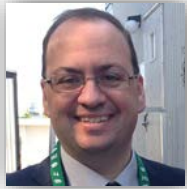




# countdown

TO THE  
CROWN

SEASON 19 WEEK 14 – April 5, 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 Iowa basketball star Caitlyn Clark's game. Accuracy important, but a side of sauce gets the clicks.

1. Bob Baffert is banned from the Kentucky Derby, not MUTH or NYSOS or IMAGINATION or any racehorse. That's a big distinction. It's like saying all Cincinnati Reds he managed are banned from the baseball Hall of Fame when it's only Pete Rose for his personal rule-breaking.
2. All 3 Gulfstream points preps this year were won wire-to-wire: HADES (Joe Orseno) in the Holy Bull; DORNOCH (Danny Gargan) in the Fountain of Youth; FIERCENESS (Todd Pletcher) in the Florida Derby. And there's a real chance there's NO California speed in this year's Derby.
3. Kentucky Derby Future Wager Pool 6 closes Saturday at 4 pm ET before the final big 3 preps. I'm looking for double the price I'm expecting on Derby Day to get involved. And 40 wagering interests here help vs. 20 on Derby Day. KDFW exactas may show particular value due to the math: 40x39 (1,560 possible combos) vs. 20x19 (380 combos).

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

1. FIERCENESS (Todd Pletcher)
2. SIERRA LEONE (Chad Brown)
3. MUTH (Bob Baffert) \*not eligible Ky Derby\*
4. MAYMUN (Bob Baffert) \*not eligible Ky Derby\*
5. FOREVER YOUNG (Yoshito Yahagi)
6. CATCHING FREEDOM (Brad Cox)
7. ENDLESSLY (Michael McCarthy) \*NEW\*
8. DORNOCH (Danny Gargan)
9. TUSCAN GOLD (Chad Brown)
10. RESILIENCE (Bill Mott)
11. JUST STEEL (D. Wayne Lukas) \*NEW\*
12. TRACK PHANTOM (Steve Asmussen)
13. DOMESTIC PRODUCT (Chad Brown)
14. DETERMINISTIC (Christophe Clement)
15. T O PASSWORD (Daisuke Takayanagi) \*NEW\*
16. MYSTIK DAN (Kenny McPeck)
17. HONOR MARIE (Whit Beckman)
18. CATALYTIC (Saffie Joseph Jr.) \*NEW\*
19. NO MORE TIME (Jose D'Angelo)
20. WEST SARATOGA (Larry Demeritte)

## This Week In Countdown History

### 2016

San Vicente Stakes 1-2 finishers Nyquist and Exaggerator went their separate ways 8 years ago this week, as we reviewed the Florida Derby win by Nyquist and previewed the eventual Santa Anita Derby win by Exaggerator in *Countdown*.

They'd reconvene in Louisville and repeat their 1-2 finish, but it would be Exaggerator who got the last laughs in the rivalry by rallying home best in the slop on Preakness Day and again in the Haskell at Monmouth.

## Keeping Ourselves Honest Picks NOW & Past

Last week's free *Countdown* selections: 3: 2-0-0 (67%)  
2024 *Countdown* season selections: 26: 10-5-5 (38%)

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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 choices won in Florida & UAE, 2nd choice in Arkansas. 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

### KEENELAND BLUE GRASS – April 6

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

Historically Speaking: Only the Florida Derby's 25 Kentucky Derby winners all-time top the Blue Grass, responsible for 23. While it's crazy no horse was won BOTH the Blue Grass and Kentucky Derby since Strike the Gold in 1991, defeated runners here have bounced back to win the Derby 3 times since, most recently Street Sense in 2007. In '21, Essential Quality won this en route to Belmont Stakes glory.

What To Watch For: 6 straight Blue Grass winners have been 2-1 or less odds, making it arguably the most trustworthy prep race in terms of form holding.

Race Keys: SIERRA LEONE (Chad Brown) and DORNOCH (Danny Gargan) rematch from the Remsen. That race has proven highly productive all season and both these runners carried their form over to singular 3YO victories in the Risen Star and Fountain of Youth, respectively. No question SIERRA LEONE faced much tougher in his return victory and did so more visually impressive. On that same token, I far prefer the XBTV video workouts I've seen on SIERRA LEONE to DORNOCH. The latter worked very fast on the clock, but was outworked by a 3f stablemate in the process while being asked. Do note that DORNOCH has always been a physical/visual enigma in that he just doesn't blow you away with athleticism. SIERRA LEONE gets reinforcements via GOOD MONEY (Chad Brown) and TOP CONOR (Chad Brown). GOOD MONEY appeals here off a fourth at Tampa, a race historically productive to the Blue Grass, and that he's sired by Blue Grass winner Good Magic, whose offspring merely won 31% at Keeneland last year.

Race Keys: Best regional measuring stick we've seen this season. Going to give us better line on GP, Tam, OP, FG, Aqu & TP. Thoughts on Gotham runner-up JUST A TOUCH (Brad Cox) may solidify in Aqueduct's Wood Memorial run prior to this race. His past performance line looks better than the initial reaction I had to see race, disappointed at his lack of brilliance that day. He's yet to run on a fast track or around 2 turns. Offspring of Justify had poor marks on the Kee dirt last year, so we'll see how he handles all the above. LAT LONG (Kenny McPeck) exits a decent third in the Lecomte at Fair Grounds and has been freshened for this; that form has held up decently since.

Race Keys: Team Turfway, which produced last year's Derby runner-up, Two Phil's, and the winner 2 years ago, Rich Strike, includes ENCINO (Brad Cox), SEIZE THE GREY (D. Wayne Lukas), EPIC RIDE (John Ennis) and MUGATU (Jeff Engler). SEIZE THE GRAY may shed light on Jeff Ruby winner ENDLESSLY (Michael McCarthy), who seems back on the Derby trail. But it's a fast turnaround on 14 days for SEIZE THE GRAY with Derby fever present in pursuit of final qualifying points. ENCINO and EPIC RIDE were the 2 best locals at Turfway this winter in the division and ran 1-2 in the John Battaglia Memorial before bypassing the poorly scheduled Jeff Ruby (which was only 3 weeks from its key local prep). There are 2 really talented colts, though it would appear ENCINO is the better suited for the additional distance based on both pedigree and their matchup last out at a sixteenth mile shorter. The post 11 draw will challenge ENCINO, but his pace versatility will come in handy for jockey Flavien Prat. Give him a big chance if he can work out a trip. Synthetic performers drawn wide sometimes benefit by avoiding the new nature of abrasive dirt kickback. He could lose ground, but actually be in a very good post for the task.

JP's Picks: W) **SIERRA LEONE** ; P) **ENCINO** S) **DORNOCH**





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## AQUEDUCT

### WOOD MEMORIAL – April 6

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

**Historically Speaking:** The Wood has had only 1 Kentucky Derby top-3 finisher since Funny Cide and Empire Maker ran 1-2 in 2003, but its 20 all-time KD winners harkens to history of yesteryear. The Wood delivered '22 Belmont winner Mo Donegal. **What To Watch For:** Florida raiders have dominated the Wood, particularly in the last decade winning all but NYRA-based Bourbonic in 2021. The vast majority had some Tampa form sprinkled in with Gulfstream.

**Race Keys:** Gotham victor DETERMINISTIC (Christophe Clement) puts his unbeaten record on the line against Withers 1-2 finishers UNCLE HEAVY (Butch Reid) and EL GRANDE O (Linda Rice) amongst the local stakes leaders. The upside amongst that trio obviously stands with DETERMINISTIC. We've seen EL GRANDE O enough after 11 starts to appreciate his game and see it has some limits. UNCLE HEAVY has an admirable record, but that 3-for-4 mark has come by a combined margin of just 1-1/2 lengths. He's not laying over anyone. Horses with brilliance should handle him, and DETERMINISTIC has shown that around 1 turn; now comes the distance question. The pedigree does not scream for it and his bandwagon filled quickly in the final furlong of the Gotham, which means he'll be an underlay price in this serious test. Add in a roadtrip back and forth to his Payson Park base in Florida in-between to avoid the New York weather. Win or lose, he's a bad bet under 5-1 and you're not going to see anywhere near that.

**Race Keys:** Florida snowbirds abound, most interestingly RESILIENCE (Bill Mott) and TUSCAN SKY (Todd Pletcher) from Gulfstream. Those barns also have Tampa backups in the entries with ELYSIAN MEADOWS (Bill Mott) and PROTECTIVE (Todd Pletcher). If Mott and Pletcher ring familiar in the Wood, they should. They've combined for 4 of the last 5 winners in this race. MERIT (Saffie Joseph Jr.) also comes north for a barn that upset Mott & Pletcher last year with 59-1 Wood bomber Lord Miles. MERIT scratched out of the Fountain of Youth in order to run in ALW company and was no match for CONQUEST WARRIOR (Shug McGaughey), who was modest and disappointing in the Florida Derby out of that race. But I like that he's had 3 works since that race, a stronger load than many of these of late and he's an exotics threat. Joseph just popped CATALYTIC (Saffie Joseph Jr.) second in the Florida Derby at 29-1 and this one plays at that level. TUSCAN SKY had issues keeping up with stablemate FIERCENESS (Todd Pletcher) in the mornings the past few weeks, but after watching that one win the Florida Derby by a city block, that may not have been as concerning as previously thought. TUSCAN SKY beat the good miler NASH (Brad Cox) in his last start at Fair Grounds, only to see that one come back and win the Hot Springs Stakes at Oaklawn next. He should factor and probably will be a solid second betting choice by the public. RESILIENCE has a fantastic pedigree to be a classics horse, ran a better-than-looks race in the Risen Star and adds blinkers in what appears to be 'go' time. Risen Star third CATCHING FREEDOM (Brad Cox) returned to win the Louisiana Derby and we'll see Risen Star victor SIERRA LEONE (Chad Brown) in Saturday's Blue Grass among the tops of this class. I not only like RESILIENCE here, but that 99-1 ML in this weekend's Kentucky Derby Future Wager is calling my name.

**Race Keys:** GETTYSBURG ADDRESS (Dallas Stewart) and EVENING NEWS (Michael Pino) rematch from a March 8 ALW at Turfway. The former has had a habit of hanging in his races after moving into contention and blinkers on helps those kind often. It's interesting they go to that equipment change first time moving to a new barn. Don't be surprised if that puts some improvement into GETTYSBURG ADDRESS.

JP's Picks: W) **RESILIENCE**; P) **TUSCAN SKY**; S) **DETERMINISTIC**





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SANTA ANITA  
PARK

## SANTA ANITA DERBY – April 6

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

Historically Speaking: 12 Santa Anita Derby alumni have gone on to win the Kentucky Derby, most recently Authentic in 2020 and Triple Crown winner Justify in 2018. Last year's 4th-place SA Derby finisher National Treasure won the Preakness..

What To Watch For: The Bob Baffert trainees can't earn Kentucky Derby qualifying points – barring a court injunction TBD next week – so California's Derby hopes likely rest on a best-case scenario of 2 locals getting the best of the points chase.

Race Keys: IMAGINATION (Bob Baffert) and WYNSTOCK (Bob Baffert) will try to give Baffert his record-padding 9th SA Derby title (he had 9 but was officially stripped of it recently with the official DQ of Justify in 2018 for a drug positive). But neither of these are among the barns' top-3 sophomores – NYSOS and MAYMUN are absent and MUTH ran last week in winning the Arkansas Derby. At best, these are 4-5 in pecking order. IMAGINATION is consistent and determined, 2 admirable qualities, but he's never blown anyone away. Taking another odds-on price on a horse with little margin for error doesn't make gambling sense, win or lose. WYNSTOCK just hasn't been good in 3 of his 5 starts. Trust is low, and note he was quarter-horsed out of the gate in his most recent workout from the gate like he's going to be sent to or near the lead by Juan Hernandez. It looks crowded and fast up front.

Race Keys: STRONGHOLD (Phil D'Amato), TAPALO (John Sadler) and EJ WON THE CUP (Doug O'Neill) return home after good showings on the road. TAPALO may have been most impressive in defeat when being collared by El Camino Real Derby favorite ENDLESSLY (Michael McCarthy), who came back to run even more promising in winning the Jeff Ruby. That's strong company and TAPALO's dirt experience prior comes back into play. STRONGHOLD beat absolutely nothing in the Sunland Derby and that race hasn't flattered the form with its alumni so far. While he doesn't need the lead – and he is not likely getting it vs. this group – his damside pedigree and past performances don't inspire a punchout late over 9F. He'll look good at some point, but project him to come up empty when it counts. EJ WON THE CUP has faced 2 quality horses in his 8 starts and was beaten 20 combined lengths by PILOT COMMANDER (Bob Baffert) and NYSOS (Bob Baffert). This isn't the strongest SA Derby, obviously, but he still feels a cut below having to drop in class to win his last 2. Plus, he's more speed.

Race Keys: So I'm back to my old pal McVAY (John Shirreffs). The late-running maiden chocked full of pedigree just needs to be taken back off the pace and let this group come back to him. Admittedly, I've been sucked into him a few times to no avail, but always thought he was the threat to Baffert's brigade if anyone was to warm them up when we got to the 9F stage. We're here, and McVAY has run a bit faster every time the distances increased so far. It's last call and I'll order 1 more. The pace should be ripe for a closer, and the price should be right at anything over 6-1, which seems reasonable to expect.

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







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## Everyone's A Critic - Reviews



GULFSTREAM  
PARK

### FLORIDA DERBY – March 30

Missouri may be the “Show Me State,” but their sister to the southeast borrowed the phrase for Saturday’s Florida Derby. Everyone wanted to know which FIERCENESS (Todd Pletcher) would show up, and last year’s 2YO Champion emphatically put his best feet forward in a 13-1/2 length drubbing. The margin of victory easily set a Florida Derby record for excess and rates one of the biggest we’ve covered on the trail in our 19 years ... perhaps none in a bigger race for an individual horse.

Hall of Fame jockey John Velazquez put FIERCENESS right into the race from post 8 of 9, breaking on top and setting all the fractions. It was a change from the Holy Bull defeat, when FIERCENESS broke a bit tardy and in some tangle and wound up chasing HADES (Joe Orseno) to no avail. This time, FIERCENESS took the race to the competition, much like Pletcher had set up in morning workouts when setting the tempo inside of quality stablemate Tuscan Sky and just ripping his heart out in futile chase. It was observation of those works at XBTV that convinced me the good FIERCENESS would show up in the Florida Derby.

He pounded excellent splits of 24.06, 23.44, 23.81, 24.32 and 12.59 for 9 furlongs in 1:48.22. Since Gulfstream reconfigured its main track to 1-1/8 miles in 2006, it’s the fourth-fastest Florida Derby. Of the 3 quicker, 2 went on to win the Kentucky Derby.

*Top-5 fastest Florida Derby Editions over 9F GP Oval:*

- 1:47.47 | Always Dreaming (2007)
- 1:47.72 | Quality Road (2009)
- 1:48.16 | Big Brown (2006)
- 1:48.22 | FIERCENESS (2024)**
- 1:48.79 | Take Charge Indy (2012)

Let’s take a look at some trip notes of key Florida Derby finishers:

**FIERCENESS** (Todd Pletcher) 1st by 13-1/2 lengths: Intent on the front, he came out running but had 4 horses inside of him also who got away quickly. Was able to get to the 3-path while leading into the clubhouse turn, then easily cleared that pair before they straightened onto the backstretch. No one ever even got close to drawing alongside him and he began to widen midway on the far turn. Velazquez geared him down the final furlong-plus yet he still galloped out a pole in front.

**CATALYTIC** (Saffie Joseph Jr.) 2nd by 13-1/2 lengths: Broke evenly and was sent up after the leaders 3-4 wide into the clubhouse turn, securing the second spot by the backstretch while essentially following Fierceness. Maintained that spot the entire backstretch run while in the 3-path outside the same pair. Asked to pick it up passing the half-mile pole to go but the leader was only getting better. Cornered well and finished up evenly and clearly best of the rest in a big effort off 2 prior sprints in the MSW and ALW ranks, the latter a runner-up at Tampa. Pedigree questions even for this trip, so longer is a ??? Best plans here are to figure out how to make him a Haskell horse at 9F in the summer as his target race.

**GRAND MO THE FIRST** (Victor Barboza Jr.) 3rd by 16 lengths: Well-drawn in the 3-hole and broke alertly, able to cross over to the fence by the first turn. Ran even and steady holding the position throughout with 2 runners to his outside, but could make no headway on the winner and failed to keep up with the runner-up. Looks best up to 1-1/16 miles, perhaps better sprinting.

**CONQUEST WARRIOR** (Shug McGaughey) 4th by 16 lengths: Outfooted as expected into the clubhouse turn and allowed to settle near the back in the 2-path. Didn’t pick it up on the backstretch run while clear inside. Began to gather on the fence into the far turn but seemed to lose interest and momentum on his own according without any traffic incident. Saved all the ground and absolutely no excuse not to run second from the top of the lane home if he was as good as I thought off his last 2 wins. Big-time disappointment here.





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**HADES** (Joe Orseno) 5th by 19-3/4 lengths: The Holy Bull pacemaker didn't get to the front after breaking out slightly at the start and then not having the foot to hold his spot vs. Grand Mo The First into the clubhouse turn. That put him in the box early and it was an infinitely different look than the ease in which he handled the Holy Bull. He had absolutely no run in him around the far turn as his unbeaten 3-for-3 bubble burst big-time. Not sure you can go on to the Derby off this, but he has points.

We've never seen **FIERCENESS** pair up big efforts, so that Kentucky Derby assessment next will have to be based on watching him train and what clues he gives. His romping debut win was followed by a Champagne disaster; his Breeders' Cup Juvenile romp by a 1-5 flat balloon in the Holy Bull sophomore return. It took him 20 days to return to the workout tab after the Holy Bull, so keep an eye on the calendar. I'd like to see him back quicker than that and be leaned on toward Louisville with vigor. That will tell me he's blossoming and not being babied to avoid a potential bounce. The Florida Derby obviously has a big chance to follow Mage's Kentucky Derby score a year ago and add a record-padding 26th winner in the Run for the Roses.

It's difficult to project Kentucky Derby credentials for the rest of these even if the points work out in their favor to play. A fresh and clearer run in the Preakness would serve the also-rans better.

The Fountain of Youth alumni in this race wound up 6th, 8th and 9th, which is not an endorsement whatsoever for Blue Grass-bound **DORNOCH** (Danny Gargan). That race felt weak when it ran and looks even weaker with the benefit of time to evaluate.



## ARKANSAS DERBY – March 30

You can take Bob out of THE Derby, but you can't take the Derby season out of Bob. **MUTH** (Bob Baffert) hijacked the 100 points from the Arkansas Derby in terms of Kentucky Derby qualifying and took them back to his Santa Anita homebase to await what figures to be a date in the Preakness Stakes. Churchill Downs' ban of Baffert has been extended through 2024, and owner Amr Zedan opted not to move his horses from the barn that delivered him Medina Spirit's success. Now they'll live with that fact and see where the chips fall for the Preakness, Belmont or beyond.

253 Derby Points Now Awarded to Ineligible Baffert Trainees:

125 **MUTH**  
50 **IMAGINATION**  
42 **WINE ME UP**  
20 **NYSOS**  
10 **WYNSTOCK**  
3 **COACH PRIME**  
3 **PRINCE OF MONACO**

Not only will those lacking points have some impact on the bottom qualifiers and cutoff line for this year's Derby 150, but more importantly the lack of Baffert presence will soften the pace. There's simply no California speed this year.

Let's dig into some of the key Arkansas Derby trip notes.

**MUTH** (Bob Baffert) 1st by 2 lengths: Broke alert and could have been sent to the front, but jockey Juan Hernandez let the fleet sprinter Time For Truth take the field into the clubhouse turn while sitting perfectly to his outside. Traveled smooth in hand in the 3 path with space between him and the pacesetter, and didn't jump into the big when Timberlake made an early dash between to the front. Took charge from that one around the far turn and never looked like a loser. Drifted a bit in the lane while clear and under urging such that additional distance could come into question against stronger competition. But he was clearly best of this group. Splits were 23.43, 24.03, 24.80, 24.99 and 12.29 for 1:49.54. It was the fastest Arkansas Derby in the past 4 years and stacks up solidly over the past 15 years.

**JUST STEEL** (D. Wayne Lukas) 2nd by 2 lengths: Got away clean and sat third under the line the first time while out mid-track. Traveled 4-wide into the clubhouse turn in striking distance and stayed that way the entire run down the backstretch and into





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the far turn. Once straightened for home, took a terrible bobble but athletically recovered and continued on with a rock-solid, even effort to be clearly second-best. Probably would have benefitted from skipping the Rebel when that race was just 3 weeks after the weather-delayed Southwest. This effort was much more representative of his earlier '24 campaign and he hasn't caught a break in terms of an easy, inside trip yet. This is a solid son of Justify who has earned his way to Louisville as a price player.

**MYSTIK DAN** (Kenny McPeck) 3rd by 6-1/4 lengths: He had an eventful first turn with Liberal Arts running up on him out of control, then took his place midflight while 3-wide. He commenced a move with a half-mile to go and made steady progress while 3-4 wide on the far turn. He didn't get with the top pair over the final quarter-mile, but was able to collar a visually tired Timberlake for third. While he didn't follow up on his Southwest Stakes smasher – this time on a fast track – he ran well enough to deserve his place in the Kentucky Derby starting gate. He's no fluke, even if not among the very best in the division.

**TIMBERLAKE** (Brad Cox) 4th by 6-3/4 lengths: The big question coming out of his freshman season here was distance and, frankly, he surprised me with the way he finished in the Rebel Stakes here at 1-1/16 miles. Beyond that was still to be determined, and it looks like he was exposed here after setting a reasonable pace. A top-class horse who gets 6F in 1:12.26 should not be going totally up and down the final furlong like he was. Flavien Prat didn't do him any favors with his aggressive move on the first turn, but once there, he had every chance to settle and deliver. He didn't. He's got the points to run in the Kentucky Derby, but I'd want no part of him at 10F, and honestly a Preakness bid appears tall for him. Cox wisely said they're going to shorten him up and bypass the Derby. Maybe later try the Haskell at 9F in summer where fast horses seem to carry.

**INFORMED PATRIOT** (Steve Asmussen) 5th by 9-1/4 lengths: No big impact here at all, which is not a good sign for the Sunland Derby alumni like **STRONGHOLD** (Phil D'Amato), who reappears in the Santa Anita Derby.

**LIBERAL ARTS** (Robbie Medina) 6th by 10-3/4 lengths (DQ'd to 8th): Draw a complete line through this race. He looked like a million bucks pre-race and I was sure he was going to fire. After passing the wire the first time, Tyler Gaffalione grabs ahold of him for no reason and the colt just hates it, tossing his head and starting a fight that nearly ends in disaster about 20 seconds later when forced to check up out of clubhouse turn chaos he caused and plummeting back through the field. By the time he resettles, he's more than 9 lengths off a modest tempo set by the race favorites who aren't expected to come back. He spends the rest of the race in makeup mode, making a wide rally before obviously losing all steam. I hate that he's not going to be Kentucky Derby horse, but look for him to make noise somewhere in the Triple Crown series.

Look for the 2-3 finishers to move onto the Kentucky Derby, while **TIMBERLAKE** would be a toss-up to enter. The Preakness impact could be stronger here with **MUTH** and **LIBERAL ARTS** horses who would be of interest at Pimlico if aimed that way.



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meydan

## UAE DERBY – March 30

While FIERCENESS (Todd Pletcher) was able to show off his stuff in commanding fashion, I'd be lying if I didn't admit that I was hoping FOREVER YOUNG (Yoshito Yahagi) didn't elicit the same kind of performance earlier in the day in Dubai. His score in the 1-3/16 miles UAE Derby was a proper step forward from an all-out win the Saudi Derby to open his 3YO campaign a month prior. But was it enough to put him in line to become the first foreigner to win the Kentucky Derby since Venezuela's Canonero II in 1971? I gotta say my opinion of FOREVER YOUNG has softened a bit after this winning effort, but there aren't a laundry list of American horses who are flourishing right now to convince me he's overmatched beyond the top 2 or 3.

From the outside post draw, FOREVER YOUNG was asked for some run from the start, but wound up 4-wide in the clubhouse turn at Meydan. Jockey Ryusei Sakai appeared content to ride him like he was on the best horse in the race, surrendering ground loss in favor of keeping the odds-on favorite in the clear. Connections have said the horse does not appreciate kickback, so keeping him in the clear was a wise move and he actually wears non-blinkered headgear to deflect the dirt. He remained patient while 4-5 wide into the far turn and began to pick up the front markers while always within striking distance. Sakai worked FOREVER YOUNG to the 2-path coming out of the far turn with only front-running, South American-bred 4YO Auto Bahn to collar. That pair drew well clear of the rest as FOREVER YOUNG score by just under 2 lengths. He stopped the clock in 1:57.89, more than 2 seconds slower than Derma Sotogake a year ago. Consider that both the Dubai World Cup and Dubai Golden Shaheen on dirt were run faster this year than last.

The New York-bred PANDAGATE (Christophe Clement) ran an admiral third coming out of his win in the state-bred Gander Stakes at Aqueduct, but there was not much in this field when the Aidan O'Brien turf runners had nothing to offer on the dirt. PANDAGATE has enough points to play in the Kentucky Derby, but obviously would be a major longshot there. The barn also has DETERMINISTIC (Christophe Clement) in this week's Wood Memorial, so perhaps his performance will determine how aggressive they might be in placing PANDAGATE next, though note it's a completely different set of owners.

FOREVER YOUNG ships to the US on April 10 and will have more than 3 weeks to acclimate to the surroundings in Louisville. Yahagi knows the road to American success having won 2 Breeders' Cup races at Del Mar in 2021 off the plane. He mentioned post-UAE Derby that FOREVER YOUNG did not handle the travel from Saudi Arabia to Dubai as well as he had hoped and took some time to settle in. That's worth keeping an eye on, monitoring how his training potentially could improve the longer he's at Churchill Downs.

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