bell, 56, is the son of Alice Chandler and the stepson of John Chandler, who owned Mill Ridge Farm, for which Bell served as general manager for 10 years before starting a bloodstock and consulting business in 1991.

With Sequoia Racing, Bell's goal is to buy colts in the \$150,000 to \$500,000 range that could make solid racehorses and go on to become top stallion prospects. In addition to McGaughey - who has two horses for the partnership - Sequoia also employs trainers Michael Matz, Kieran McLaughlin, and Barclay Tagg.

Bell said the makeup of Sequoia is two-thirds established owners and one-third newcomers to the sport. Bell declined to name his Sequoia partners, saying that "if we have success, you'll see a lot of these folks start showing up at the races, and I'll let them talk about it."

Sequoia purchased 15 yearling colts in 2007 and the same number in 2008. Thus far, Imperial Council, who at \$130,000 was the least expensive yearling purchase the group made in 2007, has shown the most potential.

Imperial Council, a son of Empire Maker, has won 2 of 3 starts. He finished second to the highly regarded Hello Broadway in his debut last summer at Saratoga before winning a maiden race at Belmont in October. Bothered by shins, Imperial Council was given some time off before winning an allowance race at Gulfstream Park by two lengths on Feb. 14.

Imperial Council has yet to run beyond seven furlongs. As a son of the Belmont Stakes winner Empire Maker out of the Thunder Gulch mare Jamar Rain, Imperial Council is bred to have success going long. In all three of his races, he has shown tactical speed that puts him right in his races from the start.

"What's surprised me so much about this horse is he's bred to go long and two turns, but he's got such a quick turn of foot," Bell said. "He's got so much tactical speed, I'm not sure where it comes from."

According to McGaughey, Imperial Council has a good mind as well. You wouldn't have suspected that, however, from his debut. While being saddled at Saratoga, Imperial Council kicked the back wall of a saddling stall and was a handful to saddle. Still, after breaking slowly, he got himself into contention, made the lead turning for home, and just got outfinished by Hello Broadway, losing by a neck.

"I was shocked when he acted up," said the 58-year-old McGaughey, a 2004 Hall of Fame inductee. "He never showed a sign of doing anything wrong. He got really upset that day. The second time we ran him he reared up one time, then he was fine. The other day, he never made a move, and he won't make a move at Aqueduct either."

McGaughey shipped Imperial Council on Tuesday from his Payson Park base in Florida to Aqueduct, and the colt was to train there for a few days before the race. Initially, the Gotham was not on McGaughey's radar for Imperial Council. McGaughey has won the Gotham three times, including in 1989 with Easy Goer, who finished second in the Kentucky Derby.

"If you asked me before he ran last time, I don't know that I would have mentioned the Gotham," said McGaughey, who has not run a horse in the Derby since Saarland finished 10th for Cynthia Phipps in 2002. "But he's done so well since then, and it's a good spot for him going a mile and a sixteenth on a regular [dirt] track. He's trained so well down here since his race - that's what makes it so exciting."

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