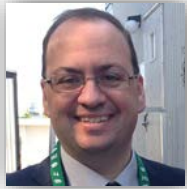




# countdown

TO THE  
CROWN

SEASON 19 WEEK 10 – March 8, 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 Super Tuesday in the election cycle. Sometimes volatile, sometimes a foregone conclusion.

1. Bob Baffert has total control of the Triple Crown trail chess pieces at Santa Anita, witnessed by his scratch of NYSOS (Bob Baffert) in the San Felipe and still running 1-2. He can still go to the Santa Anita Derby with NYSOS as an odds-on chalk to prep for the Preakness if all remains on course. It takes California Chrome or Practical Move unexpectedly to come along every so often, corresponding with a down year for Baffert, to change the script.
2. In 4 weeks, all important Kentucky Derby preps will be complete. Of any *eligible* runner, MYSTIK DAN (Kenny McPeck) owns the most 'wow' stakes bid on the trail this year via Oaklawn's Southwest. But the mud muddies it.
3. LOCKED (Todd Pletcher) has missed the Sam F. Davis with a fever and Fountain of Youth because his trainer said he didn't like his energy. It's time to think spring prep, Peter Pan and Belmont Stakes at the Spa at best.

## 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. MYSTIK DAN (Kenny McPeck)
17. TUSCAN SKY (Todd Pletcher)
18. AGATE ROAD (Todd Pletcher)
19. DETERMINISTIC (Christophe Clement)
20. DRIP (Whit Beckman)

## This Week In Countdown History

### 2019

Five years ago this week, the Gotham at Aqueduct had one of its most memorable fields in the past few decades. All eyes were on west coast raider Instagrاند, who had won his pair of 2YO starts by 10 lengths apiece for Jerry Hollendorfer.

But the even-money favorite was not nearly the same at 3, wound up third in the Gotham behind Haikal and Mind Control. Farther back 7th was Knicks Go. Mind Control would wind up a \$2M earner with scores in the G1 Jerkens & G1 Cigar Mile. Knicks Go bagged a remarkable \$9.2M and was an eventual Breeders' Cup Dirt Mile & Classic winner as well as the Pegasus World Cup. Haikal & Instagrاند never won again.

## Keeping Ourselves Honest Picks NOW & Past

Last week's free *Countdown* selections: 4: 2-2-0 (0%)  
2024 *Countdown* season selections: 18: 6-4-4 (33%)

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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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Top picks won the San Felipe & Fountain of Youth, while 2nd in the Battaglia & Gotham. 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.

Sat (3/9) Oaklawn Race 8 MSW: This 1-1/8 miles stamina test could have Arkansas Derby implications or perhaps Oaklawn's Bath House Row Stakes that is more of a Preakness prep. Four Triple Crown nominees are involved, including DJANGO (Kenny McPeek), runner-up to eventual multiple graded-stakes winner DORNOCH (Danny Gargan) last year at Keeneland, but without much to show for it since. RONALDHINO (Peter Miller) stretches out off a decent debut 3rd, while the 2-3-4 finishers behind SPEEDTAIL (Ingrid Mason) are back from their Feb. 11 event.

### TAMPA BAY DERBY – March 9

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

Historically Speaking: Street Sense (2007) and Super Saver (2010) are the Tampa Bay Derby's 2 alumni to win the Kentucky Derby, the former the only to sweep both. It's produced at least 1 KD starter every year 2004-present, but '19 third-place finisher Tacitus the only to hit the board in Louisville post-2010.

What To Watch For: The top-2 betting choices haven't swept the exacta in this race since 2007 when Street Sense and Any Given Saturday ran 1-2. There's nearly always a price involved near the top.

Race Keys: NO MORE TIME (Jose D'Angelo) headlines the Sam F. Davis returnees, which include CRAZY MOON (Greg Sacco) and EVERDOIT (Kevin Rice). There's an argument to be made that the Davis was every bit as strong as this Tampa Bay Derby field, if not better. So a repeat by NO MORE TIME would be no surprise, even if Davis winners historically have found this race a much tougher repeat. NO MORE TIME led wire-to-wire that day and should be contending for the front once again. Expect EVERDOIT, who lost his rider in the Davis, to be early speed from an inner-draw, changing the pace dynamics here from the Davis.

Race Keys: Stakes-placed Gulfstream raiders DOMESTIC PRODUCT (Chad Brown) and GRAND MO THE FIRST (Victor Barboza) bring Holy Bull and Swale black-type to the party. DOMESTIC PRODUCT should go solidly favored due to the weight trainer Brown takes on the tote as well as the higher Beyer figure earned in the Holy Bull second than NO MORE TIME earned in his Davis win. DOMESTIC PRODUCT is well drawn for his mid-pack, stalking style and has worked right on cue for this, which looks to be a prime spot. He might be an excellent Preakness prospect for an owner-trainer tandem that has had success there in recent years. As for GRAND MO THE FIRST, his sprint form is probably a bonus because his damside figures to be better routing. By Uncle Mo, you'd think this 1-1/16 miles should be a superb spot for him, but an outer draw in post 9 will be a challenge. The Swale 1-2 finishers came back to run a solid 2-3 last week in the Fountain of Youth at Gulfstream.

Race Keys: 4 maiden class risers are led by HEARTENED (Todd Pletcher) and GOOD MONEY (Chad Brown), while GIVE ME LIBERTY (Robertino Diodoro) and STURDY (George Weaver) still are seeking their diplomas. HEARTENED has a win over the track, which often is overblown when people discuss Tampa, but it certainly doesn't hurt. But this is a \$55K Street Boss, hardly Pletcher's top-10 tier sophomore. Pletcher's record 6 wins in this race have come with far bluer bloods and far more accomplished horses. GOOD MONEY also won over the Tampa strip in a 7F debut. He beat a well-meant Pletcher in that race, but it walked the final 3F in 38.60 and the final time was a tick slower than 5K claimers on the card. STURDY comes out of easily the strongest race of these maidens, third behind a couple of huge-dollar Shug and Mott runners. Though he's by champion sprinter Mitole, he's a 1-paced grinder. He would benefit if this race had more speed to spread out given his wide draw in the 10-hole. Don't ignore for the exotics. GIVE ME LIBERTY comes from Oaklawn, where he's chased in 2 starts the eventual Rebel Stakes 2nd and 5th-place finishers, COMMON DEFENSE (Kenny McPeek) and DIMATIC (Steve Asmussen). He's been training out of view amongst the winter Quarter Horses at Louisiana Downs for a barn that pops huge efforts. You never know with Diodoro, and this one feels kinda sneaky in the Ramsey Red.

JP's Picks: W) **DOMESTIC PRODUCT**; P) **GIVE ME LIBERTY**; S) **NO MORE TIME**





## Everyone's A Critic - Reviews



### GULFSTREAM PARK

#### FOUNTAIN OF YOUTH STAKES – March 2

Depleted by scratches, the \$400,000 Fountain of Youth at Gulfstream Park didn't answer as many questions as we had hoped. DORNOCH (Danny Gargan) checked a few boxes in victory as we'll discuss momentarily, but think about how much more we would know if he had done so against LOCKED (Todd Pletcher), SPEAK EASY (Todd Pletcher) and VICTORY AVENUE (Gustavo Delgado)? Beating LE DOM BRO (Eniel Cordero) by 1-3/4 lengths after lambasting him by 30-1/2 lengths in the Remsen isn't going to scare away horses for the Florida Derby; this much we know.

The Fountain of Youth foes for DORNOCH had 9 prior stakes starts combined with 6 of those resulting in defeats of 10 lengths or more. Swale sprint winner FRANKIE'S EMPIRE (Michael Yates) was beaten more than 25 lengths in his pair of stakes routes prior. By any measure, DORNOCH – bet to 20 cents on the dollar – was supposed to beat this field without ever taking a deep breath. In some ways he did, never looking seriously threatened to lose; but there was no heir of dominance.

DORNOCH and LE DOM BRO ran 1-2 throughout while every horse in the race lost margin or stayed the same vs. the winner over the last half of the race. Splits were 24.39, 23.75, 23.29, 25.52, 6.69 for 1:43.64. Since the FoY returned to 1-1/16 miles over the last 13 editions, this was 7th-fastest, smack dab in the middle (.52 slower than 2YO Champion Forte ran last year).

Let's take a look at some trip notes:

DORNOCH (Danny Gargan) 1st by 1-3/4: He traveled very comfortably without anyone inside or outside down the backstretch, asked to quicken into far turn when LE DOM BRO tried to advance inside, jockey Luis Saez barely moved his hands when that one drew basically even, cornered exceptionally well in the 2-path, moved a length clear in upper stretch under a shake of reins, while Saez only flashed the stick a few times without ever striking him once. This was very comfortable, while not flashy, and he galloped out with solid energy. Most importantly to my eyes, DORNOCH moved less than 2 harrow mark paths in the stretch run, and for as gawky and green as he was last year, this was fantastic improvement .. and 100% the most important takeaway from this race. It's also perhaps why Saez didn't want to go to the whip.

LE DOM BRO (Eniel Cordero) 2nd by 1-3/4: He broke sharp, conceded the front midway on the clubhouse turn under a hold from Edwin Gonzalez and pressed from a length back most of the way. He took his shot on the far turn, was rebuffed but didn't cave, and held second gamely and galloped out even with the winner. This effort earned him a Florida Derby try.

FRANKIE'S EMPIRE (Michael Yates) 3rd by 2: He just ran even-Steven about 2L back the entire trip, but didn't gallop out as well as the top pair. He'll be better-suited sprinting and in 1-turn miles. He might have done enough to try the Florida Derby, but should not be considered a factor there over an additional sixteenth of a mile.

DORNOCH added to the 2023 Remsen's impressive tally. That Aqueduct 9F race has now produced the winners of this year's Fountain of Youth, Risen Star and Jerome as well as the Holy Bull second. LE DOM BRO, who was also Remsen alum, added his 2nd in the FoY. So DORNOCH's win here wasn't flashy, but it's impossible to deny the quality of the Remsen result now and that, along with a workmanlike victory in return, makes him a legitimate threat still in this crop lacking starpower. Consider the full brother to 2023 Kentucky Derby winner Mage at this stage. He's 5: 3-2-0 and already a stakes winner at 9F and 8.5F. Mage was 2: 1-0-0 with a maiden sprint win and a 4th in the FoY.

Now for who didn't make the starting gate. SPEAK EASY (Todd Pletcher) ran off in the post parade and suffered a cut that necessitated his scratch, but isn't expected to miss extended time. The problem is that the calendar shrinks quickly this time of year and the colt with just 1 career start in tow will be hard-pressed to find more than 1 more effort if he's to be a Kentucky Derby horse. There's sentiment he would have won the Fountain of Youth as DORNOCH was less than brilliant in his return; arguably true, but highly speculative. Same goes on timing for the also-scratched 1-timer VICTORY AVENUE (Gustavo Delgado). He's still a maiden and likely now you've got to pull the plug on over-exuberance. As mentioned at the top of *Countdown*, the quality 2YO LOCKED (Todd Pletcher) has had everything go wrong so far at 3 with a pair of scratches. Time to work backwards from the Belmont if they can get him right.



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**AQUEDUCT**

## GOTHAM STAKES – March 2

My biggest bet peeve in modern Thoroughbred handicapping is that we're forced to ignore common sense, that activity and experience no longer mean anything. No layoff is too long. Trainers get horses fit – *many times more fit* off of extended layoffs than they do by racing them. I've mentioned my theory as to why I think that's so in recent years, owing as much to what's permissible in competition (racing) vs. out-of-competition (training) in terms of meds. There's nothing illegal in that, but you can argue it's best to train on what's permissible than to race into shape in the afternoons. So when a horse off a Saratoga layoff like DETERMINISTIC (Christophe Clement) wins the Gotham, spare me the "What a training job by X!" spiel.

Soap box aside, the stalk-and-pounce victory by DETERMINISTIC in the Gotham deserves some accolades for what it was: a good, 1-turn performance. The 1:36.37 mile was the fastest Gotham since 2019 and just the second to even go sub-1:38 since the race returned to the 1M trip in 2018. Among 4 miles on the sloppy (sealed) track at the Big A last Saturday:

1:36.37 | Gotham Stakes (3yo)  
1:37.08 | Stymie Stakes (elders)  
1:38.09 | \$16K CLM (elders)  
1:38.49 | Busher Stakes (3f)

The Gotham top-3 all look like solid 3YO sprinter/milers. DETERMINISTIC is now 2-for-2, by Breeders' Cup Dirt Mile winner Liam's Map and out of a solid turf sprint mare. Runner-up JUST A TOUCH (Brad Cox) was coming off of a sharp 6F sprint MSW debut win at Fair Grounds and showed some gameness as the 8-5 beaten favorite. Third-place EL GRANDE O (Linda Rice) keeps on punching after 11 starts and doesn't know anything but to give a hard effort. The question for all 3 of these will be distance as the 1-1/8 miles Wood Memorial looms next on the NYRA path to the Triple Crown.

Here are the trip notes from the important alumni of the Gotham:

DETERMINISTIC (Christophe Clement) 1st by 2: Patiently pursued toward the inside, though everyone kept several paths off the rail, while taking a lot of splashback. Gradually inched closer around the turn and was poised to strike at the top of the stretch. He took a bit longer to tackle the top pair, who certainly came back to him some, but he handled his business best while coming through a large opening. He galloped out in front in what was a promising comeback, but how far will he go?

JUST A TOUCH (Brad Cox) 2nd by 2: Broke alert and right in the mix from the start while widest of the leading trio and avoiding any of the kickback. He didn't handle the turn with any real zeal, losing his way while out in the 5-6 path as they were all avoiding the inside few paths. The winner zoomed right up to his inside and past him as they straightened and he didn't go with him. But he managed to real in the tired ones in a decent effort, but far short of what I thought he was capable of after seeing his debut. Justify colt earned another shot on the trail and might fit better in the speedy Blue Grass than Wood.

EL GRANDE O (Linda Rice) 3rd by 2-1/2: He chased MAXIMUS MERIDUS through solid splits over a dead track, and a 23.21 second quarter was actually a length or so faster than the opening quarter – that's usually a recipe for the pace to collapse. To his credit, he kept on well until inside the final sixteenth. He did get a perfect, first-over trip and avoided all the kickback, and failed to cash in on it, while galloping out solidly. Yes, the Wood Memorial is worth \$750K and he did run second in the Withers over that same trip, but he might fit better in the \$175K Bay Shore sprinting on the same card.

MAXIMUM MERIDIUS (Butch Reid) 4th by 4-3/4: Parx-based sprinter ran well enough on the lead and didn't cave, but you won't project this out to the Wood Memorial. Expect him to look at races like the Woody Stephens. This same barn shipped UNCLE HEAVY (Butch Reid) here to win the Withers and should have that one in the Wood lineup.

LIGHTLINE (Brad Cox) 7th by 18-3/4: For the life of me, I have no idea why they cut back the 1-1/8M Withers third-place finisher to this too-fleet test in the Gotham. He's out of a 12F turf mare was absolutely misplaced here and likely got nothing out of the race whatsoever. Likely ends up on the regional Derby tour trying to make bucks later.

BERGEN (Brad Cox): 8th by 21-1/4: Jimmy Winkfield winner had scored on a wet Aqueduct track last time, so we can't play the sloppy track card. He never showed any real interest and backed out of it from there. Maybe he gets a shot back at Keeneland in the Lexington, where he won his debut, around 2 turns.

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## SAN FELIPE STAKES – March 3

In a race historically known for brilliant, smashing efforts, the '24 San Felipe was run over a terribly slow surface and sported only a field of 4 that fell way short of its lofty norms. We might have had another cracker had NYSOS (Bob Baffert) stayed in the lineup, but his scratch passed the baton to stablemates IMAGINATION (Bob Baffert) and WINE ME UP (Bob Baffert). They managed to dance toe-to-toe for 1-1/16 miles, but took 1:44.55 in doing so, the slowest San Felipe since 1994 and fifth-slowest since this race was extended to its current distance in 1952.

The Santa Anita track was dull for sure, the same-day Santa Anita Handicap posted its slowest renewal since 1975 and seventh-slowest ever (dating back to 1935). Whether you care about the clock or not, positive takeaways from the San Felipe require a real “glass half full” mentality. SCATIFY (John Sadler), a gassed third in the 1M Lewis and trying to find another half-furlong, didn't break with his initial speed, then completely ran up on IMAGINATION into the clubhouse turn and caused chaos. SCATIFY couldn't regain his composure, fought his rider and eventually was all but pulled up to trail by nearly 38 lengths. McVAY (John Shirreffs), now a 4-race maiden, trailed most of the way and never made any threat while beaten just under 7 lengths.

So it was the Baffert barnmates WINE ME UP and IMAGINATION in their own pseudo team drill, the latter under a snug hold second to the outside of his pacemaking peer. Midway on the backstretch IMAGINATION went on with it and WINE ME UP rider Juan Hernandez wasn't keen on creating a throwdown that far out with his stablemate. He held his rail position, but didn't aggressively pick up the tempo around the far turn. Splits went from 23.51 and 23.53 to 24.47 during that time. The two hit the top of the stretch together, but a fourth quarter in 26.35 and final sixteenth in 6.69 showed they were both laboring despite a competitive battle every step of the way. Frankie Dettori got the head down on IMAGINATION for the victory, but there's really nothing separating these two. They galloped out well clear as mirror images.

Baffert has now won 17 of the 21 Santa Anita Triple Crown preps he's entered a horse in his name since the 2019 Santa Anita Derby, adding 4 second-place finishes in his 4 defeats. He's won the 3 at the current meet with different horses: MUTH, NYSOS and IMAGINATION.

Watching this, it's hard to believe either warms up NYSOS if they were to meet in the Santa Anita Derby. Baffert indicated that's where his unbeaten Bob Lewis / Bob Hope winner would run next and then on to the Preakness perhaps. The barn can't run anything in the Kentucky Derby due to an ongoing suspension from Churchill Downs, so you have to think that Arkansas Derby and Santa Anita Derby will be the main outposts for potential Preakness horses, which also include unbeaten MAYMUN (Bob Baffert), who has recently made BC Juvenile second MUTH (Bob Baffert) look pedestrian in the morning. The Blue Grass or Lexington at Keeneland also could be options if they spread the herd.





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## JOHN BATTAGLIA MEMORIAL STAKES – March 2

Turfway's top 3YO this meeting EPIC RIDE (John Ennis) looked on his way to the winner's circle at the head of the lane in the 1-1/16 miles John Battaglia Memorial. But recent MSW winner ENCINO (Brad Cox) simply outran him through the lane to post the minor 5-1 upset and set the stage for a likely Jeff Ruby rematch. It's hard to take any strikes from the winner, who overcame post 10 of 11 and simply proved best. The question now will be: How much tougher will the next race in the local series be with the shippers?

Co-second choice in the wagering BOLT AT MIDNIGHT (Mick Ruis) set the tempo inside a cut out the fractions, which wound up 23.84, 24.47, 24.67, 25.09 and 6.15 for 1:44.22. The pacesetter faded to 6th, beaten 10 lengths, while ENCINO overcame a midpack, wide trip to run a sharp final sixteenth. This Battaglia was the slowest of 4 held since TP switched to Tapeta:

1:43.02 (2023)  
1:44.00 (2021)  
1:44.12 (2022)  
1:44.22 (2024)

That ENCINO beat the 1-2 finishers from the Leonatus Stakes, EPIC RIDE and BLUE EYED GEORGE (Michael McCarthy) puts him at the head of the local class. Those two came back for solid runs in 2nd and 3rd, so they validated their prior form while finishing nearly 5 lengths in front of the rest of this 11-horse lineup. We had mentioned in our preview last week that EPIC RIDE would have to run a better final quarter in the Battaglia than he did in the Leonatus, and he did on the clock – it just wasn't as good as the winner. ENCINO did not impress this eye in his Jan. 26 maiden breaker when getting everything his way from a great draw. The Nyquist colt handled a much tougher task in the Battaglia with aplomb and is moving the right direction. His first 2 dams won stakes races at a 1M dirt trip. He finished well enough here to think 9F isn't impossible next.

Disappointing here were the scratches of GETTYSBURG ADDRESS (Brad Cox) and BREAK OUT (Saffie Joseph Jr.), the shippers from Oaklawn and Gulfstream that were going to give us some regional sense of the Turfway quality of competition this year.

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

Fri (3/1) Dundalk Race 6 \$41K Patton Stakes: 20-10-6-4-2 European Road to the Kentucky Derby points qualifier was as abysmal as the American fields as only 3 ran following the scratch of HENRY ADAMS (Aidan O'Brien). His stablemate NAVY SEAL (Aidan O'Brien) was the field's other Triple Crown nominee, but ran last as the 4-5 favorite. Don't expect to see local all-weather specialist BERGAMASCO (Jack Davidson) to join the Derby fray off this victory.

Fri (3/1) Gulfstream Park Race 7 ALW: This Florida Derby prep at 1-1/8 miles featured *Countdown* top-20 prospect CONQUEST WARRIOR (Shug McGaughey) stretch out around 2 turns and notch back-to-back victories at the meet. The \$1M colt by BC Dirt Mile winner City of Light drew off by 5 lengths as the 1-2 favorite. He got a beautiful trip saving ground midflight, split horses on the far turn professionally and put away a decent sort in MERIT (Saffie Joseph Jr.), who had been cross-entered in the Fountain of Youth. He looked a lot better to the eye than the 38.26 final 3F on the clock indicates. Speed figure folks weren't enamored either. But I liked what I saw enough to think he might have been the best 3YO at Gulfstream last weekend on a similar plane to DORNOCH (Danny Gargan).

Sat (3/2) Oaklawn Park Race 8 ALW: A week after scratching from the Rebel Stakes, TIME FOR TRUTH (Ron Moquett) returned for a promising 1-1/16 miles ALW victory that's sure to put him in the stakes mix next. The son of Omaha Beach was drawn widest in the field of 8 and broke alert but was in danger of being fanned 4-wide into the clubhouse turn. But he had a gear to clear, avoid the ground loss and get into a pressing, 2-path trip. He then took an oncoming assault from a horse to his outside midway down the backstretch and he again had a gear to dispatch that threat. He put away his pace rival, who faded 12 lengths in arrears, while kicking clear and holding the closers at bay. This is a very talented colt that they'll have a tough choice with next: the Arkansas Derby will be a stiff test. I'd be more inclined to come back at 1-1/16 miles in the Lexington at Keeneland or the Bathhouse Row at Oaklawn over 1-1/8 miles and then consider the Preakness.

