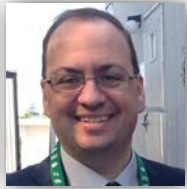




countdown

TO THE
CROWN

SEASON 19 WEEK 9 – March 1, 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 Kentucky business owner who recently found his lost \$50,000 Powerball ticket in a company car 3 months after it went missing. Keep receipts, people.

1. It's almost impossible to think the busiest week by far on the '24 trail – with major preps in FL, CA, NY and KY – includes only 3 current members of this week's *Countdown* top-20. Either I'm way off, or this promising week will become forgettable by May.
2. Highly respected KNIGHTSBRIDGE (Bill Mott) and SNEAD (Brendan Walsh) have returned to the workout tab after minor setbacks and are playing catch-up. Time may not be their friend, but I look forward to seeing what they can do upon a reappearance. We'll leave them out of the top-20 for now, but rate their abilities at top-10 levels.
3. Speaking of those 2, they're high on my Preakness Future Wager Pool 1 wish list for this weekend, which closes at 8 pm ET Saturday. More details are included at the end of this week's *Countdown* Fearless Forecast – Previews.

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. FOREVER YOUNG (Yoshito Yahagi)
5. MAYMUN (Bob Baffert) *not eligible Ky Derby*
6. TRACK PHANTOM (Steve Asmussen)
7. DORNOCH (Danny Gargan)
8. TIMBERLAKE (Brad Cox)
9. CATCHING FREEDOM (Brad Cox)
10. MUTH (Bob Baffert) *not eligible Ky Derby*
11. LIBERAL ARTS (Robbie Medina)
12. CONQUEST WARRIOR (Shug McGaughey)
13. RESILIENCE (Bill Mott)
14. TUSCAN GOLD (Chad Brown)
15. HADES (Joe Orseno)
16. LOCKED (Todd Pletcher)
17. TUSCAN SKY (Todd Pletcher)
18. HONOR MARIE (Whit Beckman)
19. AGATE ROAD (Todd Pletcher)
20. MYSTIK DAN (Kenny McPeck)

This Week In Countdown History

2021

Reigning 2YO champion Essential Quality made his 3-year-old debut a winning one, improving to 4-for-4 lifetime after scoring the Southwest Stakes at Oaklawn. The odds-on favorite romped by 4-1/2 lengths over a field that included future champion sprinter Jackie's Warrior, who set the pace and faded to third, as well as eventual \$2M earner Last Samurai.

Essential Quality added a Blue Grass victory before suffering his first career loss when third in the Kentucky Derby. He'd then win the Belmont, Jim Dandy & Travers before a third-place effort in the Breeders' Cup Classic, retiring 10: 8-0-2 with Eclipse Awards at ages 2 and 3.

Keeping Ourselves Honest Picks NOW & Past

Last week's free *Countdown* selections: 1: 0-0-0 (0%)
2024 *Countdown* season selections: 14: 4-2-4 (29%)

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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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Longshot Rebel pick was no good as favorite scored handily. Our top play in the Miracle Wood scratched. 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

As is *Countdown* custom, our maiden and allowance coverage ends with the start of March and the only mentions are very significant races with known direct impact on the trail.

Fri (3/1) Dundalk Race 6 \$41K Patton Stakes: 20-10-6-4-2 European Road to the Kentucky Derby points qualifier hits the synthetic surface in Ireland with just a field of 4. HENRY ADAMS (Aidan O'Brien) and NAVY SEAL (Aidan O'Brien) are both Triple Crown nominees who could land UAE Derby consideration off strong efforts.

Fri (3/1) Gulfstream Park Race 7 ALW: Florida Derby prep at 1-1/8 miles features *Countdown* top-20 CONQUEST WARRIOR (Shug McGaughey), coming off a troubled and visually impressive 1-turn mile MSW score. SPEAK EASY (Todd Pletcher) is entered, but reportedly will scratch to run in the Fountain of Youth. The presence of Fountain of Youth cross-entrant MERIT (Saffie Joseph Jr.) would have an impact on both races' pace.



GULFSTREAM PARK

FOUNTAIN OF YOUTH STAKES – March 2

Set the Table: 1-1/16 miles (2 turns), \$400K, KD Points 50-25-15-10-5.

Historically Speaking: 14 FoY alumni have gone on to win the Kentucky Derby, most of any non-final 3YO prep, including Mage a year ago (4th in this race). The FoY produced '11 Preakness winner Shackleford, '12 Belmont winner Union Rags and '13 Derby winner Orb in successive years.

What To Watch For: The Remsen Stakes has been highly productive so far this trail with the Jerome winner, the Risen Star winner and the Holy Bull runner-up. Its winner DORNOCH (Danny Gargan) has been flattered without running in 2024.

Race Keys: DORNOCH (Danny Gargan) and LOCKED (Todd Pletcher) are the established 2YO stakes stars making their 3YO debuts. Neither has raced at Gulfstream and both train offsite, but both have pedigree license to shine. DORNOCH's full-brother Mage rose to fame here a year ago at Gulfstream and ran strongly over the surface; LOCKED is by local Pegasus World Cup winner Gun Runner. There's no surface edge between them on paper or in estimation. Pace-wise, however, the big edge is to DORNOCH. The 1-1/16 miles races favor inside speed at Gulfstream and the sixteenth pole finish line will challenge a closer like LOCKED far more than the speedy DORNOCH. In terms of preparedness, LOCKED got a slight headstart on the campaign in Florida, but then missed the Sam F. Davis expected start due to a fever. The big question for DORNOCH will be his mental development. He was extremely green last year even in his victories.

Race Keys: How good are SPEAK EASY (Todd Pletcher) and VICTORY AVENUE (Gustavo Delgado) coming out of the same MSW race, and ALW risers MERIT (Saffie Joseph Jr.) and REAL MACHO (Rohan Crichton)? SPEAK EASY will be formidable rail speed under Irad Ortiz Jr. The son of Constitution stays in this race and doesn't run in Friday's cross-entered ALW. No reason to give up the rail draw and Irad to run 9F in that one for much less money. He'll be pace in here with DORNOCH as well as VICTORY AVENUE, the colt from the connections of Mage who was much ballyhooed in his debut when favored, but slightly outrun by SPEAK EASY, the latter a modest worker at best and dead on the board at 8-1. The pace certainly could be contested, and MERIT has been right in the mix in a pair of 1-turn starts if he stays in the field. Of this group, VICTORY AVENUE has upside ... and I love his 3 workouts since the last race vs. 2 for SPEAK EASY; he came out of his bustling. VICTORY AVENUE is on a similar path here as Mage was a year ago when that one ran a threatening race and wound up 4th.

Race Keys: Championship Meet stakes veterans FRANKIE'S EMPIRE (Michael Yates) and LE DOM BRO (Eniel Cordero) exit the Swale, while DANCING GROOM (Antonio Sano) is the only local route stakes player to advance. The prior 2-turn races for the Swale pair don't inspire confidence. DANCING GROOM will get a much better set-up in terms of pace than he did in the Holy Bull and is an interesting longshot to pace horses for the exotics. He's not impossible if it all melts down.

JP's Picks: W) **DORNOCH**; P) **VICTORY AVENUE**; S) **LOCKED**

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GOTHAM STAKES – March 2

Set the Table: 1 mile (1 turn), \$300K, KD Points 50-25-15-10-5.

Historically Speaking: Gotham alumni are 0-48 in the Kentucky Derby since 1980 and its last winner to score the KD was none other than Secretariat (1973). Cloud Computing won '17 Preakness (2nd in Gotham), while Red Bullet won both in 2000.

What To Watch For: With the Jerome winner sidelined to injury and the Withers champ sitting this out and awaiting the Wood Memorial, a deep cast of fresh faces have gathered for this field of 13, the final 1-turn KD points prep of the campaign.

Race Keys: Trainer Brad Cox sends out a 4-way brigade, let by sharp debut Fair Grounds sprint winner JUST A TOUCH (Brad Cox), Jimmy Winkfield Stakes 1-3 finishers BERGEN (Brad Cox) and AIR CAV (Brad Cox), and beaten Withers favorite LIGHTLINE (Brad Cox), coming off a third-place finish. Justify's son JUST A TOUCH has great upside and initial brilliance. LIGHTLINE is a grinding sort better suited for the Wood than Gotham. BERGEN showed the superiority of the Ky form last out.

Race Keys: EL GRANDE O (Linda Rice) leads the remaining Big A winter stakes warriors following seconds in the Jerome and Withers. He outran expectations at 9F around 2 turns in the Withers and matches up better at this trip. ELIMINATE (Todd Pletcher) and CAPITAL IDEA (Christophe Clement) bring meet experience off MSW wins. Prefer former on fast, latter if wet.

Race Keys: FACENDA (Doug O'Neill) ships east to see where he fits, while DETERMINISTIC (Christophe Clement) returns north. FACENDA debuted a winner at Turf Paradise on Jan. 30 and since moved to O'Neill's barn from fellow Santa Anita-based trainer Luis Mendez. DETERMINISTIC leaves his Payson winter home and starts for the first time since a grinding Saratoga debut score over 7F. Note: SLIDER (John Sadler) was forced to scratch due to injury.

JP's Picks: W) **JUST A TOUCH**; P) **BERGEN**; S) **EL GRANDE O**



JOHN BATTAGLIA MEMORIAL STAKES – March 2

Set the Table: 1-1/16 miles (2 turns), \$150K, KD Points 20-10-6-4-2.

Historically Speaking: Rich Strike, 4th in this race in 2022, is the only alum to go on and win the Kentucky Derby. The race's only other top-3 KD finisher was Perfect Drift (2002).

What To Watch For: Oaklawn and Gulfstream shippers will give us a bit of a regional comparison, but the surface change to synthetic obviously makes that less of a direct line.

Race Keys: Leonatus Stakes 1-2-3 finishers EPIC RIDE (John Ennis), BLUE EYED GEORGE (Michael McCarthy) and GOOD BALI (Rusty Arnold) re-match. It was a mismatch here Feb. 4 when EPIC RIDE stretched out off a highly impressive 6F MSW romp to win by 4L in his stakes debut. The son of Blame doesn't lack for route pedigree, but he'll have to finish better on the back end than he did the final quarter in the Leonatus. A bullet half-mile since then shows he's holding form. The additional 1/16 of a mile likely helps BLUE EYED GEORGE more than GOOD BALI.

Race Keys: Stablemates ENCINO (Brad Cox), FIDGET (Brad Cox) and GETTYSBURG ADDRESS (Brad Cox) enter the local stakes scene for a barn you have to fear. ENCINO has the local experience, but drew terribly and didn't impress when getting everything his way last time. FIDGET never picked up a hoof in the Smarty Jones at Oaklawn, when finishing nearly 18 lengths behind GETTYSBURG ADDRESS. The latter, a Constitution colt who drew the rail, has to be the threat of this grouping. His sire hits only 7% on the Turfway Tapeta, so there's no promises he carries his form to town.

Race Keys: Which class riser makes the leap? BREAK OUT (Saffie Joseph Jr.) and BOLT AT MIDNIGHT (Mick Ruis) seem most likely. BREAKOUT was a Gulfstream turf MSW winner last out and that GP turf form has been a 19% winner at TP over time. BOLT AT MIDNIGHT had a lightbulb-on MSW win by nearly 5L last time and is a front-running threat from a great draw.

JP's Picks: W) **EPIC RIDE**; P) **BOLT AT MIDNIGHT**; S) **BREAK OUT**





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SAN FELIPE STAKES – March 3

Set the Table: 1-1/16 miles (2 turns), \$400K, KD Points 50-25-15-10-5.

Historically Speaking: 13 San Felipe alumni have gone on to win the Kentucky Derby (Authentic, California Chrome, Giacomo and Fusaichi Pegasus since 2000; Medina Spirit DQ'd 2021). Since 2008, it's produced at least 1 KD starter every year except 2019 & 2023. The race also produced Preakness successes this century like Exaggerator, California Chrome and Point Given, the latter winning the Belmont as well.

What To Watch For: Scheduled for Saturday, but that card has been postponed and shifting to Sunday due to rainfall forecasts. The extra day won't mean much in the preparation and outcome, but keep an eye on track conditions. A drying out and deep racetrack is demanding on fitness and could give stamina-types the edge.

Race Keys: In the last 20 Santa Anita preps for the Triple Crown in which he's entered a horse in his name, Bob Baffert has won 16 of them and finished 2nd in his 4 losses (SEE FULL TABLE BELOW). So the San Felipe starts and likely ends with his trio of NYSOS (Bob Baffert), IMAGINATION (Bob Baffert) and WINE ME UP (Bob Baffert). While IMAGINATION and WINE ME UP are solid 3YOs, they appear several notches below the talent of NYSOS. Look for WINE ME UP to have the most natural early speed of the trio and contest the front. The patience NYSOS showed last out will continue to pay off as distances stretch.

Race Keys: McVAY (John Shirreffs) has disappointed me to date, but there's something there and conservative trainer Shirreffs wouldn't keep going to the stakes well with a maiden if there wasn't. He was way too close to the pace in the Lewis when flattening out to fourth, beaten 12-1/2 lengths by NYSOS. Expect more early patience and try to run late.

Race Keys: SCATIFY (John Sadler) is a Justify colt that was sort of a bargain \$120K buy at the 2YO sales. Dam Broadway Run was a pure turf sprinter, so we'll see how far this 6F Los Al MSW winner wants to go. He set the pace in the 1M Lewis and faded to third, more than 8 lengths behind NYSOS and now has to get another 1/16th of a mile.

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

Santa Anita's Triple Crown Preps Since 2019 SA Derby (RED=Baffert transferred horses for Derby points eligibility)

'19 SA Derby	Roadster	Baffert
'20 Sham	Authentic	Baffert
'20 Lewis	Thousand Words	Baffert
'20 San Vicente	Nadal	Baffert
'20 San Felipe	Authentic	Baffert
'20 SA Derby	Honor AP	Shirreffs (Baffert 2nd w/ KD winner Authentic)
'21 Sham	Life Is Good	Baffert
'21 Lewis	Medina Spirit	Baffert
'21 San Vicente	Concert Tour	Baffert
'21 San Felipe	Life Is Good	Baffert
'21 SA Derby	Rock Your World	Sadler (Baffert 2nd w/ DQ'd KD winner Medina Spirit)
'22 Sham	Newgrange	Baffert
'22 Lewis	Messier	Baffert
'22 San Vicente	Forbidden Kingdom	Mandella (Baffert runs 2nd, 3rd, 4th)
'22 San Felipe	Forbidden Kingdom	Mandella (Baffert 2nd)
'22 SA Derby	Taiba	Yakteen (winner was transfer from Baffert barn)
'23 Sham	Reincarnate	Baffert
'23 Lewis	Newgate	Baffert
'23 San Vicente	Havnameltdown	Baffert
'23 San Felipe	Practical Move	Yakteen (Baffert transfers run 4th, 5th, 6th)
'23 SA Derby	Practical Move	Yakteen (Baffert transfer runs 4th)
'24 Lewis	Nysos	Baffert
'24 San Vicente	Muth	Baffert





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PREAKNESS FUTURE WAGER POOL 1 ODDS – Feb 29-Mar 2

(JP Recommendations in BOLD)

#	Horse	ML
1	Agate Road	50
2	Book'em Danno	50
3	Born Noble	50
4	Catching Freedom	50
5	Change of Command	60
6	Coach Prime	15
7	Common Defense	60
8	Conquest Warrior	40
9	Domestic Product	40
10	Dornoch	18
11	Drip	60
12	Endlessly	60
13	Epic Ride	60
14	Fierceness	25
15	Forever Young	40
16	Hades	50
17	Hall of Fame	50
18	Honor Marie	30
19	Inveigled	50
20	Just a Touch	30
21	Knightsbridge	30
22	Liberal Arts	50
23	Locked	20
24	Maymun	10
25	Muth	20
26	Mystik Dan	40
27	Nash	50
28	No More Time	50
29	Nyos	4
30	Resilience	50
31	Sierra Leone	15
32	Snead	50
33	Speak Easy	50
34	Speedyness	50
35	Stronghold	50
36	Timberlake	20
37	Track Phantom	40
38	Tuscan Sky	50
39	Victory Avenue	50
40	All Other Three Year Olds	6

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Everyone's A Critic - Reviews



REBEL STAKES – Feb. 24

What are you looking for when you bring a top 2-year-old back for his 3-year-old debut? A middle-distance race that lacks a breakneck pace, provides modest competition and still can provide some education that goes beyond simply being better than the opposition. Check all those boxes for 2023 Champagne winner and Breeders' Cup Juvenile fourth-place finisher **TIMBERLAKE** (Brad Cox) after Oaklawn's \$1.25 million Rebel Stakes ... and, oh yeah, the money wasn't bad either at \$618,750 to the winner.

Some years the Rebel Stakes has come up every bit as difficult as the Arkansas Derby, the final leg in Oaklawn's long and challenging prep slate. You'll run into a Curlin, an American Pharoah, an Omaha Beach. This clearly was not the case last Saturday as the 1-1/16 miles test didn't even offer the local Smarty Jones or Southwest Stakes winners who preceded on the path. That left **TIMBERLAKE** a standout 4-5 favorite against 11 rivals trying to prove their worth.

The full field bunched like a turf race and tempo'd modestly with splits of 23.20, 24.47, 25.25, 24.98 and 6.09 for 1:44.00 over the 1-1/16 miles. The top 7 horses at the finish all were within 3-1/2 lengths of the lead after the first half-mile of the race. There was modest shuffling of the running order, but the race dynamics were not stark. **TIMBERLAKE** got the absolute experience you want to see in a comfortable, 2-length win: a safe trip without anxious moments, a pace that won't bottom out any of its alumni and plenty of experience along the way. Here's how I saw the trip notes:

TIMBERLAKE (Brad Cox) 1st by 2 ... The seas parted at start and had wide open spaces to get into rhythm, showed beautiful tactical speed to find a great spot in the pocket just behind the speed....took a lot of dirt on the clubhouse turn and got a good education, always under control even when horses moved inside and outside him, took cue on far turn, circled 4-5 wide around the pace players and assumed command as soon as he straightened, did drift out some in the lane when hit once left-handed, then moved in under right-hand urging....ridden out to the wire in a promising comeback win against suspect field.

COMMON DEFENSE (Kenny McPeck) 2nd by 2.... Away clean, settled nicely, saved ground, stayed patient behind horses into the far turn and didn't fight rider, dream run inside. To his credit had enough burst to go through hole when presented.

NORTHERN FLAME (Kenny McPeck) 3rd by 5... Away sharply, applied pressure 2-path, between horses the final 7 furlongs and never had a breather, outran the other speed and gave a top effort with nothing handed to him.

WOODCOURT (Cipriano Contreras) 4th by 6 ... Hard-ridden from outside post 12 into the clubhouse turn while settling for third spot early on, pursued 3-4 wide throughout and kept on fairly well.

DIMATIC (Steve Asmussen) 5th by 7 ¼ ... Outfooted into clubhouse turn after mild brush at start, got very rank on first bend behind horses and fought Tyler Gaffalione for an extended period of time before finally given his head back on the backstretch...rail and 2-path run and even throughout before flattening out. Needs to break and let to show speed next.

CARBONE (Steve Asmussen) 6th by 7 ¾ ... Set pressured pace from rail having to hustle from the start and failed text.

JUST STEEL (D. Wayne Lukas) 7th by 10 ... Not away with any zest and that left him hung out to dry, 6-wide into clubhouse turn, stayed that way the entire trip and never got involved in a step back from his previous form. Better draw helps, but fair to question if he's getting 'over the top.'





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LAGYNOS (Steve Asmussen) 9th by 13 ½ ... Had no excuses and expected more while running fresh from Smarty Jones.

TIME FOR TRUTH (Ron Moquett) scratched after his trainer said he had a minor shin bruise, though post 13 would have done him no favors. He's re-entered Saturday in Oaklawn's Race 8 ALW at 1-1/16 miles against ETHAN ENERGY (Brad Cox), a legit springboard to the Arkansas Derby.

The Rebel Stakes was 1 of 6 races on the card at 1-1/16 miles. Here's how they played out on the clock.

1:43.50 R10 Razorback (4yo & up)

1:44.00 R11 Rebel 3yo

1:44.75 R1 ALW 3yo

1:45.50 R12 MSW 3yo

1:46.42 R5 MSW 3f

1:45.60 R9 Honeybee 3f

1:46.42 R5 MSW 3f

Next on the Oaklawn trail will be the 1-1/8M Arkansas Derby on March 29. **TIMBERLAKE** makes perfect sense to come back for this spot, but trainer Brad Cox could opt to go to the Blue Grass with that one. He's already returned to his Fair Grounds winter base, and we'll see where he winds up. Kenny McPeek is sitting on a lot of Arkansas Derby options with **COMMON DEFENSE** and **NORTHERN FLAME** out of this race, as well as romping Southwest winner **MYSTIK DAN** (Kenny McPeek). You know he's supporting the Blue Grass at Keeneland with something out of that trio. **JUST STEEL** likely gets another shot in the Arkansas Derby as he's earned that in the series, and hopefully will draw better than his poor fortune in recent starts. Then there's the Bob Baffert factor. He didn't send anything to the Rebel, but the Arkansas Derby should fit into his Preakness plans with at least one of his powerful sophomores, any one of which could send the connections of **TIMBERLAKE** to Keeneland. Cox could return to Oaklawn with Smarty Jones winner **CATCHING FREEDOM** (Brad Cox), last out third-place finisher in the Risen Star at Fair Grounds. Let's see how all of those dominoes fall



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MIRACLE WOOD STAKES – Feb. 24

Maryland's final 1-turn stop on the Preakness path saw heavily favored **SPEEDYNESS** (Jamie Ness) continue his winning ways. He's now tallied 4 of his last 5 starts, avenging his Maryland Juvenile loss to Miracle Wood rival **CIRCLE P** (Flint Stites) in the process. That one rallied for third, 2 lengths behind the winner, who essentially led wire-to-wire as has been his style. Four scratches reduced the field to 7 and made the task easier for the 4-5 chalk.

Maryland-bred **SPEEDYNESS** is by Great Notion and out of the Include mare Hartigan. There's enough route pedigree on the damside to make the obvious next step to the Private Terms or Federico Tesio and see if **SPEEDYNESS** can handle more after 3 victories at the 1-turn mile trip. He's proven best of the locals this winter. That he was so badly outrun in the Advent at Oaklawn and Aqueduct's Jerome gives obvious indication he's a level below Preakness quality barring major improvement.



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Undercard Notables for Review

Sat (2/24) Saudi Arabia / King Abulaziz Racecourse Race 4 \$1.5M Saudi Derby: Japan's heavily favored FOREVER YOUNG (Yoshito Yohagi) needed every bit of the marathon stretch in this 1-turn mile to run down American speedball BOOK'EM DANNO (Derek Ryan), who ran simply too good to lose. FOREVER YOUNG was away a beat sluggishly and that's what got Derma Sotogake beaten in last year's Kentucky Derby, something you hope this talented raider can correct in the UAE Derby next. He was hard-riden down the backstretch to keep in touch while traveling 4-wide on the only turn. It took 8 left-hand strikes of the whip and 1 right-handed to collar BOOK'EM DANNO in the final jump. I would have preferred he didn't have to work so hard for it, but the 2-turn UAE Derby will be tell-tale to his Kentucky Derby prospects, not this pseudo-sprint. As for BOOK 'EM DANNO, he's a high-quality miler who should be looking at races like the Pat Day Mile and Woody Stephens.

Sat (2/24) Gulfstream Race 4 MSW: \$925K Curlin colt CORPORATE POWER (Shug McGaughey) wandered about and wore down the blueblood Tapit-Close Hatches colt BATTEN DOWN (Bill Mott) in a 1-1/8M stamina test that saw 3 necks on the wire. STURDY (George Weaver) also finished in the mix in what looks to be a solid, though not brilliant, race in 1:51.08. You could see CORPORATE POWER in a final-round prep, but the barn also has CHANGE OF COMMAND (Shug McGaughey) and CONQUEST WARRIOR (Shug McGaughey), so perhaps they go the more conservative ALW route with this one. The 1-2 finishers in this race flatter this week's returnees SPEAK EASY (Todd Pletcher) and VICTORY AVENUE (Gustavo Delgado) from their prior Pegasus World Cup Day undercard clash.

Sat (2/24) Oaklawn Race 1 ALW: 1-1/16 miles event should produce a starter or two toward stakes, including comeback winner SEIZE THE GRAY (D. Wayne Lukas), who had been away since Keeneland. The Arrogate colt earned minor checks in the Skidmore and Iroquois last year and beat a solid-looking field in this one. The time was about 4 lengths slower than the Rebel later on the card, but certainly a 3YO return that sets him up for the Arkansas Derby, Blue Grass or Lexington. The result was not an endorsement of OP ALW winners like CARBONE (Steve Asmussen) & WOODCOURT (Cipriano Contreras).

Sat (2/24) Oaklawn Race 12 MSW: Regally bred Justify-Dream of Summer colt GIVE ME A REASON (Steve Asmussen) delivered in his third start, winning a front-end slugfest while fending off several challenges over 1-1/16 miles. The half-brother to Creative Cause and Destin held by a nose and held up his strong company lines having faced KNIGHTSBRIDGE (Bill Mott) in his debut) and then COMMON DEFENSE (Kenny McPeck) in his second outing – the latter came back for a strong Rebel runner-up in the previous race on the card. Time was modest, about 8L off the Rebel, and GIVE ME A REASON is not Triple Crown nominated, so don't expect this one to have a late trail impact.

Sat (2/24) Santa Anita Race 1 ALW: This turf mile was wired by TC nom and Eddie Logan Stakes third-place finisher TWIRLING POINT (Jonathan Thomas), by versatile sire Twirling Candy, but out the star turf/synthetic mare Kitten's Point. Don't expect a crossover.

Sun (2/25) Aqueduct Race 1 MSW: REASONED ANALYSIS (Chad Brown) captured a slowly run 1M maiden in 1:42 while forward throughout. The race didn't have any TC nominees, and did not flatter romping Jan. 28 graduate CAPITAL IDEA (Christophe Clement), whose runner-up SARDIS (Chad Brown) was a well-beaten third here at 4-5 odds.

Sun (2/25) Aqueduct Race 2 ALW: Triple Crown nom RIDGEWOOD RUNNER (Carlos Martin) has put it together with back-to-back wins since adding blinkers and Lasix, wiring this 6-1/2F sprint slugfest by a nose. But this one slowed terribly late, even for a slow track in play all day, and doesn't give route vibes (with a sprint pedigree to boot).

Sun (2/25) Santa Anita Race 8 MSW: If you need any more endorsement that the 2-for-2 MAYMUN (Bob Baffert) is pretty darned good, his third-place pursuer from Jan. 20 came back to break his maiden next out in this 1M dirt route. TESSUTO (George Papaprodromou) drew clear by 2-1/2L, but a 26.83 final quarter gives the impression this field wasn't special. Nonetheless, he could be targeted toward a Santa Anita Derby date off this victory.