

Clear Sky

Tagg runner handles mud, dominates off-the-turf stakes

BY BRANDON VALVO

When rain forces races off the turf, Barclay Tagg isn't usually the type to keep his horses in the race, often electing to scratch and wait for another spot. The trainer considered such a move with Highland Sky Wednesday after morning downpours left the turf in a bog and forced the \$100,000 John's Call Stakes to the sloppy main track.

However, when three of the original seven entrants scratched, Tagg reconsidered.

"When it came off the turf, Mike (Lakow) called me up and said a lot of people are scratching and there's only going to be three or four horses. I thought, we'll stay in and have a good

JOHN'S CALL STAKES RECAP

shot," Tagg said of a conversation with NYRA's racing secretary. "But you have to talk to the owners and get everybody's OK on it, so there's a lot that goes into it. There's other races on the horizon that he could be saved for, but then you save for them and it comes up sloppy too sometimes. It's a guessing game to a great extent."

Tagg's best guess was to stay in the field and owners Bonner Young, Gerald McManis and Jerrie Stewart McManis agreed. Highland Sky would start in the featured race, moved from 1 5/8 miles to 1 1/4 miles, alongside Redicean, Red Knight and main-track-only entrant Turco Bravo.



Dave Harmon

Highland Sky hits the line with a stakes win (a muddy one) in the John's Call.

Highland Sky broke at the back of the foursome and got two smacks on his right shoulder from Manny Franco, aboard for his 11th consecutive start. Turco Bravo broke on top and led through the stretch the first time with 3-5 favorite Red Knight pressing

the pace to his outside while Redicean dropped back to race alongside Highland Sky.

"I wasn't too happy he was stuck down on the inside because that looked a little slower I thought watch-

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John's Call —

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ing the other races,” Tagg said.

Racing into the first turn, Highland Sky advanced to race just behind Turco Bravo and to the inside of Red Knight as Turco Bravo posted an opening quarter-mile of :23.81. Positions remained unchanged through a :48.46 half. Redicean put in a brief bid along the rail while his three rivals kept several paths to the outside, but dropped out of it entering the far turn.

Past 6 furlongs in 1:13.29, Turco Bravo began to tire. Red Knight edged closer under Jose Ortiz and put a head in front midway on the bend. Franco had a strong hold of Highland Sky on the favorite's heels and angled to the far outside. Franco pulled the stick into his left hand and gave Highland Sky two whacks, knocking the whip out of Ortiz's right hand in the process.

Straightening away in the 10 path, Highland Sky struck the lead. Franco checked over his right shoulder, then his left nearing the furlong marker, but found himself alone in the sea of slop. Highland Sky kicked away to win by 8 1/4 lengths in 2:04.32.

The win was Highland Sky's first since taking an optional claimer at Belmont Park June 24, 2018. Since then, he raced exclusively in turf graded stakes with a third in the Grade 2 Belmont Gold Cup Invitational his best finish. Despite the losing



Tod Marks

Trainer Barclay Tagg and Manny Franco celebrate the win.

streak, Tagg has been happy with Highland Sky and expected good results on the drop into a listed stakes.

“I thought everything was there that needed to be there if he could put it together,” Tagg said. “Manny has the idea on him now. He's got to be controlled a little bit early. Sometimes he gets away and he fights the jock and it takes it all out of him. If he can be contained early without fighting with him, that's the whole key to him. Then he's got plenty left at the end.

“There wasn't anything else that long around,” Tagg continued. “He's capable of going any dis-

tance, I think. I don't think 2 miles is too much for him or anything. It looked like a good spot, it wasn't a very big purse, but that keeps the real tough ones out of it, too. It looked like it would be a good chance to win a race.”

The John's Call victory improved Highland Sky's record to 5-for-25 with \$724,494 earned. Tagg won the race for the third time (in 16 runnings), following Auguri's off-the-turf score in 2006 and Summer Patriot's win in 2008.

Highland Sky is part of a big group of stakes horses from Young's breeding program tracing to Highland Mills, the third dam of the John's Call winner. A foal of 1982, Highland Mills lost all five starts on the track, but produced stakes winners Miss Josh, Royal Mountain Inn, Highland Springs and Highland Crystal.



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