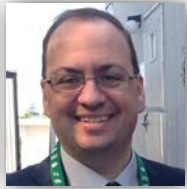




countdown

TO THE
CROWN

SEASON 19 WEEK 15 – April 12, 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 Frankie Dettori winning 6 races on Santa Anita Derby Day. Not all are worth a flying dismount.

1. It's going to be a wild month of debate regarding the speed of FIERCENESS (Todd Pletcher) and the classic-distance stamina of SIERRA LEONE (Chad Brown), who has an unheard of 3 races in a row at 9F going into the Kentucky Derby. Choose a side and cross your fingers they both make the gate for a cool showdown. 2YO champ Nyquist and late-running Exaggerator were the only horses in single digits in 2016 and ran 1-2. Sound familiar?
2. The '24 Risen Star has produced the Louisiana Derby 1-2 finishers, the Wood Memorial winner and the Blue Grass winner. Five straight years this February race has produced a Ky Derby top-3 finisher, including both of the 2-3 finishers the past 2 years. It's on course this year with SIERRA LEONE (Chad Brown), RESILIENCE (Bill Mott), CATCHING FREEDOM (Brad Cox) and HONOR MARIE (Whit Beckman) aimed at Louisville; plus talented TUSCAN GOLD (Chad Brown) is pointed at Preakness.
3. 76-1 on RESILIENCE (Bill Mott) in the Kentucky Derby Futures that closed right before the Wood ... good bet.

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

NEW: *ONLY Derby-Eligible and Aiming for Derby*

1. FIERCENESS (Todd Pletcher)
2. SIERRA LEONE (Chad Brown)
3. RESILIENCE (Bill Mott)
4. FOREVER YOUNG (Yoshito Yahagi)
5. CATCHING FREEDOM (Brad Cox)
6. JUST A TOUCH (Brad Cox)
7. STRONGHOLD (Phil D'Amato)
8. ENDLESSLY (Michael McCarthy)
9. JUST STEEL (D. Wayne Lukas)
10. TRACK PHANTOM (Steve Asmussen)
11. DOMESTIC PRODUCT (Chad Brown)
12. T O PASSWORD (Daisuke Takayanagi)
13. MYSTIK DAN (Kenny McPeck)
14. HONOR MARIE (Whit Beckman)
15. DORNOCH (Danny Gargan)
16. CATALYTIC (Saffie Joseph Jr.)
17. SOCIETY MAN (Danny Gargan)
18. NO MORE TIME (Jose D'Angelo) (bump by Lex)
19. WEST SARATOGA (Larry Demeritte)
20. DETERMINISTIC (Christophe Clement)

This Week In Countdown History

2020

With horse racing shut down nearly everywhere in America, Oaklawn Park continued to race through the early months of the pandemic. It switched its schedule this week by running the Oaklawn Stakes and pushing the Arkansas Derby back on the calendar to the first Saturday in May.

46-1 closer Mr. Big News made up more than 14 lengths while besting 12 rivals to beat Farmington Road by a half-length.

While the Kentucky Derby would not be until Labor Day weekend, this footnote race in history's winner wound up the Kentucky Derby's 3rd-place finisher ... also at 46-1 odds.

Keeping Ourselves Honest Picks NOW & Past

Last week's free Countdown selections: 3: 2-0-0 (67%)
2024 Countdown season selections: 29: 12-5-5 (41%)

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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 Resilience & Sierra Leone won the Wood & Blue Grass. 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

KEENELAND LEXINGTON – April 13

Set the Table: 1-1/16 miles (2 turns), \$400K, KD Points 20-10-6-4-2.

Historically Speaking: The Lexington produced 1984 Kentucky Derby and Belmont winner Swale, as well as 1999 Derby and Preakness champ Charismatic. Disarm got needed points here when 3rd last year and wheeled right back to finish 4th in the Kentucky Derby. It's produced a Derby starter the past 2 years (Tawny Port 7th in 2022). The Keeneland Spring Meet has directly produced at least 1 starter in each of the last 4 Preakness editions held in Spring (excluding 2020 October Preakness) who did NOT compete in the Kentucky Derby.

What To Watch For: HADES has 30 Derby qualifying points and leaps into the field with a win, while 2nd may be enough with a defection or 2; ENCINO has 20 points and likely must win and get a defection or 2 to qualify, same for LIBERAL ARTS (19).

Race Keys: HADES (Joe Orseno), LIBERAL ARTS (Robbie Medina) and LUCKY JEREMY (Bill Morey) are here because of bad trips and/or disappointing second stops on a 2-prep campaign. All 3 would need a big effort to justify Triple Crown stops next, whether its Kentucky Derby or Preakness. That Gulfstream's 3 races this year were all won wire-to-wire lends me to think HADES got away with 1 in the Holy Bull when upsetting DOMESTIC PRODUCT (Chad Brown), return winner of the Tampa Bay Derby) and FIERCENESS (Todd Pletcher), bounce-back winner of the Florida Derby. HADES took a step back in the Florida Derby and this feels forced. A fresh HADES towards the Preakness would give me more confidence. LUCKY JEREMY should appreciate the 1-1/16 miles distance as much as the competition. He's a nice regional player who is over his head in the Triple Crown talk. This could be his limit in trip. *Countdown* readers know how much I like LIBERAL ARTS. He spent the Arkansas Derby in makeup mode after imploding the first quarter-mile of that race. He should get a strong pace to rally into and, if he's as good as I think he is, make a major amount of noise late. He may still need some points help to make the Kentucky Derby if he wins Saturday, but look out for him in any of the 3 possible Triple Crown landing spots.

Race Keys: ENCINO (Brad Cox) scratched from Blue Grass after drawing wide, opting to try the Lexington. EPIC RIDE (John Ennis) validated his Battaglia form when coming back to run third in the Blue Grass Cox used this race to get Tawny Port to the Derby a few years ago and has compared this horse to Tawny Port in terms of resume. Like LIBERAL ARTS, I'm very high on this horse not only Saturday, but in any of the 3 Triple Crown races if he were to make his way there. He's got to prove himself on dirt, but the son of '16 Kentucky Derby winner Nyquist has a real class about him the way he wore down EPIC RIDE over 1-1/16 miles last time.

Race Keys: THE WINE STEWARD (Mike Maker) and FOOTPRINT (Kenny McPeck) are Keeneland Fall Meet alumni at different stages of their form cycle. THE WINE STEWARD has had setbacks delaying his 3YO return and is thrust into a tough spot. This was an early season juvenile a year ago, the kind of debut plan that's not made for Triple Crown types. We know he can handle the track and distance when in peak form and conditioning, witnessed by his 2nd in the Breeders' Futurity. Expect a solid effort, and from an inside draw, could be in the hunt. Likely finds 1 or 2 a bit more prepared. FOOTPRINT didn't debut until THE WINE STEWARD went to the sidelines, but has rattled off 7 straight starts without a break at 5 different tracks. Sire Dialed In had a sharp 7-24 mark last year on the Kee dirt with his offspring, including this one's debut win.

JP's Picks: W) **LIBERAL ARTS** ; P) **ENCINO** S) **HADES**





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Everyone's A Critic - Reviews

KEENELAND 

BLUE GRASS – April 6

Following double-digit length rallies by Rich Strike and Mage to win the past 2 Kentucky Derby editions, a decade of fear that you can't beat speed on the first Saturday in May has been softened. That's good news for the SIERRA LEONE (Chad Brown) camp following his Blue Grass Stakes victory that saw him pass 8 horses and make up nearly 9 lengths. His win in the Risen Star in February has produced nothing but flattery since, thanks to his former competition. At Keeneland, he answered the call to further improvement, running his third straight 9F race and heading to Louisville as well-equipped in the distance department as any horse in memory. You rarely see 27 furlongs in the final 3 races for any horse, today or yesteryear.

Keeneland's opening weekend played to early speed in the sprints, but was rather fair in the 5 route races. Only 1 winner led after the opening half-mile routing, the others were 2, 3, 4-1/4 and 8-3/4 lengths back at that juncture. SIERRA LEONE brought up the caboose on that list, but had more than enough real estate to deliver by 1-1/2 widening lengths. He was 1 of only 2 horses in the Blue Grass to improve his margin over the final 5F of the race, the other an insignificant 1 length while never a factor.

The pace was solid, but it also didn't cave. Splits were 23.15, 23.33, 24.35, 25.82 and 13.43 for 1-1/8 miles in 1:50.08. The final 3F went in a lackluster 39.25, but SIERRA LEONE made up 6-1/2 lengths in that time, so he came home a shade under :38, which is solid. The Blue Grass final time was smack-dab middling 5th of 10 since Keeneland returned to dirt, while the 46.48 opening half-mile was the race's quickest during that span.

Here are my horse-by-horse takes on the notable runners:

SIERRA LEONE (Chad Brown) 1st by 1-1/2: After his delay, away cleanly without speed as is his norm, climbed a bit under the line the first time while taking a lot of kickback. Traveled most of the backstretch 3-4 lengths behind the main middle flight and that kept him clear 3-4 paths off the inside. First asked immediately past the half-mile pole and he responded with an inside move and athletic cut. Angled back out to circle the field deep on the far turn, 5-wide at the quarter-pole with 4 rivals still to catch. Didn't gobble up ground, but rather steadily progressed with about 30 strides to get to Just A Touch. Paddler not most efficient mover and ducked in late before correcting and galloping out very well. Far from a perfect performance, but more positives than negatives. And it's hard to argue that he owns the 2 best wins in the division this year outside the Florida Derby of Fierceness. Likely prefers an outside draw in Louisville.

JUST A TOUCH (Brad Cox) 2nd by 1-1/2: Broke clean and naturally pulled himself up into the pace with the addition of some hand-urging from Florent Geroux. Cornered second in the 2-3 path unable to drop completely over to be alongside the speed of Top Conor on the rail. Shook clear of the other pressers onto the backstretch and was sitting a perfect, first-over trip behind a 1-start maiden mile winner who had never been 2 turns. That's the kind of trip that dominated the Kentucky Derby from California Chrome until the past 2 years. Never had a horse put pressure on his outside the entire Blue Grass, a boon to his chances. Looked like he was going to blow past Top Conor turning for home but took a bit longer to inherit the lead when that one stopped to his inside just past the furlong pole. Stride was rather up-and-down the final sixteenth as Sierra Leone ground past him. No doubt second-best and galloped out well. Looks like a spectacular Haskell prospect, but :39-plus the final 3F here will have to be vastly improved upon. This was his first 2-turner and first start beyond a mile, so it's quite possible he has more ceiling. Justify colt's dam was all 1 turn success, so we'll see. Definitely tab this one's workouts and how well he finishes up.

EPIC RIDE (John Ennis) 3rd by 5-1/4: Broke sharp and was used from a wider draw to try and get position into the clubhouse turn, ending up in the 3-4 path in pursuit of the top pair. Showed nicely composure exiting the first turn when Dornoch was rank inside of him, but he didn't flinch. Maintained his spot 3-4 paths out the entire backstretch run, content to track Top Conor and Just A Touch. Asked for more with 7/16ths left, but couldn't cut into the margin. Inched closer to Just A Touch once straightened for home, but flattened out while holding the others at bay. Distance limitations at play with this talented Turfway winter warrior. He could have won the Lexington at 1-1/16 miles, but can't fault the effort to run third in the Grade 1. Could have earned a date in the Preakness, but that will be stretching his distance limitations even more. Prefer to see him shorten up.

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DORNOCH (Danny Gargan) 4th by 6-1/2: The pre-race plan trainer Gargan said publicly was that they were going to teach Dornoch to rate in the Blue Grass since they already had points to make the Kentucky Derby. Whether you agree with that tactic or not, you had to factor it into the Blue Grass handicapping and how the race was run in terms of his next step. Did it work? Did it fail? And how might they employ tactics next time? Pinned inside a 5-horse cluster into the clubhouse turn, Dornoch tossed his head and got rank with Luis Saez wanting to do more. By the time they cornered to the backstretch, the wrestling match subsided right at the three-quarter pole and he came back to his rider. With Epic ride glued outside him the entire backstretch run, there were no breathers with the 2 pacemakers in front of him. He ran on steadily inside around the far turn but came under hard urging well before the quarter-pole and appeared to be going nowhere. He ran a bit erratically through the stretch, never responding to the stick and lost margin through the wire. Ran more like a Belmont Stakes grinder in the 12-furlong seasons, but won't have that race distance on the schedule this year. Tough spot because this didn't really work, and there's question if he's fast enough to play with the front-runners at the top of the division.

TOP CONOR (Todd Pletcher) 6th by 8: Pacemaker was being asked to do a lot in his second start, carved out a strong opening half-mile and held gamely through nearly a mile. Something to build on, but note he's the only part of the pace to back up. The 2-3-4 finishers ran 2-3-4 the entire race, it was just **TOP CONOR** tired and **SIERRA LEONE** rallied. One-turn Peter Pan could fit the bill.

GOOD MONEY (Chad Brown) 10th by 40-1/4L: Most impacted by the delay of his stablemate, he reared and thrashed in the gate, didn't break as forward as expected and never threatened while not persevered with in the lane.

No doubt the Kentucky Derby will feel the **SIERRA LEONE**, **JUST A TOUCH** and **DORNOCH** presence if all are healthy. Initial reaction in terms of contenders to win are **YES**, **LIKELY NO** and **COMFORTABLY NO** in that order.

AQUEDUCT

WOOD MEMORIAL – April 6

You're excused when you excuse races that produce 67,000-to-1 superfecta results. When the results are so topsy-turvy, they're impossible to trust and equally as difficult to respect. But one caution about Aqueduct's Wood Memorial, it was the 2-3-4 finishers at 106-1, 38-1 and 80-1 ... coupled with a 4-5 favorite running up the track ... that served the chaos. The winner? He's actually quite good.

The Wood was marred by the spill involving **DEPOSITION** (Uriah St. Lewis) in the upper stretch.

RESILIENCE (Bill Mott) has been high on our *Countdown* radar all season. He got away from some heavyweights at Gulfstream and Fair Grounds, earning his way to the Kentucky Derby with a never-in-doubt score by 2-1/4 lengths. He debuted 14th in our preseason rankings to start the season and only sank slightly after a fourth-place finish in the *Risen Star*. He had to do the dirty work that day chasing lone speed **TRACK PHANTOM** (Steve Asmussen) and ran a better-than-looked race. The Wood gave him a chance to prove our confidence in the supremely bred son of Into Mischief, whose second dam was the star dirt & turf mare *Tranquility Lake*. This colt's mama *Meadowsweet* is half-sister to turf superstars *After Market* and *Courageous Cat*. Readers know how I love brilliance up top and turf pedigree on the damside when it comes to the Triple Crown prospects. He's it.

The Wood came unglued from a parimutuel standpoint when the public went all-in for Gotham winner **DETERMINISTIC** (Christophe Clement). Forget the fact he'd never been 2 turns; forget the fact his comeback score was a on a wet track; forget the fact that he needed 6+ months between his first 2 starts and had 5 weeks this time.

Wood Memorial splits were 23.45, 24.04, 24.82, 25.04 and 12.93 for 1:50.28. That's a solid 37.97 final 3F and **RESILIENCE** went right around 37-4/5 – which was nearly identical with **SIERRA LEONE** at Keeneland. But visually the **SIERRA LEONE** gives a different impression. Something to weigh moving forward. In the last 10 years, the only Wood winners to go faster were *Mo Donegal*, who'd win the Belmont; *Vino Rosso*, who'd win a Breeders' Cup Classic; and *Wicked Strong*, a top-4 finisher in the Kentucky Derby, Belmont, Travers, Whitney, Woodward, Jockey Club Gold Cup and Breeders' Cup Dirt Mile. You get the point – those were pretty nice horses.





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Let's take a look at some trip notes of key players:

RESILIENCE (Bill Mott) 1st by 2-1/4: Away nicely from the rail to secure position into the clubhouse turn, he took his cue from jockey John Velazquez while backing off and letting longshot **EVENING NEWS** (Michael Pino) cross over his face. Got caught in a jam exiting the clubhouse turn behind that one and with 801 longshot **LONESOME BOY** (Hugo Padilla) pinned to his outside. Again, he relaxed beautifully when we've seen several members of this crop lose it in this situation. Always traveling well, JV tipped him out to the 3-path into the far turn for clear running and **RESILIENCE** patiently bided his time outside those rivals and put them away in a few jumps when asked at the quarter-pole. He got a bit tired and drifted with his head high but never was in doubt. The gallop-out didn't follow up the excellent effort, so there's some concern whether he'll be a star 10F performer. Remember those great turfers in his family were elite turf milers. But his talent is real. You just might have to time the move perfectly to get the extra distance.

SOCIETY MAN (Danny Gargan) 2nd by 2-1/4: When 108-1 shots exiting fourth-start maiden wins run this well, the first inclination is to scoff. From post 10, he was asked for a bit of run into the clubhouse turn while winding up 3-wide. He had both **DETERMINISTIC** and **MERIT** going haywire around him, but kept his composure. Settled 4-5 paths out on the backstretch, raced between horses the entire far turn while waiting for traffic in front of him, moved out nicely to go after the winner and was simply second-best. He galloped out in front. Good Magic colt showed what he could do after 3 straight troubled trips to and out of the gate. He's got points to play in the Kentucky Derby and should run on – just a matter of how fast.

PROTECTIVE (Todd Pletcher) 3rd by 3-3/4: Maiden overcome a rocky start when shuffled back, turning up the pressure on an experienced colt with only a Saratoga sprint and a Tampa MSW under his belt. Saved ground much of the trip, tipping to the 2-path to commence his rally with a half-mile left, cutting right back in to hug the fence deftly, angled out off the turn in a slingshot move saving all the ground and finished evenly. Promising race from the well-bred son of Medaglia d'Oro-Grace Hall, who wouldn't be a crazy shot at the Preakness if Fierceness doesn't go there for these connections post-Derby. The Peter Pan being 2 turns this year at Aqueduct also makes sense if they want to bypass a maiden race at 1-9 odds.

UNCLE HEAVY (Butch Reid) 5th by 11: The Withers winner had a tough draw in post 12, never found his way inside, wound up 4-5 wide most of the trip and stalked to the quarter-pole before losing steam. Appears he found this was a much tougher cast than the last in addition to the ground loss. Peter Pan could be next though they won't close door on Kentucky Derby if points situation devolves in their favor.

TUSCAN SKY (Todd Pletcher) 7th by 12L: The 5-2 second choice suffered his first loss in 3 tries while catching a dry track for the first time in stakes company. Threw jockey Manny Franco back a few jumps out of the gate and by the time he righted things, 7 or 8 runners had already gotten in front of him. This colt had pressed first-over in both previous wins at Gulfstream and Fair Grounds. He didn't get engaged down the backstretch, began some run 3-4 wide on the far turn, and was going nowhere at the time of the incident involving **DEPOSITION**. In hindsight, maybe working this colt with Fierceness was not a good thing as he was getting his heart pulled out in the mornings the past few weeks. Time to regroup.

DETERMINISTIC (Christophe Clement) 8th by 17-3/4 lengths: Odds-on chalk had run from a long chute over 7F at Saratoga and a 1-turn mile in the Gotham, so forgive him for wondering "What the heck is this?" when the clubhouse turn of the Wood came up on him so quickly. As is apt to happen on the stretch-out, he became rank jockey Joel Rosario after a slightly troubled start and angst when a jerked to the inside rail. Perhaps he thought it was time to take off like in a workout in that maneuver, but whatever the mindset, that inexperience made him a handful for about a half-mile. He finally settled into the far turn, forced to stay on the fence with runners to his outside when his trio ran up on the leading trio. With 5/16s of a mile to go, he was done. His talent was obvious, but distance was never a given and experience only seems to become a discussion point when things don't go right. Well, that's why the fastest horses don't win all the horseraces. The event is more than just pure speed.

MERIT (Saffie Joseph Jr) 10th by 24-1/2 lengths: Was ridiculously rank the first half-mile and not sure what Edwin Gonzalez was doing in the wrestling match, but neither benefitted from it.

Granted, the Wood Memorial hasn't produced a Kentucky Derby top-2 finisher since Funny Cide and Empire Maker ran 1-2 in 2003. And the horses behind **RESILIENCE** here give no impression of relevance among the upper echelon of route runners in the division. But this is a horse who ran within 3-1/2 lengths of **SIERRA LEONE** on a neutral track at Fair Grounds and just came home as fast as that one did in his final prep, showing vast improvement from New Orleans. Master horseman in charge, master pedigree in the tank and a healthy price likely on the tote in Louisville.





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SANTA ANITA
PARK

SANTA ANITA DERBY – April 6

Bob Baffert would have been 2-5 to win the Santa Anita Derby with NYSOS. Or MAYMUN. Or MUTH. Even without any of his 3 best sophomores, he still had the even-money favorite and came within a neck of sweeping the entire Santa Anita Derby series for 2024. Recall his earlier victories in the San Vicente, Robert B. Lewis and San Felipe – where he also had the second-place finisher in all 3. With that backdrop (and the beautiful San Gabriel Mountains), STRONGHOLD (Phil D'Amato) rallying to win by a neck over San Felipe victor IMAGINATION (Bob Baffert) was a notable accomplishment in a Santa Anita Derby that feels like it will be at most a footnote in its storied history.

This was not Winning Colors, Sunday Silence or California Chrome. After all, the last-out locales included Sunland Park, Turf Paradise and Golden Gate Fields – *not among also-rans, but the 1-3-4-5 finishers*. It happens. Take a depleted horse population and the near concession of the 3YO division locally to Baffert and it's a perfect storm. Add in the trainer's Kentucky Derby ban unwillingness of his owners to move those horses to other barns this year. NYSOS was injured. MUTH was went to win the Arkansas Derby. MAYMUN took a mystery pass after not working to satisfaction prior to entry day. You're left with a nice horse in IMAGINATION, no doubt, harkening to National Treasure a year ago (4th in this race). He went on to upset the Preakness, lose a nose decision to Cody's Wish in the Breeders' Cup Dirt Mile and eventually won the Pegasus World Cup. So saying IMAGINATION isn't one of Baffert's greats, but a decent follow-up to National Treasure, isn't a dead-end street.

But a vintage Baffert 3YO star wins this Santa Anita Derby for fun. Splits slowed continuously from 22.72, 24.01, 24.17 and 25.98 to a final furlong in 13.10. The 1:49.98 final time pales to Taiba for this barn just 2 years prior in 1:48.46, much less Practical Move a year ago for Tim Yakteen in 1:48.69. The final 3F in 39.08 rates uninspiring toward the Kentucky Derby as winner STRONGHOLD made up slight ground during that span in about :38-3/5.

Here are the important Santa Anita Derby trip notes:

STRONGHOLD (Phil D'Amato) 1st by neck: Outbroke TAPALO to his inside in the initial strides, which was important when that rival came outward at the start behind him. Antonio Fresu had a very comfortable hold on him and got him into a rhythm in just a few jumps. Things tightened a bit on heels into the clubhouse turn and he got a good education there, but kept his manners. Comfortable and patient throughout the backstretch, he commenced his move inside the half-mile marker while a path or 2 off the fence on the far turn. He wasn't quite push-button when the first chance to split horses came at the quarter-pole, but the hole parted once straightened out and he peeked in front. All out to hold off IMAGINATION to his inside over the final furlong with little separating them even through the gallop-out. He'll have to be much better to beat the best of this generation.

IMAGINATION (Bob Baffert) 2nd by neck: Absolutely clean start and got the perfect, first-ever trip to TAPALO into the clubhouse turn. Similar set-up to his last 2 wins, though he did entertain some pressure on the backstretch from EJ WON THE CUP who ranged up 3-wide. He kicked clear from that and had TAPALO in his sights on the far turn, led for a stride or 2 straightening out, but didn't get any separation – which has been common in his races. Showed gameness like he typically does when STRONGHOLD appeared to be going by him, dug in and raced evenly to the wire and beyond. Now 6-6 in the exacta with 3 narrow wins, 3 narrow losses. He's not a brilliant sort for the \$1M tag and connections, but his consistency is admirable.

E J WON THE CUP (Doug O'Neill) 3rd by 3-1/2L: Smooth go from the outside draw, but did find himself 4-wide into the first turn. Stalked wide down the backstretch outside IMAGINATION, who was outside TAPALO. Looked to lack the spurt 3-wide on the far turn when IMAGINATION separated, and lacked the ability to keep STRONGHOLD hemmed in at the top of the lane. But he remained steady before losing starch the final sixteenth of a mile. Wide trip didn't help, but he's short of top-class at classic distances.

TAPALO (John Sadler) 5th by 11-1/4: Unprepared breaking out, then Quarter-Horsed up the inside to pass horses under the line the first time and set the pace. Did come back to jockey Umberto Rispoli nicely into the clubhouse turn, was under very little pressure most of the journey and came up empty when asked to continue nearing the quarter-pole. The overzealous reaction to his start probably cost him some margin in the end when the tank emptied, but a top-class horse runs on with the ease of the rest of the trip. Maybe best to consider 1M to 1-1/16M goals if he's progressing into summer and fall.





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WYNSTOCK (Bob Baffert) 6th by 13-1/2: Lacked the early foot he showed in his 2 victories, through no trouble, but just without any urgency. Never involved at any point and nearly pulled up at the quarter-pole, it's a testament to how unimpressive the others in this race finished, given that he was only beaten 13-1/2 lengths while literally not even trying the last quarter-mile.

McVAY (John Shirreffs) 7th by 14: Away at the back, blew the first turn 6-wide on his own malfunction, soon after took an apparent bad step and nearly dropped jockey Hector Berrios, who held on rodeo style and then had to relocate the stirrups. Everything about the first half of this race was a disaster as he turned his head cock-eyed down the backstretch and never got involved. This horse has more than he's showing and might be a candidate to be gelded – but at his \$1.25 million purchase price, far be it from me to suggest such measures.

Consider that **STRONGHOLD** beat Wood Memorial winner **RESILIENCE** (Bill Mott) and multiple Fair Grounds stakes winner **TRACK PHANTOM** (Steve Asmussen) in a Churchill mile MSW last October. This will be the first Derby for turf-inclined trainer Phil D'Amato, a longtime protégé of the late grass conditioner Mike Mitchell. **STRONGHOLD** likely is the only member of the Santa Anita Derby to contest this year's Kentucky Derby based on the points situation keeping **EJ WON THE CUP** on the outside looking in. Trainer O'Neill has been a big backer of the Preakness over the years, so **EJ WON THE CUP** in Baltimore makes sense – along with **IMAGINATION** and any other Baffert trainees ready to roll.

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