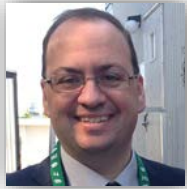




countdown

TO THE
CROWN

SEASON 18 WEEK 22 – June 9, 2023



By Jeremy Plonk
Exclusive to Countdowntothecrown.com

Editor's Note: The 18th 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. 6 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 Oklahoma Sooners softball team leading the nation in hitting, pitching and fielding. If you want to be iron-clad, you might as well cover all of the bases.

1. It's the Season 18 finale for *Countdown* and it's been a pleasure sharing my words and ideas with you here since 2006. A lot of the innocence has been lost for the series, partly because of increased exposure to everything these days and partly because the more you've been around, well, the more you've been around ...
2. Fox takes over the Belmont broadcast and has overloaded its on-air talent with football types. That's good for cross-over exposure, but leaves the production lacking in the case of something off-script Saturday; let's hope for a clean run for obvious reasons.
3. My money for the 2024 Belmont Stakes will be on Saratoga as the host. Stadium demolition in Elmont will force its move and the Spa would idyllic. Only NYC politicians not wanting to lose \$\$\$ for the city would want it at Aqueduct.

Keeping Ourselves Honest

Last week's free *Countdown* selections: 0: 0-0-0 (00%)

2023 *Countdown* season selections: 36: 14-6-4 (39%)

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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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We take pride in what we do, and have accountability.
Each week we update how our picks perform.

Fearless Forecast - Previews

Countdown loyalists know we get right to the point on the Triple Crown races, counting the field down from **Not On My Tickets** to **Exotics Inclusions** to **Win Contenders**.

NOT ON MY TICKETS

5-IL MIRACOLO: Steady-tempo sort lacks the credentials of his Belmont counterparts, beaten nearly 80 lengths in 5 career stakes bids. But he certainly has the pedigree and style to be more effective over the mile and one-half trip than many in the crop, which gives his connections at least reason to give this a shot. He's the most unlikely winner in the field but would not be a shock to split the field somewhere in the middle with a steady, mid-pack trip. That's the best-case scenario from this eye, and not enough to consider him in the wagers.

3-ARCANGELO: No horse in this field has more room for upside than the Peter Pan winner. But that upside also has the potential to burst into flames for a lightly raced colt who has never raced around 2 turns and will be stretching out 3 furlongs beyond his longest bid to date. The additional 8 pounds from 118 to 126 on the 1-turn stretch-out also is (pun intended) a weighty concern. The slow-early, fast-late Peter Pan scenario clouds just how effective he'll be going this much farther. He's got a wonderful pedigree to give this a shot, and he's rapidly improving in each start. Jockey Javier Castellano won the Derby with Mage and could get bookend trophies if this one delivers a second upset in the series. I'm not confident tossing him considering the potential upside, but I trust others more in this field.





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1-TAPIT SHOES: Runner-up in the Bath House Row at Oaklawn, there's not much separating him at all from return rival Red Route One. They've got similarly effective pedigrees for the trip and were a head apart over 9 furlongs in Hot Springs. That Red Route One was an ineffective fourth in the Preakness Stakes may put this one in perspective while making the big rise in class. Nothing he's done yet suggests he's near the top of this 3YO crop and this is a pretty deep Belmont edition among the leading 4 or 5. A midpack finish here would be a positive result.

9-RED ROUTE ONE: Tab him just ahead of Tapit Shoes given their Oaklawn result and fact this horse already has had some measuring stick in the Preakness vs. some of the better members of the crop. But it's clear the Belmont field is deeper than that at Old Hilltop, so he'll have to improve a solid amount to make a dent in the exotics. His deep-closing style doesn't seem like it can be altered at all based on his running lines though 10 proven starts. That same style has not been historically effective in the Belmont Stakes going back to Jazil in 2006 from the clouds. There are too many good horses in this race to melt down far enough to put this guy in the frame. He'll rally past tired horses for a mid-pack play.

EXOTICS INCLUSIONS

4-NATIONAL TREASURE: If the pace is more pressured than Pimlico, his win chances dwindle significantly. By pressured, it's not about time. But even so, it's plausible this race goes faster than 48-4/5, 1:13-2/5 for the opening half and three-quarters of a mile. Just the presence of a challenge alongside, not allowing National Treasure to free wheel it, would be the kind of increased pressure that would challenge the Preakness champ. It's been since Pillory in 1922 that a horse skipped the Derby and then won the final 2 legs of the Triple Crown. If it's to happen here, National Treasure must get away with an easy lead again and then come home with the stout quickness he did in Baltimore. The final 3/16ths last out was absolutely top-class on the clock. This one's 4-for-4 in the superfecta lifetime and should be contending to hold for that kind of share again under Belmont's leading active jockey John Velazquez. The key to his success is the early interest of Tapit Shoes and Il Miracolo. They'll tell his tale.

6-FORTE: Off more than 2 months since his Florida Derby victory, it's almost an impossible task to ask Forte to be at his best over 1-1/2 miles. This race is 3 furlongs farther than he's ever run. You have to think there's no way he'd run in a 1-1/2 miles race after missing a start in the Kentucky Derby if it was NOT named the Belmont Stakes. So, he's here because of the title and trophy, not because he's been primed and focused for 12 furlongs. If he's good enough to win this after the foot bruise forced him to miss the Derby and the vet's list kept him out of the Preakness, he's leaps and bounds the best 3YO in the division. He could be off 5 straight wins, 4 in Grade 1s, and the most recent over the eventual Kentucky Derby winner in Mage. But the gambler needs a much bigger price than the 8-5, 9-5, 2-1, 5-2 price he's most likely to be. Yes, he has a bullet workout June 3, but if you watched the video of the workout, he was out-finished on the wire and his non-descript workmate looked decidedly more impressive, going easier and galloping out best. I considered tossing him altogether, but *Countdown* fans know how much respect I've had for him all season.

WIN CONTENDERS

2-TAPIT TRICE: This has been the Belmont Stakes horse to watch on these pages since the Tampa Bay Derby, given his sire Tapit's historical dominance here in the last decade and his trainer Todd Pletcher's penchant for this race. But for a disappointing run in the Kentucky Derby, everything about his resume looked sparkling with 4 consecutive prior victories. He's a big, loping, long-strider who should be effective over this track and distance. Jockey Luis Saez will want to get him out in the clear on the backstretch after saving ground into the clubhouse turn – no reason to lose ground there. If he's able to stride clear from mid-pack, move into contention on the far turn, he'll be one of the real factors in the stretch. His determination in the Blue Grass when collaring the loose-leading Verifying that day is the blueprint for success. It would be no surprise if he followed the similar-formed Mo Donegal into the Belmont Stakes winner's circle for the second straight year for this outfit. At 3-1 in the morning line, he doesn't offer a lot of value, however.

7-HIT SHOW: The best horse at the best price in Belmont 155 should be the Kentucky Derby's fifth-place finisher. He made a middle-move into an extremely fast pace in Louisville and was left flat late, but didn't buckle. Now the 5-week rest works in his favor as well as a pace more likely to be in the 48s or 49s than the 45s at Churchill Downs. His Wood Memorial was disappointing to me as he should have punched that cast out, but he vindicated himself with the Kentucky Derby effort. By Candy Ride out of a Tapit mare, bring on the mile and one-half and let's see what happens; no reason on pedigree he can't handle it as well as any of these. Whereas Tapit Trice feels like an underlay price on the horizon, Hit Show very well may be the overlay. And when you're gambling, that's what attracts you.

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8-ANGEL OF EMPIRE: The best 3YO prep race in 2023 stateside was his Arkansas Derby win, where he came home in a fantastic final 3 furlongs and looked the part in doing so. Given the scratch of Forte in the Derby, he defaulted into favoritism there at a lukewarm 4-1 and – *for the most part* – ran this race. Third, beaten 1-1/2 lengths, he was trying hard through the wire and gallop-out and made up about a dozen lengths in the running. That kind of massive close doesn't work in the Belmont Stakes historically, and trainer Brad Cox opts to add blinkers to try and put Angel of Empire into the race a bit sooner. I like the equipment change in this instance and anticipate that – and a slower expected pace – to keep this horse within 5-6 lengths down the backstretch. If he's comfortable and that close, they could be in trouble trying to hold off his outstanding late kick. Remember, not only did he impressively punch them out late in the Arkansas Derby, but he outkicked Two Phil's, the eventual Kentucky Derby runner-up, in the Risen Star at Fair Grounds. His pedigree doesn't look as stout as some of these for a mile and one-half, but it's certainly not lacking for distance. Of the 9 horses in the Belmont Stakes, he's the one I absolutely trust most to run a good race. He's never lost an inch of ground from the final call to the wire in his 6 dirt races. Angel of Empire will keep coming and coming and coming ...

Belmont Stakes 155 Picks

W) ANGEL OF EMPIRE P) HIT SHOW S) TAPIT TRICE

**THANK YOU ALL
FOR 18 WONDERFUL
SEASONS OF COUNTDOWN**

