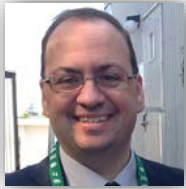




countdown

TO THE
CROWN

SEASON 19 WEEK 12 – March 22, 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 opening-week March Madness brackets:
Made for erasers.

- 2012 Derby/Preakness winner I'll Have Another retired to Old Friends Farm in Kentucky this week, where the 15YO will be a fan favorite. In our 19 *Countdown* seasons, I don't recall one getting better, faster than he did from 2 to 3.
- Rich Strike and Two Phil's, first and second in the last 2 Kentucky Derby renewals make Saturday's Jeff Ruby certainly more important than once thought. Another big Derby effort from a Turfway alum and we'll have to seriously take stock at this *trend vs. coincidence*.
- The key second-round prep winners at Turfway and Fair Grounds aren't back in the main events, ENCINO (Brad Cox) or SIERRA LEONE (Chad Brown). There's talk of some March alumni potentially training up to the Derby and bypassing a final prep. All of these are for various reasons, but also know the spacing between races that trainers are demanding today are really making it tough to put a local series together – and keep it together.

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

- SIERRA LEONE (Chad Brown)
- FIERCENESS (Todd Pletcher)
- FOREVER YOUNG (Yoshito Yahagi)
- MAYMUN (Bob Baffert) *not eligible Ky Derby*
- TRACK PHANTOM (Steve Asmussen)
- DORNOCH (Danny Gargan)
- TIMBERLAKE (Brad Cox)
- CATCHING FREEDOM (Brad Cox)
- MUTH (Bob Baffert) *not eligible Ky Derby*
- LIBERAL ARTS (Robbie Medina)
- CONQUEST WARRIOR (Shug McGaughey)
- RESILIENCE (Bill Mott)
- HADES (Joe Orseno)
- TUSCAN GOLD (Chad Brown)
- MYSTIK DAN (Kenny McPeck)
- DOMESTIC PRODUCT (Chad Brown)
- DETERMINISTIC (Christophe Clement)
- ENCINO (Brad Cox)
- AGATE ROAD (Todd Pletcher)
- NO MORE TIME (Jose D'Angelo)

This Week In Countdown History

2006

Turfway Park ran the Lane's End Stakes for the first time on a synthetic surface, and 48-1 shot With A City provided immediate chaos to handicappers dealing with the new surface. The \$2 exacta went for \$930 and the \$2 trifecta returned a whopping \$13,680 payoff.

It was the first of 6 wins in this stakes for trainer Mike Maker, all coming in the Polytrack era.

Turfway is now a Tapeta synthetic surface, and the Lane's End is called the Jeff Ruby. The race also has been run under such names as the Spiral, Jim Beam and Galleryfurniture.com Stakes.

Keeping Ourselves Honest Picks NOW & Past

Last week's free *Countdown* selections: 0: 0-0-0 (0%)
2024 *Countdown* season selections: 19: 7-4-4 (37%)

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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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No stakes were offered last week. Back with a pair Saturday. 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



LOUISIANA DERBY – March 23

Set the Table: 1-3/16 miles (2 turns), \$1M, KD Points 100-50-25-15-10.

Historically Speaking: The Louisiana Derby has produced 5 Kentucky Derby winners, most recently Mandaloun via DQ in 2021; also Country House, Funny Cide, Grindstone and Black Gold. Preakness winner War of Will came out of this race in 2019, while Belmont winner Palace Malice did so in 2013.

What To Watch For: FG has a 4-race series ending in the Louisiana Derby and not only has TRACK PHANTOM (Steve Asmussen) participated in all 4, he's the only horse Saturday to have competed in more than 1 prior. Midnight Bourbon wore down a bit for his barn in 2021 through the series, but Epicenter remained strong in 2022.

Race Keys: Risen Star returnees include TRACK PHANTOM (Steve Asmussen), CATCHING FREEDOM (Brad Cox), HONOR MARIE (Whit Beckman), AWESOME RUTA (Joseph Foster), HALL OF FAME (Steve Asmussen) and REAL MEN VIOLIN (Kenny McPeck). While Risen Star champ SIERRA LEONE (Chad Brown) sits this one out in favor of the Blue Grass, his barnmate TUSCAN GOLD (Chad Brown) takes the baton. The way the Risen Star shook out, slow early and fast late, it was not a demanding race and you can expect those alumni to come back sharper than before, not knocked out. But even so, the winner that day was able to rally from about 6 lengths and out-punch these over a half-furlong shorter in distance. Expect TUSCAN GOLD to come with a very similar trip and run off his impressive Gulfstream return. He showed in a troubled debut that he was as gifted as his eventually more accomplished stablemate SIERRA LEONE. Now it's his time to shine. In terms of a rebound, look for HALL OF FAME with a better trip to have the best chance for improvement, though expect rock-steady efforts from TRACK PHANTOM and CATCHING FREEDOM once again. HONOR MARIE would be no shock to improve slightly off his return try when fifth in the Risen Star, but there's preference to others when it comes to potential win candidates.

Race Keys: Stablemates AGATE ROAD (Todd Pletcher) and ANTIQUARIAN (Todd Pletcher) try to follow Pletcher predecessor Kingsbarns' victory in this race last year. The barn boasts a record 5 wins in this race and has versatile running styles this time that could play well together. Expect John Velazquez to show speed with local dirt MSW winner ANTIQUARIAN and his one-paced style, while Irad Ortiz Jr. will be biding his time late with the turf & dirt performer AGATE ROAD. The latter's runner-up in the Sam F. Davis was mildly flattered when race winner NO MORE TIME (Jose D'Angelo) came back to a photo-finish second in the Tampa Bay Derby. The long stretch at FG will give AGATE ROAD every chance. The keys for these barnmates will be how fast TRACK PHANTOM wants to go. If he allows ANTIQUARIAN to get into an easy tempo, it will be a positive in that camp. If he attacks from the start and increases tempo on ANTIQUARIAN, then AGATE ROAD has his best chance. Note: TRIPLE ESPRESSO (Todd Pletcher) will scratch to run in order to compete at Turfway.

Race Keys: Oaklawn Rebel Stakes alumni COMMON DEFENSE (Kenny McPeck) and NEXT LEVEL (Keith Desormeaux) may give us a better national sense of where that race's winner, Arkansas Derby-bound TIMBERLAKE (Brad Cox), fits among the crop. The FG set has proven a bit stronger to this point than the OP cast when looking at the Lecomte and Risen Star results, but the gap feels closer than it did in January and early February. The Risen Star alumni have an advantageous extra week between starts than those from the Rebel, which is a factor in today's training world. COMMON DEFENSE really got a dream run saving ground in the Rebel, so Brian Hernandez Jr. will be tasked from post 10 in crafting out something of similar ilk.

JP's Picks: W) **TUSCAN GOLD**; P) **CATCHING FREEDOM**; S) **TRACK PHANTOM**





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JEFF RUBY – March 23

Set the Table: 1-1/8 miles (2 turns), \$700K, KD Points 100-50-25-15-10.

Historically Speaking: The Jeff Ruby has produced 3 Kentucky Derby winners, most recently Rich Strike in 2022; previously Animal Kingdom and Lil E Tee. The race also produced last year's Derby 2nd Two Phil's. The race also has produced '93 Preakness winner Prairie Bayout and '91 Preakness-Belmont winner Hansel.

What To Watch For: The local Battaglia Memorial Stakes was only 3 weeks before the Ruby, so 1-2 finishers ENCINO (Brad Cox) and EPIC RIDE (John Ennis) are not wheeling back. Only 1 horse in the lineup has ever raced at Turfway, so it's about which horse adapts to the footing on this particular day.

Race Keys: How good is ENDLESSLY (Michael McCarthy), a 3X stakes winner at Del Mar, Santa Anita and Golden Gate Fields? The came home the final 3F in the El Camino Real Derby in the mid-30s while putting some uncharacteristic space between the field when it comes to synthetic assessments. Both are very good signs, while beating a pair of fellow SoCal shippers in that one for Sadler and O'Neill. There appears to be a very quick pace signed on – including some 'cheap speed' – that would bode well for his style. Horses coming off the GGF main track are 14: 0-2-0 at Turfway over the past 3 seasons, according to Betmix.

Race Keys: Florida snowbirds migrate north en masse, including FREEDOM PRINCIPLE (Jose Garoffalo), DANCING GROOM (Antonio Sano), NOTED (Todd Pletcher), OTELLO (Christophe Clement), WEST SARATOGA (Larry Demeritte) and TRIPLE ESPRESSO (Todd Pletcher). None of them jump off the page as must-see, or particularly, must-trust. NOTED and OTELLO come off major disappointments when never showing life in major stakes bids. They won the Pulpit and Mucho Macho Man, respectively, at the Gulfstream meet previously. Of those, OTELLO has been much more active in the morning since racing on the same Feb. 3 date. He could be coming into the race the better of that pair and is the most interesting of the Florida set. Outside of the star mare Idiomatic, however, OTELLO's sire Curlin hasn't had a lot of success with his Turfway progeny. Note: AGATE ROAD (Todd Pletcher) will scratch to compete at Fair Grounds.

Race Keys: Oaklawn invaders include Rebel 3-4 finishers NORTHERN FLAME (Kenny McPeck) and WOODCOURT (Cipriano Contreras) as well as ALW winner SEIZE THE GREY (D. Wayne Lukas). WOODCOURT is the only horse with TP experience, December ALW bids with a win and third-place finish. WOODCOURT had to be hard-riden from post 12 early in the Rebel and that left him a bit empty as he stayed on decently for fourth. Look for him to be part of the pace, but 9F appears a tad beyond his best. SEIZE THE GREY has been all dirt to date, though sire Arrogate gets a decent 14% winners at Turfway the past 3 seasons. SEIZE THE GREY beat a solid field on the Rebel undercard when running about 4L slower than the main event. NORTHERN FLAME, third in the Rebel, had a very difficult trip that day when running between horses for about 7F and never getting a breather, but still kept battling. He's the most promising of the OP cast. He's never run on synthetic but fellow Flameaway sophomore BLUE EYED GEORGE (Michael McCarthy) has hit the board in 2 stakes at the TP meet.

Race Keys: LUCKY JEREMY (Bill Morey) and BAYTOWN CHATTERBOX (Paul McEntee) represent local trainers but haven't run here at the meet. Both should have a major impact on the pace and how fast this race is run. LUCKY JEREMY won the Riley Allison Derby on the road before tiring to third in the Sunland Derby. LUCKY JEREMY appears clearly more impactful of the 2 with stronger running lines and 2-turn form, along with the more helpful inner post draw. He'll take them into the lane.

JP's Picks: W) **NORTHERN FLAME**; P) **OTELLO**; S) **ENDLESSLY**





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 **MARYLAND
JOCKEY CLUB**
PRIVATE TERMS – March 23

Set the Table: 1-1/16 miles (2 turns), \$100K, KD Points 0-0-0-0-0.

Historically Speaking: Last year's runner-up Coffeewithchris finished 7th in the Preakness. The race's most notable winner was 2002 Magic Weisner, runner-up in the Preakness.

What To Watch For: This is Maryland's first 2-turn 3YO prep of 2024 toward the Federico Tesio and Preakness.

Race Keys: The top-4 finishers from the local Miracle Wood Stakes could re-match, led by SPEEDYNESS (Jamie Ness), POINT DUME (Keiron Magee), CIRCLE P (Flint Stites) and STARTSWITHADREAM (Jamie Lawrence). While SPEEDYNESS essentially wired that day over a 1-turn mile, he's yet to race around 2 turns through 9 starts. Sire Great Notion may not inspire confidence there, but damsire Include provides enough stamina for this test. On pedigrees alone, none of the Miracle Wood pursuers of SPEEDYNESS have any license to get decidedly better over this longer trip. CIRCLE P's finishing style and Quiet American as damsire gives him the most license if there's to be a change in result among this quartet.

Race Keys: SPEED RUNNER (Todd Pletcher) headlines the fresh faces. The Gun Runner colt is half-brother to Blue Grass winner and Belmont Stakes third-place finisher Brilliant Speed, as well as Remsen runner-up Souper Speedy. SPEED RUNNER was a 1-placed winner over 9F in his second start before running up into a mess in the Withers when losing several positions and lengths into the far turn. To his credit, he regathered and ran on, likely an effort good enough to have been third.

Race Keys: Florida snowbirds COPPER TAX (Gary Capuano) and INVIEGLED (Jane Cibelli) return north and have had Laurel success. COPPER TAX won the James F. Lewis III sprinting as well as Delaware's Rocky Road around 2 turns. INVEIGLED was nailed late by a neck in the Lewis, but has been much more effective in recent stakes starts than COPPER TAX.

JP's Picks: W) **INVEIGLED**; P) **COPPER TAX**; S) **SPEEDYNESS**



HOT SPRINGS – March 23

Set the Table: 1 mile (2 turns), \$200K, KD Points 0-0-0-0-0.

Historically Speaking: Raced debuted on the schedule in 2023, won by Gotham 4th-place finisher Eyeing Clover (Brad Cox).

What To Watch For: The Arkansas Derby is next week, so it's the April 20 Bath House Row where you might see these and then an eye to the Preakness 4 weeks after that.

Race Keys: Four runners divert from the traditional Arkansas Derby trail, OTTO THE CONQUEROR (Steve Asmussen), CARBONE (Steve Asmussen), MENA (Steve Hobby) and MAGIC GRANT (Eddie Milligan). The Asmussen pair leave from posts 1-2 and have similar, front-end styles. We've seen the barn incinerate itself on the trail already this meet with self-inflicted pace duels. Neither has been overly successful without the lead. MENA got blitzed in the Rebel, but his patient ALW 2nd in January to the solid NORTHERN FLAME (Kenny McPeek) – my pick in the Jeff Ruby – would play here to upset.

Race Keys: Fair Grounds raiders NASH (Brad Cox) and COUNT DRACULA (Kenny McPeek) offer more pace. NASH has shown flashes of brilliance, but has been a disappointment this year while trying to find the right distance and level. This could be perfect for him as the horse to beat if he relaxes like he did in the Gun Runner and Florent Geroux clocks the move. That Geroux is here – and not riding Louisiana Derby Day at Fair Grounds – is massively significant. They may think this could be a Preakness horse if we're reading the tea leaves properly. Of course, he also rides First Mission for Cox in the \$600k Essex.

Race Keys: Class risers MR FILLIP (Robertino Diodoro) and FROST FREE (Brett Creighton) add sprint speed to hot pace scenario. FOOTPRINT (Kenny McPeek) would be effective with his closing style and shortening to 1M fits his pedigree.

JP's Picks: W) **NASH**; P) **MENA**; S) **FOOTPRINT**

