

Focus Group a tepid favorite in 1 1/2-mile Sycamore

By: Marty McGee



LEXINGTON, Ky. – The time-worn advertising adage of “But wait, there’s more!” is for anyone who thought all the important stuff was already done at the Keeneland fall meet.

Graded stakes will be run on four consecutive days this week at Keeneland, starting Thursday with the Grade 3, \$150,000 Sycamore for 3-year-olds and up. It’s another good one, with a near-capacity field and no standout favorite ready to go 1 1/2 miles (three turns) around a turf course that has already withstood a good deal of heady

action through the first half of the 17-day meet.

Focus Group, a Chad Brown trainee already with a Grade 2 victory to his credit this year, will spot his rivals four to seven pounds under the allowance conditions of the 25th Sycamore. In his last eight starts dating to July 2018, the 5-year-old horse has earned Beyer Speed Figures in the narrow range of 94 to 100, underlining his consistency while likely to make him a lukewarm choice in a well-matched group.

Jose Ortiz will be aboard Focus Group when he breaks from post 5 in a field of 11. Brown already has won two Grade 1 turf races at this meet, with Uni in the First Lady and Cambier Parc in the Queen Elizabeth II Challenge Cup.

Mike Maker, always a threat in these turf marathons, counters with the uncoupled duo of Space Mountain (post 3, Corey Lanerie) and Marzo (post 10, Ricardo Santana Jr.), both of them claimed for \$62,500 this year. Space Mountain was a last-out winner of the Remington Green on the Oklahoma Derby undercard, and Marzo earned a career-high 94 last month over the Churchill Downs turf when narrowly defeated in his first start in Maker’s care.

Santana replaces Florent Geroux, who was named on Marzo but is sidelined indefinitely after being injured Sunday morning in a training accident.

Another top challenger is Nakamura (post 4, Javier Castellano), a Maryland-bred 4-year-old who had a three-race win streak snapped in his latest start at Laurel Park when a close fourth in the Japan Cup. His trainer, Graham Motion, is a three-time winner of the Sycamore, having won with Sanagas (2011) and Holiday Star (2014-15).

Fringe players in an interesting cast include Postulation (post 6, Jorge Vargas Jr.), sharp in two starts since returning to action this summer for Michael Matz; Zumurudee (post 9, Tyler Gaffalione), in off a useful comeback last month at Colonial Downs; and My Boy Jack (post 7, James Graham), still transitioning to turf after being the second wagering choice behind Justify in the 2018 Kentucky Derby.

Rounding out the lineup are Changi, Blended Citizen, and Golden Dragon. Another would-be starter, Midnight Tea Time, has been re-entered here Friday in a turf allowance by trainer Joe Sharp and is a likely scratch.

The Sycamore, the eighth of nine Thursday races, goes at 4:57 p.m. Eastern on a card that starts at 1:05 p.m. Back-to-back allowances (races 6 and 7) directly precede the feature as opening legs of the late pick four.