SPORTS

So, Who Misspelled American Pharoah?

By MELISSA HOPPERT MAY 22, 2015



With a win at the Belmont Stakes, American Pharoah, working out Friday, would be the first to win the Triple Crown since 1978. Reed Palmer Photography/Churchill Downs, via Associated Press

Two major questions hang over American Pharoah heading into the Belmont Stakes: Can he be the first horse since 1978 to win the Triple Crown? And why is his name misspelled?

The first will be answered June 6 at Belmont Park. The second answer may lie with a 64-year-old registered nurse in a tiny central Missouri town.

As American Pharoah gained prominence, his owners — Zayat Stables, led by Ahmed Zayat — were asked about the seemingly mistaken rendering of pharaoh. At first, Zayat's son Justin, the racing and stallion manager for the stable, said the mistake was made by the Jockey Club, the organization that registers thoroughbreds in the United States, Canada and Puerto Rico and approves their names. In response, the Jockey Club's president and chief operating officer, James L. Gagliano, released a statement before the Kentucky Derby saying, in part, "Since the name met all of the criteria for naming and was available, it was granted exactly as it was spelled."

Rick Bailey, the registrar for the Jockey Club for more than 11 years, added in a telephone interview that there was "no data entry on our end."

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Marsha Baumgartner, with her husband, Dave, left, in a photo provided by the couple, named American Pharoah through a contest Zayat Stables held to name its 2014 crop of 2-year-olds. Patrick Smith/Getty Images

Justin Zayat then suggested to reporters that the name was misspelled when it was submitted in a contest Zayat Stables held online in which the public was invited to name their 2014 crop of 2-year-olds.

So who submitted the winning name in the Zayat Stables contest? Marsha Baumgartner, of Barnett, Mo.

And how did she spell it?

“I don’t remember how I spelled it; I don’t want to assign blame,” she said. But, she added, “I looked up the spelling before I entered.”

Baumgartner, a horse racing fan since Secretariat swept the Crown in 1973 with a record 31-length victory in the Belmont, said this week in a telephone interview that she began following the stable’s website when Paynter, the second-place finisher in the 2012 Belmont and the winner of the Haskell Invitational that year, developed a life-threatening bout of colitis. The Zayats posted daily updates on his condition on their website and on social media.

So Baumgartner thought it would be fun to enter the contest. She submitted names for several of their foals and settled on American Pharaoh for the dark bay colt because, she said, his sire is Pioneerof the

Nile and his dam's sire was Yankee Gentleman. Ahmed Zayat is from Egypt.

The name request for American Pharoah was submitted electronically by Zayat Stables on Jan. 25, 2014, through the Jockey Club's registration website. Names can also be submitted on paper and sent by mail or fax, but about 85 percent are now submitted online, Bailey said. One to six names, ranked in order of preference, can be submitted, and now that tools are available to help owners sort through which names are available, the average is two or less.

In American Pharoah's case, only one name was submitted. The process takes minutes, and at the end, a screen asks the owner to "carefully review" the form for "completeness and accuracy."

Then the Jockey Club gets to work, checking to see if the name is within the rules, which include an 18-character limit (Pioneerof the Nile was rendered that way to conform to this guideline) and a ban on obscene or offensive phrases. Search engines, Wikipedia and Urban Dictionary are helpful in the vetting process, Bailey said.



American Pharoah's name was submitted to the Jockey Club, the organization that registers thoroughbreds in the United States, Canada and Puerto Rico. There was some debate over whether the Jockey Club misspelled the word "pharaoh," or if the name was submitted to it with the misspelling included, transposing the "a" and the "o."
Patrick Smith/Getty Images

Three people must sign off on each name. The deadline to submit a name without incurring a fee is Feb. 1 of the foal's 2-year-old year. In 2014, 36,671 names were submitted, and 26,792 were granted approval. The most common reason a name is rejected is that it is similar to a name already in use. In 2014, there were 5,144 rejections for similar names.

Misspellings, which are often done on purpose to match a name in a horse's pedigree or for personal reasons, are not uncommon and are not flagged by the Jockey Club. In American Pharoah's case, he was already registered and had paperwork on file, so once his name was approved, he merely had a small name tag affixed to his registration.

Every year, the Jockey Club provides a list of recently released names to owners. The names of horses over the age of 10 who have not been actively racing or breeding for five years are on this list. But winning big races, the way American Pharoah has, lands a name on the historically important list, of which there are currently 17,000.

So now another horse cannot be named American Pharaoh — spelled correctly — for instance, because it is too similar to the Derby and Preakness winner's name and could confuse the betting public and prospective buyers.

Baumgartner and her husband, Dave, who is the president and chief executive of the Bank of Versailles in Versailles, Mo., attended American Pharoah's Rebel Stakes and Arkansas Derby victories at Oaklawn Park in Hot Springs, Ark. They met the horse and joined the Zayats in the winner's circle after the Rebel. Marsha Baumgartner purchased a copy of the photograph and is planning to frame it after Triple Crown season.

The Baumgartners also attended their first Kentucky Derby this year, but they did not reconnect with the Zayats there. As American Pharoah decisively won the Preakness on a sloppy track in Baltimore, they watched from the comfort of their home in Barnett.

They do not have plans to travel to New York for the Belmont. "I understand it's sold out," she said matter-of-factly. (As of Friday, there were about 25,000 general admission tickets left.)

Asked if she would host a party, she replied, "I haven't thought about

that, but it's a good idea."

She did not receive a prize for her winning name suggestion, and she has garnered little attention for it, despite the horse's soaring success. She said she was O.K. with that.

"I just hope he can win the Triple Crown," she said. "I feel pretty strongly that he can do it, but it depends so much on luck."

As for the hubbub about the misspelled name, she said, "Horses can't spell, anyway."

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