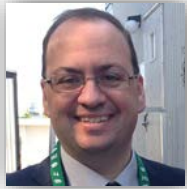




# countdown

TO THE  
CROWN

SEASON 19 WEEK 3 – January 19, 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 NFL force-feeding playoff games onto a pay streaming service.  
You'll even ruin a good one if you push it too far.

1. Churchill Downs has moved the goalposts on the owners of horses trained by Bob Baffert, advancing the cutoff date to Jan. 29 for those runners to exit that stable or forfeit eligibility for May's Kentucky Derby. That late notice is a mistake in what I've otherwise supported since the DQ of Medina Spirit. Make rulings and stick with them.
2. Fair Grounds, which runs the Lecomte Saturday, has become more impactful on the trail in recent years than Oaklawn, a complete flip of nearly two previous decades.
3. Pool 3 of the Kentucky Derby Future Wager is this Friday-Sunday with 40 parimutuel interests. Value plays this far out should be 40-1 or more and include: KNIGHTSBRIDGE (Bill Mott) at 50-1 ML, SNEAD (Brendan Walsh) at 50-1 and CHANGE OF COMMAND (Shug McGaughey) at 60-1.

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

## This Week In Countdown History

### 2021

Fair Grounds' Lecomte Stakes provided a doozy as top-3 finishers Midnight Bourbon, Proxy and Mandaloun all would turn out to be important racehorses. They would repeat as the Risen Star trifecta next out before chasing Hot Rod Charlie in the Louisiana Derby.

Mandaloun would go on to run second in the Kentucky Derby, placed first after the medication DQ of Medina Spirit. Midnight Bourbon would be second in the Preakness & Travers and 3rd in the Saudi Cup. Proxy came back at ages 4 & 5 to win races like the G1 Clark and G2 Oaklawn Handicap, plus finish 3rd in last year's Breeders' Cup Classic, earning \$2.7M.

## Keeping Ourselves Honest Picks NOW & Past

Last week's free Countdown selections: 1: 0-1-0 (0%)  
2024 Countdown season selections: 3: 2-1-0 (67%)

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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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Our Pasco Stakes top-2 were reversed in a chalky result. 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 (1/19) Sunland Park Race 9 \$100K Riley Allison Derby: The Sunland Derby trail gets going at 1 mile as shipper LUCKY JEREMY (Bill Morey) – perhaps the best-named 3YO in *Countdown* series history – looks to build off his second-start Churchill MSW score. The son of Preakness winner Lookin At Lucky routes for the first time. Fair Grounds debut-winning Vino Rosso colt CRAFTED (Steve Asmussen) also wired last out sprinting. His third dam was the star sprinter Dream Supreme.

Fri (1/19) Aqueduct Race 5 ALW: NY-breds go the 1-turn mile here, including the blue-blooded Tapit-Bar of Gold colt SLAMMIN GOLD (John Kimmel). BRICK AMBUSH (Danny Gargan) drops out of the state-bred stakes ranks.

Fri (1/19) Fair Grounds Race 7 ALW: Turf sprint features Kentucky Downs Juvenile Mile winner ASPENITE (Steve Asmussen).

Sat (1/20) Fair Grounds Race 5 MSW: Dirt route at 1-1/16 miles includes 3 runners well-beaten behind Lecomte entrant ETHAN ENERGY (Brad Cox) and could give us a better line on that one into the main event. But it's \$1.4M Gun Runner second-timer HALL OF FAME (Steve Asmussen) who garners eyeballs after a debut second at Churchill over 7F. NIGHT OUT (Mike Stidham) has been knocking on the door for Godolphin, while Justify rookie SAINT DAMASCUS (Kenny McPeek) has a tough draw and assignment routing in the first attempt. The latter is half-bro to the McPeek barn's Tampa Bay Derby winner and G1-winning turf Classic Causeway.

Sat (1/20) Fair Grounds Race 8 MSW: Eight first-time starters are among the 12 in this 6F sprint. SABI (Mike Stidham) is an Into Mischief-Jehozacat blueblood colt who should improve second out. The rookies include \$900K Curlin colt EXPLORATION (Brad Cox), a bullet worker from the female family of Visionaire, Tara's Tango et al. The barn also sends out Godolphin rookie CORNISHMAN (Brad Cox), another Curlin, this one a homebred out of G2 winner/G1-placed racemare Penwith.

Sat (1/20) Laurel Park Race 1 MSW: Melting pot 1-1/16 miles route includes shippers from Gulfstream, Aqueduct and Parx. The locals will give us a better line on Dec. 30 graduate EL DIVINO NINO (Rodolfo Salomon-Sanchez).

Sat (1/20) Santa Anita Race 1 MSW: 6-1/2 furlong sprint includes \$1.05 million buy NORMANDY LANDING (Bob Baffert). The Gun Runner colt is maternal grandson of the superstar racemare Flute. Stablemate and fellow rookie \$950K 2YO buy MAYMUN (Bob Baffert) is a son of Frosted and \$50K yearling who was pinhooked for a massive profit. Likely fast and built to win early, but those kind rarely are trail prospects. \$1.25M second-timer McVAY (John Shirreffs) looks to rebound off a summer Del Mar dud. The Constitution colt is from the female family of Phone Chatter, Dixie Chatter et al.

Sun (1/21) Fair Grounds Race 7 MSW: 1-1/16 miles turf route includes the debut of ULTIMATE VALUE (Brendan Walsh), a half-bro to Prevalence. ZVEREV (Cherie Devaux) is a son of millionaire G1 winner Balance and trying to find his way after 4 starts.

Sun (1/21) Laurel Park Race 3 MSW: \$325K Candy Ride colt MR. McMAHON (Brittany Russell) debuts over this 6F sprint.

Sun (1/21) Aqueduct Race 4 \$100K Rego Park Stakes: Five NY-bred sprinters match up over 6-1/2F, led by New York Stallion Series winner ANTONIO OF VENICE (Rudy Rodriguez) and Notebook Stakes runner-up DETECTIVE TOM (Michelle Nevin).

Sun (1/21) Aqueduct Race 8 MSW: The 1M is as loaded with big-barn influence as you'll find at the Big A in January. JD FACTOR (Rick Dutrow) comes off a runner-up behind OTELLO (Christophe Clement), who since returned to win Gulfstream's Mucho Macho Man Stakes. BOUNTEOUS (Bill Mott) is an Into Mischief blueblood out of a half-sister to Close Hatches. \$525K Curlin colt ELIMINATE (Todd Pletcher) is out of the strong stakes mare I'm A Looker and has been decent through 3 starts. Chad Brown and Kenny McPeek add lightly raced depth that we'll find out what they've got.

Sun (1/21) Tampa Bay Race 9 MSW: Turf mile has some name barns, but appears B-level performers for those. Wait and see.

Sun (1/21) Santa Anita Race 3 MSW: 9F turf route \$1M Quality Road colt LAKE SUPERIOR (Bob Baffert) back on grass.





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## LECOMTE STAKES – Jan. 20

Set the Table: 1-1/16 miles (2 turns), \$200,000, KD Points 20-10-6-4-2.

Historically Speaking: Kentucky Derby winners War Emblem (2002) and Mandaloun (2021) were Lecomte alumni. The past 2 Derby runner-ups, Two Phil's and Epicenter, ran in the Lecomte, as did 2019 Preakness champ War of Will.

What To Watch For: Trainers Brad Cox, Keith Desormeaux, Steve Asmussen and Mark Casse have accounted for the last 5 Lecomte victories – and they possess 7 of the 8 entries in this race.

Race Keys: Trio from the Dec. 23 Gun Runner Stakes could re-match, including winner TRACK PHANTOM (Steve Asmussen), third-place finisher NASH (Brad Cox) and seventh-place NEXT LEVEL (Keith Desormeaux) ... though NEXT LEVEL is expected to scratch, according to reports. Those three also figure to control all of the pace in the Lecomte, though Gun Runner pacemaker NEXT LEVEL would lighten the pace load if he's out. NASH should break much better this time and not waste most of his race in the middle-move, making him dangerous back on his maiden-breaking form two starts back. TRACK PHANTOM has a highly reliable running style and form, making him look a lot like Midnight Bourbon, Epicenter, those types for Asmussen down this path in recent years. I do question if the sprint dams for NASH and TRACK PHANTOM will betray them when we get to the Risen Star, Louisiana Derby and Triple Crown; but for this trip, there's little worry.

Race Keys: CAN GROUP (Mark Casse) and AWESOME ROAD (Brad Cox) are 2023 stakes performers who are entered and potentially making their 3YO debuts. But AWESOME ROAD is expected to scratch. CAN GROUP won the G2 Bourbon on turf and was a solid fourth in the Breeders' Cup Juvenile Turf. Versatile sire Good Samaritan ran on anything, and his son was second in a couple of Ellis sprints with mild late interest over the summer. We'll know after this start which surface direction to go, but I suspect he'll handle dirt routes reasonably well, but maybe not as well as turf.

Race Keys: ETHAN ENERGY (Brad Cox) and LAT LONG (Kenny McPeck) are the class-rising MSW winners last out, the former from FG and the latter via Oaklawn. LAT LONG will give us one of our first regional measuring sticks between the FG and OP runners, where in 2023 the FG horses crushed OP in head-to-heads at most every turn. ETHAN ENERGY was highly impressive in his Dec. 23 stretch out for the first time and we'll see how he fares without Lasix Saturday. LAT LONG is going to give up some early pace position to quicker horses here, but will have no excuses with the long FG stretch.

JP's Picks: W) **NASH**; P) **TRACK PHANTOM**; S) **ETHAN ENERGY**





## Everyone's A Critic - Reviews



### PASCO STAKES – Jan. 13

Highly credentialed sprinter BOOK 'EM DANNO (Derek Ryan) left no doubts as the 1-10 favorite in Tampa Bay Downs' 7-furlong Pasco Stakes. The Buccherio gelding decimated five rivals by 12-1/2 lengths and stamped his promising 2YO sprint form in his 3YO debut. The final time of 1:23.26 dwarfed the 3YO fillies in the same-day Gasparilla, who went in 1:24.69.

Pasco splits were 22.53, 23.22, 24.97 and 12.54 the final furlong. It was a solid come-home time for BOOK 'EM DANNO, but still doesn't give the vibe that he's going to be a two-turn factor in races like the Sam F. Davis or Tampa Bay Derby. Sire Buccherio was a top-class turf sprinter, but the damside of the pedigree does have some turf route influence and damsire Ghostzapper is fairly versatile. BOOK 'EM DANNO projects to be an elite sprinter in this crop and should remain pointed at 1-turn races. The \$1.5 million Saudi Derby could be next, Ryan said, held over the 1-turn mile trip on Feb. 24.

Runner-up WEST SARATOGA (Larry Demeritte) was cutting back in trip and ran modestly, while a bit spotty, to win the place photo. He may have done enough to earn a longshot berth routing on the local trail, but I expected to see more. Expect the field for next month's Sam F. Davis to be significantly tougher with G1 Breeders' Futurity winner and Breeders' Cup Juvenile third-place finisher LOCKED (Todd Pletcher) slated to make his sophomore debut there.

### *Undercard Notables for Review*

Fri (1/12) Gulfstream Race 6 ALW: Turf-bred SILENT HEART (Brian Lynch) made it back-to-back grass scores in this 5F turf sprint unlikely to impact the trail. The Heart to Heart colt prevailed by a half-length over a field lacking big-barn influence.

Fri (1/12) Fair Grounds Race 7 MSW: Rookies ruled 4 of the top 5 spots in this turf sprint, one that failed to flatter Dec. 16 MSW dirt winner HONKYTONKHIGHWAY (Bret Calhoun). Oklahoma-bred MIND BOLT (Bret Calhoun) scored the 21-1 debut upset.

Fri (1/12) Turfway Race 5 MSW: Justify colt TENNESSEE (Brad Cox) bested three heads on the wire in this 1M melee, despite a nightmarish trip as the favorite. This one didn't handle the rail well in his dirt debut at Churchill – a race that produced eventual Gun Runner Stakes winner TRACK PHANTOM (Steve Asmussen) – so TENNESSEE might be worth another look back on that footing. He's a \$1.2M 2YO purchase, but this race only went less than 2L faster than \$8K claimers the race prior.

Sat (1/13) Gulfstream Park Race 6 MSW: Odds-on favorite TURN UP THE TREES (Todd Pletcher) worked harder than many expected to debut a winner in this 6F test. The \$500K son of Liam's Map dueled throughout in a half-length score in a slow 1:12.20 as the top-4 were within 2-1/2 lengths at the wire. He'll have to show more and best to find an ALW next, not stakes.

Sat (1/13) Gulfstream Park Race 8 ALW: ABRUMAR (Saffie Joseph Jr.) acted up beforehand, yet stayed composed while pestered by a 105-1 shot up front to post a wire-to-wire 10-1 upset in this 1-1/16M turf test. He held sway by a length over Aqueduct debut winner CUGINO (Shug McGaughey), the 6-5 favorite, despite post 11. He's now 2-for-2 on the GP lawn in the Ramsey red and may get a shot in stakes company at Turfway off this.





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Sat (1/13) Gulfstream Park Race 9 MSW: The undercard player of the week was \$1M purchase / second-timer CONQUEST WARRIOR (Shug McGaughey), who overcame a troubled start and traffic on the turn to score a rallying victory. The final quarter of this 1-turn mile was 26.40, so they weren't blistering, but you had to like the determination of the son of BC Dirt Mile and Pegasus World Cup winner City of Light. CONQUEST WARRIOR previously was third behind fleet speedster EL CAPI (Rick Dutrow), one of the 2023's faster 2YOs. Among those dispatched here included a disappointing, flat, fifth-place return from BE YOU (Todd Pletcher), fourth in the G1 Hopeful and third in the G1 American Pharoah. Keep tabs on this race moving forward, including debut third MILITARY ROAD (Christophe Clement), who is by Quality Road and a direct descendent of legendary mare Personal Ensign.

Sat (1/13) Aqueduct Race 1 MSW: \$200K Vino Rosso colt TUSCAN SKY (Todd Pletcher) rolled to a 5-1/4 length victory in his 6F dirt debut. He's a half-brother to millionaire grass dasher Private Creed, so we'll see how far he might want to run. A 24.62 final quarter wasn't shabby as he ran 1:10.51 to best 5 rivals from modest competing barns.

Sat (1/13) Oaklawn Race 5 MSW: COMMON DEFENSE (Kenny McPeek) rolled by them all to win this dirt mile by 3-1/2 widening lengths. The 8-5 favorite by Breeders' Cup Mile winner Karakontie certainly flattered the form of his stablemate and debut conqueror LAT LONG (Kenny McPeek), who will try to parlay that Dec. 17 effort into the Lecomte Stakes this Saturday at Fair Grounds. As for COMMON DEFENSE, the quality of this race does come into some question as the pace was modest and yet the front runners all caved and the closers ruled despite a tepid 26.73 final quarter.

Sat (1/13) Fair Grounds Race 7 MSW: CAMARO Z (Greg Foley) continued his improvement since moving to turf, breaking his maiden in career start 4 in this grass mile. The Liam's Map colt held gamely after dueling in a 3-way photo. The win flattered the form of FG debut winner McAVOY (Mark Casse).

Sat (1/13) Santa Anita Race 4 \$200K Cal Cup Derby: MICI'S EXPRESS (Steve Knapp) turned the tables after 5 stakes defeats to win this 1-1/16 miles affair for CA-breds. The \$5K bargain by Slew's Tiznow has now bagged \$250K+ through a durable, 11-race career to this stage. He's yet to try open company on dirt, but was beaten 9 lengths in the G3 Zuma Beach on turf.

Sun (1/14) Laurel Race 4 ALW: ONE WAY TRAFFIC (John Salzman Jr.) led wire-to-wire in this 5-1/2 furlong dash, which was an easier task after the scratch of Maryland Million Nursery runner-up PRADO ROAD (Brittany Russell). The winner did duel the 4-5 favorite into submission, who finished 8-1/2 lengths back and beat just one runner home. ONE WAY TRAFFIC is a Maryland-bred by Force the Pass, the 2015 G1 Belmont Derby winner on turf. May be one for turf sprints based on the dam.

Sun (1/14) Tampa Bay Downs Race 5 MSW: Stablemates TIRELESS (Todd Pletcher) and ROUGHSHOD (Todd Pletcher) ran 1-2 as expected in this 1 mile and 40-yard route around 2 turns. TIRELESS, an \$875K Not This Time colt who knocked on the door a few times in Kentucky at 2, had the foundation and experience edge over his rookie barnmate and prevailed by three-quarters of a length late. TIRELESS hails from the same female family at Haskell winner/Belmont Stakes runner-up Paynter and could get a stakes date at Tampa off of this effort. Plenty to appreciate from Medaglia d'Oro colt ROUGHSHOD in a game defeat, 5-1/4 lengths clear of the rest, but he was unable to capitalize on a slow, even tempo that went his way. This race went 2-3 lengths faster than a 3YO ALW in the very next race on the card.

Sun (1/14) Tampa Bay Downs Race 6 ALW: The 1 mile and 40-yard test went 2-3 lengths slower than a 3YO MSW run in the race immediately before this, so consider that in the victory by Inaugural Stakes runner-up CRAZY MASON (Greg Sacco). The connections scratched the Coal Front colt from Saturday's Pasco to run in this spot and get the 2-turn experience while avoiding a 1-9 shot in the stakes. CRAZY MASON outduked turf-to-dirt mover FULMINEO (Arnaud Delacour) by a half-length while both overcame a slow pace. Mixed vibes, but it's certainly back to stakes for CRAZY MASON next.

Thu (1/18) Fair Grounds Race 8 ALW: Sugar Bowl Stakes fourth-place finisher THE DONEGAL CLAN (Dane Noel), whose only prior win was at Delta Downs, wired this 6F sprint in a sharp 1:09.86. The Twirling Candy colt flattered the form of Sugar Bowl victor LEGALIZE (Cherie Devaux). This ALW cast included runner-up ALDER (Brad Cox) and HONKY TONK HIGHWAY (Steve Asmussen), but neither of those has established much promise with multiple chances.

**SPECIAL NOTE:** Oaklawn has postponed the Southwest Stakes to February 3, pushing the race back a week, due to wintry weather.

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