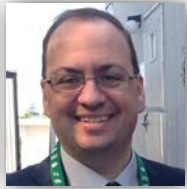




# countdown

TO THE  
CROWN

SEASON 19 WEEK 4 – January 26, 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 dreams. Most folks don't wanna wake up.

1. Bob Baffert withdrew his appeal of Medina Spirit's 2021 Kentucky Derby disqualification, finally putting an end to the chapter. Churchill Downs Inc. within an hour said it would hold firm on its imposed Jan. 29 deadline for horses to vacate his barn to be eligible in 2024. Hardball.
2. Remsen winner DORNOCH (Danny Gargan), half-bro to Mage, had his first work of '24 Monday in prep for the Fountain of Youth, breezing 4F in 51.95 at Palm Meadows. No horse has more growing up to do mentally among the headliners in this crop; let's see his progress. Also back on the tab in the last week was TIMBERLAKE (Brad Cox).
3. SNEAD (Brendan Walsh) and CHANGE OF COMMAND (Shug McGaughey) at 69-1 & 83-1 offered as much value in the Kentucky Derby Future Wager this past week as any two horses I've liked *this much* at *this stage* in a very long time. Note: Betting on DRUM ROLL PLEASE (Brad Cox), the Jerome winner, was suspended as he was announced injured and off the Derby trail.

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

## This Week In Countdown History

### 2023

Turn back the clock one year to Gulfstream's Pegasus World Cup Day and its Race 2 maiden special weight sprint at 7F. The field included a favored first-timer named Foxburg for Bill Mott, who finished last. Among a trio of debut runners in that heat was the longest price of three, the 11-1 shot Mage.

Mage romped by 3-3/4 lengths in nearly wire-to-wire fashion paying \$25.20 and would go on finish fourth in the Fountain of Youth, second in the Florida Derby and then upset the 149th Kentucky Derby. He'd add a Preakness third and Haskell runner-up later in the campaign. Gulfstream has an identical 7F MSW race on the card ... in Race 2, no less... this Saturday.

## Keeping Ourselves Honest Picks NOW & Past

Last week's free *Countdown* selections: 1: 0-1-0 (0%)  
2024 *Countdown* season selections: 4: 2-2-0 (50%)

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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 Lecomte 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.





## Fearless Forecast - Previews

### *Undercard Notables for Preview*

Fri (1/26) Gulfstream Race 10 ALW: Florida-breds sprint 6F here, including 2YO stakes check-getters SOUND OF THE BEAST (Rohan Crichton) and ROAR READY (Ruben Sierra) as well as recent Limehouse Stakes runner-up LOUIE THE SUN KING (Kathleen O'Connell). None project as classic-distance types.

Fri (1/26) Tampa Bay Downs Race 8 MSW: 7F sprint features Good Magic rookie GOOD MONEY (Chad Brown) off bullets at Payson Park as well as Palm Beach Downs first-timer ACCLAIMED VICTOR (Todd Pletcher), a \$725K Omaha Beach colt who carries on the immaculate Personal Ensign-My Flag bluest of bloods on the damside. DONEGAL FREEDOM (Todd Pletcher) also raids for the debut and is half-brother to last year's Ellis Derby winner Steal Sunshine, who runs Saturday in the Pegasus World Cup.

Fri (1/26) Turfway Park Race 5 MSW: This 1-1/16M route is topped by ENCINO (Brad Cox), a Nyquist second-timer who was runner-up a neck as the favorite in his debut Dec. 29 after missing the break. He's out of a half-sister to Kentucky Derby winner Street Sense and should graduate with ease if he's to be a trail player. Like ENCINO, several in here could give us a better line on STINGY (Paulo Lobo), winner of that Dec. 29 tilt.

Fri (1/26) Turfway Park Race 5 MSW: 6-1/2F sprint wraps the card with far less interesting runners than the route earlier in the program. This one could tell us more about OH REALLY (Cherie Devaux), a rallying debut winner Dec. 22 at TP.

Sat (1/27) Gulfstream Race 2 MSW: This promising 7F cast includes BATTEN DOWN (Bill Mott), a regally bred Tapit-Close Hatches home-bred working bullets for Juddmonte. He's full-bro to \$3.7M earner Tacitus. Other reputable rookies include Constitution colt SPEAK EASY (Todd Pletcher), \$600K Munnings colt MY TRUE COLORS (Todd Pletcher) and \$925K Curlin colt CORPORATE POWER (Shug McGaughey), the latter out of Golden Rod winner Road to Victory. BIG CITY (Jose D'Angelo) will give us a better line on Dec. 30 sharpshooting winner BORN NOBLE (Todd Pletcher).

Sat (1/27) Aqueduct Race 3 \$100K Jimmy Winkfield Stakes: Field of 5 sprinters over 6F includes stablemates AIR CAV (Brad Cox), fifth in the Champagne, and BERGEN (Brad Cox), a Keeneland debut winner coming off an allowance runner-up at Churchill. The latter is half-bro to G1 Test winner Chi Town Lady.

Sat (1/27) Aqueduct Race 4 MSW: 7F sprint has some big-barn influence with MUAZARAH (Todd Pletcher) and MIDDLE MARKET (Chad Brown), but they've failed in 6 combined starts to date. COOL OPERATOR (Bruce Levine) chased and faded in his debut behind the super-fast – *but unfortunately recently injured and off the trail* – EL CAPI (Rick Dutrow).

Sat (1/27) Sam Houston Race 9 \$100K Texas Turf Mile Stakes: NEAT (Rob Atras) switches surfaces after a 6th-place run in Fair Grounds' Gun Runner Stakes behind the eventual 1-2 Lecomte finishers. Keeneland's Indian Summer winner COMMITTEE OF ONE (Steve Asmussen) will stretch out off of turf sprints.

Sat (1/27) Fair Grounds Race 2 MSW: 6F sprint includes \$1.7M debut artist GUN PARTY (Steve Asmussen), a son of Curlin and star mare Carina Mia, the first of 3 foals to race out of the G1 Acorn winner. JUST A TOUCH (Brad Cox) is a \$300K son of Justify out of a win-early dam who later won the Comely at age 3. This race could give us more read on Dec. 30 blowout winner DONCHO (Michelle Lovell) as his runner-up EVAN ON EARTH (Greg Foley) is back.

Sun (1/28) Gulfstream Race 7 MSW: Two-turn turf affair at 7-1/2 furlongs includes the debut of impeccably bred Frankel-Mrs. McDougal colt GUN BARRELL CITY (Todd Pletcher). He's half-brother to last year's Twilight Derby winner Seal Team and bred all turf. The field also includes G2 Pilgrim third-place finisher LIAM'S JOURNEY (Mike Maker).



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Sun (1/28) Oaklawn Race 6 ALW: The first of two divisions of a 1M allowance for a \$140K purse was wildly popular at the entry box as the only 3YO race in Hot Springs over the past few weeks due to cancellations. TEJON PASS (Peter Miller), third in the Bob Hope and runner-up in the local Renaissance Stakes, stretches out around 2 turns for the first time. NEXT LEVEL (Keith Desormeaux) scratched out of last week's Lecomte at Fair Grounds for this spot, while Gun Runner fourth-place finisher FOOTPRINT (Kenny McPeck) also gives us some Louisiana-Arkansas regional barometer.

Sun (1/28) Oaklawn Race 8 ALW: The second of split divisions of a 1M allowance for a \$140K purse includes Smarty Jones fourth-place finisher GETTYSBURG ADDRESS (Brad Cox) and last year's Tremont winner GOLD SWEEP (Steve Asmussen). This looks like the softer of the two divisions on paper; let's see how that shakes out.

Sun (1/28) Aqueduct Race 5 MSW: 1-turn mile headlined by JD FACTOR (Rick Dutrow), a narrow runner-up last out to eventual Mucho Macho Man Stakes winner OTELLO (Christophe Clement).

Sun (1/28) Aqueduct Race 9 \$100K Rego Park Stakes: New York-breds sprint 6-1/2F here so it'll take a monster effort to produce a trail consideration. ANTONIO OF VENICE (Rudy Rodriguez) goes for back-to-back Big A state-bred stakes wins.

Sun (1/28) Santa Anita Race 6 MSW: 2-turn mile may be make-or-break time for a couple of high-priced Into Mischief barnmates. \$700K second-timer NEW KING (Bob Baffert) needs to improve off his modest debut fourth, while \$675K third-timer CORNELL showed a bit of life last time after a non-descript debut. The \$825K Constitution purchase INDESPENSABLE (John Sadler) has been knocking on the door and was runner-up to solid prospect IMAGINATION (Bob Baffert) in a similar spot last time. This race should also give us a better line on Dec. 26 local graduate COLORADO CRUISER (Luis Mendez).



## SPECTACULAR BID STAKES – Jan. 27

Set the Table: 7 furlongs (1 turn), \$100,000, KD Points 0-0-0-0-0.

Historically Speaking: race debuted in 2021; last year's runner-up Coffeewithchris would become the race's first alumnus to compete in a Triple Crown race, finishing 7th in the Preakness.

What To Watch For: trainer Brittany Russell won this race a year ago with Prince of Jericho and looks for a repeat via MISSION BEACH. Kentucky Derby and Preakness-winning trainers John Servis (KELLY'S KIDZ) and Rick Dutrow (GUANARE) are represented.

Race Keys: MISSION BEACH (Brittany Russell), a former Bob Baffert trainee who competed in Saratoga and Del Mar stakes at 2, headlines the locals off his handy Dec. 22 Laurel sprint win as the 2-5 favorite. The \$400K son of Curlin is out of mare who was a win-early dasher as a juvenile at Charles Town. This one seems more destined for sprints, but 7F should suit Saturday. The Maryland cast also includes the return of James F. Lewis Stakes winner COPPER TAX (Gary Capuano), who had a rocky trip in the Remsen last out when finishing up the track. He had won 5 in a row prior to that and fits back better at this distance.

Race Keys: New York influence comes from Jerome fifth-place finisher SWEET SODDY J (Raymond Ginter Jr.), who shipped here in December to win the 7F Heft in wire-to-wire fashion, and GUANARE (Rick Dutrow), 2-for-2 at Aqueduct since coming to that barn from Florida. The horse he romped last time, IRIDESCENT (David Jacobson), returns in Saturday's Jimmy Winkfield at Aqueduct.

Race Keys: Parx-based Witty shipped here to win the Spectacular Bid 2 years ago and that path will be followed by MAXIMUS MERIDIUS (Butch Reid) and KELLY'S KIDZ (John Servis). The former looks to have a higher ceiling while giving away some experience to the latter. Both are by Maximus Mischief and exit the same sprint allowance.

JP's Picks: W) **GUANARE**; P) **MISSION BEACH**; S) **COPPER TAX**





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## Everyone's A Critic - Reviews



### LECOMTE STAKES – Jan. 20

A true rematch of the Dec. 23 Gun Runner Stakes ensued as 1-2 finishers TRACK PHANTOM (Steve Asmussen) and NASH (Brad Cox) repeated the exacta over the same 1-1/16 miles trip as four weeks prior. They clearly stamped themselves the head of the first half of the New Orleans stakes set with the Risen Star and Louisiana Derby still to come and promising to bring significantly more opposition.

The favored pair carouselled around the track 1-2 throughout behind tepid, but consistent, fractions of 24.01, 24.35, 24.79, 24.86 and 6.72. The final time of 1:44.73 was more than 2 lengths slower than TRACK PHANTOM stablemate HALL OF FAME (Steve Asmussen) went earlier on the card in an impressive MSW score. It was the second-slowest of 5 Lecomte editions since stretching to this distance in 2020. None of their 4 other rivals made a dent, while Oaklawn raider LAT LONG (Kenny McPeck) was clearly third-best and put more than 8 lengths on the rest.

TRACK PHANTOM's Gun Runner-Lecomte double was something his stable predecessor Epicenter wasn't able to pull off, the latter finishing second in the Lecomte after leading nearly the entire trip. Of course, he'd bounce back to win the next 2 in the local series, finish second in the Kentucky Derby and Preakness, then add wins in the Jim Dandy and Travers. TRACK PHANTOM has the better resume to this point and arguably stronger pedigree. Expect him next in the Risen Star.

NASH, my top pick and the public's 6-5 favorite, just wasn't good enough in pursuit. The barn was on fire all day at FG with everything clicking, so you'd expect he also came into the Lecomte with his very best. As good as his maiden win looked, the bright future for this one in terms of a Triple Crown prospect has dimmed a bit. His damside pedigree never screamed route, but, then again, TRACK PHANTOM is out of the star sprinter Miss Sunset, and these two have not been comparable twice. In his defense, NASH had to do the dirty work vs. lone speed and that's never an easy task. Cox indicated he may look for an easier spot next for NASH, then could take a late-trail shot to see if he can get back in the Triple Crown talk. Second-place here isn't a termination notice – Epicenter and Two Phil's ran second in the past two Kentucky Derbies off that form.

In addition to TRACK PHANTOM, February's loaded Risen Star is expected to get Kentucky Jockey Club winner HONOR MARIE (Whit Beckman), Remsen runner-up SIERRA LEONE (Chad Brown), Gun Runner second SNEAD (Brendan Walsh), Smarty Jones winner CATCHING FREEDOM (Brad Cox) and the previously mentioned Jan. 20 MSW romper HALL OF FAME (Steve Asmussen).





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

Fri (1/19) Sunland Park Race 9 \$100K Riley Allison Derby: LUCKY JEREMY (Bill Morey) lived up to his fantastic name with a 2-length score as the 4-5 favorite. The son of 2010 Preakness winner Lookin At Lucky loomed large on the far turn, but didn't put the field away as assertively as you'd like to see. The 25.48 final quarter in this 1M test will have to be improved on to be a serious Sunland Derby threat at 9F later in the meet, but this was his first route bid after a Churchill sprint win in his 2nd start.

Fri (1/19) Aqueduct Race 5 ALW: DOC SULLIVAN (Michael Micelli) romped by 7 lengths vs. fellow New York-breds in this 1-turn mile. The Solomini colt took 25.93 the final quarter, so it may be more about what was behind him.

Fri (1/19) Fair Grounds Race 7 ALW: Kentucky Downs Juvenile Mile winner ASPENITE (Steve Asmussen) was a comfortable turf sprint winner, pulling away by 2-3/4 lengths. He's by Florida Derby winner Constitution, but already has finished out of the money in a pair of dirt races washed off the turf. Likely to stick to grass for a barn with other trail hopes.

Sat (1/20) Fair Grounds Race 5 MSW: It's almost inevitable on a big race card that someone on the undercard steals the show and puts everyone ga-ga. Enter \$1.4M Gun Runner second-timer HALL OF FAME (Steve Asmussen), who dazzled in this 1-1/16 miles test and stopped the clock more than 2 lengths faster than stablemate TRACK PHANTOM (Steve Asmussen) a few races later in the Lecomte. He excelled sprint-to-route and made the kind of second-start leap you love to see from a young horse. Asmussen indicated he would look next to the Risen Star Stakes, where he'll have significant fanfare off this win by 10-3/4 lengths ... gutting the second betting choice, who wound up 19+ lengths back. HALL OF FAME makes an instant leap into the *Countdown* rankings this week and is one to watch.

Sat (1/20) Fair Grounds Race 8 MSW: BEE DANCER (Dallas Stewart) debuted a length winner of this 6F sprint in 1:10.92, topping a lineup that had 7 first-time starters among its field of 11. He bested a pair of well-bred Brad Cox trainees who ran 2-3 as the post-time favorites, but this field had 7 of them within about 5 lengths at the wire and doesn't scream trail promise.

Sat (1/20) Santa Anita Race 1 MSW: Not long after HALL OF FAME sizzled Saturday at Fair Grounds, MAYMUN (Bob Baffert) tried to steal his thunder in a massive debut performance. The \$950K 2YO buy by Frosted smashed his 6-1/2 furlong rivals by 7-1/2 lengths in wire-to-wire fashion. There's not much pedigree here, his first two dams ran 5 total times, neither winning, and he brought \$50K as a yearling. But he's obviously fast from the pre-sale 2YO work and this smasher. Let's see if he can stay sound, because \$950K April buys like this are supposed to debut winners at Del Mar in the summer, not in late January. Runner-up McVAY (John Shirreffs) made significant second-time improvement off the layoff and could be worth following. The \$1.25M Constitution colt is from the female family of Phone Chatter, Dixie Chatter et al. He's a sneaky SA Derby-type.

Sun (1/21) Santa Anita Race 3 MSW: BANDWAGON (Phil D'Amato) overcame a rocky start and wide run to score a rallying victory in this 1-1/8 miles turf test. But this was a fast-early, slow-late turf race, more what you'd expect to see on dirt, and a battle of attrition. The pedigree leans turf, so I'd be surprised to see this one on the Santa Anita Derby trail.

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