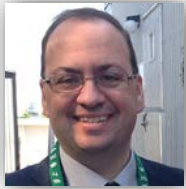




countdown

TO THE
CROWN

SEASON 19 WEEK 13 – March 29, 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 John Calipari's years as the Kentucky men's basketball coach. People demand to see *only* the good ones.

1. After last Saturday's Private Terms win by COPPER TAX (Gary Capuano), the 2023 Remsen alumni added another scalp on the trail, which previously included the Jerome, Tampa Bay Derby, Fountain of Youth and Risen Star. It's proving to be one of the most productive springboards in our 19 years doing *Countdown*.
2. KNIGHTSBRIDGE (Bill Mott) returned Thursday in an ALW at Gulfstream and romped by 9L over 1M. My preseason #3 *Countdown*-ranked contender may be the most gifted member of this crop in the east. A Peter Pan-Belmont path would make sense, but the physical issues that slowed his return may make him more of a Travers prospect.
3. While all will eye the Japanese runner FOREVER YOUNG (Yoshito Yahagi) in Saturday's UAE Derby, note fellow countryman T O PASSWORD (Daisuke Takayanagi) has accepted his Japan Road to the Derby invite after winning last week's Fukuryu Stakes with a mad late dash.

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

1. SIERRA LEONE (Chad Brown)
 2. FIERCENESS (Todd Pletcher)
 3. FOREVER YOUNG (Yoshito Yahagi)
 4. MAYMUN (Bob Baffert) *not eligible Ky Derby*
 5. CATCHING FREEDOM (Brad Cox)
 6. MUTH (Bob Baffert) *not eligible Ky Derby*
 7. DORNOCH (Danny Gargan)
 8. TIMBERLAKE (Brad Cox)
 9. LIBERAL ARTS (Robbie Medina)
 10. CONQUEST WARRIOR (Shug McGaughey)
 11. RESILIENCE (Bill Mott)
 12. HADES (Joe Orseno)
 13. TUSCAN GOLD (Chad Brown)
 14. TRACK PHANTOM (Steve Asmussen)
 15. MYSTIK DAN (Kenny McPeck)
 16. DOMESTIC PRODUCT (Chad Brown)
 17. DETERMINISTIC (Christophe Clement)
 18. HONOR MARIE (Whit Beckman) *NEW*
 19. NO MORE TIME (Jose D'Angelo)
 20. WEST SARATOGA (Larry Demeritte) *NEW*
- Coming soon: T O PASSWORD (Daisuke Takayanagi)

This Week In Countdown History

2017

A south Florida early exodus of stakes players like 2YO champ Classic Empire, Irish War Cry and Practical Joke left the Florida Derby up for grabs. Always Dreaming had won both of his 3YO starts in modest fashion, a Tampa Bay Downs maiden and a 9F Gulfstream ALW on the Fountain of Youth undercard.

That made him 5-2 second choice behind the consistent, but unspectacular Gunnevera – and it was no contest. Always Dreaming drew off to score by 5 lengths and would go on to Louisville and make the Kentucky Derby a fourth straight win.

Interestingly, Always Dreaming never won again. He closed his career with 5 straight losses, 3 of them running off the board.

Keeping Ourselves Honest Picks NOW & Past

Last week's free *Countdown* selections: 4: 1-1-1 (25%)
2024 *Countdown* season selections: 23: 8-5-5 (35%)

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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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Our only big misfire came in the Jeff Ruby in a solid week. We take pride in what we do, and have accountability. Each week we'll update how our top picks perform. Each week we'll update how our top picks perform.





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Fearless Forecast – Previews



GULFSTREAM
PARK

FLORIDA DERBY – March 30

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

Historically Speaking: Mage last year became the record-padding 25th Florida Derby alum to win the Kentucky Derby. The race also produced 2020 Belmont winner Tiz the Law in recent vintages.

What To Watch For: Fountain of Youth winner DORNOCH (Danny Gargan) skips town for the Blue Grass at Keeneland next week, while we've already seen Holy Bull runner-up DOMESTIC PRODUCT (Chad Brown) hit the road to win the Tampa Bay Derby. Given the insular nature of this field, we'll find out more about the Floridians nationally in those races than this one.

Race Keys: The Holy Bull 1-3 rematch of HADES (Joe Orseno) and beaten favorite FIERCENESS (Todd Pletcher) takes center stage. Little was known about HADES in terms of the overall 3YO class going into that one, but the Florida-bred stretched out and stepped into open company in one swoop, improving to 3-for-3. The pace was easy that day and he had a big edge with rail speed going 1-1/16 miles. There's a longer run now to the first turn, and a sixteenth of a mile longer in the stretch. The question also becomes how much more pace might he find? This race isn't loaded with it. Don't be surprised if FIERCENESS goes right after him from the start. He has trained very well in team works at XBTV since his last start and I'm expecting a much improved effort from his flat third at 1-5 odds. There's a 6-pound weight shift with everyone at equal weights this time, so FIERCENESS will have no excuses. I don't think his overblown issues in the early strides of the Holy Bull had anything to do with his flat finish. It's put up time for the 2YO champion. HADES earned my respect last time. He won't be an easy out. Almost certainly the public comes back to FIERCENESS favored, tempting a gamble on HADES – but I anticipate a rebound.

Race Keys: There's so much local stakes seasoning amongst the challengers: the 2-3-4 from Fountain of Youth, 1-2-3 from the Swale and last year's Florida Sire Stakes In Reality winner. FofY alumni LE DOM BRO (Eniel Cordero), FRANKIE'S EMPIRE (Michael Yates) and REAL MACHO (Rohan Crichton) look reasonable on paper but that race was so scratch-depleted that their placings have to be tempered. LE DOM BRO was clearly best of that group in terms of a longer projection, galloping out nicely with the winner. Some of those were sprinters prior, part of the 1-2-3 Swale runners who've had a stretch-out since – and that group includes Tampa Bay Derby third GRAND MO THE FIRST (Victor Barboza). But like some of the other preps this season, the pace was so ridiculously slow in Tampa that the jury remains out if GRAND MO THE FIRST has any reason to keep punching against better horses over 9F. He earned the chance to find out, but I'll pass for now. SEMINOLE CHIEF (Jack Sisterson) wired a Tapeta ALW since being drubbed in the Withers at Aqueduct, which doesn't give any sense of belonging on the trail in a race like this. But his 2YO route form in the FSS In Reality gives him fringe credentials to re-test the waters.

Race Keys: 4 of these will be making their stakes debut, led by CONQUEST WARRIOR (Shug McGaughey), the most promising of the quartet. His 2 wins at the meet have him on a positive arc for a patient trainer that waits until they're ready for this kind of assignment. Be certain CONQUEST WARRIOR will run to his best ability – now we will find out how that stacks up with some accomplished colts. I loved his win over the distance and track in ALW company. His MSW win over ANTIQUARIAN (Todd Pletcher) was flattered with that one's next-out victory and a follow-up good effort last week in the Louisiana Derby. BAIL US OUT (Todd Pletcher), CATALYTIC (Saffie Joseph Jr.) and IRIS'S DREAM (Cheryl Winebaugh) also rise in class. From Tapeta to a Tampa sprint to a turf score, those 3 all have multiple hurdles to overcome on Saturday.

JP's Picks: W) **FIERCENESS** ; P) **HADES** S) **CONQUEST WARRIOR**





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ARKANSAS DERBY – March 30

Set the Table: 1-1/8 miles (2 turns), \$1.5 million, KD Points 100-50-25-15-10.

Historically Speaking: 7 Arkansas Derby alumni have won the Kentucky Derby, including Country House most recently in 2019 and Triple Crown winner American Pharoah in 2015. Last year's race produced Derby 3rd Angel of Empire, 4th in the Belmont. Preakness winner Oxbow ('13) and Belmont victor Creator ('16) have come out of this race in more recent years.

What To Watch For: Given the wretched January weather and missed training days at Oaklawn, the locals have been playing catch-up all season. The Smarty Jones, Southwest and Rebel all were won by horses who trained at Fair Grounds and vanned to Hot Springs for stakes dates. That should be less a factor now, but it's notable several alumni of those races once again departed for other venues and have returned for the dough.

Race Keys: Rebel alumni **TIMBERLAKE** (Brad Cox), **DIMATIC** (Steve Asmussen) and **JUST STEEL** (D. Wayne Lukas) are re-matched from a race that **TIMBERLAKE** proved much best with a strong finish. I wasn't sure he was a 2-turn animal after watching his 2YO races, but he came back the way you like to see one improve from 2 to 3. I still don't know he's a 9F-10F runner, but they're all in that boat around this time of year. His final 3F in the Rebel indicates he is trending a good direction in that regard and he got the perfect comeback race and education. The Rebel was a much easier field than this and much easier than its historical norm, so the waters deepen. **JUST STEEL** was returning on only 3 weeks' rest from a rescheduled Southwest, so maybe we give him a mulligan from a terrible post that day. He's better than his last, but seems a longshot.

Race Keys: Southwest alumni **MYSTIK DAN** (Kenny McPeck) and **LIBERAL ARTS** (Robbie Medina) opted to skip the Rebel and its quick turnaround after weather wreaked havoc on the schedule. Very shrewd move by both connections. Now they come into the main event freshened from their bases at Fair Grounds and Lexington's The Thoroughbred Center, respectively. Both finished very strong in the Southwest, freakishly well up the rail by **MYSTIK DAN** in the slop. **LIBERAL ARTS** made a sustained move that would have looked better on paper had the winner not spurted clear late. **LIBERAL ARTS** galloped out well and immediately was on my 9F Arkansas Derby radar. They pick up 6 and 5 pounds, respectively, and this race gets tougher with **TIMBERLAKE** and **MUTH** in the fold. But either rates a major win chance on Saturday. **LIBERAL ARTS** should be the value play at 8-1 or more. It's not going to easy to beat the 3 favorites here, all without any major flaws.

Race Keys: Fresh faces **MUTH** (Bob Baffert) and **TIME FOR TRUTH** (Ron Moquett) are serious challengers with vastly different backgrounds. **MUTH** is proven goods dating back to Del Mar last summer and represents a barn that exists seemingly only to pursue the 3YO riches. **TIME FOR TRUTH** is a late bloomer, speed merchant, ready for a prime time debut for a trainer who rarely dances the trail, but has the utmost respect for his program. I won't be surprised if **TIME FOR TRUTH** proves to be this good, but there are 4-5 really good options in this race. He'll make his way onto some tickets. I've liked what I've seen on video of **MUTH** training since the San Vicente expect he'll make anyone who beats him earn it.

JP's Picks: W) **LIBERAL ARTS** ; P) **MUTH** S) **TIMBERLAKE**





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UAE DERBY – March 30

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

Historically Speaking: UAE Derby alumni are infamously 19: 0-0-0 in the Kentucky Derby all-time, bested by a 5th-place finish in 2011 by Master of Hounds. Last year produced Japanese runner Derma Sotogake, 6th in Louisville.

What To Watch For: For an international runner to be effective on the US dirt, I want to see them be able to handle a fast pace – be right in the mix and run on with it, not just passing tired horses. No matter who succeeds in the UAE Derby, it will be a more effective and tell-tale Kentucky Derby prep the faster they go the first half of the race.

Race Keys: FOREVER YOUNG (Yoshito Yahagi) brings considerable promise and hype from Japan. The Saudi Derby winner needed every inch of the 1-turn mile last time to run down a quality American speed horse. This will be a totally different race shape at 3/16ths of a mile farther and with no American gas. Anything short of an emphatic win will be a disappointment even if the big prize awaits in Louisville. Other Japanese TC noms include BALLON D'OR (Mikio Matsunaga). SATONO PHOENIX (Masato Nishizono) and GEORGE TESORO (Takayuki Kato). The latter is decidedly more credentialed among this trio and is a maternal grandson of Casino Drive, the 2008 Peter Pan Stakes winner who also found stakes success in Japan.

Race Keys: Irish-based barnmates HENRY ADAMS (Aidan O'Brien) and NAVY SEAL (Aidan O'Brien) carry the reputed Coolmore colors in dual dirt auditions. Ryan Moore lands on HENRY ADAMS, who brings competitive Group 1 form from France and Newmarket on turf. He's by the brilliant No Nay Never, but gets stamina from damsire Galileo as he stretches beyond 7 furlongs in his first try since October. NAVY SEAL disappointed when last of 3 in the Patton on Dundalk's synthetic and will try a third surface after catching deep turf courses throughout his juvenile season.

Race Keys: America's lone interest is New York-bred PANDAGATE (Christophe Clement) with 2 blowout wins vs. state-breds and an open company allowance defeat at Laurel. He's by Dubai World Cup winner Arrogate and will try to win around 2 turns for the first time.

JP's Picks: W) **FOREVER YOUNG** ; P) **HENRY ADAMS** S) **GEORGE TESORO**

Everyone's A Critic - Reviews



LOUISIANA DERBY – March 23

The Louisiana Derby ran rather true to form as nearly every horse expected to fire did so and had every chance to deliver in a race that was uneventful from a bad-trip perspective. It was faster than the Lecomte and Risen Star in the local prep series and that provided a commonsense result with a pair of closers – with previous stakes-winning credentials – sealing the deal. CATCHING FREEDOM (Brad Cox) got back to his Smarty Jones-winning form at Oaklawn, while HONOR MARIE (Whit Beckman) looked more like the horse who captured Churchill's Kentucky Jockey Club in the fall.

Like most races on the 2024 trail, the Louisiana Derby won't dazzle on the clock. Splits were 23.49, 24.84, 24.21, 24.84 and 18.78 for 1-3/16 miles in 1:56.16. That time lies smack-dab in the middle of the short history of this race at this trip.





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Last 5 Years Since 1-3/16 Miles:

1:54.38 | Epicenter (2022)
1:55.06 | Hot Rod Charlie (2021)
1:56.16 | Catching Freedom (2024)
1:56.47 | Wells Bayou (2020)
1:57.33 | Kingsbarns (2023)

And when you look at the names on that list, it also feels proportionally right. **CATCHING FREEDOM** appears a cut below Epicenter and Hot Rod Charlie in terms of raw talent, but a better horse than Wells Bayou and Kingsbarns. Like we mentioned, rather true to form in many facets. The race could produce upwards of 4 Kentucky Derby starters depending how the final points and field shakes out. The top-3 finishers all deserve some looks in Louisville in a race that's become quite important historically in recent years.

Here are my detailed key horse-by-horse notes:

CATCHING FREEDOM (Brad Cox) 1st by 1L: Rallied from last, 8-3/4L back. Broke relatively clean and was unhurried at the back while fighting a bit of the kickback under the wire the first time. Prat put him in the 2-3 path into the clubhouse turn while under a decent hold. He began to ask him to pick it up with about a 3F to run, still last, came 5-6 paths wide off the far turn and had dead aim on the field widest on the straight. He ran into a little tightness with Honor Marie a few times in the lane, experience that will pay off perhaps down the road when challenged. He finished up with good energy, but was quickly pulled up and not allowed to gallop out. He reminds me a lot of last year's Cox trainee Angel of Empire in terms of resume, running style and overall quality. That one wound up 3rd in Louisville and 4th at Belmont.

HONOR MARIE (Whit Beckman) 2nd by 1L: Rallied from next-to-last, 7-1/4L back to simply be out-kicked in the stretch by the winner, who went by him after some close quarters in upper stretch. This was progressive step from his Risen Star, but not a monumental leap forward. Still, progress toward the first Saturday in May is sought and he's providing it. He had an extremely clean run despite being well back the first time through the stretch, something not always the case in the Kentucky Derby. He made steady progress 3-4 wide around the far turn and got some close-up stretch action that helps the educational process.

TUSCAN GOLD (Chad Brown) 3rd by 1-3/4L: The lightly raced class riser ran third evenly for most of trip, never looking like he was about to coil and strike, yet never giving way much of anything. This was a very steady effort when you consider the ground loss and fact that his only route at Gulfstream was a sixteenth pole finish line, while this Fair Grounds lane is among the longest in all of American racing. He got into a comfortable stride just behind the leading group under the wire the first time and made a quick advance around rivals while 4-wide into the clubhouse turn. He remained out on the track down the backstretch, never tucked in and remained 3 and 4-wide on the far turn. The total ground loss here certainly makes the margin of defeat highly palatable. And, he galloped out slightly best along with Common Defense.

TRACK PHANTOM (Steve Asmussen) 4th by 2-1/2 L: Just like in the Risen Star, he set the pace, but had to go 1.64 seconds faster the first half-mile, 2.20 faster through 6F and 2.02 faster through 1M. That stronger pace and longer trip here by another 110 yards amounted to his defeat, admirably enough by only 2-1/2 lengths considering. But the problem is the pace doesn't get any easier in the Triple Crown series, nor do the race distances. Just like Epicenter and Midnight Bourbon, Asmussen veterans of this series before him, his best chance probably is the Preakness with a smaller field size at the shortest trip of the series.

COMMON DEFENSE (Kenny McPeck) 5th by 4L: Broke a tad inward and off balance, but soon gathered and hustled up into a nice, first-over pressing trip into the clubhouse turn while out in the 3-path. Bided his time with Track Phantom within a length the entire backstretch run, all of it without any pressure to his outside. That's a no-excuse trip and he was simply outfooted in the lane by four others while never able to catch Track Phantom in a quintessential "hang." Still, he galloped out as well as anyone in the race. I don't think he or 8th-place finisher **NEXT LEVEL** (Keith Desormeaux) offered any rousing endorsement of Rebel Stakes winner **TIMBERLAKE** (Brad Cox) ahead of this week's Arkansas Derby.

ANTIQUARIAN (Todd Pletcher) 6th by 4L: Unruly before the start and went through the gate dumping John Velazquez, delaying the start with a reload. After all that, he bobbled at the break and took a few strides to gather himself. He then starting pulling the rider nearing the wire the first time wanting to get into the race, but wound up 3-wide into the clubhouse turn between horses with no breather. He ran amongst the stalking flight the entire backstretch when 4-wide in the clear into and around the far turn. He was just even through the lane in a one-paced effort that looks like his style. Perhaps a Belmont consideration most years, but the 10F at Saratoga won't play like the 12F at Belmont Park did.





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AGATE ROAD (Todd Pletcher) 7th by 4-1/4L: Brushed slight at the break with Antiquarian but it didn't impact his running style as he took an expected spot near the back and saved ground inside. He got a great trip throughout, mildly angled to the 3-4 path coming off the far turn and was just even through the lane in an effort neither good nor bad.

HALL OF FAME (Steve Asmussen) 10th by 12L: Broke clean and alert and was outsprinted to the lead and settled along the rail with a no excuses pressing trip and retreated from about 3F out. What a disappointment after his initial career sizzle.



JEFF RUBY – March 23

Race favorite **ENDLESSLY** (Michael McCarthy) proved much the best, and soon after this 1-1/8 miles Turfway test, his trainer proved quite grounded. It's on to the American Turf next for the Jeff Ruby winner – as of the last announced plan by McCarthy. While it's tempting to look at the past 2 editions of this race and see the Derby success of 2022 winner Rich Strike and 2023 runner-up Two Phil's, the morning dirt work by **ENDLESSLY** has shown them enough that it's not his forte.

ENDLESSLY overpowered his 9 rivals by 4 widening lengths, completing the 9F in 1:50.15 after race splits of 23.33, 25.24, 24.43, 24.93 and 12.22. He came home strongly in the mid-36s over the final 3F despite a 3-4 wide trip on the far turn. He's now won stakes at Del Mar and Santa Anita on turf, and Golden Gate Fields and Turfway on Tapeta surfaces. His El Camino Real Derby victory earned him an automatic and fees-paid berth into the Preakness. If he's to show up in the Triple Crown, that would likely be it, but even that appears a longshot plan.

The Kentucky Derby impact could be light from the Ruby with **ENDLESSLY** taking the 100 qualifying points into hiding. Runner-up **WEST SARATOGA** (Larry Demeritte) is confirmed for the Derby by his barn after a 36-1 runner-up effort that will make him one of the longest prices in Louisville. But he's comfortably in the field with 50 points. Five runners finished within a quarter-length of one another in a melee behind the winner. Those precious few feet could be what keeps horses like **SEIZE THE GREY** (D. Wayne Lukas), **TRIPLE ESPRESSO** (Todd Pletcher), **LUCKY JEREMY** (Bill Morey) and others out of the big dance. A bad bump created by **NOTED** (Todd Pletcher) in upper stretch really impacted both **WOODCOURT** (Cipriano Contreras) and **TRIPLE ESPRESSO**, very likely costing either or both a shot at second money. Don't be surprised to see a couple of these back in the Lexington at Keeneland looking for a few Derby points to push them into field if successful. Derby Fever does such things.

I can't help but think the John Battaglia Memorial 1-2 finishers **ENCINO** (Brad Cox) and **EPIC RIDE** (John Ennis) would have offered more challenge to the winner than this cast. But that race unfathomably was scheduled only 3 weeks prior to the Jeff Ruby and put those 2 players on a course out of town for a final Triple Crown test.





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MARYLAND JOCKEY CLUB PRIVATE TERMS – March 23

COPPER TAX (Gary Capuano) found the drop in class to the \$100,000 listed Private Terms Stakes the proper prescription, rallying to win by a neck in a 3-way photo. The 2-1 post time favorite put 14-3/4 length and 19-1/2 length losses in the Grade 2 Remsen and Grade 3 Sam F. Davis in the rearview mirror, while keeping Preakness hopes alive for the Maryland-based colt. The Delaware Park and Laurel Park prior stakes winner has now won 6 of his last 8 and beat stakes-seasoned rivals in the picture here to do it.

Runner-up **INVEIGLED** (Jane Cibelli) ran evenly while pressing throughout in defeat, coming off a fourth-place finish in the Grade 3 Holy Bull at Gulfstream, a race that included unbeaten **HADES** (Joe Orseno), next-out Tampa Bay Derby winner **DOMESTIC PRODUCT** (Chad Brown) and reigning 2YO champ **FIERCENESS** (Todd Pletcher). The presence of this quality winter Floridian in the field gives the Private Terms some street cred as Maryland's first 2-turn prep of the season.

SPEEDYNESS (Jamie Ness) proved best of the local stakes set while running third, beaten only two necks in a bid to repeat his Miracle Wood victory from Feb. 24. His sharp recent form notwithstanding, the Great Notion MD-bred is not Triple Crown nominated at this stage.

The local path stretches out to 1-1/8 miles next in April's Federico Tesio Stakes, where you expect to see several of these rematch with a Preakness automatic berth on the line. But the fast-early, slow-late nature of the Private Terms doesn't bode well for more distance. Splits were 23.51, 23.88, 25.51, 26.82 and 6.66 for a final time of 1:46.38. Look for the fresh faces in the Federico Tesio.



HOT SPRINGS – March 23

The most visually appealing score of the 3YO weekend may have come from **NASH** (Brad Cox) in the \$100,000 Hot Springs, a potential Preakness springboard held just a week in front of the Arkansas Derby. The April 20 Bath House Row Stakes remains on the Oaklawn stakes schedule and could have middle jewel implications if **NASH** is aimed that way. There's question how far the brilliant son of Medaglia d'Oro wants to run, but this 5-1/2 length romp underscored the raw ability he showed at Fair Grounds in previous starts.

NASH stalked patiently behind splits of 23.15, 24.49 and 24.92 before a final quarter in 25.93 and overall mile in 1:38.49. It's fair to have wanted to see more on the clock even if dominant on the track. Dam Sara Louise was a superstar sprinter and that could be the limit to what **NASH** does best when we look back on him some day. I'd prefer to see him look at the Pay Day Mile, Chick Lang and Woody Stephens among the Triple Crown race dates, rather than push back longer toward a Preakness hope.

Runner-up **CARBONE** (Steve Asmussen) might get a chance to work back into the Preakness fold in a race that barn often supports. Expect to see him in the Bath House Row with a chance to show if he'll earn a Triple Crown berth.

