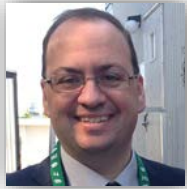




countdown

TO THE
CROWN

SEASON 19 WEEK 17 – April 26, 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 final Kentucky Derby picks. The right ones just come to you; hand-wringing usually leads you wrong.

1. **FIERCENESS** (Todd Pletcher) and **SIERRA LEONE** (Chad Brown) threw down the gauntlet last weekend in works that were their final major preps. The spin over the track at Churchill this weekend is mere maintenance. Both are coming up to the race impeccably so far off their preps.
2. Since Silver Charm in 1997, Barbaro (2006) and Super Saver (2010) are the only post-time second choices in the betting to win the Kentucky Derby. If you want to beat the favorite (10 wins during that span), get yourself a price.
3. **DOMESTIC PRODUCT** (Chad Brown) is the under-the-radar horse rocketing up my playbook. Wouldn't it be wild if the Tampa Bay Derby tote delay turned out to be the best preparation for the long Kentucky Derby build-up and raceday hub-bub? D.P. made his stablemate **TUSCAN SKY** (Chad Brown) look pedestrian while working out at Payson Park recently, and I think the latter is a major threat in the Preakness Future Wager this week.

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. **DOMESTIC PRODUCT** (Chad Brown)
5. **FOREVER YOUNG** (Yoshito Yahagi)
6. **CATCHING FREEDOM** (Brad Cox)
7. **JUST A TOUCH** (Brad Cox)
8. **STRONGHOLD** (Phil D'Amato)
9. **ENCINO** (Brad Cox)
10. **JUST STEEL** (D. Wayne Lukas)
11. **TRACK PHANTOM** (Steve Asmussen)
12. **HONOR MARIE** (Whit Beckman)
13. **MYSTIK DAN** (Kenny McPeck)
14. **DORNOCH** (Danny Gargan)
15. **ENDLESSLY** (Michael McCarthy)
16. **T O PASSWORD** (Daisuke Takayanagi)
17. **CATALYTIC** (Saffie Joseph Jr.)
18. **SOCIETY MAN** (Danny Gargan)
19. **WEST SARATOGA** (Larry Demeritte)
20. **GRAND MO THE FIRST** (Victor Barboza Jr.)

This Week In Countdown History

Our historical comparables edition hits its 12th year. Here's how we compared previous Derby winners.

- 2012: I'll Have Another – Indian Charlie (1998)
- 2013: Orb – Pioneerof The Nile (2009)
- 2014: California Chrome – Brother Derek (2006)
- 2015: American Pharoah – I'll Have Another (2012)
- 2016: Nyquist – Chief's Crown (1985)
- 2017: Always Dreaming – Congaree (2001)
- 2018: Justify – Air Forbes Won (1982)
- 2019: Maximum Security (DQ'd) – Big Brown (2008)
- 2020: no comparables due to pandemic schedule shift
- 2021: Medina Spirit (DQ'd) – Mor Spirit (2016)
- 2022: Rich Strike – not analyzed
- 2023: Mage – Dream Shake (opted late for '21 Pat Day Mile)

Keeping Ourselves Honest Picks NOW & Past

Last week's free *Countdown* selections: 3: 1-0-1 (33%)
2024 *Countdown* season selections: 33: 13-5-6 (39%)

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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 pick **IMPERIAL GUN** won the Bath House Row to lead our handicapping efforts. 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

It's our favorite week of the year, time for the historical comparables, a *Countdown* tradition that debuted in 2012.

Here's how the Class of 2024 shapes up with well-matched predecessors of Kentucky Derbies past. We'll list this year's cast alphabetically.

CATALYTIC (Saffie Joseph Jr.): Similar look to last year's Kentucky Derby winner Mage, who also had 3 starts heading into Louisville, including a Florida Derby runner-up behind a Todd Pletcher-trained 2YO champion (Forte, now Fierceness). Both debuted winners in Gulfstream sprints, were defeated next out and improved to run well enough in the Florida Derby to garner the points for the Kentucky Derby. Both trained by year-round Gulfstream barns, Gustavo Delgado and Joseph. A year prior, Charge It also snuck into the Derby in this same fourth start after a Florida Derby runner-up and wound up 17th, so this kind of light resume can be volatile.

CATCHING FREEDOM (Brad Cox): While there are similarities to stable predecessor Angel Of Empire from a year ago, the 2018 comp to Noble Indy fits best. Both sons of Florida Derby winners (Constitution here, Take Charge Indy), they both ran third in the Risen Star before winning the Louisiana Derby. Both were debut winners who didn't start their 3YO seasons in New Orleans, but finished them in FG's two big races with same results for championship trainers (Cox, Pletcher). Noble Indy had more tactical speed, but couldn't get near the front on Derby Day and wound up 17th. Expect better from late-running Catching Freedom, perhaps matching Angel Of Empire's third a year ago.

DOMESTIC PRODUCT (Chad Brown): This one is similar to 2016 when Destin won the Tampa Bay Derby and was shut down to await the big dance by Todd Pletcher. Both won NYRA maiden races in October, finished off the board in their first stakes attempts, wintered in South Florida while traveling from that base for success. Both made 5 prior starts to the Kentucky Derby. Destin finished sixth in the Derby and second in that year's Belmont. From a pedigree standpoint, however, you must admit an advantage to Destin for the classic trips (Giant's Causeway-Dreaming of Summer bloodline).

DORNOCH (Danny Gargan): While he's full-brother to last year's winner Mage, the preparation and records are apples and oranges. It's also tough to compare horses of today to 1995, but Thunder Gulch and Dornoch share a lot in common. Both lost their debuts in New York, caught minor stakes placings before signature 2YO wins in the 9F Remsen at Aqueduct. They both won the Fountain of Youth at Gulfstream only to disappoint when fourth each in the Blue Grass. It was a different time with more races in-between, but Dornoch's 3-6 and Thunder Gulch's 4-9 record pre-Derby compare. That loss at Keeneland wound up ballooning the winning price in the 1995 Derby on Thunder Gulch to 24-1 in one of the great overlays in the race's history. Win or lose, those with faith in Dornoch will benefit from a bigger price next week as well.

ENCINO (Brad Cox): He's on the same path as Cox-trained Tawny Port, winner of the Lexington at the last call for Derby points like this colt a few weeks ago at Keeneland. Both wintered at Turfway, and while Encino is 3-for-4 lifetime, Tawny Port was a similar 3-for-5. Tawny Port was a son of Kentucky Derby runner-up Pioneer of The Nile, while Encino is by Derby winner Nyquist. Encino showed more speed last out in the Lexington, whereas Tawny Port was more of a defined closer. Florent Geroux rode both to wins in the Lexington, but opted for other Cox trainees on Derby Day (Cyberknife then, Just a Touch now). Tawny Port finished seventh in the Kentucky Derby at 80-1 odds.

ENDLESSLY (Michael McCarthy): Two years ago, another turf specialist with equally impressive synthetic form named Tiz the Bomb came into Louisville off a similarly impressive Jeff Ruby victory at Turfway. Both were multiple stakes winners on grass at 2, lost the Breeders' Cup Juvenile Turf, and then added a pair of synthetic stakes victories in their 2 starts leading up to the Derby. Furthermore, both are sons of Breeders' Cup Juvenile Turf winners, Hit It A Bomb (then) / Oscar Performance (now). Tiz the Bomb finished 9th in the Kentucky Derby before resuming a career on grass.

FIERCENESS (Todd Pletcher): While not as perfect as 2016 Kentucky Derby winner Nyquist was to this point in his campaign 8 years ago, these are both debut winners who traveled across country to win the Breeders' Cup Juvenile and later went wire-to-wire to win the Florida Derby (at 6-5 odds both) in their final Kentucky Derby preps. Both trained by Derby-winning barns (Pletcher, Doug O'Neill) and both sons of brilliant Breeders' Cup winners considered best around a mile or slightly farther (City of Light now, Uncle Mo then). Fellow 2YO champion Nyquist was 7-for-7 and didn't have the misfires on his resume Fierceness has while 3-for-5, but the high end of each rates at the head of their respective classes. A similar result in Louisville would be no surprise.





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FOREVER YOUNG (Yoshito Yahagi): It's hard not to just draw the line to last year's Derma Sotogake, the Japanese-based colt who prepped in the Saudi Derby and UAE Derby on the same path as Forever Young. Trainer Yahagi has had prior US success in the Breeders' Cup, and that may give this one a bit of an edge in the adjustment phase than Derma Sotogake's connections who were new to everything. Both have American pedigrees, Derma Sotogake by Mind Your Biscuits, and Forever Young out of a strong female family loaded with mares like Roamin Rachel, Darling My Darling and Forever Darling. Derma Sotogake is a perfect 5-for-5 lifetime, while Derma Sotogake took longer to come around, losing his first 3 before winning 4 of his last 5 coming into Louisville, where he finished a credible sixth after trouble at the break.

GRAND MO THE FIRST (Victor Barboza Jr.): The Mark Casse-trained State of Honor in 2017 shares a lot with this colt. Both began their careers on synthetic tracks with success at 2, then put together a series of consistent placings around 1 turn on dirt at Gulfstream (Mucho Macho Man then / Swale now) followed by identical Tampa Bay Derby and Florida Derby placings. They share similar pedigrees with brilliant middle-distance up top and predominantly turf damsires. Both horses brought 6-race streaks into the Kentucky Derby of in-the-money finishes. State of Honor set the pace and tired to 19th in the Derby.

HONOR MARIE (Whit Beckman): Not a well-known name in Derby history, but 2011's Santiva matches up very well here as both of these colts were winners of Churchill's Kentucky Jockey Club Stakes in November and then had hot-and-cold efforts in 2 starts as sophomores. Honor Marie was second in the Louisiana Derby and off the board in the Risen Star; Santiva was second in the Risen Star and off the board in the Blue Grass. They both performed for Churchill-Fair Grounds trainers who had yet to make a Kentucky Derby start, Eddie Kenneally then, Beckman now. Santiva finished a respectable sixth to Animal Kingdom at 34-1.

JUST A TOUCH (Brad Cox): Two years ago, Cox-trained Zozos debuted with a Fair Grounds 6F MSW win in late January and would make his way to the Kentucky Derby with a runner-up in the Louisiana Derby after just 3 starts. Just A Touch debuted at FG on a nearly identical date and pattern, and notched his Derby berth with a runner-up in the Blue Grass in his third outing. Resumes similar, its noteworthy Just A Touch has a much better route pedigree than the sprint-bred Zozos, who wound up 10th in Louisville (from tough post 19) and later became a graded stakes-winning miler.

JUST STEEL (D. Wayne Lukas): This is a throwback kind of horse with 11 starts before the Kentucky Derby. So it's not surprising we throw it back 11 years to when the 9-started Oxbow set the stage for this one. Both are sons of elite Horses of the Year who had signature victories under the twin spires, Justify now / Awesome Again then. Their immaculate pedigrees gave them reasons for excuse, why the 2-9 Oxbow and 2-11 Just Steel were kept in the frays ... that, and Lukas' longtime belief that you can't win it if you're not in it. Both did just enough along the southern trail, Just Steel placing in the Smarty Jones, Southwest and Arkansas Derby; Oxbow running top-5 in the Lecomte, Risen Star, Rebel and Arkansas Derby. Both were Saratoga 2YOs, Churchill winners in November and 4-prep sophomores into Louisville. Oxbow ran 6th in the Kentucky Derby after a mid-race move fell flat late, won the Preakness and was runner-up in the Belmont.

MYSTIK DAN (Kenny McPeck): He's on the exact same 6-race pattern as J Boys Echo in 2017 for fellow Churchill Downs lifer Dale Romans. How's this for finishes since the debut? Mystik Dan 2-1-5-4-1-3, peaking with a Southwest victory that had folks buzzing about his ability in the next-to-last prep (101 Beyer) ... only to come back to earth in the Arkansas Derby. Now consider J Boys Echo at 2-1-4-3-1-4 where his next-to-last prep in the Gotham has everyone agape with a big figure (102 Beyer) ... only to sputter in the Blue Grass – sound familiar? Each had dominated fields in both of their wins, but didn't sustain success. J Boys Echo finished 15th in the Derby and 9th in that year's Belmont.

RESILIENCE (Bill Mott): This one breaks theme a bit, but the comparable is 2010 sophomore Drosselmeyer from this same Mott barn. Both Saratoga debuters took 4 starts to break their maidens, turned the corner with wins at Gulfstream in January and made their stakes debuts with 4th-place finishes in the Risen Star on the road. Where the story diverts is that Drosselmeyer finished 3rd in the Louisiana Derby next and was rerouted from the Kentucky Derby toward the Dwyer in a springboard to his subsequent Belmont Stakes victory. Fast forward: Resilience exited the Risen Star 4th and went to the Wood, winning that and moving a chess piece ahead of Drosselmeyer in his potential Triple Crown race pursuit. Both are by elite milers, Into Mischief (now) / Distorted Humor (then), and out of star-laden female families.





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SIERRA LEONE (Chad Brown): He's taken the exact same 4 races as Zandon, the 2022 Kentucky Derby third-place finisher for this same barn. Both debuted a winner in fall around 1 turn, stretched out to the Remsen at 9F next and eerily lost nose photos to qualify foes that meet again in the Kentucky Derby (Mo Donegal, Dornoch). The lone difference in resume is Zandon returned 3rd in the Risen Star, a race Sierra Leone won, while both rallied to win the Blue Grass en route to Louisville. Sierra Leone has the stronger pedigree top and bottom, perhaps enough to improve on Zandon's third enough to wear the roses.

SOCIETY MAN (Danny Gargan): Bodexpress surprised the 2019 Florida Derby field with a 71-1 runner-up that put him into the Kentucky Derby at the 11th hour and folks barely knowing his name before the final prep. He had 4 non-descript starts prior and just stuck around the same circuit before finding his breakthrough moment. Society Man wintered on the NYRA circuit and was barely known going into his 106-1 runner-up in the Wood Memorial. He, too, was making his fifth career start and, like Bodexpress, makes his way to Louisville without a stakes win in tow. Further, they're both sons of Kentucky Derby runner-ups, Bodemeister (then) / Good Magic (now). Bodexpress wound up 13th in the Kentucky Derby and famously tossed his rider at the start of the Preakness.

STRONGHOLD (Phil D'Amato): In 2018, veteran SoCal trainer Jerry Hollendorfer had one of his best chances in the Kentucky Derby with Instilled Regard. Fast forward this year and it's SoCal vet Phil D'Amato with a lot of similarities. Both colts were runner-up in the Los Alamitos Futurity, both went on the road to win races (Lecomte then, Sunland Derby now) before returning home to finish preparation in the Santa Anita Derby. Instilled Regard ran into a much tougher cast with Justify, Bolt d'Oro and wound up fourth in the SA Derby and Kentucky Derby; Stronghold beat a weakened SoCal cast this year, but can't fault a 6: 3-3-0 record over 6 different tracks. By the way, Instilled Regard would go on to be a G1 winner on turf, which is D'Amato's forte. Maybe someday turf?

T O PASSWORD (Daisuke Takayanagi): Japanese invader is one of the most lightly raced Kentucky Derby starters of all-time with just 2 starts (both wins). That's most similar to China Visit in 2000, who won the UAE Derby in his second start after a debut victory at Deauville. T O Password raced both starts at home in Japan, so China Visit may have been slightly more seasoned. The Kentucky Derby was the first US foray for both, while China Visit finished a better-than-expected sixth of 19 to Fusaichi Pegasus et al.

TRACK PHANTOM (Steve Asmussen): In 2010, Todd Pletcher-trained Discreetly Mine was best at Fair Grounds up to 1-1/16 miles (then the Risen Star trip), but weakened to fourth in the Louisiana Derby when stretched farther. Like Track Phantom he was a horse who took 3 starts to break his maiden and became a stakes performer at 2. Both were offspring of sharp racemares, Pretty Discreet prior and Miss Sunset with this colt. Discreetly Mine pressed and tired to 13th in Louisville, later cut back and became a Grade 1-winning sprinter.

WEST SARATOGA (Larry Demeritte): Lots of correlation here to Lookin At Lee, the surprise runner-up in the 2017 Kentucky Derby at 33-1 odds. Both were early debuters, broke their maidens at Ellis Park, went through Churchill's Iroquois and Keeneland's Breeders' Futurity with busy 6 and 7-race juvenile campaigns. They each ran 3 preps at 3, cashing minor checks and edging into the field. Both sires were Preakness winners, Exaggerator here and Lookin At Lucky back then. Lookin At Lee was 2-9 coming into Derby Day, West Saratoga 2-10.





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Everyone's A Critic - Reviews



FEDERICO TESIO – April 20

Maryland's traditional Preakness prep could provide some local flavor to the middle jewel in the Triple Crown after Laurel-based COPPER TAX (Gary Capuano) continued his consistent winning ways. The now 4-time stakes winner overcame a stumbling start to wear down rival SPEEDYNESS (Jamie Ness) for the second race in a row. COPPER TAX has now won the region's pair of 2-turn sophomore stakes after his neck decision in the 1-1/16 miles Private Terms last month.

The 1-1/8 miles Tesio didn't come easy to COPPER TAX, but his Laurel stakes performances have come to expect that. His James F. Lewis III, Private Terms and Tesio victories have come by a combined margin of 1-1/4 lengths. SPEEDYNESS, the 1-turn mile Miracle Wood winner, gave him everything he wanted on the front end, opening up a clear lead before being collared.

Tesio splits were 24.07, 23.14, 24.69, 26.65 and 13.46 for 9 furlongs in 1:52.01. That the final 3F slowed to 40.11 is a stark reminder how much tougher things will be if COPPER TAX is sent to the Preakness. The race is always better with local influence and the occasional Magic Weisner, Oliver's Twist or Deputed Testimony come along every 20 years or so to shake it up. But it's fair to remind that COPPER TAX tried the national scene twice to terrible results in Tampa Bay Downs' Sam F. Davis and Aqueduct's Remsen, where he was beaten a combined 34+ lengths. He's better now, fair to say, so we'll see what the connections decide to do. Trainer Capuano nearly pulled off the Derby-Preakness double with Captain Bodgit back in 1997, narrowly missing in both races to Silver Charm et al, so he knows what kind of horse it takes.

LAT LONG (Kenny McPeck) was a flat fifth here and certainly didn't give any plaudits to his Blue Grass Stakes alumni as they head to Louisville. But he was also beaten 14 lengths in the Blue Grass at 57-1, so it's not like we're taking a contender from that race and feeling overly disappointed that he didn't factor more on the class drop.



BATH HOUSE ROW – April 20

After minor checks in the Smarty Jones, Sunland Derby and Arkansas Derby, INFORMED PATRIOT (Steve Asmussen) got his payday in the \$200,000 Bath House Row at Oaklawn. The victory earned an automatic berth in the Preakness Stakes if the connections opt that way with this son of 2007 Triple Crown veteran Hard Spun, who was 2nd in the Derby, 3rd in the Preakness and 4th in the Belmont. INFORMED PATRIOT won the battle, outdueling the pacemaker, and the war, holding off his stablemate IMPERIAL GUN (Steve Asmussen) to score by a head.

Bath House Row fractions were 23.55, 25.31, 25.03, 25.18 and 12.41 for 1-1/8 miles in 1:51.48. Those early breathers were important to the winner in fending off the late threat. He can't expect those kind of fractions at the top level – which is why he consistently was stalking mid-flight in those races and not as engaged early as he was in the Bath House Row class-drop.

The top 2 both are Triple Crown nominees and Asmussen has been a staunch supporter of the Pimlico stakes program on Preakness weekend over the years. He sent Red Route One to the final 2 legs of the Triple Crown last year after winning this event. Where these runners end up could depend a lot on how the barn's premier sophomore, TRACK PHANTOM (Steve Asmussen) fares in the Kentucky Derby. This duo seems more appropriate for the Sir Barton at 1-1/16 miles on the undercard of the Preakness. The regional Derby circuit this year in West Virginia, Ohio, Iowa and Oklahoma make a lot of sense.





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ILLINOIS DERBY – April 21

Stretch-out sprinter PATRIOT SPIRIT (Michael Campbell) ran them off their feet in the 1-1/8 miles Illinois Derby, which returned to the Hawthorne stakes schedule for the first time since 2017. Tampa Bay Downs' Inaugural Stakes winner over 7F may have hit the crossroads, however, in terms of the Triple Crown. Not only was he not nominated, he was not late nominated. That means it's a \$150,000 supplemental fee if the connections want to play in the Preakness or Belmont Stakes. After this 5-3/4 length romp, it's at least some consideration.

PATRIOT SPIRIT wired the field of 5 behind splits of 23.50, 24.28, 23.80, 25.43 and 13.42 for 9 furlongs in 1:50.43. The 38.85 final 3 furlongs isn't remarkable, but it stacks up in this class with some of the other major 9F preps in shouting distance. He's by Florida Derby winner Constitution and certainly washed away the poor memory of a terrible effort in the 2-turn Sam F. Davis at Tampa. He's probably best for the regional Derby scene in West Virginia, Ohio, Iowa, Oklahoma and the like.

REAL MEN VIOLIN (Kenny McPeck), beaten 59+ lengths in the Risen Star and Louisiana Derby, was no match late but clearly second-best in this one – putting another 5-3/4 lengths between him and the rest. I wouldn't draw much regional barometer from this, though that he easily handled Oaklawn winter runner WOODCOURT (Cipriano Contreras) continues the belief here that the Fair Grounds cast was better than the Arkansas runners. That's a point I would take confidently into my Kentucky Derby handicapping.

**OUR ANNUAL HORSE-BY-HORSE
BOTTOM-LINE ANALYSIS
WILL BE PUBLISHED THURSDAY
OF DERBY WEEK.**

