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HEADLINE: Like it is Arkansas Derby punctuates great racing season

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BODY:

HOT SPRINGS - Steel gray skies, occasional downpours and cool temperatures saluted the final live racing day of the season at Oaklawn Park.

Not that it mattered.

Nothing was going to dampen the mood after this racing season.

Fifty-five racing days ago, the 100-year Celebration of Oaklawn broke on a fantastic Friday and it has gone the distance without much of anything going wrong. The opening weekend had food prices the same as they were for the grand opening, and with hot dogs going for a dime and corned beef sandwiches for half a buck, the mood was festive to say the least.

It was a record-setting weekend, but it was just the beginning and the momentum touched four calendar months and ended in one of the most successful seasons in track history.

Not that it was needed or necessary, but Charles Cella decided to make a statement about the racetrack that has been in his family since its beginning: Oaklawn Park is still a viable player in the racing world.

As racing giants Churchill Downs and Magna, owned by Frank Stronach, have gobbled up tracks around the country, Cella has been able to keep all admirers at bay.

If Oaklawn is ever run by anyone other than a Cella, it will be because the Cellas chose for it to be.

For the biggest birthday in the track's history, Cella reached deep into his personal checkbook. Every race, except for stakes races, saw purse increases, and that brought much better stock to the spa city.

It set a healthy tone.

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Even if you didn't have a 3-year-old and a shot at the \$5 million bonus - for winning the Rebel Stakes, the Arkansas Derby and Kentucky Derby - the increased purses helped everyone catch a little Derby fever.

On March 20, nine thoroughbreds went to post for the first leg of the Cella challenge, all hoping to have their ticket punched. When Smarty Jones won by more than 3 lengths, another atmosphere began to take over Oaklawn, and the racing industry watched curiously.

The Smarty party was on.

Being undefeated and running a 106 Beyer speed figure - the only horse in the Derby who had run to triple ratings - didn't scare off many and 10 showed up to take on the bell ringer.

A murmur ran through the crowd when Smarty Jones didn't want to load, but he didn't fight too hard and as soon as he was in the race was off.

Honestly, a horse could not have had a better trip.

Or a better ride.

Cloaked in the royal blue of Someday Farm, jockey Stewart Elliott rode like he was a Hall of Famer.

He broke Smarty Jones sharply from the 11 hole, dueled for the early lead while bearing in to save ground, settled for second by a half-length as 22.3 flashed on the board for the first quarter of a mile.

Purge, who finished second to Smarty in the Rebel Stakes, and jockey Cornelio Velasquez slowed the next quarter down, but it was perfect strategy for the undefeated Smarty Jones.

Going into the second turn, Elliott started asking for a little more, and he got it.

Smarty Jones, under a hand ride, beat Borrego, who finished second.

With Master David losing in the Wood Memorial and Lion Heart in the Bluegrass Stakes, Smarty Jones may have become America's horse.

He could be this year's Funny Cide, last year's winner of the Kentucky Derby and Preakness, but don't expect to get the same long odds on this Pennsylvania-bred as last year's

New York-bred.

No one pulled harder for Smarty Jones than Cella, who could be writing the biggest horse racing check of his life (he insured only half the \$5 million bonus), but he accomplished what he set out to do.

It is time to return the Arkansas Derby to Grade I status.

It poured a couple of times Saturday, but it didn't rain on anyone's parade.

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