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Injury clouds Derby field Scientific Scienti

By Richard Rosenblatt THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

LOUISVILLE, Ky. — The strongest Kentucky Derby favorite in 11 years might have an Achilles' heel.

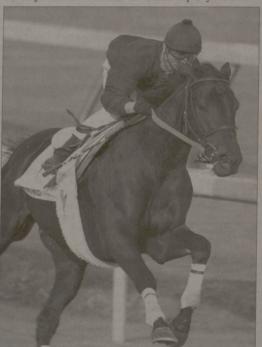
Empire Maker's bruised foot was again the focus at Churchill Downs, two days before the race. Trainer Bobby Frankel proclaimed his 6-5 favorite "100 percent" after a jog Thursday morning, but opposing trainer Ron Ellis said, "It's not an ideal

'It would be sad for the race to lose the big favorite, the drawing card," said Ellis, who trains 12-1 choice Atswhatimtalknbout. "A lot of people are looking forward to him running. I know they think he's a superstar. The way he's run, he could be."
The way Empire Maker worked out with a spe-

cial three-quarter shoe on his bruised right front foot reaffirmed Frankel's belief that his colt is ready to handle 16 challengers in the 1 1/4-mile Derby on Saturday.

"It's as good as he's ever jogged. No big deal," said Frankel, who also trains 8-1 co-third choice Peace Rules. "These things are an everyday occurrence for me and every other trainer.

The bruise was discovered after Empire Maker won the Wood Memorial at Aqueduct on April 12, a victory that established him as the top 3-year-old.



Practice rider Rob Smith works out with Offlee Wild on Tuesday at Churchill Downs.

News of the injury, however, didn't come or until Tuesday, after Empire Maker returned from

morning gallop. Veterinarian Ken Reed has treated the bruisew a moist, warm wrap to help reduce swelling and he soaked the foot in warm water and Epsom salts. Par of the shoe was cut away below the bruise to he relieve pressure and allow the hoof to absorb more

liquid while soaking The horse took Wednesday off, only walking inside Frankel's barn. But the son of 1990 Derb winner Unbridled was back on the track Thursday

"He looked fine, but he's never been a great jog ger," Frankel said. "He's got those long legs and doesn't fire them up and down like pistons. He'sa better galloper than jogger

A 1 1/2-mile gallop Friday is next, followed by Derby morning gallop leading up to the 6:04 pm post time. A gallop should be a better indication how Empire Maker handles the track.

"I've had horses with bruises that are gone in day and horses with bruises that take a month,

Bruise or no bruise, Empire Maker faces a tough task trying to give Frankel his first Derby victor Only one favorite has won the race in the last 2: years: Fusaichi Pegasus in 2000.

D. Wayne Lukas, who sends out long shots Scrimshaw and Ten Cents a Shine in his quest fora fifth Derby win, said the injury "can't be a positive in any way, shape or form.

Trainers can scratch a horse from the Derby as late as 15 minutes before the preceding race. After that, only racing officials can pull a horse.

Once Empire Maker leaves from the No. 12 pos

with Hall of Famer Jerry Bailey aboard, nobodynot even Frankel — has any idea if the bruise will affect the colt's performance.

"I wish it was that easy to predict they're going to run good every time," Frankel said. "But it's not the nature of the game. Until he proves he's a Secretariat or Seattle Slew or one of those, you're always eligible to run a bad race

Empire Maker is the biggest Derby favorite sino Arazi was 6-5 in the morning line before finishin eighth in 1992. After impressive wins in the Florid Derby and Wood, Empire Maker was already being touted as a Triple Crown threat, in part because his regal pedigree and Hall of Fame connections. But Frankel balked when asked what separate

Empire Maker from the other 3-year-olds. 'Let him do the talking," the trainer said, "Ican brag all I want about a horse. I've been disappoint

ed so much.

Frankel was 0-for-38 in Breeders' Cup races before Squirtle Squirt won the 2001 BC Sprint. And he's 0-for-7 in Triple Crown races, but has three sec onds: Aptitude in the 2000 Derby and Belmont Stakes, and Medaglia d'Oro in the 2002 Belmont.

In Empire Maker and Peace Rules, though Frankel has one of the strongest Derby hands ever.

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