



countdown

TO THE
CROWN

SEASON 19 WEEK 18 – May 2, 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.

Fearless Forecast – Kentucky Derby 150 Preview

The moment we've all been waiting for is almost here. *Countdown* fans know our tradition of bottom-line time at the Triple Crown. We've evaluated these colts for months and are ready to make the tough decisions for Kentucky Derby 150.

NOT ON MY TICKETS

AE-MUGATU (Jeff Engler): Over-matched colt was 181-1 when splitting the Blue Grass field and has just 1 synthetic win at Gulfstream from 12 starts. Does have a run-all-day style that would see him pass some tired horses if he's able to draw into the field, but not nearly enough to worry about for the superfecta. Form has some similarity to Rich Strike of '22 shocking fame, but the big difference was Rich Strike's 17-1/4 length Churchill maiden win that seemingly was the only connecting dot to his success upon returning to CD. Needs a scratch by any horse by 9 am Friday to compete.

T O PASSWORD (Daikuke Takayanagi): Front-running winner over 9F in Japan to qualify for this race but was absolutely all-out with the cavalry flying at him. Five horses passed him moments after the wire. Hard to imagine he takes American pace heat, extends another furlong and doesn't back up big-time ... especially with a historically light 2-race career pre-Derby. Taiba was 12th here a few years ago among only 5 to try it since 1937 (none better than 6th). Great-grandson of American influences Sunday Silence on top of the pedigree and Timber Country on the bottom. Hasn't competed on the same level as fellow Japanese runner Forever Young and not from nearly as respected of a trainer at home and abroad.

WEST SARATOGA (Larry Demeritte): No lead, no pass is a difficult situation for any horse, but maybe the easiest situation for a handicapper; you toss these kind. Without the early foot to make the front, he's been short in the stretch of the Sam F. Davis (losing 4-1/2 lengths in the final call) and Jeff Ruby (losing 3-1/2 lengths in the final call), yet managing to secure minor placings. That barely works in weaker prelims, much less a faster pace than he's used to and an entire battery of closers who will come calling vs. 1 or 2 in the preps. Appreciate his consistency and durability since debuting in a Keeneland baby dash 13 months ago, but he's here because he won a 5-way photo for second at Turfway that tilted the points in his favor by a desperate picture.

EPIC RIDE (John Ennis): Very nice middle-distance horse that I like quite a bit, but wasn't able to finish at all in Blue Grass that came home rather slowly. Outside position would likely force him to be used a bit harder the opening quarter-mile than you'd like if trying to squeeze a bit more out of the lemon. Same scenario in Blue Grass when hard-used from wide draw early and couldn't get tucked in for any position. Previously had no excuse to get run down late in the Battaglia, so you have to go back to a 1-mile trip to find him finishing with a flourish. I like this horse in a lot of situations, but definitely not this one.

GRAND MO THE FIRST (Victor Barboza Jr.): No one could keep pace with Fierceness in the Florida Derby, but his other Derby head-to-heads saw him defeated a neck by Domestic Product, 2-1/2 lengths by Catalytic and 3-1/2 lengths by Endlessly in separate matchups. And all those are longshots in Derby 150. Nothing wrong with 6-6 in the money over 3 surfaces and 6 different distances, but Uncle Mo colt simply runs into too many here that look at least a few lengths better over shorter trips, much less the 10F. Wider draw won't help his even running style; I'm assuming ground loss.

CATALYTIC (Saffie Joseph Jr.): Pedigree screams miler top and bottom, even if he was runner-up in the 9F Florida Derby off of 2 lesser sprints prior. Someone had to run a distant 2nd to Fierceness in there, though he overcame ground loss and ran on evenly in doing so to best the rest. Hades' poor effort out of that race in Lexington next time didn't flatter what was behind Catalytic in Florida Derby. Could argue Mage-like resume with same number of starts and key 2nd in Florida Derby prior, but that one had stronger pedigree for trip, and a 7F MSW win + 1-1/16M Fountain of Youth 4th as his pair of prior starts, not sprints at GP in October and Tampa. This is a much lighter resume even if the same number of starts and final tune-up result.

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NOT ON MY TICKETS (CONT.)

SOCIETY MAN (Danny Gargan): 106-1 Wood Memorial runner-up drew post 20 and will almost certainly be forced to drop farther out the back of the field than preferred after a stalking trip at Aqueduct. How many horses is he capable of passing? Likely none of the best ones, but certainly will go by many of the tired ones after galloping out best in NY. Was wide in the Wood when hard-sent and had a ton of chaos going on around him and kept his composure, so that's a good rehearsal for Saturday's traffic. Bred for the trip top and bottom (sire Good Magic was a Derby runner-up and sired last year's winner Mage) and you get jockey Frankie Dettori, insuring nerves of steel in the saddle. Could outfinish his odds, but doesn't threaten.

DORNOCH (Danny Gargan): Neither of his 3YO starts have given any indication he's made any significant improvement since his juvenile campaign, where he battled back to defeat Sierra Leone in the Remsen. The scratch-depleted Fountain of Youth was hardly a test, taking no pressure to his inside or outside the entire trip while leading, but he won with some professionalism and lacked the inefficient quirks of his 2YO races. Tasked with learning to rate in the Blue Grass, he was pinned inside a cluster of horses on the clubhouse turn and got very rank with Luis Saez. He didn't get a breather in the entire race with horses on all sides of him and then ran erratically in the lane when the rider went back to the stick, which he avoided in the Fountain of Youth. Hard to fathom him not having to fire like a rocket from post 1 on Saturday, then take heat and then be professional enough in the lane without the whip as a good option. His Fountain of Youth score took a hit when his pursuers returned to run 6th, 8th and 9th in the Florida Derby. They stacked up with him far better than Fierceness.

TRACK PHANTOM (Steve Asmussen): Equipment changes in the Derby never work, so going blinkers on here seems like all the wrong move, even if this particular horse might need them. I question sharpening his focus in a race where you don't want to run off early and kick in the adrenaline jets amongst 150,000 strong. Despite the longer distance in the Louisiana Derby, he had to go about 10 lengths faster the first 6F than he did in the Risen Star. That took a bigger toll on him than it should have considering the Louisiana Derby field was considerably softer in competition without Sierra Leone and Resilience in the rematch. Now we add another 1/16th of a mile and it's realistic another 8-10 lengths faster pace. His mama Miss Sunset was such a high-class sprinter; it's just a matter of time – and distance – before the bottom falls out for him. I love the horse and he's such a classy animal and hard trier. He's just way more Preakness than Derby if there's a Triple Crown race where he can be impactful.

STRONGHOLD (Phil D'Amato): More than 39 seconds for the final 3F of the Santa Anita Derby, against a sub-par cast for the historical quality of that race, leaves me wanting more out of this colt to consider Saturday. He broke highly alert, overcame some chaos on the clubhouse turn and got a good education in the SA Derby nonetheless, passing those tests. His success at Churchill at 2 is a feather in his cap, winning a maiden against eventual Wood winner Resilience and eventual Lecomte winner Track Phantom. But given his running style and post 18, it's hard to envision him fast enough to not lose ground on the clubhouse turn. At some point, the Jimmy Creed on the damside of his pedigree will be exposed and perhaps the slow come-home at Santa Anita was the first hint at that. He's training very well to run his peak race; but it's a matter of the toll the trip takes and just how far that peak effort fizzles – my estimation is between 1 mile and 1-1/16 miles.

FOREVER YOUNG (Yoshito Yahagi): I dangerously overrated the Japanese interests a year ago and it's safe to say I don't feel good about making the same mistake. But I totally respect the form of this unbeaten, one-gear cruiser. Last year Derma Sotogake was fast enough to run with American speed – but got bumped at the start and wound up 6th. This colt doesn't have that kind of early ability and his trainer's admission that he's concerned about taking kickback from the dirt is a big enough deal that he started wearing a face covering (blinkers with no cups essentially) in the UAE Derby. They're going to have to stay wide to avoid that, which may or may not be feasible from post 10 (after scratch of Encino). You have an international jockey who hasn't ridden the race, and now we put 19 others around him and there's a recipe for problems. But on pure ability, he may be as good as any of these, save the very best efforts by Fierceness. It's difficult to toss a runner because you assume something will go wrong. But couple that with workouts that just haven't impressed the eye and I'm left demoting what feels like an underlay price as a horse who should be top 3 or 4 in the public choices.

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NOT ON MY TICKETS (CONT.)

JUST A TOUCH (Brad Cox): So lightly raced like his papa Justify and Mage a year ago, and slightly even more so in that only 1 of his 3 lifetime starts has been around 2 turns (they each had 2 of 3). Highly impressive debut sprint winner looked destined for stakes from Day 1 and I was stunned he didn't look better in the Gotham when running second. It wasn't a good second in that the competition was light and he looked out of sorts on the turn and lost momentum. He just passed gassed foes to gain the place. Hustled more in the Blue Grass and got the dream, first-over trip behind a longshot leader who had only a single maiden start on his resume prior. Never had any pressure to his outside, took longer to go by that one than it should have and then shortened stride in the lane in a slow come-home time. Some will argue fast fractions were in play and that he gets credit for holding second. But the 2-3-4 runners throughout remained 2-3-4. It was just that Top Conor stopped and Sierra Leone rallied by them all. Nobody else closed an inch. Damside pedigree doesn't inspire more distance. Major talent, but I can't take him Saturday over 10F with what he's done so far.

CATCHING FREEDOM (Brad Cox): Late-runner saves ground from post 4 and should be near the very back of the pack with Sierra Leone drawn a few stalls to his inside. You can almost envision those pair bidding time together and moving in tandem with Flavien Prat understanding Sierra Leone's style and quality ranking among this group. Which one gets the spot? Which one avoids the plummeting front-runner? Who goes inside, who goes outside? Sierra Leone got the best of him in the Risen Star, and it's fair to rate the Louisiana Derby win by Catching Freedom against an easier field with a more favorable pace set-up. My Louisiana Derby trip notes in *Countdown* noted that this colt resisted the kickback early in the Louisiana Derby and Prat had to get him out in the 2-3 path around the clubhouse turn despite being back in the pack. From post 4, he could get buried inside here and if he starts fighting Flavien, that's a bad deal to recompose and then last 10F. He's also got trip notes here about clunky at the start and rough with lead changes in upper stretch, while being pulled up with no gallop out in the Louisiana Derby. There's a lot of compounding mistakes there to try and overcome and I haven't loved his workouts at CD. Encino looked like he could have taken him at any moment last week. Tough one to leave off, but I'll take my chances.

EXOTICS CONTENDERS

MYSTIK DAN (Kenny McPeck): Got a good education in the Arkansas Derby when Liberal Arts ran up and over him, the kind of rodeo that's almost expected in the Kentucky Derby's 20-horse melee. Post 3 might welcome more jostling with the field wanting to come down on him under the wire the first time. Overcame adversity to run a credible third at Oaklawn in a race that stacks up decently, time-wise, in that event over the last decade-plus. Ran well enough there to think his wet-track buzzsaw in the Rebel wasn't a fluke. His top-end efforts are quite good, witnessed by his Churchill maiden sprint win last Fall. Hernandez likely to glue this one to the rail as long as he can. Not without a chance for a share, but distance might be slightly out of his reach (as is the case with nearly all of these). Obviously moves up on a wet track if that's in the cards.

ENDLESSLY (Michael McCarthy): About 10 days ago, this was an easy toss. The turf-synthetic star was training poorly on the dirt at Churchill Downs just like he had at home at Santa Anita. But his last 2 works improved and he's looked far more comfortable than I thought possible. Enough to win? Doubtful. Enough to reconsider his form and dig a bit deeper? Yes. Animal Kingdom in 2011 became the first horse to win the Kentucky Derby in his first start on dirt, and, as you likely recall, did so also coming out of Turfway's signature prep. And, yes the '22 Ruby produced Derby winner Rich Strike and last year's Derby runner-up Two Phil's. But the Jeff Ruby this year lacked the 1-2 finishers of the local prep, the Battaglia, because that race was only scheduled 3 weeks apart. That sent the 2 best winter horses at Turfway packing, Epic Ride to finish third in the Blue Grass and Encino to win the Lexington. Can't help but think the Ruby would have been far tougher had they been in the mix. But his final 3F in 36-and-change was as good late as anyone in a final prep, and he came home similarly well in the El Camino Real Derby, which isn't easy to do at 9F that early in the year. His BRIS late pace figures are surprisingly weak for what feels like such a good finisher. I'm torn, but think his price will be extremely appealing to include in exotics and worth the obvious risk that he turns out to loathe the dirt when it's hitting him in the face. The wider draw in 14 helps avoid some.



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HONOR MARIE (Whit Beckman): Mild improvement from the Risen Star where he galloped out well to the Louisiana Derby, but that race came up decidedly easier with Sierra Leone & Resilience heading out of town. The pace set-up was much more conducive to his closing style as well, so it's reasonable to question whether he got decidedly better or the situation improved. Seems to be gathering a lot of whispers in the mornings leading up to Derby 150 – as my late pal Bob Neumeier used to call them “*the she-she*” horse in every Derby. Those kind often are overbet and infrequently deliver on the overzealous hope, but given the no-name connections of Beckman and Curtis, there's probably not going to be overwhelming support here even with the steam. This is a quality horse who won the Kentucky Jockey Club over the track in the Fall, though it's far cuppier and loose in the Fall than the tightened, speedy strip they'll see on Derby Day. Nonetheless, he's in home confines again and that never hurts. In a meltdown Derby scenario, like we've seen the past 2 years with Rich Strike and Mage, he certainly makes you think twice about him as a late-running threat. He has never lost margin in the final call of his 5 career starts, something only he can boast among the American entrants. His best BRIS late pace figure did come in the Kentucky Jockey Club and a similar run could land him in the superfecta.

JUST STEEL (D. Wayne Lukas): Iron Man of the group with 11 starts and danced all 4 legs of the Arkansas Derby series after racing deep into fall at Churchill, winning a sprint stakes over the track. Not bad for a Saratoga summer debut 2YO. His only poor try in his last 6 starts came in the rescheduled Rebel when the Oaklawn winter wreaked havoc, making that race only 3 weeks after the Southwest due to a postponement and on the heels of horses stabled there missing more than 2 full weeks of training in late January. Once he got back on a regular schedule, rebounded nicely to run clear-cut second in the Arkansas Derby behind likely Preakness leading contender Muth, who is ineligible for the Derby due to trainer Bob Baffert's ban by Churchill Downs. The Arkansas Derby stacked up nicely in terms of historical times and this was a good race by Just Steel despite being hung wide the entire way. Finally draws favorably in Derby 150 in post 6 and could stick around evenly paced for a long time as others wilt around him and closers find traffic to negotiate. Mid-packers rarely win the Derby, so his best win chance is to be pressing like he did last out; but his best chance to light the board is to sit seventh-ish and let the race unfold in front of him. At 88 years old, Lukas seeks a fifth Kentucky Derby win and his first since Charismatic in 1999.

DOMESTIC PRODUCT (Chad Brown): His experience dealing with the 30-minute plus delay to the Tampa Bay Derby due to tote issues gave him quite a Kentucky Derby rehearsal, simulating the need to keep mentally together through the long circling in the mile chute at Churchill, walkover in the pomp & circumstance and paddock proceedings. That's a big variable pre-race and he's got a unique experience the other major contenders do not. As for the race, who knows? It was the slowest Tampa Bay Derby since 1994 because of a pace so slow (6F in 1:16.21) you don't even know whether to trust the fast final 5/16ths of a mile or just assume they *HAD* to go fast. Yes, his 125 BRIS late pace figure at Tampa is a product of the race shape, but that followed a whopping 108 in the Holy Bull when he ran past Fierceness for second (recall they bumped at the start and that was Fierceness' excuse; this horse overcame more and beat him that day). Concern here that Brown initially said they'd head to the Wood or Blue Grass after Tampa, only to lay off nearly 2 full months. Note he was back on the tab 15 days after the Tampa Bay Derby and has worked right on cue weekly since. He did win over 9F in October and trained exceptionally well on XBTV video over the deep & demanding Payson Park surface in Florida before coming north. They got everything they could get out of him in that regard without racing. The pedigree doesn't scream 10F as sire Practical Joke has gotten mostly sprinters/milers and the damside pedigree has a sprint tilt as well. The distance might get him late, but he feels like a horse who is going to threaten in upper stretch under the nation's top jockey Irad Ortiz Jr. He's on all my exotics.

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WIN CONTENDERS

SIERRA LEONE (Chad Brown): Derby 150's obvious biggest threat from the back of the pack still can win this race, but his task got more difficult when drawing post 2. He's devoid of any speed, which means 18 horses to his outside are going to move left in the opening run through the stretch and that's likely to cause a chain reaction. He'll either be 1) shuffled back several positions farther than he should or 2) jockey Tyler Gaffalione will be forced to just walk out of there and stay several lengths behind the mass of kickback that's going to ensue. Even if either happens, Sierra Leone can still win. He's that good of a 1-1/4 miles horse. But he's not beating Fierceness if he spots him 15-20 lengths and even the A- version of Fierceness shows up. That's insurmountable. So his win chances hinge on Fierceness not showing up and keeping his own mind clear before the race. This refusal to load in the Blue Grass at Keeneland could be exacerbated with the Derby pre-race hoopla. Post 2 means he'll stand in the gate a very long time once inside. The only positive about being inside is that the turf course will give him a big gap between him and the crowd, whereas outside posts in the gate are near the grandstand fans. Once in motion, don't expect him to be pace dependent. He's put in his rally behind fast and modest set-ups. His come-home time in the Blue Grass was decent as he made up more than 6 lengths the final 3F as the others floundered. That's likely to be similar Saturday when the front 6-8 horses wilt behind whoever takes command. He's not the most efficient mover with his padding stride and has not run a straight course in the stretch on occasion, all things that could stunt his progression in the final stages. But you'll take his 37-1/5 final 3F in the Risen Star any day of the week and his 3 straight 9F starts are perhaps unprecedented in the Derby – I haven't found a horse with similar on paper. So much to like here and respect.

RESILIENCE (Bill Mott): He was beaten only 3-1/2 lengths by Sierra Lone in the Risen Star when making his stakes debut and chasing lone speed Track Phantom in that one. He didn't back up when he could have, and galloped out well that day in defeat. Mott turned to blinkers after that spotty performance and the colt responded with the Wood victory. His come-home in the Wood was equal the final 3F to what Sierra Leone put up in winning the Blue Grass, but consider he would have a solid head-start on that one in terms of race placement in the rematch. Wish there would have been more gallop-out at Aqueduct as the 10F question looms. New pilot Junior Alvarado may have to time the move just right to stretch him the distance, which might benefit from dropping a bit farther back than his last few and making one run into a tiring pace (and from post 19 that would probably be better than gunning out of there). *Countdown* readers know I love brilliant sires with a turfy damside pedigree for Triple Crown prospects. Sire Into Mischieff already has a couple Derby winners of recent vintage. His damsire Smart Strike obviously goes to the turf talk, and his mama's siblings include millionaire grass star milers Courageous Cat and After Market. His second dam Tranquility Lake is as classy as you could ask. Loved the professionalism he showed in the Wood with some chaos around him in-race. In an era where horses with 3 and 4 preps at age 3 have won each of the last 7 Derby editions, his seasoning edge over the 2-prep favorites Sierra Leone and Fierceness might be the boost needed for an upset. If Fierceness is too good and runs everyone off their feet, that seasoning could help push him past the gassed chasers.

FIERCENESS (Todd Pletcher): No race has produced more Kentucky Derby winners than the Florida Derby, 25 of them after Mage a year ago. And in all the Florida Derby editions, no horse has won it more devastatingly than his 13-1/2 length record margin. The only to run faster under the current configuration of the Gulfstream track were Always Dreaming, Quality Road and Big Brown (2 of 3 Kentucky Derby winners, all elite racehorses). I've picked only 5 favorites to win the Kentucky Derby over the past 20 years. They were Smarty Jones, Street Sense, Orb, California Chrome and Tiz the Law. That's 4 winners and a strong runner-up. I mentioned this not to brag, but to make two points. One, it's rare for me to settle on the favorite for the Kentucky Derby. More importantly, when you do all of this evaluation and you conclude the favorite simply looks too good for the others, that's the time to deny your inner desires to get cute and fish for prices. Of course, Fierceness can lose. They all do, and he has twice. But no horse in this race can beat him when he runs his best race. Every indication of his training since the Florida Derby says that's the kind of race he's about to unleash. He was back on the tab a full week faster than he was after the Holy Bull, an indication of exactly when the 'seriousness' started. Was I cold on Fierceness following the Holy Bull? Absolutely. He was in big-time danger if he didn't turn things around. Not only did he turn them around, he propelled far forward. The only scenario I see him losing is if he doesn't show up with anything near his best ability. Self-inflicted. No pace scenario or traffic situation will make up for the 8-10 lengths better than these horses that he is. He has to NOT be at his best. Fierceness projects to be among the 3-4 fastest horses early in the field of 20. Few will argue that. And when you look at his 109 and 113 BRIS late pace figures in the Breeders' Cup Juvenile and Florida Derby, he feels invincible the final quarter-mile if he's got aim on the lead at the top of the stretch, must less working with any advantage at that point. The public discussion about his repaired hooves would be a long-term concern, but not something that's factoring into my immediate handicapping as strong as he's been working. Neither his dam nor grand dam lasted very long as racehorses, so let's enjoy him while we can. I'll key him singularly on top in the superfectas with the Exotics and Win contenders listed.



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Kentucky Derby 150 Picks:

- W) **FIERCENESS**
- P) **RESILIENCE**
- S) **SIERRA LEONE**
- 4th) **DOMESTIC PRODUCT**

JEREMY PLONK'S DERBY 150 PACE PROJECTION

SPEED	PRESS	MIDDLE	CLOSER
DORNOCH FIERCENESS T O PASSWORD TRACK PHANTOM	JUST A TOUCH STRONGHOLD CATALYTIC WEST SARATOGA EPIC RIDE RESILIENCE JUST STEEL	GRAND MO THE FIRST DOMESTIC PRODUCT FOREVER YOUNG MYSTIK DAN	ENDLESSLY CATCHING FREEDOM HONOR MARIE SOCIETY MAN SIERRA LEONE AE-MUGATU

