



1st ANNIVERSARY

DERBY DAY

Off to the races

Text and photos by Fred Minnick

For trainer **Bennie Stutts Jr.**, seeing one of his horses run for the roses is a lifelong dream come true.

It's the day before the 134th Kentucky Derby. Hidden in the shadows of his stall at Barn 36 stands Smooth Air, a handsome 3-year-old thoroughbred.

The other horses peek their heads out of their stalls to see what some

guy with a camera is doing. But not Smooth Air. Unlike his stablemates, he's used to the attention.

Then a black SUV pulls up, and the beautiful bay horse with a small patch of white between his eyes straightens his ears and whinnies. As the car door

opens, Smooth Air's eyes widen, and he stands at attention. He wants to look good.

When his 70-year-old trainer, Bennie Stutts Jr., arrives with a handful of carrots, Smooth Air looks like he's in horse heaven.

"This horse loves carrots," says Bennie.

The day before, when Bennie took Smooth Air to the track for one last workout, Smooth Air calmly walked and galloped on command. Decked out in a green bridle and with fancy gold bandages on his legs, he easily completed a timed run of four furlongs, half a mile, at an impressive time of 38.2 seconds.

"I wish I was as calm as this horse," Bennie says, patting him on the head and feeding him another carrot. "This horse has taken me on quite a ride."

Racing experts say Bennie is an old-fashioned trainer. He works with each horse differently—following their natural schedule, not his—and pampers them with plenty of green apples, carrots, and affectionate strokes and kisses. It's the same way that Bennie's father worked.

Some 50 years ago, Bennie went with his dad to see his first Kentucky Derby—only then he had to stand on a car to see the action. Now, after being a trainer for more than 40 years, Bennie Stutts Jr. has his first horse running for the roses, a professional milestone few trainers reach.

"I've been on the racetrack all my life, and people remember my father. That makes me more emotional than anything. I tell you, no son ever loved a father more than me," Bennie says, tears forming in his eyes. "This rider calls me and says, 'If you're half as good a trainer as your father was, you'll win the Derby.'"

Unfortunately, that prediction didn't come true. Smooth Air was banged around in the race and finished 11th out of 20. But Bennie accomplished his main objective: to bring his horse back home healthy and safe.

That didn't happen for everyone. This year's Derby, won by Big Brown, was marred by tragedy when second place finisher Eight Belles had to be euthanized after falling and breaking her legs. Animal rights activist organization PETA criticized Eight Belles's jockey and trainer for the



Horses jockey for position before the first turn of the race. Eight Belles (in green saddle blanket) later had to be put down after her tragic fall.

horse's death, but Bennie says the criticism is unfair.

"It's wrong to say anything about the trainer or jockey," Bennie says. "[The critics] don't know what they're talking about. For a filly to run like she did and to be destroyed after the race—that's a horrible thing, horrible. I saw [Eight Belles's trainer] Larry Jones, and I gave him a hug. I told him, 'I feel so bad for what happened to your filly.' He and I teared up."

After the Kentucky Derby, Bennie returned to Pembroke Pines, Florida, to continue training his other five horses. Smooth Air went on to win the Ohio Derby. As of press time, he has earned \$600,000, making him Bennie's most successful racehorse. "We're so proud of him," Bennie says.

And Bennie's family is proud of him. His wife, two daughters, and four grandchildren all made it to Louisville

to watch Bennie on the horseracing world's biggest stage. His wife, Dianne, says Bennie has a great reputation as a trainer, and she is thrilled to see him make it to Churchill Downs. "We couldn't have asked for a better gift," she says.

Bennie is much older than most first-time Kentucky Derby trainers; legendary trainer Nick Zito was 24 when he saddled his first winner. But Bennie doesn't plan to call it quits anytime soon.

"Horse trainers don't retire," he says. "I think horse trainers just die. And that's me. No, I'm not able to work like I used to, but I don't forget much of what I've learned in the past. And you're never too old to learn."

A frequent contributor to ELDR, Fred Minnick (fredwrite.com) is a professional writer and photographer based in Louisville, Kentucky.