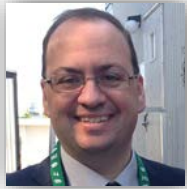




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TO THE
CROWN

SEASON 19 WEEK 5 – February 2, 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 Groundhog Day – never worth a 6-week wait.

1. **FIERCENESS** (Todd Pletcher) returns in the Holy Bull on Saturday, and there's no such thing as 'must-win' this time of year. However, you have to go back to Super Saver in 2010 to find a big-time 2YO who lost his way early in the season and got it back to win the Derby.
2. Trainer Bob Baffert announced Monday that the transfer portal from his barn is closed when it comes to the 2024 Kentucky Derby. None of his owners opted to move horses by Churchill Downs' Jan. 29 deadline to vacate in order to maintain eligibility for the Run for the Roses. Big news? We won't know until the first Saturday in May and just how big of an influence his horses had on the '24 trail. The Kentucky Derby is 150 years old; it'll be just fine – record handles the past 2 years without Baffert as witness.
3. From a good betting race standpoint, I'm happy to see January go. So far this trail hasn't produced one. The Southwest looks to be the first this Saturday.

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

1. **FIERCENESS** (Todd Pletcher)
2. **NYSOS** (Bob Baffert) *not eligible Ky Derby*
3. **SIERRA LEONE** (Chad Brown)
4. **SNEAD** (Brendan Walsh)
5. **MUTH** (Bob Baffert) *not eligible Ky Derby*
6. **TRACK PHANTOM** (Steve Asmussen)
7. **CHANGE OF COMMAND** (Shug McGaughey)
8. **DORNOCH** (Danny Gargan)
9. **CATCHING FREEDOM** (Brad Cox)
10. **HONOR MARIE** (Whit Beckman)
11. **LOCKED** (Todd Pletcher)
12. **HALL OF FAME** (Steve Asmussen)
13. **TUSCAN GOLD** (Chad Brown)
14. **KNIGHTSBRIDGE** (Bill Mott)
15. **LIGHTLINE** (Brad Cox)
16. **CONQUEST WARRIOR** (Shug McGaughey)
17. **RESILIENCE** (Bill Mott)
18. **TIMBERLAKE** (Brad Cox)
19. **NASH** (Brad Cox)
20. **JUST A TOUCH** (Brad Cox) *new*

This Week In Countdown History

2012

Reigning 2YO champion Hansen made his sophomore return in Gulfstream's Holy Bull this week a dozen years ago. Unbeaten through 3 starts, including the Breeders' Cup Juvenile, he proved no match for Algorithms. That brilliant son of Bernardini rolled by front-running Hansen in the stretch and drew clear by 5 lengths, keeping his perfect record intact.

Algorithms never raced again, retiring 3-for-3 after injury. At stud, he has yet to reproduce his brilliance, topped by his son Math Wizard, who won the PA Derby. Hansen won 2 of 6 on the season, adding the Gotham and Iowa Derby – but was ninth in the Kentucky Derby in his lone Triple Crown start.

Keeping Ourselves Honest Picks NOW & Past

Last week's free *Countdown* selections: 1: 1-0-0 (100%)
2024 *Countdown* season selections: 5: 3-2-0 (60%)

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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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Skinny price, but our top pick won Laurel's Spectacular Bid. 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 (2/2) Gulfstream Race 2 MSW: 5F turf sprint has \$550K rookie REFUEL (Todd Pletcher), a son of Hard Spun who is half-brother to Following Sea, the Vosburgh winner and Cigar Mile/Haskell runner-up.

Fri (2/2) Turfway Race 6 \$125K Leonatus Stakes: 1M Tapeta test features Turfway Prevue winner VOTE NO (Bill Morey). EPIC RIDE (John Ennis) was sharp in victory here Jan. 5 and has the pedigree to stretch out; beware. SALVATTORE PRINCE (Jose D'Angelo) exits back-to-back Gulfstream wins. Note AWESOME ROAD (Brad Cox) will scratch and run in OP's Southwest.

Sat (2/3) Gulfstream Race 4 MSW: 1-1/16 miles route on the Tapeta includes \$700K 2YO buy BAIL US OUT (Todd Pletcher), a Lookin At Lucky who debuted fourth behind stablemate BORN NOBLE (Todd Pletcher) on Dec. 30, and will give us a better line on that one going into Saturday's Race 6 at GP.

Sat (2/3) Gulfstream Race 6 ALW: The 1-turn dirt mile includes 3 last-out maiden debut winners – including BORN NOBLE (Todd Pletcher), one of the meet's most impressive maiden winners Dec. 30. The \$725K son of Constitution meets 10+ length debut romper MERIT (Saffie Joseph Jr.), off since early November, and Jan. 5 Tampa debut winner ARI'S MAGIC (Christophe Clement), who was sharp against easier and finds a natural class rise, and seems more a 1-turn sort in long-range projection. The more-experienced opposition includes Woodbine's G3 Grey runner-up PIPER'S FACTOR (Katerina Vassilieva).

Sat (2/3) Gulfstream Race 9 \$125K Swale Stakes: Sprinters who last started in FL, CA, NY, LA and PA meet in this melting pot over 7F. BENTORNATO (Jose D'Angelo) was the star of Gulfstream's Florida Sire Stakes series and defends the home track. RISK IT (Steve Asmussen) makes a rare trip from FG to GP for that barn, as does LEGALIZE (Cherie Devaux), winner of the Sugar Bowl in New Orleans. Gun Runner, sire of RISK IT, won the 2018 Pegasus World Cup for Asmussen.

Sat (2/3) Gulfstream Race 11 G3 \$175K Kitten's Joy Stakes: TOCAYO (new trainer Steve Klesaris) and beaten favorite AGATE ROAD (Todd Pletcher) renew their 1-2 finish in the Dania Beach Stakes as they extend to 1-1/16 miles on turf. They'll be joined by Pulpit Stakes winner NOTED (Todd Pletcher), Armed Forces winner FREEDOM PRINCIPLE (Jose Garoffalo) and dirt-to-turf mover FIRST WORLD WAR (Brendan Walsh), runner-up in the Mucho Macho Man last out.

Sat (2/3) Oaklawn Race 4 MSW: This race could give us a better line on Dec. 31 local winner TIME FOR TRUTH (Ron Moquett) as his 2-4 pursuers are back as part of a deep lineup. Big-barn rookies include HAPPY GREY (Steve Asmussen), a \$230K Runhappy whose second dam was millionaire turfer Sweet Talker, Mo Town home-bred MORUNNING (Brad Cox) and \$600K Into Mischief MARAVICH (Ron Moquett), whose second dam is Fantasy winner and \$1.2 million earner Joyful Victory.

Sat (2/3) Oaklawn Race 6 MSW: This 1-1/16M test looks soft on paper and should run through well-drawn DIAMTIC (Steve Asmussen) at short odds. The Gun Runner-Time to Tap colt exits a solid third at Fair Grounds and benefits from a second route and fitness edge away from the Oaklawn freeze of recent weeks. He's full-brother to last year's Wood Memorial third and PA Derby runner-up Dreamlike.

Sat (2/3) Fair Grounds Race 9 ALW: turf route gives us some extra info on MAYCOCKS BAY (Mike Stidham), who ships to Oaklawn for the same-day Southwest, as a few of his pursuers make a surface change. Four last-out MSW winners make the natural class rise in a competitive bunch.

Sat (2/3) Santa Anita Race 2 MSW: Turf sprint provides surface change for \$300K Mendelssohn colt BARTHOLDY (Simon Callaghan), who cuts back in trip after chasing Lewis Stakes entrant COACH PRIME (Bob Baffert) last time.

Sat (2/3) Tampa Bay Downs Race 4 MSW: Turf route includes \$240K Not This Time rookie WAITLIST (Todd Pletcher) and Juddmonte home-bred BLUE SPINEL (Chad Brown), a Kitten's Joy firster whose second dam is English and French One Thousand Guineas winner Special Duty.

Sat (2/3) Tampa Bay Downs Race 7 MSW: 6F dirt sprint offers first-timer LOCK BARREL (Bill Mott), by Union Rags and a maternal grandson of G1-winning turf mare Announce. The rest appear to be more sprint-inclined locals than trail prospects.

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GULFSTREAM PARK HOLY BULL STAKES – Feb. 3

Set the Table: 1-1/16 miles (2 turns), \$250K, KD Points 20-10-6-4-2.

Historically Speaking: The Holy Bull has produced 3 Kentucky Derby winners (Go For Gin '94, Funny Cide '03 and Barbaro '06) with Funny Cide also adding the Preakness. Tiz the Law won the '20 Belmont after winning this earlier in spring. Mo Donegal was third here in '22 but later scored the Belmont as well.

What To Watch For: These 1-1/16M races at Gulfstream end at the sixteenth pole finish line and are a bit more reasonable on the stretch-out for developing horses. That's important as five of these eight tackle two turns for the first time.

Race Keys: FIERCENESS (Todd Pletcher) dropped jaws twice in 3 starts last year, then disappeared in-between those memorable efforts at Saratoga and in the Breeders' Cup Juvenile. By my account, he's more the excellent FIERCENESS than the singular, head-scratching FIERCENESS. Six works back in pretty even spacing, including a bullet in the next-to-last work (always the most important drill in a horse's form cycle), indicate he's returning with promise of a representative effort. A two-prep campaign is planned, so they'll want to get something out of this race; it's not a throwaway. He's got one quality opponent to beat.

Race Keys: Four of the top 5 from the Mucho Macho Man Stakes re-match. OTELLO (Christophe Clement) shouldn't be 2-for-2 to open his career around 1 turn given his sire Curlin's offspring get better with distance and age. That's a big sign. The late-running Mucho Macho Man winner should handle those rivals once again. NO MORE TIME (Jose D'Angelo) spent most of the MMM making up for a troubled start and was left empty late; look for him to improve with a clean break and manageable pace around 2 turns. Both INVEIGLED (Jane Cibelli) and SEA STREAK (Eddie Owens) appear to have had their best chance shorter and don't project to improve at this trip.

Race Keys: Also-rans from the Remsen and Kentucky Jockey Club will see where they fit. DOMESTIC PRODUCT (Chad Brown) removes blinkers after fading badly in the Remsen over a wet track. His inconsistent form leaves little confidence to his current trajectory. DANCING GROOM (Antonio Sano) was overmatched in the Kentucky Jockey Club and adds blinkers for his first start at 3. He's got a route pedigree, but ran better in miles last year. He's capable of moving forward.

JP's Picks: W) **FIERCENESS**; P) **OTELLO**; S) **NO MORE TIME**



ROBERT B. LEWIS STAKES – Feb. 3

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

Historically Speaking: 3 Lewis alumni have won the Kentucky Derby (Ferdinand '86, Charismatic '99, I'll Have Another '12), the latter pair also winning the Preakness. Medina Spirit won this race in '21, but was DQ'd from victory in the KD. Last year's race failed to produce a Triple Crown starter.

What To Watch For: Bob Baffert had all 4 starters in last year's race when winning it for a record-padding 11th time and 5th in a row. No Sham this year so this got a deeper field of early season routers since San Vicente has been only stakes of meet and at 7F.

Race Keys: NYSOS (Bob Baffert) showed as much brilliance at age 2 as any horse in Southern California, which says something when stablemates PRINCE OF MONACO (Bob Baffert) won the Del Mar Futurity and MUTH (Bob Baffert) won the American Pharoah. This Nyquist colt is a brilliant mover and additional distance shouldn't be any issue as his sire won the Kentucky Derby, of course, and his third dam is Breeders' Cup Distaff winner Unbridled Elaine. He's training well with no excuses over a rather casual, 2-turn mile trip.





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Race Keys: Los Al Futurity winner WYNSTOCK (Bob Baffert) is off to Oaklawn for the Southwest, but his pursuers WINE ME UP (Bob Baffert), COACH PRIME (Bob Baffert), ACE OF CLUBS (DOUG O'NEILL) and STRONGHOLD (PHIL D'AMATO) all re-match. Consider STRONGHOLD was second in that race, beaten a half-length and besting this quartet of returnees. But a race prior STRONGHOLD was disappearing in the rearview mirror of NYSOS (Bob Baffert) by nearly 9 lengths in the Bob Hope. With blinkers on for the first time, expect STRONGHOLD to be forwardly placed and likely have to do the dirty work making first run at NYSOS; that's a tough assignment. COACH PRIME gets the nod of the Los Al Futurity returnees.

Race Keys: MSW risers McVAY (John Shirreffs), BETTER THAN GOLD (Gary Mandella) and SCATIFY (John Sadler) get the class test and I'm highly intrigued in McVAY off his runner-up to promising MAYMUN (Bob Baffert) just 2 weeks ago. This one looks like a route player for a patient barn. I won't be shocked if McVAY is a Santa Anita Derby winner by April. He'll want a fast pace here and then come running with some steam.

JP's Picks: W) **NYSOS**; P) **McVAY**; S) **COACH PRIME**



SOUTHWEST STAKES – Feb. 3

Set the Table: 1-1/16 miles (2 turns), \$800K, KD Points 20-10-6-4-2.

Historically Speaking: Lil E Tee (1992) and Smarty Jones (2004) are the only Southwest alumni to win the Kentucky Derby. The Southwest has produced at least 1 Derby starter each of the last 10 years the KD was held in spring.

What To Watch For: Rescheduled a week later than originally slated, the Oaklawn-based horses missed several days of training in January due to weather and will be behind the fitness calendar compared to the out-of-town shippers.

Race Keys: WYNSTOCK (Bob Baffert) and LIBERAL ARTS (Robbie Medina) bring graded stakes victories in from California and Kentucky. The former exits a 13-1 upset in the Los Alamitos Futurity and has caught life in his last 2 on the front end since stretching out in trip. LIBERAL ARTS has won 2 of his last 3, including October's G3 Street Sense at Churchill. He'll be running late in the Southwest given his prior form. Neither absolutely stands out in this spot, but the price will be bigger on LIBERAL ARTS and the pace hot enough to maybe give him the head-to-head edge with a rally.

Race Keys: Fair Grounds vs. the locals. CARBONE (Steve Asmussen), COMMON DEFENSE (Kenny McPeck) and JUST STEEL (D. Wayne Lukas) hold down the OP fort. MAYCOCKS BAY (Mike Stidham) and AWESOME ROAD (Brad Cox) make a formidable FG cast. Last year, the FG set was superior to OP and I'm leaning that direction until proven otherwise. That said, CARBONE looks like the absolute real deal. He's 9-2 in the morning line, but think he'll be favored at post time. The pace will be hot with him and MAYCOCKS BAY included. The 12-hole draw for AWESOME ROAD would pose a challenge if he breaks running, but likely will take back and try to make a run.

Race Keys: Springboard Mile 1-3 finishers OTTO THE CONQUEROR (Steve Asmussen) and MAGIC GRANT (Eddie Milligan) offer diverse running styles; the former part of the likely hot pace and the latter closing from deep. OTTO THE CONQUEROR's class can be drawn through his ALW win at Churchill when beating HONOR MARIE (Whit Beckman), the eventual G2 Kentucky Jockey Club victor.

JP's Picks: W) **LIBERAL ARTS**; P) **AWESOME ROAD**; S) **CARBONE**





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WITHERS STAKES – Feb. 3

Set the Table: 1-1/8 miles (2 turns), \$250K, KD Points 20-10-6-4-2.

Historically Speaking: The Withers has not produced a Kentucky Derby winner. Last year, Hit Show won this race for Brad Cox and ran 5th in the Derby, the first appearance in that race for a Withers alum in 3 years.

What To Watch For: Sandwich race between 1-turn mile Jerome and 1-turn mile Gotham.

Race Keys: Jerome 2-3 finishers EL GRANDE O (Linda Rice) and KHANATE (Todd Pletcher) are re-matched while adding an extra turn and furlong. Both dueled on the pace last time and don't give any indication based on past performances that they'll appreciate the additional workload.

Race Keys: LIGHTLINE (Brad Cox) replaces DRUM ROLL PLEASE (Brad Cox), the injured Jerome winner, for the barn that won this race a year ago. This wonderfully bred son of Breeders' Cup Dirt Mile / Pegasus World Cup winner City of Light and the turf marathon star mare Upperline, has the kind of pedigree I absolutely love in a classics hopeful. He's been in the Countdown Top-20 all season and I'll be disappointed if he doesn't rally past this bunch to win Saturday.

Race Keys: New faces SPEED RUNNER (Todd Pletcher) from the local maiden ranks, SEMINOLE CHIEF (Jack Sisterson) from Florida, MISSION BEACH (Brittany Russell) from Maryland via California and UNCLE HEAVY (Butch Reid) from Pennsylvania make this quite a melting pot. Of those, MISSION BEACH is most interesting as an ex-Baffert trainee coming off a Laurel 6F win. He should like the distance extension being a son of Curlin. SPEED RUNNER is by Gun Runner and broke his maiden in his second start while at the Withers trip. The class rise here doesn't look overwhelming.

JP's Picks: W) **LIGHTLINE**; P) **MISSION BEACH**; S) **SPEED RUNNER**

Everyone's A Critic - Reviews



SPECTACULAR BID STAKES – Jan. 27

Scratches decimated Maryland's first 2024 step toward the Federico Tesio and Preakness, limiting the field to just three. Heavily favored GUANARE (Rick Dutrow) improved his mark to 3-for-3 since coming north from Florida and changing barns, patiently pouncing the dueling pair and winning clear by 2-3/4 lengths. The favorite at 30 cents on the dollar is by sprint champion Runhappy and has sprint genes on the damside as well. He's improving, but this race doesn't tell us a whole lot, and 38.70 over the final three-eighths going 7F doesn't endorse trying much farther than a one-turn mile.

Runner-up SWEET SODDY J (Raymond Ginter Jr.) had previously won the Heft at Laurel, but was no factor when fifth in Aqueduct's Jerome. He wound up 9 lengths clear here of HAD TO HAVE HIM (John Salzman Sr.) in the caboose.





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Undercard Notables for Review

Fri (1/26) Gulfstream Race 10 ALW: PURE CLASS (David Fawkes) upset Florida-breds at 17-1, winning this sprint 6F in 1:11.01. This result did not flatter the alumni of the Limehouse Stakes and likely won't impact the trail in any way.

Fri (1/26) Tampa Bay Downs Race 8 MSW: Big-barn rookies ran 1-2 in this 7F sprint as Good Magic colt GOOD MONEY (Chad Brown), coming off bullets at Payson Park as well as Palm Beach Downs, held sway over odds-on firster ACCLAIMED VICTOR (Todd Pletcher), a \$725K Omaha Beach colt who carries on the immaculate Personal Ensign-My Flag bluest of bloods on the damside. This was a fast-early, slow-late race that took 38.60 the final 3F – and went a tick slower than \$5K claimers earlier on the card – so it indicates this one likely is not ready to make a huge class rise next. Still, this feels like a good race for Tampa.

Fri (1/26) Turfway Park Race 5 MSW: ENCINO (Brad Cox) wired this 1-1/16M route as the expected odds-on favorite and appears to be a class riser of note. The Nyquist second-timer 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. This was a flattering result for STINGY (Paulo Lobo), winner of that prior Dec. 29 event.

Fri (1/26) Turfway Park Race 9 MSW: 6-1/2F sprint was a good endorsement for rallying Dec. 22 debut winner OH REALLY (Cherie Devaux) as his pursuers came back to run 1-3 in this spot.

Sat (1/27) Gulfstream Race 2 MSW: The same race that produced Mage's debut victory on last year's Pegasus World Cup Day undercard gave us SPEAK EASY (Todd Pletcher) at the end of 7F. The home-bred by Constitution was overlooked at 8-1 on the board despite Pletcher / Irad and scorched throughout with eventual runner-up VICTORY AVENUE (Gustavo Delgado) before inching away by 1-3/4 lengths. VICTORY AVENUE, from some of the same connections as Mage, almost struck déjà vu. The top pair went 44.61 to the half-mile, so 37.35 over the final 3F was outstanding to complete the trip in 1:21.96. This race had a lot of depth on paper as also-rans included flat, 6th-place finisher BATTEN DOWN (Bill Mott), a regally bred Tapit-Close Hatches full-brother to \$3.7M earner Tacitus. A respectable third by BIG CITY (Jose D'Angelo) gives us mixed signals on Dec. 30 sharpshooting winner BORN NOBLE (Todd Pletcher).

Sat (1/27) Aqueduct Race 3 \$100K Jimmy Winkfield Stakes: Odds-on chalk BERGEN (Brad Cox) made easy work late of 4 sprint rivals, drawing clear by 5-1/4 lengths over a muddy track. The time of 1:12.63 won't break any watches, but 25.03 the final quarter wasn't bad considering the boggy mud and he totally spread-eagled this entire field. BERGEN debuted a winner at Keeneland, was runner-up in a Churchill allowance after that and is half-bro to G1 Test winner Chi Town Lady. The colt by BC Dirt Mile winner Liam's Map likely earned a Gotham bid with this performance, but shouldn't be considered a big prospect for two-turn classics.

Sat (1/27) Aqueduct Race 4 MSW: RIDGEWOOD RUNNER (Carlos Martin) led every jump over the 7F in 1:27.50 to win by 4-1/2 widening lengths. A 39.82 final 3F won't cut it even on a deep and muddy track. May foal by Klimt looks like a sprinter.

Sat (1/27) Sam Houston Race 9 \$100K Texas Turf Mile Stakes: NEAT (Rob Atras) cruised to a 5-1/2 length victory in a dirt-to-turf surface change, and further validated the Fair Grounds Form of the Gun Runner Stakes. Not only did he improve off a 6th in that one, but the race produced the 1-2 repeaters in the Lecomte Stakes since. NEAT is a son of Florida Derby winner Constitution and it would not be a surprise to see him get one more chance back on dirt this spring.

Sat (1/27) Fair Grounds Race 2 MSW: Hotshot Justify rookie JUST A TOUCH (Brad Cox) lived up to the hype with a 4-1/2 length romp over \$1.7M debut artist GUN PARTY (Steve Asmussen), a son of Curlin and star mare Carina Mia. Those two were more than 5 lengths ahead of the rest in a strong top-end 6F sprint in 1:10.50. A 24.40 final quarter was outstanding and the final time was essentially equal to older allowance runners on the same card. 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. GUN PARTY won't be a maiden long, but JUST A TOUCH is on the fast track to stakes. It's really a matter with the Cox barn to find a spot amongst a crowded lineup, and you're not going to want to go 9F+ next in the Louisiana Derby series – so expect a road trip. This would be an excellent Gotham prospect or perhaps Oaklawn's Rebel if they want to dance two turns right away.

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Sun (1/28) Gulfstream Race 7 MSW: **BREAK OUT** (Saffie Joseph Jr.) delivered a neck victory with a fast come-home time in this 7-1/2 furlong turf tilt. Final splits of 12.02 and 6.06 were legit acceleration for the son of versatile sire Good Samaritan. **BREAK OUT** had run decently on dirt and Tapeta in prior tries, so Joseph will have options. He may have earned a road trip to Turfway, where a race like March's John Battaglia would be a reasonable first step up in class for Kentuckian Ken Ramsey.

Sun (1/28) Oaklawn Race 6 ALW: Turfway raider **WOODCOURT** (Cipriano Contreras) rallied from 10th of 11 to win a meltdown 1M allowance by a head as 4 runners hit the wire within a length. This race walked home with a 27.14 final quarter as out-of-towners ran 1-2-3 and the locals paid the price for missed training time in recent weeks in Hot Springs. This split division went about 6 lengths slower than its cohort two races later on the card. **WOODCOURT** is now a 4-time winner eligible under the \$100K optional claiming price and being shrewdly shopped. The disappointment here was the pace fade from favorite **TEJON PASS** (Peter Miller), previously third in the Bob Hope and runner-up in the local Renaissance Stakes sprinting. Runner-up **NEXT LEVEL** (Keith Desormeaux) scratched out of last week's Lecomte at Fair Grounds for this spot, and likely shows back up in a stakes next.

Sun (1/28) Oaklawn Race 8 ALW: The faster of 2 split division 1M ALW races on the Sunday card by about 6 lengths, **NORTHERN FLAME** (Kenny McPeek) took them coast-to-coast on the front end. The son of Flameaway held on despite a 26.90 final quarter as none of the back markers made any real dent. **NORTHERN FLAME** was fourth in last year's G1 Breeders' Futurity at Keeneland and his win here flatters the form of **CARBONE** (Steve Asmussen), who had most recently drilled him in an Oaklawn ALW on Dec. 31 and appears this Saturday in the Southwest Stakes. **NORTHERN FLAME** certainly earned his way back into the major prep talk next, but will need to pick up his game against the big boys.

Sun (1/28) Aqueduct Race 5 MSW: Those handicapping the Holy Bull this Saturday may draw some measure of **OTELLO** (Christophe Clement) in that one based on this result. **JD FACTOR** (Rick Dutrow), a narrow runner-up to the eventual Mucho Macho Man Stakes winner **OTELLO**, disappointed upon his return with a tired third, beaten 9-1/2 lengths, as the 6-5 favorite. **CAPITAL IDEA** (Christophe Clement) was a no-doubt-about-it winner here, drawing off by more than 8 lengths despite a wide trip over the 1-turn mile. The May foal by Classic Empire needed 51.47 over the back half of the race to improve off his debut third on Dec. 31, but the overall time was a couple lengths faster than an elder ALW for fillies/mares on the card.

Sun (1/28) Aqueduct Race 9 \$100K Rego Park Stakes: **MISCHIEF JOKE** (Mike Maker) went wire-to-wire to best fellow New York-breds over 6-1/2F. By Practical Joke out of a Distorted Humor mare, expect this one to stay around one turn.

Sun (1/28) Santa Anita Race 6 MSW: The "other" Baffert, 7-1 shot **CORNELL** (Bob Baffert), prevailed after a 1M battle with **MALIBU ROCKS** (Mike Puype) and even-money favorite / stablemate **NEW KING** (Bob Baffert). This field of 6 didn't come home with zest, 26.20 over the final quarter, and yet the top two separated late. This result was not flattering to Jan. 1 maiden breaker **IMAGINATION** (Bob Baffert). **CORNELL**, a \$675K son of Into Mischief and the Wesley Ward-trained sprinter Banree, may have caught the right field here; can't project him to punch out top horses at a distance beyond this mile.

Wed (1/31) Gulfstream Park Race 7 MSW: Last, but certainly not least, was the week's most important winner to this eye, **TUSCAN GOLD** (Chad Brown). We've had him in the Countdown top-20 despite coming into the year a maiden and he showed why with this 6-1/4 length romp over 1-1/16 miles. He absolutely spread-eagled this field (14 lengths to third), though did not come home with zest on the clock, the caveat – 26.53, 6.64. **TUSCAN GOLD** is by Medaglia d'Oro and out of the excellent racemare Valadorna. His debut fourth at Aqueduct may have been the 2YO MSW of the year with winner **SIERRA LEONE** (Chad Brown) running a dynamite second in the Remsen out of it and runner-up **CHANGE OF COMMAND** (Shug McGaughey) since impressing at Gulfstream with back-to-back wins.

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