

INTERVIEW CALVIN BOREL

WHAT TOOK YOU SO LONG?



Before he rode the 50-1 Kentucky Derby winner, not too many racefans outside America might have paid attention to Calvin Borel, despite it being the 42-year-old's second win in the race. Now he's added the Preakness, beating the horse he rode at Churchill Downs, he's US racing's biggest name. **David Ashforth** meets this 'extraordinary, ordinary man'

WHERE were you all those years? Kentucky sure would miss you now. Calvin Borel, at 42, riding all his life, has only just reached the top of the big fruit tree, his hard-worked hands on the reins of the two best three-year-olds in America. Winner of the Kentucky Derby on Mine That Bird, winner of the Kentucky Oaks and Preakness on Rachel Alexandra, Borel is an uplifting spirit. An extraordinary, ordinary man, a late blooming, sunny hero, a star without self-importance, it is easy to see why racefans love him. With his ready, wide grin, he wants to please everyone and disappoint no-one. He's as easy a man to like as you could find.

From 0 to 4,000 in 38 years

"My daddy farmed sugarcane in Louisiana," Borel says. In his strong cajun accent. "He took care of the sugarcane, and his boys took care of the horses." There were five boys, and Calvin was the last of them, by 12 years. "That's why they call me Boo-boo," he laughs, "because I was a mistake." Borel took to horses like a turtle to a bayou. "I was a natural rider, and that's all I wanted to be," he says. "At eight years old, I was riding in bush races. You'd hook two horses together in a match, and race straight alongside a rail. That's how I got polished up. I got to 12 and, like my brother Cecil told my mum and dad, I wasn't going to be a lawyer or a doctor, all I wanted to be was a jockey. That's when I left school." Calvin lived with Cecil, who was a jockey himself and later a trainer. At 16, Borel rode his first winner, at Delta Downs, and the same year was leading rider there and at Evangeline

Downs, both Louisiana tracks. "My brother kept me straight, gave good guidance, kept me away from drugs," says Borel. "I made my mooney early but he'd give me \$50 and that's all I had to live with. He'd put the rest in the bank, and save it for me. He was like a second dad, and I worked hard for him. We had 60 head of horse and we'd win six or seven races a week. Then we went to Louisiana Downs, and I was leading rider there." Wherever he went, Borel rode winners. In 1995, he beat Pat Day for the riders' title at Oaklawn Park, in Arkansas and, in 1996, he was leading rider at Ellis Park, in Kentucky. He was riding a lot of winners and, by 2005, he'd ridden 4,000, but they were mainly at tracks far from the headlines.

The big breakthrough

Then, in 2006, at Churchill Downs, Borel made a breakthrough. He won the Grade 1 Stephen Foster Handicap on Seek Gold, at 92-1 and, on his only mount at that year's Breeders' Cup, won the Juvenile on Street Sense, for trainer Carl Nafzger. That fall, Borel added Churchill Downs to the list of tracks at which he had been leading rider and, when Street Sense won the 2007 Kentucky Derby, Borel threw his arms in the air and enjoyed "the greatest feeling in the world". Churchill Downs is a track at which Borel excels, and a track that suits his hankering for the rail. Calvin Bo-rail, they call him. "My brother always told me, the rail is the shortest way round. One day, I rode all evening long and, when I got a horse beat because I went around the outside, he put cones all around a shedrow. 'Why are you doing that?' I asked. 'I'm just showing you how much further you're going, how much ground you're losing,' he

said. He was always telling me, 'you've got to save ground around the turns'." "I realised then that it made a lot of difference. Now, I'd rather get stopped once or twice around a turn than go seven or eight wide. I promise you, 75 per cent of the time you're better off getting stopped than going round the outside. When horses are getting tired, they drift out or drift in and you will find holes." "At Churchill Downs, it's a long stretch and I can sit patiently until 40 yards from the wire and still make my decision and get out and win races. I love the track. I know it like the back of my hand and I just fit it to a T."

'Jesus, I got a lot of pony under me'

Chip Woolley, the trainer of Mine That Bird, thought Borel would fit his Derby outsider to a T, because Woolley wanted the back. "Chip used to get on him himself," says Borel, "and he kept telling me, 'Calvin, this horse has got a turn of foot you wouldn't believe.' I watched the reruns of his races and, believe me, this horse was way underestimated. For three weeks, Chip told me, 'Whatever you do, Calvin, take this horse back. Take him back to last and make a three-eighths of a mile or a quarter-mile run with him. I'm not telling you you'll win but I promise you he'll have a turn of foot that you ain't never seen before.' "On the morning of the race, I studied the form and got really excited. I thought, "You know what? This race could sit up for me just right." I even called Lisa, my fiancée, and said, "Baby, bring my suit because this horse will run good today." "I thought I'd got it won at about the three-eighths pole, when I squeezed him a little bit and he got

me to the horse in front so quick. I thought, 'Jesus, I got a lot of pony under me', so I dropped his head back and sat for another 100 yards and tried to place my spots. A horse in front was getting tired and drifting a bit and I thought, 'I'm going to wait until I turn for home and then I'm just going to go for it' and, when I asked him, he went from 20mph to 60mph in three jumps." "That's what you want. You don't want to have to ride to get up to and through a hole, you want a horse that's in there, and he's gone. I knew I had that kind of pony under me. Three jumps and he was gone." It was a sweet moment for Borel, and bitter-sweet. He often mentions his parents, Clovis and Ella, both of whom are now dead. "My mum got to see me win my first Derby, on Street Sense," says Borel, "but I just wish they were here now to see what I accomplished in my life. I was raised perfect - 'yes, sir' and 'no, sir' all the time. They were so good to me, we always had food on the table. I accomplished a lot while they were here but nothing like this. I always told them that, one day, I was going to win the Kentucky Derby." They'd both be very proud of him.



HORSE PLAY

Just for the fun of it

► **Googling a runner**
Waterhip Down 6.50 Huntingdon
Waterhip Down is a novel about a small group of rabbits. Written in 1972 by Richard Adams, it remains Penguin Books' best-selling novel. It was later turned into an animated film which contains the song Bright Eyes, sung by Art Garfunkel. If you don't shed a tear when you hear the line 'How can the light that burned so brightly, suddenly burn so pale, Bright eyes', you must be some sort of robot.

- Easy as 1-2-3
- 1 Who was the last man to breed, own and train a Derby winner?
 - 2 Who was the last French-bred to win the Derby?
 - 3 Who was the last French-trained Derby winner?
- Answers on page 19

► The List

Champions League Final racehorses

1. Fyrol - John Mulhern novice hurdler
2. Ryan Giggs - Alan Jarvis mid-90s maiden
3. Sir Alex - Seamus Roche 7yo
4. Tevez - Southwell winner
5. Viva Ronaldo - Richard Fahey 3yo

► On this day . . .

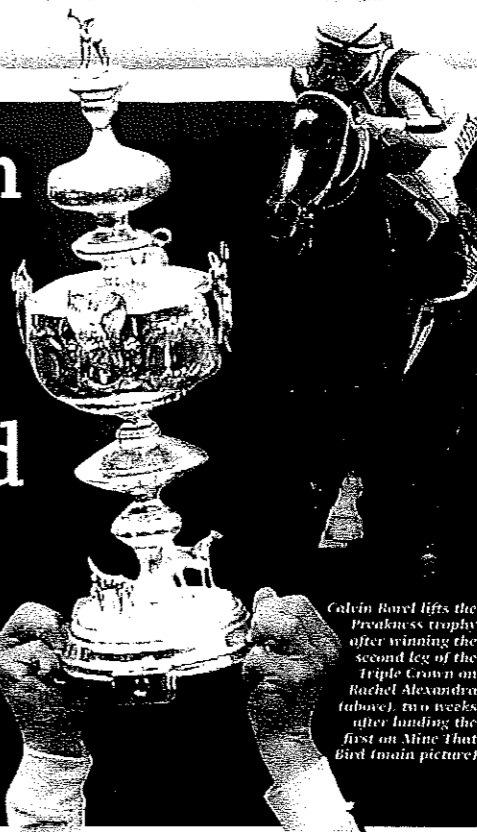
May 26, 1909 King Edward VII became the only reigning monarch to win the Derby when Minour triumphed at Epsom. The 2,000 Guinea victor, ridden by Herbert Jones, completed his Classic double when the patriotic judge awarded him the verdict by a short head from Louviers, with William The Fourth next. The King had owned Derby winners Persimmon (1896) and Diamond Jubilee (1900) while Prince of Wales. The great Bayardo was unfit at Epsom and finished only fifth; he won his next 15 races.

► My favourite . . .

George Margaron
Horses Young Mick and Gunner B
Razecourse Aant; I've done well there and I love the place
Racing heroes Tony McCoy and Lester Piggott
Relaxation I don't really have time for hobbies but I do like photography
Holiday destination Dearville; I go for the sales and the racing
Restaurant The French Horn, Sanning On-Thames - it does the best duck in the world

Compiled by Andrew Pennington, John Randall, Nicholas Godfrey and Peter Scrymgeour

'I ain't ever been on a horse like this, never. Street Sense had a turn of foot but this filly is like Secretariat'



Calvin Borel lifts the Preakness trophy after winning the second leg of the Triple Crown on Rachel Alexandra (above) ten weeks after landing the first on Mine That Bird (main picture)

RACHEL ALEXANDRA glided without a request from his jockey to the wire, winning by more than 20 lengths. The Kentucky Oaks crowd stood in awe, as Calvin Borel has been since last November, when the unbeaten partnership was first forged. Borel remembers: "The first time I ever sat on her, I told my agent, Jerry Hissam. This is the best horse I have ever been on in my life. I ain't ever been on a horse like this, never." Jerry looked at me and said, "Better than Street Sense?" "Well," I said, "Street Sense had a turn of foot but this filly is like Secretariat." Then Borel, an expression on his face that combines still strained belief with an urge to share the feeling, tells me what Rachel Alexandra was like that day when she won the Golden Rod Stakes, at Churchill Downs, in a stakes record time. "She left the gates running and said, 'Let's go. How fast do you want to go?' It was unbelievable. "Whatever I want her to do, she just keeps doing it. You don't find those kind of horses. I've never got on a horse like it, no sir." After the Oaks, the Preakness was harder work, and not just because of the challenge of a gate 13 slot, and a field of colts. The filly they're calling

America's Sweetheart didn't move as smoothly, yet she won, staying off Mine That Bird's late flourish. "Believe me," says Borel, "you didn't see Rachel Alexandra that day. She was struggling so much. She wasn't handling the track and she kind of fought me down the backside and I was a little concerned at the pace but I had no choice. It was either let her go or sit back and get hung ten wide." "I told myself, 'Calvin, you're on the best horse, and you know she's the best horse, so just let her do her thing. If she's as good as you think she is, they will not get by her.' She was struggling so much on the surface but she still took off when I asked her, she struggled so hard." With the Belmont, and a fascinating second round with Mine That Bird in prospect on June 6, does he think the race will have taken its toll. "My opinion," says Borel, "yes, it took a little bit out of her, but I know that Jess Jackson and Steve Asmussen [owner and trainer] will not run the filly if she's not 110 per cent. If she runs, she'll be right and, if she's at her best, she'll win." As well as the extra distance, there is the track to consider. Belmont, Borel concedes, is more like Pimlico than Churchill Downs. "Now that she's run over a sandy track, I don't think it will be as bad for her as in the Preakness," he says. "Having raced on it once will help her a lot." And Mine That Bird? Borel, of course, thinks a lot of the Kentucky Derby winner, but he preferred Rachel Alexandra in the Preakness, and he prefers her still. "He's a gutsy little horse," says Borel. "A lot of people thought he was a fluke winner of the Derby but he showed them in the Preakness that he was no fluke. He's a gear, little horse and he'll run good but, if I have the choice, I've got to ride the filly, oh yes. I'm just waiting for Mr Jackson to give me an answer."



NETJAYS