

Q&A with Triple Crown winner Mike Smith

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Mike Smith came to Kentucky Downs for the first time on Thursday, Sept. 6, but it wasn't to ride races. Rather he was on hand to sign Coady Photography-designed prints commemorating Justify's 2018 Triple Crown to raise money for three charities: Old Friends thoroughbred retirement farms, Permanently Disabled Jockeys Fund and The Giving Circle.

Smith met with the media before he started the signing session. Here are highlights of the interview:

On being at Kentucky Downs for the first time, but not riding races:



"We're blessed to be able to achieve what we're able to achieve, and along with that comes the opportunity to raise some money for some great organizations and charities: PDJF, Old Friends, The Giving Circle. These are wonderful, wonderful charities. All I've got to do is give up my time. I have a lot of that right now. So I'm so blessed to be able to come down here and thankful that Kentucky Downs asked me to come to raise some money for some great people."

When it was so long from Affirmed in 1978 until another Triple Crown winner in American Pharoah in 2015, did you wonder if it could ever happen again? And then when it did, did you think, "There we go for another 37 years"?

"Was it possible to get it done? The reason it started to change and get so difficult to get done is because the fields started getting bigger, especially in the Derby. Back in the day, you didn't see a 20-horse field, really. There were times you'd see seven, eight, nine, 10-horse field. Now you've got 20 in there no matter what. It's just a difficult, difficult race to win. But I always thought it could be done. It was so close. Matter of fact, Bob (Baffert) got so close two other times, with Silver Charm in 1997 and Real Quiet in 1998, before he pulled it off. Of course he missed (winning) the 2001 Derby with Point Given and then won the last two legs. It was definitely doable, it was just going to take a very, very special horse to get it done. And that was American Pharoah, and then for a horse to pop up three years later by Justify was just incredible."

“(Baffert) can make a lot of riders’ and owners’ dreams come true. He’s a brilliant, brilliant horseman. His record speaks for itself. My words don’t justify him, speaking of the word justify.

“Every now and then it will hit me. I’ll just be walking around the house and just get up from the chair and realize that we won the Triple Crown. Man, I’ve got to sit down again after I think about it. Trying to put it into words what it means and



feels like is just impossible to do. It’s just life-changing. It’s the most complete, humble feeling you could possibly feel. Humble is the best feeling I’ve ever felt. So magnify it times thousands and thousands and that’s what it feels like.

“I haven’t watched (the Belmont replay) one time. It’s so vivid in my imagination that I don’t need to watch it. I remember every single step. From the time I got on him in the paddock, I truly remember

every step like it was just happening. (At the finish) it was just amazing. I just wanted to hug everything and everyone. I truly did. It’s just incredible. I was high-fiving and telling everybody they were the greatest. Here I just won the Triple Crown and I’m telling everybody else how great they were.”

Was it a different feeling from winning the Derby, which winners have described as being surreal, an out-of-body experience that you cannot even fathom?

“Oh yeah. The Derby is a dream come true. You have flashbacks being a child, all the work you put in to get there. But the Triple Crown is just overwhelming. It’s life-changing. I can’t put it into words. I wish I could. I honestly wish and hope everybody gets to feel that feeling, because it’s amazing... You feel all those things winning the Derby: out-of-body experiences, flashbacks. When you win the Triple Crown, I crossed the wire and I literally was floating. I didn’t even feel the weight on the horse. I didn’t have no weight. I was a butterfly. I wanted to float over everybody and just give them a hug. That’s what it feels like.”

When in the Belmont did you feel like you would win the Triple Crown?

“You know what’s amazing? And I don’t ever think this, I don’t ever put the cart before the horse and all that kind of stuff, but when I crossed the wire in the Preakness, it was pretty much Triple Crown for me. I thought all along that



Justify’s favorite track would probably be the Belmont. He’s a big powerful, long-striding horse and I thought those turns would suit him really well. I thought as long as I could stay on leaving the gate and I got him out going forward that he was going to be extremely difficult to beat. At that point, win, lose or draw, I was just happy for

opportunity, so blessed for the opportunity to even go for a Triple Crown. I didn’t really think about winning or not winning. I certainly didn’t think about losing. I was just happy for the opportunity. Because I knew that given the opportunity, without stumbling or anything weird happening, he was probably going to win the race. He was that good.

“I dreamed of the opportunity to win the Triple Crown. I actually dreamed of winning it. I’ve always felt, for some odd reason, that I was going to win one. But it took so long. And to win it at this stage of my career, I think that’s the reason God made me wait so long. Because I think I appreciate it so much more. Because I don’t think I would have at a young age. You have so much ahead of you: ‘OK, We won the Triple Crown. Now what?’ Now I really enjoy and embrace and appreciate everything in life, really period, a whole lot more. So it was meant to be at this late stage. And it can be done again. Because I ain’t done yet.”

You haven’t been at Kentucky Downs long, but your initial impressions?

“I just absolutely love it. The purses I just amazing. The quality of racing is incredible. I’m going to make it a point, you can bet, to ride here next year. If I’m healthy enough, I’ll be here.”