



# 50 *to* 1

IS A SURE BET

New movie dramatizes the 2009 upset victory of Mine That Bird in the Kentucky Derby.

photos and story by Evalyn Bemis

# 50 to 1



*Calvin and Bird share a tender moment at the premiere.*

The red carpet was rolled out and ready. The marquee of the historic theater read “World Premiere, 50 to 1.” Photographers, reporters and TV crews had staked out their turf to capture the stars upon arrival.

The first to make an entrance was the leading man. He had been groomed to look his best for his moment in the spotlight. He wore shiny silver shoes and a luxurious coat of a rich dark hue. A hint of mint could be detected as he leaned over the barrier to greet his fans. “Look, is it really Bird?” said a young girl to her mother as she offered a peppermint.

Indeed it was. Mine That Bird (Birdstone x Mining My Own) and his connections had come to the opening of “50 to 1” at the Kimo Theater in Albuquerque, NM in March. [Spoiler alert: the film is based on the true



*Bird's co-owner Leonard Blach DVM, sports his 50 to 1 belt buckle at the world premiere.*



*Country music star Christian Kane plays owner Mark Allen as a fun-loving and charismatic guy with the ability to turn an RV breakdown into an excuse for a party.*



*Film Director Jim Wilson, jockey Calvin Borel, and Lisa Borel.*



*Trainer Chip Wooley hauled Mine That Bird in a beat-up old bumper-pull trailer, from New Mexico to Churchill Down, and history.*



Jockey Calvin Borel played himself in the movie. This still from the film portrays Bird and Borel pulling away from the rest of the Derby field on their way to the finish line. Photo courtesy of 50 to 1

story of Mine That Bird's improbable victory in the Kentucky Derby, so yes, he does win the race]. Bird traveled from the Double Eagle Ranch in Roswell, NM to attend the movie's premiere, riding in a custom Turnbow trailer emblazoned with his own logo. It was a much more fitting rig for the winner of over \$2,200,000 than the beat-up old bumper-pull that he was hauled in to Kentucky in April of 2009.

Now eight-years-old and having nothing more pressing to do than deciding which side of the pasture to graze, Bird came out of retirement to play himself in some of the scenes in the movie. That's him eating grass at a rest stop somewhere on the way to Louisville, while his trainer Chip Wooley and exercise rider Alex discuss whether he has a chance in the race (not much of one is the honest assessment). That's him hanging out in the real stall where he was stabled at Churchill Downs. And that's him with Calvin Borel, the jockey whose brilliant maneuvering

through the mud and mayhem of a 19-horse race took them from dead last before the turn for home to going away by 6 ¾ lengths at the finish.

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Apparently that is something hard to do. Certainly he was a natural when he h a m m e d it up with Bird at the premiere.

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*Calvin Borel's expression says it all, moments after pulling off one of the biggest come-from-behind victories in Derby history. Photo courtesy of Wiki Commons*





Calvin was given high marks by 50 to 1 director Jim Wilson for the excellent job he did playing himself in the movie. Here they are on the set of the movie 50 to 1. Photo courtesy of 50 to 1

They made funny faces at each other while Calvin unwrapped a handful of mints, these being Bird's favorite thing in the world.

The other stars of the movie arrived on what looked like a rock-and-roll band's tour bus. It was covered with images from the film and would be carrying the cast on a seven-state promotional trip, that started in New Mexico and would end in Kentucky shortly before the 2014 edition of the Run for the Roses. This novel approach was Writer/Producer/Director Wilson's way to build excitement for the film after getting the cold shoulder from Hollywood. Apparently movies featuring horses have not been big at the box office so 50 to 1 almost didn't make it out of the starting gate. But just like Bird made a dreamer out of his trainer and owners, so too his story inspired Wilson, who staked his reputation as the producer of *Dancing With Wolves* and his knowledge as an owner of racehorses to get this one made.



"Nobody gave them a chance."

Skeet Ulrich is cast as down-on-his-luck trainer Chip Wooley. He is at his best when he comes to the rescue of others, whether it is improving the odds in a bar fight, using his crutches in interesting ways, or figuring out Bird's preference for running from behind.

Country music star Christian Kane plays owner Mark Allen as a fun-loving and charismatic guy with the ability to turn an RV breakdown into an excuse for a party. You want these guys with their black cowboy hats to trump all those snobby owners at Churchill Downs.

William Devane is cast as co-owner Leonard Blach DVM and represents the sober side of Bird's connections. Madelyn Deutch is vivacious as Bird's exercise jockey and looks pretty good with a stick in her back pocket. Bruce Wayne Eckelman plays thoroughbred trainer Bob Baffert with an uncanny physical resemblance and a certain prissiness. You have to wonder – can anyone work with horses and really stay that impeccably dressed?

Chip Wooley got his first look at the film at the premiere, watching it with his brother, assistant trainer Bill Wooley, his sisters and their husbands, and many other family members and friends. When asked his impression, he answered guardedly, "it makes a

good story." He said the best part for him was re-living the race, from the moment the gates opened, to Bird's astonishing run from so far off the lead that the race-caller didn't even see him until the last few yards to the finish line.

The audience was equally thrilled, erupting with cheers as Bird began to roar up the rail. Actual race footage was used, particularly the overhead view shot from the blimp, but it would be easy to think it was a Hollywood rendition, so fantastic were those 2 minutes and 2.66 seconds.

The film fittingly ends with the wreath of roses draped over Bird's neck and all the 'cowboys from New Mexico' grinning ear-to-ear. He was only the second gelding to win the Derby since 1929 and the second biggest upset winner. A two-dollar win wager paid \$103.20.

Mine That Bird ran in the Preakness two weeks later under Mike Smith. He finished closely behind filly Rachel Alexander, ridden by her regular jockey Calvin Borel. With Calvin back in the tack, Bird placed third in the Belmont. His owners engaged D.



Bird was only the second gelding to win the Derby since 1929 and the second biggest upset winner at 50 to 1 odds. A two-dollar win wager paid \$103.20. photo courtesy of Churchill Downs

Wayne Lukas to take over his training from Chip Wooley but he never won another race and was retired to New Mexico in November 2010.

When Bird returned to Churchill Downs for the filming of 50 to 1, Calvin said Bird knew exactly where he

was and what was expected of him and that it was such a pleasure to ride him again. Oh, that all racehorse stories should have such happy endings, with a surfeit of mints and one's own special trailer for road trips and appearances. In that way, Bird is one in a million.

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