

It was 20 years ago that trainer Shug McGaughey came to Churchill Downs with the favorite, Easy Goer. The 2-year-old champ had turned in an awe-inspiring performance with his 13-length romp in the Gotham Stakes (gr. II), in which he missed the world record by a fifth of a second. But the son of Alydar could only finish second in the Kentucky Derby (gr. I) to Sunday Silence.

This year McGaughey is hoping to win his first Derby with Imperial Council, a colt that was beaten 8½ lengths in the Gotham while making his stakes debut and his first start around two turns.

So, why are most people so high on the son of Empire Maker? It's simple. From the first time he set foot on the racetrack, he has displayed all the signs you look for in a top-class horse. He has tremendous natural speed but can rate off the pace; he has an easy, fluid way of moving that makes him appear light on his feet; he is the consummate pro in the way he runs; and he is bred for classic distances.

Following standout victories in his final start at 2 and first start at 3, he made his stakes debut, stretching out from 6½ furlongs to 1¼ miles. Although he was expected to sit right off the pace, he was taken far back by new rider Rajiv Maragh, some 10 lengths off the lead, over a generally speed-favoring Aqueduct inner track. Still far back turning for home, he looked to have no shot to hit the board. By the time Imperial Council got running, I Want Revenge was long gone.

But Imperial Council still put in a big stretch run to get second in what most people felt was a good step forward.

Now he gets regular rider Edgar Prado back in the Wood Memorial (gr. I). If he takes another big step forward, McGaughey will have a shot to get that elusive first Derby win. 🏆

IMPERIAL COUNCIL

Dark bay or brown colt foaled
Jan. 21, 2006. Bred in Kentucky
by G. Watts Humphrey Jr.

Empire Maker	Unbridled
	Toussaud
Jaramar Rain	Thunder Gulch
	Jaramar Miss

Should Imperial Council and The Pamplemousse line up together in the starting gate at Churchill Downs May 2, bragging rights will be up for grabs in a sort of family feud between second cousins. Each claims grade II winner Special Warmth as his third dam. And while The Pamplemousse might hold the edge in experience, Imperial Council can claim a pedigree more honed toward the classics. After all, his sire is Belmont Stakes (gr. I) winner Empire Maker, who is by Kentucky Derby (gr. I) winner Unbridled, out of a grade I-winning mare (Toussaud) who is the daughter of an Irish Derby (Ire-I) winner (El Gran Senor). Imperial Council's dam, Jaramar Rain, is a graded stakes-placed daughter of Derby-Belmont winner Thunder Gulch out of a mare by a Preakness-Belmont winner Risen Star, whose third-place finish in the Derby kept him from emulating the feat of his Triple Crown-winning sire, Secretariat.

As if that weren't enough, Imperial Council is inbred to Derby winner and classic sire Northern Dancer 4x5. Although he is inbred to the speedy Mr. Prospector 4 (Fappiano) x 4 (Gulch), both lines also introduce female families with close ties to the classic distances. While grandsire Unbridled may be by the brilliant miler Fappiano, his dam is a daughter of 10-furlong specialist Le Fabuleux, who at 3 won four stakes, including the Prix du Jockey-Club (French Derby). Great grandsire Gulch may have been a champion sprinter, but when bred to the Storm Bird mare Line of Thunder, he sired Thunder Gulch. Although not a stakes winner, Line of Thunder ran a close second in the group I Cheveley Park Stakes at 2 and had enough class to finish fourth in the 10-furlong Sun Chariot Stakes at 3. Her dam, Shoot a Line, won the Irish Oaks over 12 furlongs and is a daughter of High Line, who won three successive Jockey Club Cups over 16 furlongs of Newmarket's turf.

Jaramar Rain, who won the nine-furlong New Castle Handicap, descends from the hardy California stock developed by E.B. Johnston's Old English Rancho. Imperial Council's first three dams averaged 24 starts, a respectable figure given the climate surrounding horses of quality these days. 🏆