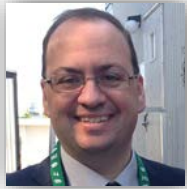




countdown

TO THE
CROWN

SEASON 19 WEEK 6 – February 9, 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 Toby Keith's red Solo cups of musical lore: cheap and disposable. RIP, Toby.

1. Bob Baffert's 11 previous Lewis Stakes winners included just 6 that started for him in the Kentucky Derby, only 3 hit the board if you count Medina Spirit pre-DQ. So there's nothing set in February that the Derby will be missing in terms of NYSOS (Bob Baffert); reserve any uproar for May.
2. The biggest surprise last week wasn't the loss by 2YO champ FIERCENESS (Todd Pletcher) in the Holy Bull, but rather the dominant manner in which MYSTIK DAN (Kenny McPeck) made a mockery of the Southwest, which looked to be the trail's most competitive race to date and wound up an 8-length laugh. FIERCENESS had shown an ability to lay an egg prior; MYSTIK DAN had never touched the kind of air he ran through at Oaklawn.
3. Next week's Risen Star at Fair Grounds is shaping up as the strongest and deepest prep so far on the '24 trail. The race will enter this Saturday for the Feb. 17 FG card.

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

1. NYSOS (Bob Baffert) *not eligible Ky Derby*
2. SIERRA LEONE (Chad Brown)
3. FIERCENESS (Todd Pletcher)
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. LIBERAL ARTS (Robbie Medina) *new*
11. HONOR MARIE (Whit Beckman)
12. HALL OF FAME (Steve Asmussen)
13. TUSCAN GOLD (Chad Brown)
15. HADES (Joe Orseno) *new*
16. CONQUEST WARRIOR (Shug McGaughey)
17. LOCKED (Todd Pletcher)
18. RESILIENCE (Bill Mott)
19. TIMBERLAKE (Brad Cox)
20. MYSTIK DAN (Kenny McPeck) *new*

This Week In Countdown History

2007

Super Bowl Sunday's most impressive winner in *Countdown* history came in our second season when first-time starter Curlin rocketed to a 12-3/4 length victory at Gulfstream Park for trainer Helen Pitts. He was as green as he was brilliant, tipping his hand of huge things to come. Curlin would draw new ownership interests and a barn change to Steve Asmussen before winning the Rebel and Arkansas Derby at Oaklawn.

Curlin won the '07 Preakness, was second in the Belmont and third in the Kentucky Derby. He'd later add a Breeders' Cup Classic and Dubai World Cup to his \$10.5M resume. Curlin remains among the very best horses in the 19-year history of the *Countdown* series.

Keeping Ourselves Honest Picks NOW & Past

Last week's free *Countdown* selections: 4: 1-0-3 (25%)
2024 *Countdown* season selections: 9: 4-2-3 (44%)

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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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With 3 favs tabbed on top, going 1-for-4 was a weak week. 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 (2/9) Tampa Bay Downs Race 7 ALW: 1M turf tilt includes last year's Central Park Stakes runner-up **WALLEY WORLD** (Chad Brown), a More Than Ready who has raced exclusively on grass.

Fri (2/9) Turfway Race 5 MSW: 1M Tapeta heat could give us a better line on Jan. 12 local MSW route winner **TENNESSEE** (Brad Cox), who is back in Saturday in a TP ALW, as several of his pursuers reunite.

Sat (2/10) Aqueduct Race 1 MSW: 6-1/2F sprint may be last call for Triple Crown nominee **ELIMINATE** (Todd Pletcher) to kickstart a campaign. The \$525K son of Curlin is out of the good sprint mare I'm A Looker, but has been beaten favorite in 3 starts to date with minor checks in each.

Sat (2/10) Tampa Bay Downs Race 2 MSW: 1M40Y route on dirt includes turfer **HEARTENED** (Todd Pletcher) on the surface change. The only TC nom in the field catches a light bunch with no excuses after knocking on the door in recent tries.

Sat (2/10) Turfway Race 6 ALW: 1M test includes Jan. 12 winner and Triple Crown nominee **TENNESSEE** (Brad Cox), a Justify colt who is half-brother to Dueling Grounds Derby winner Moon Over Miami. This otherwise appears a modest cast.

Sat (2/10) Gulfstream Race 2 MSW: Turf mile lacks any TC nominees but has Good Magic-Ava's Kitten rookie **RAMESSES** (Saffie Joseph Jr.) and **OSCAR'S WORLD** (Brian Lynch), the latter knocking on the door through 2 starts at the meet.

Sat (2/10) Gulfstream Race 6 MSW: Turf mile split division of GP Race 2 Saturday also lacks at Triple Crown nom. Perhaps of note here is **THEMANUPFRONT** (Michael Yates), fourth on dirt last time vs. *Countdown* Top-20 member **RESILIENCE** (Bill Mott). Not sure moving to turf and drawing the 10-hole gives us an apples-to-apples barometer, but let's see what he does.

Sat (2/10) Gulfstream Race 8 MSW: 6F sprint includes 5 Triple Crown nominees, including rookies **IT'S MY LIFE** (Gustavo Delgado), an Into Mischief who is half-brother to Sugar Bowl/Smarty Jones winner Gold Street; **PROPRIETARY TRADE** (Chad Brown), a bullet-working Practical Joke colt; and **SECRET CRUSH** (Todd Pletcher), a \$300K Candy Ride whose grand dam is none other than superstar Take Charge Lady.

Sat (2/10) Gulfstream Race 11 ALW: 7-1/2F turf route is an interesting return spot for ballyhooed Jan. 13 debut winner **TURN UP THE TREES** (Todd Pletcher). The \$500K son of Liam's Map wasn't as dominant as advertised in that hard-fought 6F dirt win; let's see how he stretches his legs on grass.

Sat (2/10) Oaklawn Race 10 \$150K Ozark Stakes: 6F stakes includes Triple Crown nominee **TIME FOR TRUTH** (Ron Moquett), a sharp debut winner by Omaha Beach. Non-TC noms **AMERICAN RASCAL** (Steve Asmussen) and **VALENTINE CANDY** (Steve Asmussen) are barnmates destined to sprint. **AMERICAN RASCAL**, the Curlin-Lady Aurelia boy wonder, took Keeneland by storm in April and has been conservatively campaigned since a Royal Ascot flounder. **VALENTINE CANDY** has a pair of sprint stakes wins at the meet and this Justify colt is capable of a third.

Sun (2/11) Oaklawn Race 3 ALW: 6F sprint lacks any TC noms, but includes **BOOTH** (Steve Asmussen), a Mitole colt who was beaten favorite in the Ed Brown Society at Churchill to **JUST STEEL** (D. Wayne Lukas), last week's Southwest runner-up.

Sun (2/11) Oaklawn Race 9 MSW: Triple Crown nominees **FLASH FAST** (Kenny McPeck) and **NATIVE LAND** (Riley Mott) have drawn tough wide posts in this 1-1/16M race. Both come off solid third-place efforts routing at the meet.

Sun (2/11) Santa Anita Race 6 ALW: The star of the weekend may be second-timer **MAYMUN** (Bob Baffert), who headlines this 1M ALW on Super Bowl Sunday. He could not have been more dominant or impressive in his Jan. 20 debut victory. He doesn't scream classic distances on the pedigree and developmental fronts, but there's no denying he's brilliant. At \$900K, he's the third-most expensive entrant: \$1.8M rookie **REVISED STATUTE** (Richard Mandella) takes on winners, while **IMAGINATION** (Bob Baffert) wired maidens in his third start to back up his \$1.05M pricetag.

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RACING POKER GOLF

SAM F. DAVIS STAKES – Feb. 10

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

Historically Speaking: The Davis has not produced a Kentucky Derby winner in its history through 29 starters, topped by '06 runner-up Bluegrass Cat. It has produced at least one Derby starter 16 of the last 20 years, but none last year. The '05 winner Andromeda's Hero would wind up second in that year's Belmont Stakes.

What To Watch For: This race has had 11 or 12 starters each of the past 3 years and another dozen are entered for Saturday. Winners were 5-2, 8-5 and 3-1 in those deep fields, however. Trainer Todd Pletcher has won this race a record 7 times and will have AGATE ROAD (Todd Pletcher) and TIRELESS (Todd Pletcher) entered.

Race Keys: AGATE ROAD (Todd Pletcher) and FULMINEO (Arnaud Delacour) are Breeders' Cup Juvenile Turf alumni with just enough dirt form to give this one a go and see if they fit on the trail. They ran 1-2 in the Pilgrim and while AGATE ROAD is the slightly more accomplished, FULMINEO has the benefit of a race already over the track in ALW company. Not a lot separates the pair and you should get a much better price on FULMINEO. The feeling here is that the Davis is a backup plan for AGATE ROAD, who was entered in Gulfstream's Kitten's Joy on turf last weekend and scratched after stablemate LOCKED (Todd Pletcher) came down with a reported fever that necessitated him bypassing the Davis. Never a fan of that schedule shift.

Race Keys: Big-barn stakes debuts for CHANGE OF COMMAND (Shug McGaughey), TIRELESS (Todd Pletcher) and ELYSIAN MEADOWS (Bill Mott) provide the X factors in this race. CHANGE OF COMMAND has been steadily improving and has been a clone in preparation to this point as 2013 Kentucky Derby winner Orb for the same barn. If he's going to keep that line moving forward, he'll need to handle this group with some additional late zip than he showed last out at Gulfstream. His worktab since then indicates it's quite possible. TIRELESS took 4 tries to graduate, 3 as the favorite, barely delivering at 1-2 odds on the ship to Tampa on Jan. 14. A race over the track never hurts, and top pilot Antonio Gallardo knows the oval. He feels a cut below, however. ELYSIAN MEADOWS topped NY-breds twice so far and it's been a big crop for sire City of Light. This is a big move from 6-1/2 furlongs to 1-1/16 miles while taking on open company and stakes runners for the first time.

Race Keys: Dirt stakes shippers NO MORE TIME (Jose D'Angelo) and COPPER TAX (Gary Capuano) will test the Tampa main for the first time. NO MORE TIME was in makeup mode after a troubled start to the Mucho Macho Man Stakes and then ran out of steam as can be expected. Pedigree-wise, there's no assurance he'll improve trying 2 turns for the first time, and the MMM Stakes alumni disappointed in their return in the Holy Bull last week. As for COPPER TAX, his sixth of 10 in the Remsen last out has looked better in recent weeks as horses coming out of that race have had strong returns since. He won around 2 turns at Delaware Park in stakes company and has a versatile running style.

Race Keys: Local stakes veterans PATRIOT SPIRIT (Michael Campbell), CRAZY MASON (Greg Sacco), WEST SARATOGA (Larry Demeritte), EL PRINCIPITO (Michael Laurato), and EVERDOIT (Kevin Rice) provide depth. PATRIOT SPIRIT won the Inaugural sprinting, but my concern isn't so much the distance but that he's only had 3 workouts since that December 2 race. He may be a bit short, as they say. WEST SARATOGA was up against a sprint dynamo in BOOK'EM DANNO (Derek Ryan) in the Pasco and should be better-suited routing under more comfortable fractions. CRAZY MASON kicked it into gear late in a well-placed allowance route prep Jan. 14, giving him a race since his Inaugural runner-up to PATRIOT SPIRIT. Look for him to turn the tide on that one and factor Saturday.

JP's Picks: W) **CHANGE OF COMMAND**; P) **CRAZY MASON**; S) **WEST SARATOGA**





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GOLDEN GATE FIELDS EL CAMINO REAL DERBY – Feb. 10

Set the Table: 1-1/8 miles (2 turns), \$100K, KD Points 0-0-0-0-0. Winner earns automatic berth & fees paid to Preakness. **Historically Speaking:** Two of the last 3 ECR Derby winners contested the Preakness, including '21 middle jewel victor Rombauer. Chase the Chaos went on to finish 5th in Baltimore a year ago. Charismatic in 1999 is the only alum of this race to win the Kentucky Derby, also adding the Preakness. Cavonnier ('96) and Casual Lies ('92) were second in the KD after passing through the ECR Derby.

What To Watch For: The El Camino Real Derby will be what may be its final appearance as Golden Gate Fields is scheduled to close its doors later in 2024. It's one of only two venues with Triple Crown preps on synthetic surfaces, joining Turfway Park's trail.

Race Keys: Obvious favorite **ENDLESSLY** (Michael McCarthy) brings the Rombauer conditioner back to familiar territory and his credentials easily outshine the rest in this field. Multiple G3 wins last year in the Del Mar Juvenile Turf and Zuma Beach, while beaten only 3-1/2 lengths in the Breeders' Cup Juvenile Turf, make him squarely the horse to beat Saturday. Turf-to-synthetic is not a rubberstamp surface transition as many lazy handicappers have assumed over the years, so betting at a short price does come with that caution. Betmix stats show sire Oscar Performance offspring 6: 0-2-3 at GGF on the main.

Race Keys: Local ace **WILD JEWELS** (Steve Specht) has won all 3 starts at GGF, including the Golden Nugget and Gold Rush Stakes. He may not scream 9F based on his past performance, but he's a son of El Camino Real Derby winner Tamarando, so it might be there. The only other local of interest would be rapidly improving **ARCTIC BREEZE** (Blaine Wright), a 9-length maiden winner last out in his sixth start. He's a \$375K son of Arrogate and just might be later blossoming like his sire.

Race Keys: SoCal wildcards **GUY NAMED JOE** (Doug O'Neill) and **TAPALO** (John Sadler) come from top barns but haven't shown high-level talent to date. Both have shown gradual improvement to their credit and have plenty of pedigree to play. **TAPALO**'s damsire is Belmont winner Empire Maker and **GUY NAMED JOE** is a son of Triple Crown winner American Pharoah out of the excellent racemare Hungry Island. Betmix shows the American Pharoah offspring at 21% wins at GGF and a positive ROI. That will be the value play.

JP's Picks: W) **GUY NAMED JOE**; P) **ENDLESSLY**; S) **WILD JEWELS**

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Everyone's A Critic - Reviews

GULFSTREAM PARK HOLY BULL STAKES – Feb. 3

The headline to the Holy Bull, with all apologies to the winner, was the empty third-place finish from reigning 2YO champ and Breeders' Cup Juvenile winner FIERCENESS (Todd Pletcher). Apologists will cite some rough going in the first few strides of the 1-1/16 miles race for the 1-5 favorite, but realists understand a superstar would overcome such hurdles with relative ease against modest competition. Bottom line: this was a huge step backward for FIERCENESS.

Now to HADES (Joe Orseno), unbeaten through 3 starts, who took heat every step of the way in his first route bid and turned away a champ who had every chance to go by him. I glowed about his ALW win Jan. 31 in *Countdown*, but failed to translate it to the Holy Bull against stronger foes and a longer trip. As written in the Jan. 5 edition: "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."

Call it lazy handicapping and not trusting the initial evaluation enough. Sometimes we become cynical against a gelding by blue collar sire Awesome Slew and trained by an Orseno outfit that hasn't had a 3YO seriously on the trail in 20+ years. It's been a long time since Red Bullet, Macho Uno and Thunder Blitz. My short-shrifting aside, HADES has announced his candidacy in 2024. He wasn't fast winning in 1:46.07, but he took heat and took the champ's punch.

Back to FIERCENESS, the concern has to be high for the City of Light colt. He's run two eye-popping races in victory and tossed in the same number of balloon-popping follow-ups. His Champagne seventh was more disastrous than this in terms of what's on paper, but certainly this loss rings far more important as we seek development from the freshman to sophomore seasons. Head-on replay inspection shows he had some early bouncing between DOMESTIC PRODUCT (Chad Brown) and SEA STREAK (Eddie Owens), but it was no degree of danger. Arguably the incident wasn't any more treacherous for DOMESTIC PRODUCT, who ran by FIERCENESS in the stretch to gain the runner-up by a comfortable 1-1/2 lengths. He was beaten 16 lengths in the Remsen when last seen for reference point.

I mentioned at the head of last week's *Countdown* that we haven't had a big-time, stakes-winning 2YO lose his way early on the trail and get it back to win the Kentucky Derby since Super Saver in 2010. Pletcher trained that one, and he'll have to figure out FIERCENESS with the benefit of one more start: potentially the Florida Derby, Wood Memorial, Blue Grass or Arkansas Derby, the latter the race that produced Super Saver. Breeders' Cup Juvenile winners to win the big Derby are Street Sense and Nyquist, and both came out to run absolute crackers in victory in their 3YO returns. FIERCENESS returned a lot more like BC Juvy winners Good Magic, Classic Empire, Hansen (modestly beaten in their comeback bids), each having some sophomore success, but falling far short of any return championship status.

Meanwhile, the Mucho Macho Man Stakes alumni had their participation certificates handed back to them after the Holy Bull. They ran fourth, sixth and seventh in a field of 7, none closer than 6 lengths to the band of fresh faces. OTELLO (Christophe Clement) never got going and was beaten just under 7 lengths while besting only SEA STREAK.

The Gulfstream Park scene looks wide-open heading into the Fountain of Youth, a race in which FIERCENESS was always slated to bypass. That said, HADES would make sense in a return bid. But he's now raced Dec. 9, Dec. 31 and Feb. 3, racking up 3 starts in 8 weeks. If you're thinking Kentucky Derby, you might want to take a little more time between this one and the final prep, awaiting those April showcases. Fountain of Youth leadership could fall to Mage's kid brother DORNOCH (Danny Gargan), whose Remsen victory has been flattered by the eventual Jerome winner and the Holy Bull runner-up.



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SANTA ANITA
PARK

ROBERT B. LEWIS STAKES – Feb. 3

As advertised. Check that, better than advertised. NYSOS (Bob Baffert) not only crushed the Grade 3 Lewis as anticipated by 7-1/2 lengths, but he did so showing patience and professionalism. That's rare in a two-turn debut for a horse with so much natural speed. The son of Breeders' Cup Juvenile winner Nyquist assumed the mantle as America's leading sophomore just moments before the reigning Breeders' Cup Juvenile champ FIERCENESS (Todd Pletcher) showed vulnerability in his Holy Bull loss at Gulfstream Park.

SCATIFY (John Sadler) and WINE ME UP (Bob Baffert) set the Lewis table up front through fractions of 22.81, 23.86 and 24.44 before NYSOS pounced and took over. The final quarter was 25.54 and completed the mile in 1:36.65. *Editor's Note: the Lewis was shortened from 1-1/16 miles to 1 mile this year after the Santa Anita stakes schedule nixed the 1M Sham. We apologize for not pointing that out in last week's report and publishing the incorrect distance.*

The visuals were spectacular as NYSOS shifted gears, maneuvered and reached out like a good one. You won't find flaw with this performance and bonus points are added for the running style in which he won. Stamina should not be an issue as his damsire is Preakness winner Bernardini and his third dam is Breeders' Cup Distaff heroine Unbridled Elaine.

NYSOS is a May 8 foal who didn't debut until October 21, so his upside remains firmly in front of him. Wins at 6, 7 and 8 furlongs now provide a logical progression in distance and quality of competition – though he's really yet to find much of that. His (overmatched) morning workmate prior to the Lewis was 4YO Reincarnate, a Kentucky Derby alum from 2023, and an indicator that even in Baffert's powerful barn, there isn't anyone in his age bracket ready to keep him warm.

As for the others, runner-up WINE ME UP was even throughout, just as he was when fourth in the Los Al Futurity. He continues to perform 3-7 lengths off the more brilliant ones in the barn in repeated afternoon matchups. The Vino Rosso and Kitten's Joy in his pedigree indicate he may maintain that even style even the longer they go. He would seem a Wood Memorial or Blue Grass contender out of town. SCATIFY ran promising enough off of just a single 6F debut win at Los Al prior. The Justify colt earned a future date on the trail to develop further. The maiden McVAY (John Shirreffs) was too close to the early pace and that look away his late punch while fourth. There's more here than he's showing and a breakout maiden route win next might be the experience and boost to put him back in the SA Derby talk. But I was disappointed in his performance in the Lewis.

Next on the Santa Anita Derby trail will be the San Felipe on March 2. Baffert controls nearly all of the important players on the west coast, so how he divides up the brigade will impact other horsemen's plans to stay home or travel. Right now it looks like NYSOS, stablemate MUTH and everyone else in SoCal.

Due to the ban on Baffert-trained runners in the Kentucky Derby, the subtle, 2-week change in the calendar that now likely circles the Preakness for many of his best sophomores will impact desired spacing between starts. Given that the Belmont Stakes is 1-1/4 miles this year at Saratoga during Belmont Park's reconstruction project, Baffert figures to have much more target on that race than historically at 12F on the end of a long Triple Crown season. Expect him to point some horses towards Pimlico and some toward Saratoga directly ... then work backward on the calendar on how to get there.

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SOUTHWEST STAKES – Feb. 3

If you had Steve Asmussen stablemates dueling one another into submission, and Bob Baffert running last of 11 on a roadie to Oaklawn, then maybe, *just maybe*, you saw something coming in the Southwest. But chances are you still got blindsided by the freight train that was MYSTIK DAN (Kenny McPeek) – even if you handicapped for something cute.

What looked to be the deepest and most contentious *Countdown* prep so far in 2024 turned out to be a laugher, much in the frame of Mine That Bird's 2009 Kentucky Derby victory. Granted, 11-1 is not 50-1 ... and McPeek has more name recognition – *though fewer black hats and Wranglers* – than Chip Woolley. But you could stylistically lay MYSTIK DAN's improbable blowout margin and barnstorm up the rail on a wet track right next to ole 'Bird.

Wet tracks are always the caution and the number one factor in blowout margins. That's true to my handicapping on the Triple Crown trail or a Thursday at Laurel. Some horses sail over it, others flounder ... and when you combine the affinity and disdain, margins stretch farther and farther apart. It may be true that MYSTIK DAN is 8 lengths better than these, but it's far more likely the conditions were the biggest factor. After all, he had 4 previous starts and faded to fifth in the Smarty Jones, already succumbing over the same track and distance against a lighter field. He reversed his margin on runner-up JUST STEEL (D. Wayne Lukas), who beat him in the Smarty Jones, by almost 9 lengths. MYSTIK DAN's only previous win came over 5-1/2 furlongs and passing horses had never been his forte to date. So that he blew by 5 rivals and ran this strong routing was what made it particularly unexpected.

LIBERAL ARTS (Robbie Medina) came with a steady run and loomed a danger at the quarter-pole. But the rocket-launch up the inside by MYSTIK DAN was next-level through the wire. Consider the Southwest splits: 23.56, 24.39, 25.28, 24.51 and 5.93 for 1:43.67. Those fourth quarter and final sixteenth come-home times are absolutely crazy for OP. It's common to see good horses go 5-8 lengths slower in just the fourth quarters here in major races.

But note how LIBERAL ARTS continued his progress and then galloped out best by a mile. Of course, that means nothing to the Southwest result, but bodes well for the son of Arrogate as the distances increase. He's got a beautiful foundation and distance progression and is one to watch. I liked everything about this effort, even if I picked him to win and he fell short of that. JUST STEEL also deserves plaudits for a game second. He was the only of the top-4 Southwest finishers to have trained locally at Oaklawn, where more than 10 days were lost due to track closures. The shippers had a major advantage, and notably McPeek was shrewd to trainer MYSTIK DAN at Fair Grounds in-between the Smarty Jones and Southwest.

The obvious disappointment here was WYNSTOCK (Bob Baffert), who pressed the pace and wilted to last, failing to bring his Los Al Futurity-winning form east. He feels second tier, particularly for a barn with so many brilliant types. Stablemates CARBONE (Steve Asmussen) and OTTO THE CONQUEROR (Steve Asmussen) did each other no favors in dueling up top. Couple that with them both missing training time locally and the result was explainable, nonetheless a letdown. Don't give up on both yet.

Also worth noting is that another big Southwest winner was Smarty Jones victor CATCHING FREEDOM (Brad Cox), who saw his past pursuers run 1-2 while he bypassed this step on the trail for bigger tests. Next up will be the Rebel Stakes on Feb. 24 and that race now is only 3 weeks between since the Southwest was pushed back a week on the schedule due to the track and weather situation. Now it's very tough for the Southwest runners to run back that quickly, so CATCHING FREEDOM and a new cast of Arkansas Derby series hopefuls should take center stage.





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AQUEDUCT®

WITHERS STAKES – Feb. 3

The last 4 Withers winner have combined for 6 Triple Crown top-5 finishes, including 2022 Preakness winner Early Voting and the consistent punches from Hit Show (2023) and Max Player (2020). None of those three ran fast at the Big A when winning; in fact all slower than the 1:53.79 on the teletimer this past weekend. So before we snobbishly dismiss Parx-based **UNCLE HEAVY** (Butch Reid), recent history indicates we need to at least hear him out.

With Jerome winner **DRUM ROLL PLEASE** (Brad Cox) sidelined from the trail due to injury, the Withers was open to a potential fresh face. Front-running **EL GRANDE O** (Linda Rice) did his best to see it out for the Jerome alumni, but was collared in the final jump by **UNCLE HEAVY** in a nose decision. The race splits unfolded in 24.14, 25.35, 24.95, 25.73 and 13.62 for the final 1:53.79 for the testing 1-1/8 miles this early in the campaign. That pair finished 2-1/2 lengths clear of 6-5 favorite **LIGHTLINE** (Brad Cox), one of three shippers to land in the superfecta.

UNCLE HEAVY earned a third victory in 4 starts and has done it the hard way by a combined win margin of 1-1/2 lengths. The PA-bred son of 2014 Preakness third-place finisher Social Inclusion gave his modest sire his biggest win at stud. **UNCLE HEAVY** is unbeaten around two turns having won the Wait For It Stakes at Parx previously. His late-running style and success now at 9F will play to optimism as the races get longer. Expect him to await the Wood Memorial.

Farther trips and tougher competition likely will separate from **EL GRANDE O**, who put away the pace players to run fifth and ninth (last), but surrendered a 3-length lead in the final sixteenth. He's now 10 races into his career – admirably with 8 exacta finishes – so it's fair to start envisioning his ceiling with only a prep or two left before the Triple Crown starts. It's the fourth time he's given up the lead late from anywhere between 5-9F. He'd be best-served shortening back to the Gotham and aiming for the Woody Stephens on the Belmont undercard at 7F.

No doubt the disappointment was the modest third-place run by **LIGHTLINE**, a horse I'm very high on, but have to temper a bit after this performance. It was his first over a wet track and he didn't embarrass himself, but he only made up 2-1/2 lengths over the final 3F when those in front of him weren't exactly star commodities. He's got to get much better in the Wood Memorial next, but he's capable of better than this. **MISSION BEACH** (Brittany Russell) didn't pick up a hoof after a troubled start and the ex-Baffert Californian may be best-aimed at Laurel's Federico Tesio over a track he's shown success on. Perhaps the wet track in the Withers was a culprit, but class relief and fast footing are in the recommendations.

Undercard Notables for Review

Fri (2/2) Turfway Race 6 \$125K Leonatus Stakes: **EPIC RIDE** (John Ennis) was highly reputed in *Countdown* after his Jan. 5 win at Turfway and, in this 1M stakes follow-up, showed he's a major player on TP's Jeff Ruby trail. While still green and clunky with his lead changes, he showed obvious talent again with a 4-length score. But he's a May 17 foal and the 25.75 final quarter offers some concern how much farther this son of Blame will go in the immediate future. Let's see who shows up in the Ruby. Turfway Prevue winner **VOTE NO** (Bill Morey) faded to fifth of 6, beaten 13 lengths, after dueling with the winner.

Fri (2/2) Gulfstream Race 2 MSW: 5F turf sprint saw \$550K rookie **REFUEL** (Todd Pletcher) scored wire-to-wire while slightly pulling away late. This son of Hard Spun is half-brother to Following Sea, the Vosburgh winner and Cigar Mile/Haskell runner-up. Pletcher has so many options it's doubtful we see this one on the trail, but it was a promising start.

Sat (2/3) Gulfstream Race 4 MSW: 6-5 favorite **BAIL US OUT** (Todd Pletcher) prevailed by a half-length in this hard-fought 1-1/16 miles route score on the Tapeta. The \$700K 2YO by Lookin At Lucky had debuted fourth behind stablemate **BORN NOBLE** (Todd Pletcher) on Dec. 30. He may have earned a stakes bid back on dirt out of this, but would be a big leap to a race like the Tampa Bay Derby for now.

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countdown

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SEASON 19 WEEK 6 – February 9, 2024

Sat (2/3) Gulfstream Race 6 ALW: Nearly as stunning as the Holy Bull defeat by stablemate FIERCENESS (Todd Pletcher) later on the same card, 2-5 chalk BORN NOBLE (Todd Pletcher) simply wasn't supposed to lose this off his impressive Dec. 30 MSW score. The \$725K Constitution colt was clear in deep stretch before 26-1 longshot REAL MACHO (Rohan Crichton) reeled him in with no excuses. BORN NOBLE fell apart late with a 26.72 final quarter, alarming for a 1-turn mile of a horse supposed to be Florida Derby-type material. ALW races don't often fill this time of year and time is running out to see if you're stakes-quality, so expect BORN NOBLE to step up in class despite the loss and see what he's got. As for REAL MACHO, he was beaten nearly 10 lengths when fifth behind CHANGE OF COMMAND (Shug McGaughey) last out, flattering that one's form into this week's Sam F. Davis Stakes at Tampa Bay. The top pair here are on perfect timing to the Fountain of Youth and make sense there.

Sat (2/3) Gulfstream Race 9 \$125K Swale Stakes: The 2 longest shots on the board ran 1-2 in this 7F stakes as FRANKIE'S EMPIRE (Michael Yates) scored at 14-1 by 3-1/2 widening lengths. 4-5 favorite LEGALIZE (Cherie Devaux), the Sugar Bowl winner at Fair Grounds, stopped to finish last of 7. By Classic Empire, FRANKIE'S EMPIRE was a well-beaten third in the Sapling around two turns last year as a juvenile and might get a chance to go longer, but currently looks best as a closing sprinter.

Sat (2/3) Gulfstream Race 11 G3 \$175K Kitten's Joy Stakes: Dirt-to-turf runner FIRST WORLD WAR (Brendan Walsh) improved on his Mucho Macho Man runner-up by posting a determined, half-length score in this grass route at 1-1/16 miles. He came home strong in 22.97 and 5.84 the way you want to see on the turf. The War Front colt likely will be best at middle distances even if surface versatile. A slow pace here helped the front runners hold control throughout. That the dirt horse (albeit one with good turf form to open his career) beat a field that included the winners of the Dania Beach and Armed Forces local stakes isn't a strong endorsement of the GP turf crowd so far this meet.

Sat (2/3) Oaklawn Race 4 MSW: Solidly favored MR FILIP (Robertino Diodoro) scored wire-to-wire in this deep 6F race, drawing clear by 2-1/2 lengths in the end. He's fast, going 1:10.89, and bred to be so with speed top and bottom on the pedigree. Don't expect this son of Mitole to stretch out. It was a promising debut fourth by Mo Town home-bred MORUNNING (Brad Cox), who made up ground despite a troubled trip.

Sat (2/3) Oaklawn Race 6 MSW: DIMATIC (Steve Asmussen) was green and clunky, but effective in victory over 1-1/16 miles on the move from Fair Grounds. The 3-length victor didn't beat much in this spot, but has a pedigree to play. He's by Gun Runner and is full-brother to last year's Wood Memorial third and PA Derby runner-up Dreamlike. The out of towners continue to hold an edge in these races vs. the locals who missed 11 days of training in January. The final time of 1:46.11 was slow, as was the come-home time (26.46, 6.79) – especially when the same-day Southwest went in 1:43.67, about 12-15 lengths faster.

Sat (2/3) Fair Grounds Race 9 ALW: Washed off the turf and at 1-1/16 miles on a sloppy main track, City of Light colt LE GRIS (Al Stall Jr.) handled the transition with a dominant, 6-length victory. He's now won back-to-back following a 9F turf MSW score. Off-the-turf races and wet tracks often lead to blowout margins, so take this one with a grain of salt until proven otherwise. This race was 8-9 lengths slower than non-winners of 2 lifetime claimers earlier on the card, though conditions worsened throughout the day. He'll be headed to the stakes ranks next.

Sat (2/3) Santa Anita Race 2 MSW: ISLAND CRUISER (John Sadler) wired the field in this 6-1/2 furlong turf sprint as the 6-5 favorite. The colt by Sadler's fast sprinter / miler Catalina Crusier had knocked on the door in 2 previous starts and has sprinted on turf exclusively to this stage.

Sat (2/3) Tampa Bay Downs Race 4 MSW: \$240K Not This Time rookie WAITLIST (Todd Pletcher) rallied wide from far back to get up by a neck and score at 8-1 odds. That's no easy task to win at 9F in the first start, and note his dam's only win came in a 7F MSW on dirt at Churchill, so he may get a chance on the main track soon enough. The final furlong in 11.88 was solid considering he still had work to do.

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