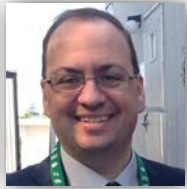




# countdown

TO THE  
CROWN

SEASON 19 WEEK 2 – January 12, 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. 5 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 the retirement of legendary college football coach Nick Saban. Rarely is one irreplaceable.

1. The Kentucky Derby's announced purse increase from \$3M to \$5M this week comes as an unnecessary flex. Sure, the Derby ought to be at the top of the payroll, but the extra \$2M isn't going to impact field size, handle, stud value or prestige. Who wins? A few horsemen.
2. Key Floridians plan to avoid each other, according to media reports. BC Juvy winner FIERCENESS (Todd Pletcher) goes to Gulfstream's Holy Bull, Remsen winner DORNOCH (Danny Gargan) awaits Gulfstream's Fountain of Youth and Remsen runner-up SIERRA LEONE (Chad Brown) will travel to Fair Grounds for the Risen Star.
3. RIP to WHERE'S CHRIS (Rick Dutrow), the speedy Nashua winner, who died in a collision at Belmont on Monday, which also claimed the life of 5yo Constitutionlawyer. It's a reminder that danger lurks daily for these athletes.

## 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. CHANGE OF COMMAND (Shug McGaughey) *\*new\**
9. DORNOCH (Danny Gargan)
10. CATCHING FREEDOM (Brad Cox)
11. TRACK PHANTOM (Steve Asmussen)
12. NASH (Brad Cox)
13. HONOR MARIE (Whit Beckman)
14. LIGHTLINE (Brad Cox)
15. RESILIENCE (Bill Mott)
16. TIMBERLAKE (Brad Cox)
17. TUSCAN GOLD (Chad Brown)
18. LOCKED (Todd Pletcher)
19. DRUM ROLL PLEASE (Brad Cox) *\*new\**
20. PRINCE OF MONACO (Bob Baffert)

## This Week In Countdown History

### 2014

Countdown to the Crown previewed a Gulfstream MSW in which first-time starter Constitution was unveiled. Not only did he win that day, he'd open his career 3-for-3, including the Florida Derby, then come back at 4 to win the Donn Handicap.

Constitution is the sire of 2024 important members of the trail like PARCHMENT PARTY (Bill Mott) and CATCHING FREEDOM (Brad Cox), winner of the Smarty Jones at Oaklawn on New Year's Day.

## Keeping Ourselves Honest Picks NOW & Past

Last week's free Countdown selections: 2: 2-0-0 (100%)  
2024 Countdown season selections: 2: 2-0-0 (100%)

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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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Top picks MUTH (Bob Baffert) and DRUM ROLL PLEASE (Brad Cox) won the San Vicente and Jerome at short prices. 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 (1/12) Gulfstream Race 6 ALW: Turf sprint matches stablemates DOUBLE YOUR MONEY (Brian Lynch), not beaten far in either the G2 Bourbon or the Pulpit Stakes, and last out maiden winner SILENT HEART (Brian Lynch). We're a ways from either on the trail going long on dirt, however.

Fri (1/12) Fair Grounds Race 7 MSW: Turf sprint could shed some additional light on Dec. 16 MSW dirt winner HONKYTONKHIGHWAY (Bret Calhoun) as his 2-3-4 pursuers re-match. American Pharoah rookie BONZER (Joe Sharp) has trained fast in the a.m.

Fri (1/12) Turfway Race 5 MSW: This 1M route includes a measuring stick for Saturday Gulfstream ALW performer KATHEEB (Brendan Walsh) as his 2-3 pursuers SALTED CARMEL (Mike Maker) and PROMISSIO (Doug O'Neill) are back from Dec. 9.

Sat (1/13) Gulfstream Park Race 6 MSW: A 6F sprint topped by \$500K first-timer TURN UP THE TREES (Todd Pletcher), a son of Liam's Map. Rookie (Cherie Devaux) is an Uncle Mo colt whose second dam was outstanding graded stakes-winning sprinter Molto Vita. BOURBON SOCIETY (Ian Wilkes) exits a debut second behind hot-rising *Countdown* Top-10 performer CHANGE OF COMMAND (Shug McGaughey), who returned to win in ALW company last week.

Sat (1/13) Gulfstream Park Race 8 ALW: Deep field in this 1-1/16M turf test, which includes Central Park Stakes third-place finisher TYPHOON FURY (George Weaver), Keeneland maiden breaker and Cecil B. Demille Stakes alum DEADPAN (Mark Casse) and romping Turfway debut winner KATHEEN (Brendan Walsh). Big A debut winner CUGINO (Shug McGaughey) also offers promise. THE PROCESS (Cherie Devaux) moves dirt to turf in his third start; he's by More Than Ready and out of Zenyatta's half-sister Eblouissante.

Sat (1/13) Gulfstream Park Race 9 MSW: BE YOU (Todd Pletcher), fourth in the G1 Hopeful and third in the G1 American Pharoah, returns to the maiden ranks in this dirt mile. He'll meet a promising, but less experienced, cast that includes MILITARY ROAD (Christophe Clement), a bullet-working rookie by Quality Road and a direct descendent of legendary mare Personal Ensign. \$1M purchase / second-timer CONQUEST WARRIOR (Shug McGaughey) exits a third-place run behind fleet speedster EL CAPI (Rick Dutrow), one of the 2023's faster 2YOs.

Sat (1/13) Aqueduct Race 1 MSW: First-timers in this 6F dirt test include \$200K Vino Rosso colt TUSCAN SKY (Todd Pletcher), half-brother to millionaire grass dasher Private Creed, and AMBITION (John Kimmel), by Derby winner Street Sense and out of the outstanding turf sprint mare Inspired. Neither may be trail types, but rather more brilliant.

Sat (1/13) Oaklawn Race 5 MSW: Stablemates EL MAGNIFICO (Steve Asmussen) and rookie SITKA (Steve Asmussen) may headline this dirt mile. The former has been second 4 of 5 outings with very strong company lines; the latter is by Speightstown and out of a half-sister to Jerome winner Adios Charlie. This race could give us a better line on OP meet winner LAT LONG (Kenny McPeck).

Sat (1/13) Fair Grounds Race 7 MSW: This turf route features alumni who chased debut winner McAVOY (Mark Casse) in mid-December as well as local November graduate ST. ARMAND'S KEY (Joe Sharp), who has yet to run back at the meet.

Sat (1/13) Santa Anita Race 4 \$200K Cal Cup Derby: Five Cal-breds square off in the 1-1/16 miles race that California Chrome gave repute to in 2014 before winning the Kentucky Derby and Preakness. Four of them re-match from the King Glorious at Los Alamitos, won by LAST CALL LONDON (Peter Miller). The new face is WILD JEWELS (Steve Specht), a winner of three straight on Tapeta at Golden Gate Fields, including the Golden Nugget Stakes and Gold Rush Stakes.

Sun (1/14) Laurel Race 4 ALW: Dirt dash at 5-1/2 furlongs includes Maryland Million Nursery runner-up PRADO ROAD (Brittany Russell), 1 of 3 last-out winners in the lineup.

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Sun (1/14) Tampa Bay Downs Race 5 MSW: Stablemates **TIRELESS** (Todd Pletcher) and **ROUGHSHOD** (Todd Pletcher) headline this 1 mile and 40-yard route around 2 turns. **TIRELESS** is an \$875K Not This Time colt who knocked on the door a few times in Kentucky at 2. He's from the same female family at Haskell winner/Belmont Stakes runner-up Paynter. First-timer **ROUGHSHOD** is by Medaglia d'Oro. The tough field also includes debut artist **ATROCIOUS** (Christophe Clement), a \$500K son of Ghostzapper and \$1M-earner & Black-Eyed Susan winner Fifthshadesofhay.

Sun (1/14) Tampa Bay Downs Race 6 ALW: The 1 mile and 40-yard test lacks some of the big-barn influence you expect to see. Inaugural Stakes runner-up **CRAZY MASON** (Greg Sacco) is cross-entered here as well as Saturday's Pasco Stakes. **SECRET LOVER** (Antonio Sano) took 8 tries to break his maiden, but before that was second in the Florida Sire Stakes series finale. We'll find out if turfer **FULMINEO** (Arnaud Delacour) takes to the dirt. He was runner-up in the G2 Pilgrim last year in NY and exits a last-place finish in the Breeders' Cup Juvenile Turf.



## PASCO STAKES – Jan. 13

Set the Table: 7 furlongs (1 turn), \$125K, KD Points 0-0-0-0-0.

Historically Speaking: Pasco produced 5 Kentucky Derby starters since its 1999 inaugural, including '09 KD third-place finisher Musket Man. No Derby runners since 2019 winner Win Win Win ran 9th in Louisville.

What To Watch For: Tampa Bay Derby series gets its final sprint prep following December's Inaugural. The Sam F. Davis and TB Derby both will be around 2 turns at 1-1/16 miles and sure to attract more ship-in types than this.

Race Keys: **WEST SARATOGA** (Larry Demeritte) and **BOOK 'EM DANNO** (Derek Ryan) bring significant stakes form south for the first time. The former won Churchill's G3 Iroquois and returns to what looks to be a preferred 1-turn trip. The latter was runner-up in the Nashua at Aqueduct after winning stakes at the Big A and Monmouth prior.

Race Keys: Four local alumni of the Inaugural Stakes are back, but not that race's winner, **PATRIOT SPIRIT** (Michael Campbell). **CRAZY MASON** (Greg Sacco) and **RATHMORE** (Tom Albertrani) were 2-3 in the Inaugural and both broke their maiden on the NYRA circuit. **CRAZY MASON** is cross-entered in a route ALW on Sunday at Tampa and could await that spot. **RATHMORE** set the pace over 6F last time and should be quickest from the outside post.

Race Keys: **BRANDED ROCKET** (Kathleen O'Connell) is the X-factor off his debut win over the track on Christmas Eve.

JP's Picks: W) **WEST SARATOGA** ; P) **BOOK 'EM DANNO**; S) **CRAZY MASON**





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## Everyone's A Critic - Reviews



### JEROME STAKES – Jan. 6

Odds-on favorites beating 4 rivals in listed stakes company don't move the January needle much, so it's a tempered enthusiasm for DRUM ROLL PLEASE (Brad Cox) after a comfortable win in Aqueduct's \$150K Jerome. He earned 10 Kentucky Derby qualifying points in the 3-3/4 length score while widening his margin through the wire. But note the Jerome has produced only 2 Kentucky Derby starters in more than a decade and none since 2018.

The PA-bred by Hard Spun rallied last-to-first after a bumpy start and proved superior to the Jerome cast. Splits were 24.50, 24.56, 25.86, 26.99 for 1:41.91 – hardly setting the track on fire late despite his visual dominance of this cast. Older maidens went about a length faster in the next race. DRUM ROLL PLEASE had been a solid third in the Remsen prior behind DORNOCH (Danny Gargan) and SIERRA LEONE (Chad Brown), current *Countdown* Top-10 sorts.

Runner-up EL GRANDE O (Linda Rice) did beat pace dueler REGALO (Brittany Russell) by about 14 lengths, winning the battle, but losing the war. I'd keep EL GRANDE O around 1 turn for the foreseeable future.

The next stop on the NYRA circuit for these will be the 2-turn decision in the 9F Withers or await March's 1-turn mile in the Gotham. The Cox barn did get on the board early at Aqueduct last winter with Withers winner Hit Show and took that one to top-5 finishes in the Derby and Belmont. DRUM ROLL PLEASE appears similarly talented at this stage. That comparable puts DRUM ROLL PLEASE on the fringe of Derby discussion for now.



### SAN VICENTE STAKES – Jan. 6

True, it's been since Nyquist in 2016 that a San Vicente winner has made it to the Kentucky Derby. But the 7-furlong sprint has been moved up a month on the calendar in 2024 and replaced the two-turn mile Sham as the kickoff to the Santa Anita Derby series. We'll see what impact that has as the season unfolds, but having Breeders' Cup Juvenile runner-up MUTH (Bob Baffert) cut back in trip to score this race Jan. 6 feels like a step in the right direction ... for both the race and the horse himself.

MUTH was able to put away PILOT COMMANDER (Bob Baffert) with relative ease over the final sixteenth of a mile in the San Vicente, winning by 2-3/4 lengths, but didn't break the clock in doing so. Splits were 22.88, 22.39, 24.49 and a final furlong in 13.25 for 7F in 1:23.01. It's just the second time in 15 years the San Vicente couldn't shade 1:23 on the clock. Still, we know this colt stacks up with the current crop pretty well.

MUTH doesn't have to prove himself around two turns, already winning the Grade 1 American Pharoah last year before his second in the Breeders' Cup. He's looking at likely two runs in the spring, the San Felipe and Santa Anita Derby if he stays home, or the Rebel and Arkansas Derby if he's Baffert's annual choice to head to Oaklawn. Baffert added a record-padding 12th San Vicente, his 4th in the last 5 years.

PILOT COMMANDER (Bob Baffert) and SLIDER (John Sadler) put nearly 6 lengths back to the rest, which included a trio of overmatched longshots. It was a solid stakes debut for PILOT COMMANDER, but not one that predicts a massive spring to come. SLIDER set the tempo, but the turf sprint specialist at age two provided hot-and-cold results: yes, he's fine on dirt; no, he's not begging for more ground and simply looks like a sprinter.





## ***Undercard Notables for Review***

Fri (1/5) Gulfstream Park Race 7 ALW: Following nearly the identical model as 2013 Kentucky Derby winner Orb, his stable predecessor, CHANGE OF COMMAND (Shug McGaughey) graduated successfully through the ALW ranks in this 1-1/16 miles springboard to perhaps the Fountain of Youth. The Into Mischief colt dueled throughout with local debut winner CARDINALE (Todd Pletcher) and prevailed by a neck that appeared slightly more comfortable than the margin suggests. The race didn't come home particularly strong on the clock (25.75, 7.21 4Q and final 1/16M). But the top pair put 6-1/2 lengths on the rest and CHANGE OF COMMAND is blossoming in his last few starts after facing top-flight FIERCENESS (Todd Pletcher) and SIERRA LEONE (Chad Brown), the BC Juvenile winner and Remsen runner-up, at age 2. I'm in this guy's corner right now.

Fri (1/5) Oaklawn Race 7 MSW: The top pair ran away 8-1/2 lengths on the rest in this 1M affair, GOLDBRICK (Bret Calhoun) scoring a neck decision from off the pace in a surprising change of tactics over odds-on CRUSHED IT (Brad Cox). The latter has now dropped both career decisions in photo finishes. The final quarter in 25.86 is pretty average for OP this time of year, but don't get hung up on the winner being by BC Dirt Mile winner Goldcents. There's plenty of damside stamina. While GOLDBRICK doesn't jump out as a firm stakes player just yet, note his Churchill conqueror last fall, CARBONE (Steve Asmussen), already has won at the OP meet in a very good ALW at a mile and is 2-for-2.

Fri (1/5) Turfway Park Race 5 MSW: EPIC RIDE (John Ennis) wired a carousel 6F sprint that went 1-2-3-4 the same order all the way around, clicking off 6F in 1:10.19 – a fast time on a night not producing particularly fast times. This Blame colt was a solid debut second at TP in December and no reason he can't route with a damside family that's had sufficient turf route success. EPIC RIDE sputtered 5 lengths clear of runner-up BOWSTREET (Paulo Lobo), a half-brother to Hot Rod Charlie. This was a good group by Turfway MSW standards.

Fri (1/5) Tampa Bay Downs Race 6 MSW: The \$725K Good Magic rookie ARI'S MAGIC (Christophe Clement) delivered to his 4-5 favoritism in this 6F sprint, rallying for an easy, 4-1/2 length score. This one leans sprint on the damside of the pedigree and didn't beat much here while stopping the clock in 1:10.71. Older \$12.5K claimers went 2 lengths faster earlier on the card. Doesn't give top-class route vibes for next outing; take the easier and/or shorter path.

Sat (1/6) Gulfstream Race 10 \$100K Limehouse Stakes: A trio of scratches – including heavy favorite and BC Juvenile Turf Sprint runner-up VALIANT FORCE (Jorge Delgado) who acted up at the gate – left just four runners in this 6F sprint. SHIP TO SHORE (Eddie Owens Jr.) dominated by 8 lengths in 1:10.51 in wire-to-wire fashion. Bred to sprint, he'll be better short.

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: Odds-on favorite and 2023 G2 Pilgrim winner AGATE ROAD (Todd Pletcher) was upset by the front-end heist performed by TOCAYO (Rodolfo Sanchez-Salomon). The Maryland-bred winner by Kentucky Derby champ Always Dreaming took advantage of the scratches of his likely early speed challengers and set extremely slow fractions to score by 1-1/2 lengths. TOCAYO went 1-for-7 on dirt, winning a \$20K MCL at Laurel on that surface and has found better career footing on grass.

Sat (1/6) Turfway Park Race 6 \$125K Turfway Prevue Stakes: Solid favorite VOTE NO (Bill Morey) dusted 4 rivals to start the Jeff Ruby series, drawing away by 5-1/4 lengths for his second stakes win. The Kentucky Downs Juvenile Sprint winner bounced back from his only defeat in four starts, a third-place effort in the G2 Bourbon at Keeneland. VOTE NO has a turf-on-turf pedigree by Divisidero and likely stays put on the Tapeta for the next few starts.

Sun (1/7) Fair Grounds Race 5 ALW: MAYCOCKS BAY (Mike Stidham) blew away this off-the-turf cast over 1 mile and 70 yards, cruising by 10-3/4 lengths over a fast track. He got away with rhythmic splits and posted a fourth quarter in a rock-solid :25.03 while widening home. The top-3 finishers here all exited the same race against next-out Gun Runner Stakes second SNEAD (Brendan Walsh), a horse I have extremely high hopes for on the Countdown trail. The result here flatters his form some. As for Godolphin home-bred MAYCOCKS BAY, he's by champion sprinter Speightstown and with a lot of turf miler on the bottom of the pedigree. We'll see how far he'll go under pressure. You might want 1-1/16 miles next vs. the Risen Star at 9F, looking at a road trip to Oaklawn if that's the case.



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Sun (1/7) Laurel Race 7 ALW: **SPEEDYNESS** (Jamie Ness), third in the Maryland Juvenile Championship, decimated 7 foes by 14-1/4 lengths to notch his fourth lifetime win. The 1-turn mile was fast early with an opening half-mile in 46.82, but was nearly 52 for the back half. Dam Hartigan was a 2-turn stakes winner on the MJC circuit and this one will get every chance on the Federico Tesio path.

Tue (1/9) Mahoning Valley Race 1 MSW: **LIEUTENANT GENERAL** (Wesley Ward), half-brother to superstar turf sprinter Golden Pal, debuted an uninspiring third of five in a one-mile route on a quagmire of a wet track. Not much to see here.

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