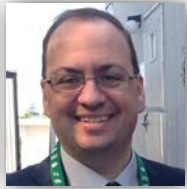




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TO THE
CROWN

SEASON 19 WEEK 1 – January 5, 2024



By Jeremy Plonk
Exclusive to Countdowntothecrown.com

Editor's Note: The 19th season of Countdown to the Crown – the longest-running, same-authored Triple Crown scouting report in the Thoroughbred industry – offers the most comprehensive analysis of the 3-year-old scene. Countdowntothecrown.com is the home each week from Jan. 6 through the Belmont Stakes, and Countdown keeps you apprised of the rising stars of the sophomore class.

3 Things You Won't Read Anywhere Else

Opinions are like a College Football Playoff semifinal finish at 12:40 am ET. Don't sleep on 'em ... you might miss an epic.

1. As much of a Baffert-Cox-Pletcher trap as we're apt to fall into, it's worth noting that Gustavo Delgado and Jena Antonucci won two-thirds of last year's Triple Crown. The previous 2 campaigns brought us Eric Reed and Michael McCarthy peppered amongst the heavyweight names. The optimist in me still wants to believe a good one can come from anywhere ... even in a super-trainer era.
2. The solid effort by Derma Sotogake despite a terrible start in last year's Derby – coupled with his return runner-up in the Breeders' Cup Classic – should embolden Japan to continue its pursuit of the roses ... stronger than ever.
3. Sophomores with extra pedigree intrigue to follow this year include HUNT BALL (Bill Mott), the half-brother to Cody's Wish; Mage's full-brother DORNOCH (Danny Gargan); and HEARTLAND (Bob Baffert), the Justify colt who is half-bro to champion Classic Empire. These types rarely make a big impact, but are fun to keep tabs on.

You Asked for It ... It's Back This Week's Top-20

1. FIERCENESS (Todd Pletcher)
2. NYSOS (Bob Baffert)
3. KNIGHTSBRIDGE (Bill Mott)
4. SIERRA LEONE (Chad Brown)
5. SNEAD (Brendan Walsh)
6. PARCHMENT PARTY (Bill Mott)
7. MUTH (Bob Baffert)
8. DORNOCH (Danny Gargan)
9. CATCHING FREEDOM (Brad Cox)
10. TRACK PHANTOM (Steve Asmussen)
11. NASH (Brad Cox)
12. HONOR MARIE (Whit Beckman)
13. LIGHTLINE (Brad Cox)
14. RESILIENCE (Bill Mott)
15. TIMBERLAKE (Brad Cox)
16. TUSCAN GOLD (Chad Brown)
17. LOCKED (Todd Pletcher)
18. PRINCE OF MONACO (Bob Baffert)
19. ETHAN ENERGY (Brad Cox)
20. THE WINE STEWARD (Mike Maker)

This Week In Countdown History

2006

The inaugural season of *Countdown to the Crown* kicked off with eventual Kentucky Derby winner Barbaro's victory in the January 1 Tropical Park Derby at Calder.

The 2-5 favorite drew off by 3-3/4 lengths to improve to 3-for-3 lifetime (all on turf) and add to his Laurel Futurity score.

Barbaro would make his first start on dirt next out in the Holy Bull at Gulfstream, winning that and the Florida Derby before his romping victory in the Run for the Roses.

Keeping Ourselves Honest Picks NOW & Past

Last week's free *Countdown* selections: 0: 0-0-0 (0%)
2024 *Countdown* season selections: 0: 0-0-0 (0%)

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2023 *Countdown* season selections: 37: 14-6-4 (38%)
2022 *Countdown* season selections: 35: 12-8-1 (34%)
2021 *Countdown* season selections: 35: 10-5-6 (29%)
2020 *Countdown* season selections: 36: 11-8-3 (31%)

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We take pride in what we do, and have accountability.
Each week we'll update how our top picks perform.





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Fearless Forecast - Previews

Undercard Notables for Preview

Fri (1/5) Gulfstream Park Race 7 ALW: Rare 1-1/16M dirt ALW this time of year lured 6 runners, including \$1M purchase CHANGE OF COMMAND (Shug McGaughey), a 6-1/2 length local winner after shipping south last month. His 2YO form included solid pursuits of top-flight FIERCENESS (Todd Pletcher) and SIERRA LEONE (Chad Brown), the BC Juvenile winner and Remsen runner-up, respectively. And CHANGE OF COMMAND's career arc looks identical to this point as to 2013 Derby winner Orb for the same barn. Interesting if he continues to move forward and a top-10 sort next week if so. Challenges include fellow last-out winners RAGUEL (Brendan Walsh), who is by Justify, and CARDINALE (Todd Pletcher).

Fri (1/5) Oaklawn Race 7 MSW: 1M test lured 12 runners, topped by narrow debut runner-up CRUSHED IT (Brad Cox). Barn trained the Dogwood Stakes-winning dam Pinch Hit. Should route by Dialed In. Rail speed GOLD BRICK (Bret Calhoun) won't be easy to reel in with two-turn experience and strong form. Rookie SARPEDON (Ron Moquett) may be one to watch, by Medaglia d'Oro and whose second dam is superstar turf route mare Sealy Hill. \$1.15M purchase TORNADO ROAD (D. Wayne Lukas) showed mild improvement in his second start.

Fri (1/5) Tampa Bay Downs Race 6 MSW: 6F sprint features debut of \$725K Good Magic colt ARI'S MAGIC (Christophe Clement) in what otherwise looks like a very modest bunch. Damsire leans sprint and big 2YO sales pricetag likely means brilliance, but not necessarily a classics player.

Fri (1/5) Turfway Park Race 5 MSW: 6F sprint includes Godolphin rookie MONTEVALLO (Eoin Harty), a Bernardini colt out of a half-sister to champion Folklore. Third-timer BOWSTREET (Paulo Lobo) is half-brother to Hot Rod Charlie. Good-looking bunch includes pursuer of impressive Churchill winner KNIGHTSBRIDGE (Bill Mott), namely SHARP SHOT (Brad Cox).

Fri (1/5) Sunland Park Race 9 MSW: Opening day card in New Mexico includes intriguing second-timer CAPTAIN FABULOUS (Joel Marr), a home-bred half-brother to multiple G1-winning turf star mare Going to Vegas, vs. a very non-descript cast.

Sat (1/6) Gulfstream Race 10 \$100K Limehouse Stakes: Breeders' Cup Juvenile Turf Sprint runner-up VALIANT FORCE (Jorge Delgado) tries dirt for the first time while making his initial start after a barn change. He's 1 of 3 Delgado trainees in this 7-runner sprint over 6 furlongs, including Breeders' Cup Juvenile also-ran CUBAN THUNDER (Jorge Delgado).

Sat (1/6) Gulfstream Race 11 \$125K Dania Beach Stakes: Turf milers meet, featuring G2 Pilgrim winner AGATE ROAD (Todd Pletcher) and Laurel Futurity hero AIR RECRUIT (Arnaud Delacour), both exiting the Breeders' Cup Juvenile Turf, where they finished three-quarters of a length apart. FRONTLINE WARRIOR (Shug McGaughey) has a brilliant pedigree by War Front out of Breeders' Cup Filly & Mare Sprint winner Shamrock Rose, but seems a classics stretch.

Sat (1/6) Turfway Park Race 6 \$125K Turfway Prevue Stakes: This 6-1/2 furlong Tapeta sprint kicks off the Jeff Ruby series with a field of 7. It's a 1-2-3 rematch of a local Dec. 20 ALW vs. 9-5 ML favorite VOTE NO (Bill Morey), winner of the Ky Downs Juvenile Sprint and third-place finisher in the G2 Bourbon at Keeneland. VOTE NO has a turf-on-turf pedigree by Divisidero.

Sun (1/7) Fair Grounds Race 5 ALW: Turf mile features several pursuers of sharp November dirt ALW winner SNEAD (Brendan Walsh), who since returned to run second in the Gun Runner Stakes and appears to be a major trail player to this eye. Among those exiting the key race and moving to turf is BLOWN COVER (Brad Cox), a \$650K son of Gun Runner adding blinkers. He's out of a half-sister to Oaklawn Handicap winner Cyber Secret, so a dirt route future makes sense.

Sun (1/7) Laurel Race 7 ALW: 1-turn mile includes a couple of pursuers of REGALO (Brittany Russell), entered in Saturday's Jerome at Aqueduct and you should have a better line on those runners after seeing Saturday's race at the Big A. The field also includes SPEEDYNESS (Jamie Ness), third in the Maryland Juvenile Championship and 3-time winner in open company.

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JEROME STAKES – Jan. 6

Set the Table: 1 Mile (1 turn), \$150K, KD Points 10-4-3-2-1.

Historically Speaking: Only 2 Jerome alumni have later made Ky Derby gate: '13 Vyjack (18th), '18 Firenze Fire (11th).

What To Watch For: Trainers with strong Mid-Atlantic presences (NJ, PA, MD) have won this race 6 of last 7 years, while Michael McCarthy raided from California a year ago.

Race Keys: DRUM ROLL PLEASE (Brad Cox) figures to be a strong favorite off his G2 Remsen third-place finish and his performance here will shed some light on Remsen 1-2 performers DORNOCH (Danny Gargan) and SIERRA LEONE (Chad Brown). Hard Spun colt has been effective at the mile trip in prior starts. This one carries the big-barn influence along with KHANATE (Todd Pletcher), a restricted maiden winner at Keeneland who appears modestly credentialed.

Race Keys: REGALO (Brittany Russell) and SWEET SODDY J (Raymond Ginter Jr.) exit Laurel victories and horses from this part of the country have had Jerome success. The former has won around 1 turn and 2, while the latter's Heft Stakes sprint score came just 7 days ago. Note SWEET SODDY J also is cross-entered in the Turfway Park Prevue on Saturday.

Race Keys: New York-bred EL GRANDE O (Linda Rice) had one of the deepest 2YO seasons in America for any stakes horse, running 8 times, winning the Bongard and Sleepy Hollow. Nearly all of his best efforts were from on the lead, so expect early speed under hustling gate rider Kendrick Carmouche, who takes over for the first time.

JP's Picks: W) DRUM ROLL PLEASE; P) REGALO; S) EL GRANDE O



SAN VICENTE STAKES – Jan. 6

Set the Table: 7 furlongs (1 turn), \$200K, KD Points 0-0-0-0-0

Historically Speaking: This race is moved up about a month on the calendar and replaces the 2-turn mile Sham Stakes as the SoCal kickoff to the Triple Crown trail. Last year's Sham included eventual Preakness winner National Treasure, Derby entrant Reincarnate and important '23 sprinter Speed Boat Beach ... so there's a lot to replace. The 2016 San Vicente 1-2 finishers Nyquist and Exaggerator repeated that finish in the Kentucky Derby and the latter won the Preakness.

What To Watch For: Bob Baffert has won this race 3 of the last 4 years and 12 times overall since Silver Charm's '97 score. Each of his recent 3 winners then hit the road next to Saudi Arabia or Oaklawn.

Race Keys: MUTH (Bob Baffert) goes as a strong favorite against 5 rivals, including stablemate PILOT COMMANDER (Bob Baffert). His Breeders' Cup Juvenile runner-up effort was good enough to win that race most years, but was merely second-best to a historic performance by FIERCENESS (Todd Pletcher) that day. The cut-back to 7F is curious in terms of his Triple Crown development, but he's certainly highly credentialed sprinting off a 5F debut win and Best Pal runner-up. Expect him forward throughout and too tough for these. PILOT COMMANDER led throughout his November debut win at Del Mar and this looks like a natural steppingstone for the son of Justify. His debut pursuer IMAGINATION (Bob Baffert) came back to win at Santa Anita nicely on New Year's Day.





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Race Keys: Turf-to-dirt movers make up the bulk of Baffert challenges. SLIDER (John Sadler) blew the turn in the Speakeasy while still winning before no threat in the Breeders' Cup Juvenile Turf Sprint; he's fast enough to contend and has dirt form, but 7F is a question. FORMIDABLE MAN (Mike McCarthy) also moves turf-to-dirt, but is out of a true grass mare in Fanticola. And BOLTAGE (Richard Mandella) showed nothing in his dirt sprint debut before a trio of grass mile races around 2 turns.

Race Keys: MOONLIT SONATA (Tim Yakteen) was a late-running dirt debut winner late in the Del Mar fall meet at 33-1 and should at least appreciate the 7F trip and the footing.

JP's Picks: W) **MUTH**; P) **PILOT COMMANDER**; S) **MOONLIT SONATA**

Everyone's A Critic - Reviews



HEFT STAKES – Dec. 30

Maryland's Preakness path offered an on ramp over 7 furlongs at Laurel Park in the \$100,000 Heft Stakes. The well-traveled SWEET SODDY J (Raymond Ginter Jr.) took the lead from the start and was never headed in a dominant performance by 6 lengths. The gelded son of Bee Jersey exited an unsuccessful journey to Oaklawn three weeks prior for the Advent Stakes, but righted the ship with a stop-off at his Lexington, Ky. training center.

SWEET SODDY J clicked off splits of 22.69, 23.45, 25.11 and 12.79, finishing 7F in 1:24.04. The top-3 finishers basically pulled the carousel around the Laurel oval while 4-5 favorite CATAHOULA MOON (Jerry Robb), the Maryland Million Nursery winner, chased futilely and faded to 6th of 7. Others here included 7-length debut winner GREAT OPPORTUNITY (Brittany Russell), a non-threatening runner-up, and \$625K Constitution colt AMERICAN WAR HERO, who has failed to live up to his price and didn't factor in fourth.

There's no rest for the weary as SWEET SODDY J has been entered back this week in both the Turfway Park Prevue Stakes and the Jerome at Aqueduct. Trainer Ginter appears to be playing the short game in terms of distance and long-range forecasts, potentially starting for an eighth time since August.





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MUCHO MACHO MAN – Jan. 1

Aqueduct debut winner OTELLO (Christophe Clement) lured the public's attention as the 8-5 favorite in the Mucho Macho Man Stakes, and the son of Curlin delivered on that promise after some tense moments. Jockey Luis Saez bided his time last of six in a tight-packed field before opportunity presented itself late in this one-turn mile. OTELLO punched by with a half-length score in workmanlike fashion.

The Mucho Macho Man kicks off the Florida Derby series, but hasn't had a major impact on the local 3YO centerpiece often. That five of these six clumped within 3-3/4 lengths at the wire doesn't give strong vibes this year will be any more impactful. Splits for the Mucho Macho Man were 24.33, 22.30, 24.67 and 26.46 for 1:37.78.

By Curlin, you'd expect OTELLO to improve with age and distance, and trained by Clement, those would seem to be similar calling cards. So perhaps it's premature to shortchange the forecast for OTELLO. But he doesn't appear to be particularly brilliant, the kind of talent it takes to win races like the Fountain of Youth and Florida Derby historically. His best path may be the Tampa Bay Downs route with an eye toward the Wood Memorial. Dam Isabella Sings gives him classy turf route genes and this one may run all day as a potential Belmont Stakes kind of horse. Remember this year's Belmont will be 1-1/4 miles at Saratoga, and a patient player like Clement might look to something like that as more of a goal than forcing the Derby talk.

SEA STREAK (Eddie Owens Jr.) had every chance to carry his pace and battled gamely while giving way slightly in third. He may be best-suited for the sprint ranks. Runner-up FIRST WORLD WAR (Brendan Walsh) ran well while cutting back from two-turn efforts and established himself on dirt for a race like the Holy Bull or Fountain of Youth. You could also see Walsh taking FIRST WORLD WAR to Fair Grounds. The performance here by FIRST WORLD WAR was further flattery for my highly respected PARCHMENT PARTY (Bill Mott) off their allowance effort in November at Churchill.



SMARTY JONES STAKES – Jan. 1 & RENAISSANCE STAKES – Dec. 31

Eerily reminiscent of last year's Arkansas Derby winner Angel of Empire for the same barn, CATCHING FREEDOM (Brad Cox) swept past the field in Oaklawn's Smarty Jones Stakes to announce his legitimate presence on the Derby trail. The \$575K son of Constitution made his stakes debut a rousing success as the 8-5 favorite against 8 rivals.

Cristian Torres, Oaklawn's leading rider in 2023, patiently handled CATCHING FREEDOM, kept him outside of any trouble on the far turn, and opened up late to win by 2-1/2 lengths. Splits for the 1-1/16 miles Smarty Jones, which extended trip this year from its previous 1M distance, were 23.02, 23.99, 25.66, 26.14 and 6.25. Final time was 1:44.59, solid most years in comparison to the same-distanced Southwest Stakes, run a month later in the meeting. The caution is that the top-6 finishers were within 4-1/2 lengths at the wire, a sign most often of a race that's not particularly strong.

Cox registered a third Smarty Jones win in the last 4 years, but previous winners Victory Formation and Caddo River found longer distances against top-class horses beyond their best trip. CATCHING FREEDOM's sire Constitution won the 9F Florida Derby and his dam Catch My Drift was third in the Beldame and won the Summer Colony, both at 9F. Cox indicated that CATCHING FREEDOM likely would go next in the Risen Star at his Fair Grounds base, or the Rebel at Oaklawn with the Arkansas Derby his primary final prep target.





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Beyond the winner, JUST STEEL (D. Wayne Lukas) underscored his form that saw him win the Ed Brown at Churchill sprinting. The Justify colt obviously ran well enough around two turns here to wipe away the memory of his fading bid routing in the Breeders' Futurity at Keeneland. He earned a trip to the Southwest, where he'd be among the favorites, or March's Rebel, which figures to be considerably tougher competition. Third and fourth-place finishers INFORMED PATRIOT (Steve Asmussen) and GETTYSBURG ADDRESS (Brad Cox) did enough to keep on the trail for connections that will give them every chance to show if they're got the stuff.

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VALENTINE CANDY (Steve Asmussen) notched his second Oaklawn sprint stakes win of the young meet when patiently pouncing to victory in the Dec. 31 Renaissance Stakes, a \$150,000 affair over 6F. The Advent Stakes winner Dec. 8 waited while the top 3 pace players in this race wound up in the final 3 spots as the script flipped in the lane. TEJON PASS (Peter Miller) was second-best in an interesting regional matchup via Del Mar.

VALENTINE CANDY, a Justify colt, certainly has pedigree to go longer and his patience here was a plus. But Asmussen doesn't appear in a hurry to stretch him out, and this could be his next in a long line of sprint stars. Time of 1:11.29 was second-fastest on a card loaded with 6F races, but notably .77 slower than TIME FOR TRUTH (Ron Moquett) ran in a 2YO MSW the race prior.

Undercard Notables for Review

Tue (12/26) Santa Anita Race 2 MSW: COLORADO CRUISER (Luis Mendez) re-rallied to best URBAN LEGEND (Bob Baffert) by a nose in 1:09.91 for 6F. The top-5 in the 6-horse field were within 2 lengths at the wire in a race that didn't inspire major stakes hopes. This race did flatter the form of *Countdown* No. 2-ranked prospect NYSOS (Bon Baffert) as the top pair were in his wake by 10+ lengths in his impressive victory Oct. 21 at SA.

Fri (12/29) Santa Anita Race 7 \$100K Eddie Logan Stakes: Turf mile won by 2-1 favorite LORD BULLINGDON (Michael McCarthy). This was a slow early, rocket-fast late race in which the final quarter was eclipsed in 22.67. The winner, also hero of the Qatar Golden Mile at SA on Breeders' Cup weekend, has a miler-type pedigree, but might be a candidate to stretch out in the El Camino Real Derby, a race McCarthy won in 2021 with eventual Preakness winner Rombauer.

Fri (12/29) Turfway Race 5 MSW: STINGY (Paulo Lobo) pulled a 47-1 one-mile upset in wire-to-wire fashion over first-timer and betting favorite ENCINO (Brad Cox), whose rally from 10th came up a neck short. ENCINO is a Godolphin home-bred by Nyquist out of a half-sister to Kentucky Derby winner Street Sense. The winner lacks no pedigree either, by Medaglia d'Oro and out of a half-sister to the legendary Gun Runner.

Sat (12/30) Gulfstream Park Race 1 MSW: Debut romp for BORN NOBLE (Todd Pletcher) by 5-1/2 widening lengths over 7F as 6-5 chalk. Constitution colt was very green in stretch while clocking final 3F in modest 38.44. Six of 8 here sold for \$220K+. Might be one for Tampa two-turn test next for education.

Sat (12/30) Fair Grounds Race 8 MSW: Sprint-bred DONCHO (Michelle Lovell) ran off and hid by 5 lengths in a 6F test, clocking sharp 1:09.99. Spread-eagled field and interesting dasher to follow, but not for classics.

Sun (12/31) Aqueduct Race 5 MSW: LAMBETH (Bill Mott) rallied to win 1-turn mile by nose while adding blinkers in second start. Arrogate colt saw stablemate KNIGHTSBRIDGE (Bill Mott) flattered by the much-improved runner-up effort here by prior rival, second-timer / unplaced CD debut runner McQUEEN (Todd Pletcher).

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Sun (12/31) Gulfstream Race 9 ALW: Florida-bred affair saw HADES (Joe Orseno) romp to 2-for-2 mark by 8L in a very sharp 1:23.29 for 7F. That clocked about 9L faster than an open MSW for 2YO fillies on same card. Final 3F in 37.20 legit. With MSW and ALW in tow, has to head to stakes next. Alabama winner Pretty Discreet back a few generations on damside pedigree for son of miler Awesome Slew.

Sun (12/31) Oaklawn Race 5 MSW: IMPERIAL GUN (Steve Asmussen) drew clear with a front-running win over 1-1/16 miles by 5-3/4 widening lengths. Gun Runner colt's second dam Memorette was runner-up in SA Oaks, third in Ashland and 5th in Ky Oaks while earning nearly \$900k. Big move forward in second start off troubled debut fourth and bullet drill since. Going right direction locally.

Sun (12/31) Oaklawn Race 6 MSW: Wire-to-wire 6F debut win for TIME FOR TRUTH (Ron Moquett), a son of Omaha Beach who stopped clock in 1:10.52, easily fastest time of day and .77 faster than VALENTINE CANDY (Steve Asmussen) in the same-day Renaissance Stakes. Big gaps back to the rest legitimizes time in bulky field of 12.

Sun (12/31) Oaklawn Race 7 ALW: Churchill winner CARBONE (Steve Asmussen) wired this 2-turn 1-1/16M route by 4L while I remain bullish on runner-up LIGHTLINE (Brad Cox), who rallied from last of 12 after a wide trip from post 11. He was the only closer to make a dent and now is set up well for a stakes engagement next. CARBONE is now 2-for-2 but the Mitole colt is bred top and bottom for sprints. LIGHTLINE is by BC Dirt Mile and Pegasus World Cup winner City of Light and out of the outstanding turf marathon mare Upperline. Keep an eye out here.

Mon (1/1) Gulfstream Race 6 MSW: RESILIENCE (Bill Mott) cruised to 4-1/4 length score in this 1-1/16M dirt route. Into Mischief colt from blue hen female family as second dam Tranquility Lake was a star racemare and produced After Market, Courageous Cat et al. This one had chased LOCKED (Todd Pletcher) and NASH (Brad Cox) at 2 and is improving. Beware. Runner-up SKIP THE LINE (Todd Pletcher) is merely half-brother to the megastar Arrogate, and he's finally putting it together after 3 starts. The result here did not flatter Fair Grounds' Gun Runner winner TRACK PHANTOM (Steve Asmussen).

Mon (1/1) Santa Anita Race 4 MSW: Heavily favored IMAGINATION (Bob Baffert) delivered on expectations with a front-running score over a 2-turn mile on dirt. The full-bro to Monmouth Oaks winner Occult was never seriously threatened after a dicey start, while comfortably in front by 1-3/4 lengths under the line. The \$1M colt by Into Mischief was a narrow runner-up in both prior Del Mar starts.

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