For those who follow the seasonal Kentucky Derby prep races, this weekend is one not to be missed. It's the bicoastal equine equivalent of Super Tuesday, with the Wood Memorial, at New York's Aqueduct, and the Santa Anita Derby, not far from Los Angeles. By the end of the day, we should be able to distinguish the three-year-olds who look regal on paper but just won't be good enough to win in Louisville next month from those awesomely pedigreed horses that have a real shot at immortality.

The foregoing could have been written almost any year, but what makes this weekend newsworthy right now are two factors, neither of which is independent. First, the Wood has attracted a lineup as competitive as any in years. You'd probably have to go back to the Dinkins administration to find an overall field this strong, which is tremendously good news for the beleaguered racetrack in the flight path of JFK. Aqueduct in April has never been the most bucolic of settings, and the past few years have seen any number of horrors. Aqueduct's leading trainer, Richard Dutrow, Jr., was ruled off the track for excessivedrug-related suspensions. On top of that, there's been a rash of breakdowns, malfeasance by officials, and shrinking field sizes—so much so that the five-day weekly racing schedule contracted to four halfway during the winter meet.

But there's nothing more tonic than a compelling Wood Memorial to juice up attendance figures and jazz up the vibe at the dreary Big A—and the entries this year promise to do just that. Todd Pletcher's Revolutionary, off a crushing score in the Tampa Bay Derby, ships to New York one win away from being sent off as the likely favorite in the Kentucky Derby, but he'll have to hold off not only the unde- feated Vyjack, trained by Dutrow epigone Rudy Rodriguez, but also the underachieving but still promising Normandy Invasion, who lost all chance in his last start in the Risen Star in New Orleans when he stumbled badly out of the gate. Normally the hometown crowd would be expected to be solidly in the corner of Vyjack, a working-class gelding who captured the Gotham Stakes last month, but Rodriguez inherited not just Dutrow's horses when the trainer was ordered off the grounds. He seems to have picked up his tendency to get suspended for drug-related offenses as well: just this week he completes a twenty-day suspension for two medication positives on a different horse.

Both the Santa Anita Derby and the Wood are even more central this year to who makes it to the Louisville starting gate in May for a second reason. In previous years, you could get a colt or filly into the Kentucky Derby if he or she had sufficient earnings. It didn't mat- ter whether the purse came from Dubai or Delta Downs—it was only the total dollars earned that ultimately counted. This year, Ken- tucky Derby officials reformed the entry policy, allocating a point system to a handful of key races, which stripped the bodacious pots of some less prestigious preps of any significance.

What that means is that a horse like Normandy Invasion, who looked like a million as a two-year-old, has to run first or second to punch his ticket to Kentucky. This do-or-die setup has already eliminated last year's two- year-old champ, Shanghai Bobby, from consideration after his lackluster off-the-board finish in the Florida Derby last weekend. And it almost certainly rules out the best three-year-old of either sex to race this year—Dreaming of Julia, who finished two seconds faster in the Gulfstream Oaks, a race restricted to fillies, than Orb, the winner of the same day's Florida Derby. Her dazzling performance gar- nered comparisons to Rachel Alexander, but we likely won't see her take on the colts until the Preakness, if at all. The new point system is hardly perfect— though it has for the most part received only light criticism from trainers and owners. But nobody's happier about it than the officials of the New York Racing Association, which will enjoy its day in the sun on Saturday.

Press release text by Eric Banks

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