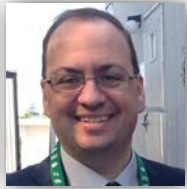




# countdown

TO THE  
CROWN

SEASON 19 WEEK 16 – April 19, 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

Today we salute those who died on April 19, 1995 in the Oklahoma City bombing. I drove through OKC that morning on the way to work and it's a day I'll never forget. God rest the souls of those lost that day 29 years ago and give strength to their loved ones on the anniversary.

1. Horses have won the Kentucky Derby from basking in weeks of local preparation all the way to Funny Cide barely showing up before the Barnstable Brown cocktail party served its first hors d'oeuvres. Don't overemphasize the arrival.
2. The race for third choice in the Derby win pool likely comes down to who catches the rage in final workouts. The late, great Bob Neumeier called them the "she-she" horses. Pencil FIERCENESS favored, SIERRA LEONE second and let the she-sheing begin.
3. The Kentucky courts ruled Thursday that Amr Zedan's Hail Mary lawsuit to upend Churchill Downs' ban of Bob Baffert – and his horse MUTH – fell short about the 10-yard line. It was a longshot, but odds are now that it might chap CDI enough to consider further punitive years. Stay tuned.

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

\*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. ENCINO (Brad Cox)
  9. ENDLESSLY (Michael McCarthy)
  10. JUST STEEL (D. Wayne Lukas)
  11. TRACK PHANTOM (Steve Asmussen)
  12. DOMESTIC PRODUCT (Chad Brown)
  13. HONOR MARIE (Whit Beckman)
  14. MYSTIK DAN (Kenny McPeck)
  15. DORNOCH (Danny Gargan)
  16. T O PASSWORD (Daisuke Takayanagi)
  17. CATALYTIC (Saffie Joseph Jr.)
  18. SOCIETY MAN (Danny Gargan)
  19. WEST SARATOGA (Larry Demeritte)
  20. DETERMINISTIC (Christophe Clement)
- Brink: GRAND MO THE FIRST (Victor Barboza Jr.)

## This Week In Countdown History

### 2013

The Al Stall Jr.-trained Departing rallied for a convincing, 3-1/2 length victory at Hawthorne in the Illinois Derby. He exited a third-place effort in the Louisiana Derby, a race that produced that year's 2-3 Kentucky Derby finishers, Golden Soul and Revolutionary.

Departing went on to run 6th in the Preakness, but had a productive summer winning the West Virginia Derby and Super Derby and later added a Grade 2 turf win and Grade 1 dirt placing to his career resume that nearly reached \$2M earned.

## Keeping Ourselves Honest Picks NOW & Past

Last week's free Countdown selections: 1: 0-0-0 (0%)  
2024 Countdown season selections: 30: 12-5-5 (40%)

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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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2nd pick ENCINO won the Lexington as LIBERAL ARTS flopped. We take pride in what we do, and have accountability. Each week we update how our picks perform.





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## Fearless Forecast – Previews



MARYLAND  
JOCKEY CLUB

### FEDERICO TESIO – April 20

Set the Table: 1-1/8 miles (2 turns), \$125K, KD Points 0-0-0-0, Preakness automatic bid to winner.

Historically Speaking: It's been since Deputed Testamony splashed home best to upset the Preakness in 1983 that the Tesio produced the middle jewel's winner. Oliver's Twist (1995) and Magic Weisner (2002) made some exacta magic exiting the Tesio. Last year, Perform and Coffeewithchris finished 6th and 7th moving on to the big dance.

What To Watch For: The workout tab has been sparse in recent days at Laurel since an EHV breakout was reported. As a handicapper, you wonder if those shipping in from out of town may benefit from not having their program as interrupted.

Race Keys: Private Terms top-5 finishers COPPER TAX (Gary Capuano), INVEIGLED (Jane Cibelli), SPEEDYNESS (Jamie Ness), CIRCLE P (Flint Stites) and STARTSWITHADREAM (James Lawrence III) re-match, along with well-beaten CELTIC CONTENDER (Hamilton Smith). The Private Terms was the first 2-turn stakes on the Maryland trail and cavalry was coming after front-running SPEEDYNESS over 1-1/16 miles. The additional trip – and presence of additional early speed among some fresh faces – should further accentuate the rallying types. Appreciate the work pattern since then for COPPER TAX and fully expect him to best the re-matchers, despite a tough post 12, which likely makes him take even farther back at the start.

Race Keys: Big-name barns raid with CAROLO RAPIDO (Todd Pletcher) and LAT LONG (Kenny McPeek). CAROLO RAPIDO made the Laurel journey a winning one March 22 in his third start after modest tries at Aqueduct. He got a much easier trip against that bunch than he figures to Saturday. LAT LONG is the class of the field coming out of the Lecomte and Blue Grass. He wheels back on 14 days' rest, but it was a non-effort at Keeneland last out, and I like when a good trainer sends a horse who underachieved right back to work like this. McPeek shipped Hayes Strike to Laurel to win last year's Private Terms, so he recognizes which type of horse fits here.

Race Keys: CLASSIC JOKE (Richard Silaman) and MISSION BEACH (Brittany Russell) stretch out from the Bay Shore at Aqueduct. They would contribute to a hot pace along with local class riser MALINOIS (Phillip Capuano), who has won 3 in a row on the front. MISSION BEACH did win over the Laurel track in December after transferring from Bob Baffert. She's a \$400K Curlin who has vastly underachieved and they can't seem to figure out where he fits in terms of distance yet. CLASSIC JOKE has 2 wins, both wiring 6F sprints, and there's question what tactic this son of Practical Joke will employ; it's a matter of the tank running on E late.

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



MARYLAND  
JOCKEY CLUB



REMINGTON PARK  
RACING • CASINO



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## BATHHOUSE ROW – April 20

Set the Table: 1-1/8 miles (2 turns), \$200K, KD Points 0-0-0-0, Preakness automatic bid to winner.

Historically Speaking: Inaugurated in 2019 as the Oaklawn Stakes, its 2020 winner Mr Big News wound up 3rd in the September edition of the Kentucky Derby that pandemic-altered season. Last year's winner Red Route One went on to finish 4th in the Preakness and 8th in the Belmont Stakes.

What To Watch For: Triple Crown nominees in the field are IMPERIAL GUN, INFORMED PATRIOT and COUNT DRACULA. Others would have to supplement to the Preakness or Belmont at a cost of \$150K.

Race Keys: Arkansas Derby also-rans IMPERIAL GUN (Steve Asmussen) and INFORMED PATRIOT (Steve Asmussen) take the class drop. Asmussen used this race for Red Route One successfully a year ago. INFORMED PATRIOT has been the stronger of the pair, but his pedigree leans more miler and the 9F will be a real test given that and his running lines. IMPERIAL GUN is much more made out to be a class-distance sort and has more upside while less credentialed on paper.

Race Keys: MAXIMUS MAGIC (Norm McKnight), COUNT DRACULA (Kenny McPeck), BRILLIANT MAN (Chris Hartman) and WILLY D'S (Greg Compton) re-match from a March 28 mile allowance. The 26-2/5 final quarter in a mile race (with the 1/16th-pole finish line in play that day) raises major red flags for the additional furlong.

Race Keys: Maiden winners GOULD'S GOLD (Kenny McPeck) and MILITANT (Brad Cox) make the immediate rise in class after same-day scores 3 weeks ago. GOULD'S GOLD won despite a distance and set-up not in his favor and should be better-suited to go around 2 turns; we'll see if he's ready for the 9F. MILITANT got a good education, but a very soft pace made his route MSW victory slightly less impressive. He wouldn't surprise for top connections.

JP's Picks: W) **IMPERIAL GUN** ; P) **GOULD'S GOLD** S) **MILITANT**



## ILLINOIS DERBY – April 21

Set the Table: 1-1/8 miles (2 turns), \$200K, KD Points 0-0-0-0, Preakness automatic bid to winner.

Historically Speaking: Much of its history was held after the Derby, but in modern times did produce 2022 Ky Derby and Preakness winner War Emblem. Not held since 2017 and returns to the schedule.

What To Watch For: Only 2 of 6 nominated to Triple Crown, and April 2 late nomination has passed. Any non-TC nom who would want to run in Preakness or Belmont would have to pay \$150K supplemental fee.

Race Keys: REAL MEN VIOLIN (Kenny McPeck) and LE GRIS (Al Stall Jr.) are the pair of Triple Crown nominees and spent the winter at Fair Grounds. An expected hot pace with 2 sprinters in the 9F field should help their late-running styles. Reylu Gutierrez is riding well at Keeneland and his trip to pilot REAL MEN VIOLIN is a solid endorsement. Distance will be no issue for LE GRIS and he's got some quality about him while inconsistent. To his defense, he's been asked to do turf/dirt/Tapeta.

Race Keys: PATRIOT SPIRIT (Michael Campbell) and RAGUEL (Brendan Walsh) wintered and raced in Florida. The former is the lone stakes winner in the field of 6, sprinting in the Inaugural at Tampa. He backed up readily in the 1M Iroquois last year and the 1-1/16M Davis this year; he's hard to recommend this far. RAGUEL trainer Walsh is having a big week at Keeneland and the barn's going well again. This son of Justify has met a couple of tough Shug McGaughey sops in Florida.

Race Keys: WOODCOURT (Cipriano Contreras) simply faced tougher than these in his last few and has held form no matter the assignment. Hindered by terrible post draws at Oaklawn, he's drawn beautifully here and should be able to run these down with a great set-up in front of him. Not a TC nominee, you could see him a lot this year in regional Derbies.

JP's Picks: W) **WOODCOURT** ; P) **RAGUEL** S) **REAL MEN VIOLIN**





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## Everyone's A Critic - Reviews

### KEENELAND LEXINGTON – April 13

All the levers were perfectly pulled for ENCINO (Brad Cox) in the past week. First, trainer Brad Cox opted to scratch the son of 2016 Kentucky Derby winner Nyquist out of the Blue Grass Stakes on April 6 when drawing the far outside post. Second, jockey Florent Geroux responded to a speed-friendly racetrack and asserted ENCINO's presence from the opening bell of the Lexington Stakes. The result: a 2-pronged approach that puts ENCINO into the Kentucky Derby if they want it, and into Preakness consideration as a strong backup.

Granted, there was no SIERRA LEONE (Chad Brown) in the Lexington, which made bypassing the Blue Grass an easier decision to make when Cox already had JUST A TOUCH ready to go a week ago. However, that EPIC RIDE (John Ennis) ran so well in the Blue Grass to be third after ENCINO previously had measured him impressively at Turfway was a feather in the cap for the eventual Lexington winner. Cox tends to pull the right levers in the Lexington, winning it for a third straight edition and fourth time in 5 renewals. But Geroux's intent on the front was just as important.

ENCINCO led through splits of 23.55, 23.73, 24.66, 25.28 and 6.71 for 1-1/16 miles in 1:43.93. It's the second-fastest of 17 races at meet at 1-1/16 miles through 2 weeks, just .08 slower than the G1 Ashland for 3YO fillies. In 9 years since the Lexington went back to dirt, it ranks 5th-fastest, right in middle. But ENCINO was the first to wire this race during that span (avg. winner had been 5-3/4L back after the opening half-mile).

Here are the important trip notes:

**ENCINO (Brad Cox) 1st by 3/4:** Hustled away quickly from the start with hands-pumping, Florent Geroux was able to clear the field into the clubhouse turn and pick his spot thereafter. He came back nicely on cue turning onto the backstretch and rated kindly, letting out a notch when a longshot wanted to pick up the tempo and easily got more breathing room. He was never under pressure, and when The Wine Steward came to him inside the quarter-pole he was able to respond with mostly all hand urging as Geroux was in too tight to use the whip. He rebuffed a quality rival and had something left.

**THE WINE STEWARD (Mike Maker) 2nd by 3/4:** Away since October, his slowed winter return likely took some toll in the final sixteenth of a mile in what has to be considered a strong effort. He was engaged from the start, tracked nicely while saving ground the entire trip, moved on the far turn to chase the loose leader, drew almost even and simply was outgamed late. This was a promising return with more than 8 lengths back to the rest that could set him up for the Preakness or a second-half campaign.

**LIBERAL ARTS (Robbie Medina) 6th by 15-3/4:** Listless effort for a colt who had excuses in Arkansas last time, but simply brought nothing to this picnic when returning on 2 weeks' rest. He had never raced on less than a month break, so it's hindsight to say this experiment to cram Kentucky Derby points backfired big-time. Patiently awaiting the Preakness or Belmont may have done him better. A bit wide for the first turn, but saved all the ground around the far turn and had a chance to pass more horses than he did if he fired with his previous flair. What a letdown his last 2 starts have been.

**HADES (Joe Orseno) 7th by 19:** Also coming back on 2 weeks' rest, nothing good came out of his cram session for the Holy Bull winner, who has now disappointed in back-to-back starts since. Even with blinkers on and jockey Jose Ortiz asking for speed at the start, he was unable to deliver any of that front-running promise from Florida. He wound up sixth into the clubhouse turn when simply outfoted and never got involved after being unable to make a wide dent passing the half-mile pole.

**LUCKY JEREMY (Bill Morey) 8th by 28:** Broke alert enough from the far outside draw but simply wasn't fast enough to go with the speed here and that wound up getting him nudged out into the 4-path into the clubhouse turn. He was never able to get in, but didn't do enough to make you think it made any difference. The effort certainly didn't flatter ENDLESSLY (Michael McCarthy), the Jeff Ruby winner, or STRONGHOLD (Phil D'Amato), the Sunland Derby and subsequent Santa Anita Derby champ.





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The question now becomes: Can ENCINO factor in the Kentucky Derby or Preakness. His pace versatility is admirable, a neck away from perfection in 4 starts: 2 front-end wins, a rally from 6th to win and a rally from 10th to be second. Last year Disarm came out of this race (a loss) and finished fourth in the Run for the Roses. Recent history since the Lexington's return to dirt indicates the Preakness could be an effective spot. Note last year's winner First Mission was injured after the Preakness draw and could not compete, and no races was run in 2020 due to the pandemic. But there's solid results amongst the other Lexington winners to consider:

2015 Divining Rod | 3rd Preakness  
2016 Collected | 10th Preakness  
2017 Senior Investment | 3rd Preakness  
2018 My Boy Jack | 5th Kentucky Derby  
2019 Owendale | 3rd Preakness  
2022 Tawny Port | 7th Kentucky Derby