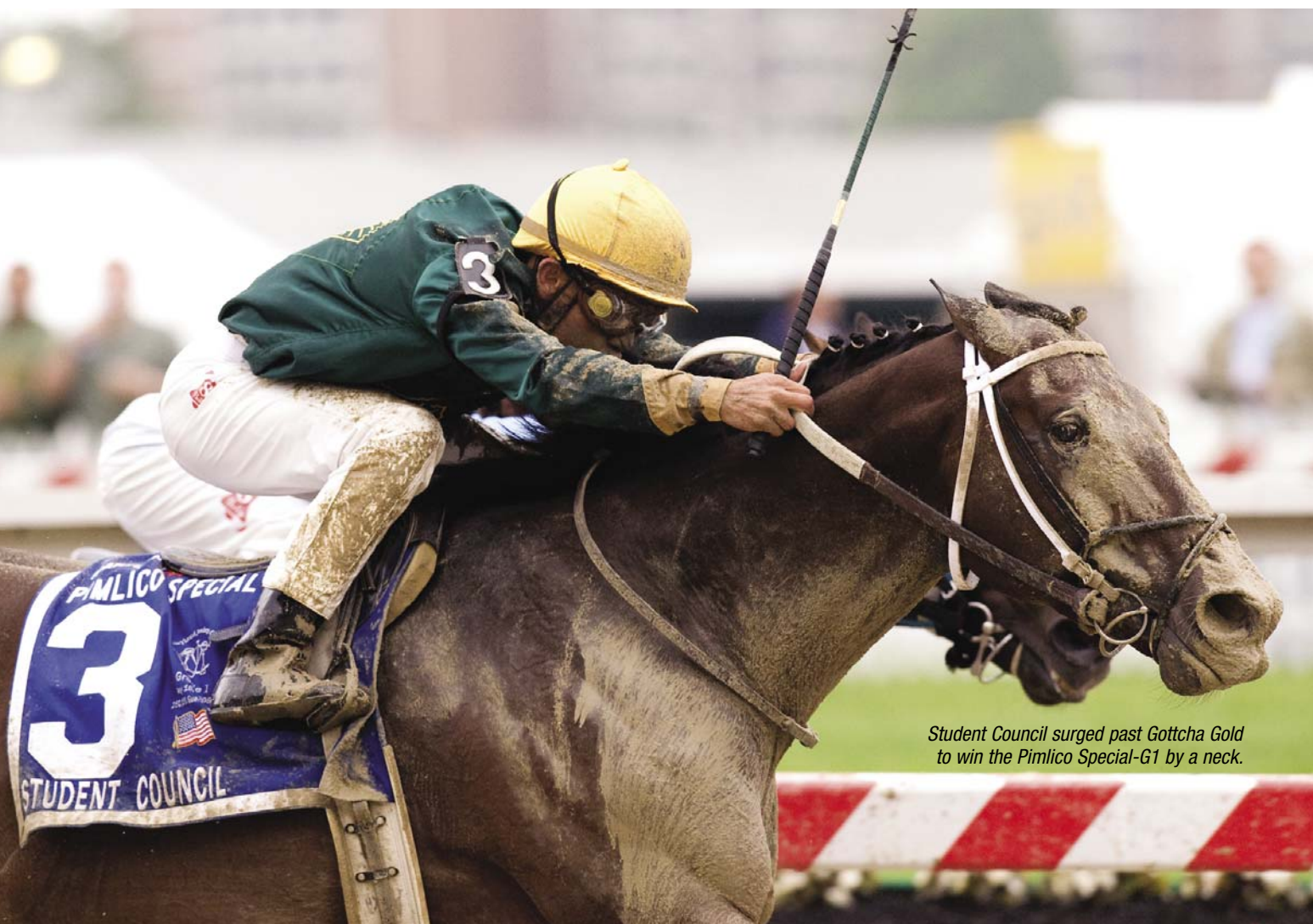


Student Council rules in Grade 1 Pimlico Special

Maryland's historic event for older runners returned to the schedule and showcased a strong performance by an on-again, off-again handicap star. by Cindy Deubler



Student Council surged past Gottcha Gold to win the Pimlico Special-G1 by a neck.

JIM MCCUE

Rosendo (Ro) Parra, a wunderkind in the world of computer retailing, became hooked on racing as a teenager accompanying his father to tracks in Maryland.

The family had moved to Maryland from Parra's native Ecuador in 1974, and not long after that he made a vow to himself: "Once I was able to afford to invest in horses, I knew that's what I wanted to do."

Now retired from a top executive post at Dell and continuing to build his fortune as a venture capitalist living in Austin, Tex., Parra, 48, returned to his childhood stomping grounds at Pimlico on May 16 and watched his Millennium Farms colorbearer Student Council rally from last to first in stirring fashion to win the 41st running of the Grade 1 Pimlico Special.

The Pimlico Special, sponsored this year by the Maryland Lottery, returned to the calendar after a one-year hiatus. The Maryland Jockey Club offered a Grade 1 race with a much more modest purse—a guaranteed \$250,000, half the value of the 2006 running won by future Horse of the Year Invasor (Arg).

With last year's Horse of the Year, Curlin, enjoying a freshening following his dominating victory in the Dubai World Cup-G1, and numerous other top prospects having been retired to stud, the 2008 handicap divisional races have turned into a smorgasbord for older runners.

Student Council, a 6-year-old son of Kingmambo purchased by Millennium Farms from breeder Will Farish in August 2007, became a rising handicap star late last summer while taking the \$1 million Pacific Classic-G1 at Del Mar a week after joining Parra's stable.

Parra has raced more than 40 stakes winners, and is the breeder of Breeders' Cup Juvenile Stakes-G1 winner Wilko, but Student Council is

his first Grade 1 winner as an owner.

When he won the Grade 2 Hawthorne Gold Cup Handicap in his second start for Millennium Farms, Student Council's value was rising fast, and he was nearly shuffled off to stud at Parra's farm in Kentucky, joining six horses already on the roster. But the plan went awry after a trip to Japan in November, in which Student Council finished eighth of 16 in the Japan Cup Dirt-G1.

Rather than retire him on a low note, Parra gave Student Council an opportunity for redemption.

"Student Council has proven to be one of the top older horses in training this year," said Parra in December. "He's sound, he's fresh, and we believe he's got more Grade 1 wins in him."

Under the care of trainer Vladimir Cerin on the West Coast, Student Council was well beaten twice at Santa Anita this winter before being sent to Steve Asmussen's Churchill Downs base. Asmussen was the trainer of record when Student Council won the stakes at Hawthorne last fall.

Asmussen, who also has Curlin in his barn, tried Student Council in the Grade 3 John B. Connally Breeders' Cup Turf Handicap on April 5 at Sam Houston; he set a very slow pace before giving way to finish seventh, beaten four lengths. That was the well-traveled Student Council's final prep before the Pimlico Special, which was his first start at Pimlico.

The Pimlico Special attracted eight other runners, led by Todd Pletcher-trained A. P. Arrow, who tested Curlin in Dubai in his previous start and finished fourth. A. P. Arrow's trip south on I-95 from New York to Baltimore on the day of the Pimlico Special proved much more eventful than flying halfway around the world. Following his morning van ride, the morning-line favorite, a son of A.P. Indy, began to show signs of colic and was scratched.

One day earlier, Nick Zito-trained Wanderin Boy, second to Invasor as the odds-on favorite in the 2006 Special, also suffered from colic after shipping to Pimlico and scratched.

Thus an evenly matched field of seven (there was only a four-pound weight spread under the handicap conditions) lined up to contest the mile and three-sixteenths Special. Rain pelted the area during the early morning hours, but by post time, with a stiff breeze and under overcast skies, the track was officially listed as muddy.

Favoritism (at 2-1) fell to Grasshopper, the colt who came tantalizingly close to knocking off Kentucky Derby winner Street Sense in the Travers Stakes-G1 last summer in his stakes debut. Owned by Farish, Edward J. Hudson Jr. and Inwood Stable, Grasshopper had a wealth of experience behind him, as his trainer Neil Howard and rider Robby Albarado captured the 2003 running of the Pimlico Special with ultimate Horse of the Year Mineshaft.

The slight second choice at 2.10-1 was the horse with the best off-track record, Centaur Farms Inc.'s Gottcha Gold. A Florida-based runner from the barn of Eddie Plesa Jr., Gottcha Gold had a win, a second and a third from three lifetime starts over a wet track, the most lucrative a second-place finish to Corinthian in the inaugural Breeders' Cup Dirt Mile over the Monmouth Park slop.

Student Council was the fourth choice at odds of 7.2-1.

When the field was sent on its way, Fair Hill-based Xchanger came out quickest, but Gottcha Gold was urged immediately to the front by Chuck Lopez, and then was able to set a leisurely, uncontested pace. After a quarter in :23.87, a half in :47.46 and three-quarters in 1:11.39 under a nice hold, Gottcha Gold held a length advantage over Xchanger.

Around the far turn, Gottcha Gold opened up on the field, while behind him the early trailers—Grasshopper, Virginia-bred Sir Whimsey and Student Council—began to make their moves.

Grasshopper, normally closer to the pace in his best efforts but as many as a half-dozen lengths off the leader on this day, made a strong move as he swung wide around the far turn, then flattened out. Neither Howard nor Albarado blamed the track; they concluded that it just wasn't his day.

"That wasn't the real Grasshopper," noted Albarado.

Guided by Shaun Bridgmohan, Student Council followed the same path as Grasshopper, with Sir Whimsey to his inside, as he set sail into the stretch. Quickly overtaking Grasshopper, Student Council took dead aim on the leader, who had moved clear by more than two lengths.

With a sixteenth to go, Gottcha Gold kept digging in, but Student Council was closing with every stride. A few yards before the wire, Student Council surged past the game pacesetter. The margin of victory was a neck; final time was 1:54.87. It was five and three-quarters lengths back to Sir Whimsey in third. Grasshopper finished fifth.

"Steve [Asmussen] had him ready for this race," said a delighted Parra. "I spoke to him just an hour before the race, and he told me to smile in the winner's circle."

The victory increased Student Council's bankroll to \$1,307,731 from 27 career starts, the majority earned since last August.

When the time is right, Student Council, out of graded stakes winner Class Kris (by Kris S.) and a half-brother to graded winner Gradepoint, will retire to Millennium Farms in Lexington, Ky., the Thoroughbred establishment that Parra purchased nine years ago. But Parra timed it perfectly for a triumphant homecoming. ✨