

# COUNTDOWN TO THE CROWN

SEASON 9 WEEK 11 – March 14, 2014

By Jeremy Plonk  
Exclusive to  
Countdowntothecrown.com



*Editor's Note: The ninth season of Countdown to the Crown offers the most comprehensive scouting report of the 3-year-old scene. Countdowntothecrown.com is the home each Friday from Jan. 3 through the Belmont Stakes, and Countdown keeps you apprised of the rising stars of the sophomore class from the maiden ranks through the Grade 1 stakes.*

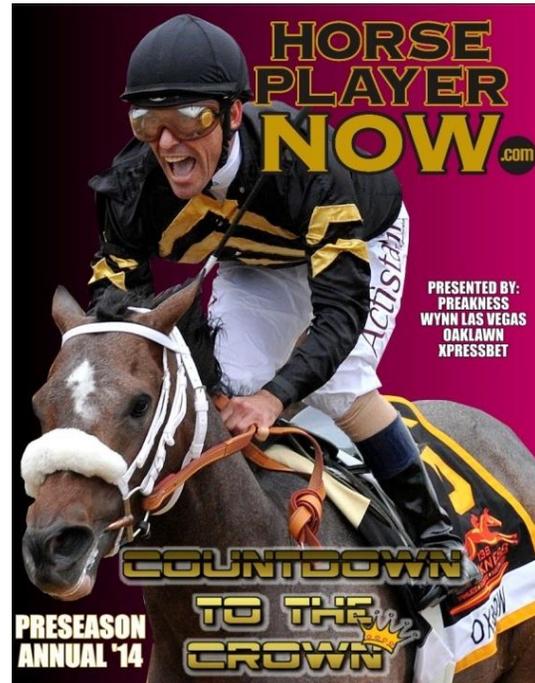
## Three Things You Won't Read Anywhere Else

Opinions are like a late night call with Jake from State Farm. Rarely do you make a sale, and more often than not, you just sound hideous.

1. Be careful of evaluating a race and sticking steadfast to your immediate inkling. I didn't truly appreciate CALIFORNIA CHROME (Art Sherman) and his G2 San Felipe score until mid-week and closer inspection of the performance.
2. SHARED BELIEF (Jerry Hollendorfer) was officially taken off the Derby trail this week by a trainer who has played games with the public all winter. This kind of insincerity and insular feeling of importance isn't the kind of thing the Derby Gods smile upon, which may explain 'Dorf's past bad luck getting through the first Saturday in May.
3. Let's not over-think this, shall we? Recently at Santa Anita, the sophomore NUMBER FIVE (Richard Mandella) wore number five in race five and, of course, he won ... at 5-2 odds to complete the pick five. So, genius, when exactly does NUMBER SIX run?

## This Week's Fearless Forecast

This section previews the coming attractions in 3-year-old stakes and undercard races. As is custom in *Countdown* each season, once the calendar flips to March, we focus exclusively on stakes races and only touch on undercard races in exceptional circumstances.



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All eyes are on Oaklawn for Saturday's Rebel, but OP also may get some Arkansas Derby oomph with Sunday's Race 7 allowance route, including SIX SPOT (Steve Asmussen), THUNDERGRAM (Mark Casse) and FIRE STARTER (Steve Hobby).

The Santa Anita Derby desperately is looking for depth and could find some of it after Sunday's Race 8 allowance route. That cast includes COOL SAMURAI (John Shirreffs) and THE ADMIRAL (Bob Baffert) among others in a pretty strong cast worth our attention.

**- Rebel Stakes -  
(Saturday/Oaklawn Park)**



**Saturday's G2 \$600,000 Rebel Stakes at Oaklawn** projects in my bracketology to produce no less than three Kentucky Derby starters. You can take the over/under as you wish, but barring injuries, this race has as much realistic Derby Day depth as any race we've seen this year. This is not a modern-style prep

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of hopefuls looking to test the stakes waters. These, friends, are proven goods – and gives us a rare, true intersectional clash on the trail. As good as I thought TAPITURE (Steve Asmussen) and STRONG MANDATE (D. Wayne Lukas) were in the G3 Southwest here last month, the interest for invasion was mild. West coasters KOBE'S BACK (John Sadler) and HOPPERTUNITY (Bob Baffert) accepted the roadie, but perhaps as much to do with their deep roster of stablemates on the west coast as it is with any desire to ship 1,600 miles for potentially 10 percent of the purse. In short, beating TAPITURE and/or STRONG MANDATE on their home court won't be easy.

STRONG MANDATE is the kind of horse who oozes the Triple Crown trail. He harkens to last year's Preakness winner Oxbow with the pedigree, tenacity and style for the DWL barn. All he's looking for is a signature win at 3, and he will ascend back to the No. 1 perch in the *Countdown* rankings. It very well could come Saturday. The Tiznow colt bounced out of his Southwest second just 8 days after the race and fired a bullet, then worked on his patience in a drill last week to ready for the longer dances ahead of him. He can be a little headstrong and sloppy in mechanics, but his 3-race ascent in 42 days at Saratoga tells you he thrives on running. His comeback placing at OP certainly appeared to carry some weariness late as he chucked and ducked in the lane. Expect him to be much tighter now, like the night-and-day difference between his first two career starts at the Spa last summer. If he runs his race, the Rebel runs through STRONG MANDATE.

TAPITURE could not have looked any better in the Southwest and a repeat of that makes him one of the real stars on the 3YO trail. He's been based at OP since then, and let's not forget that many of his Southwest rivals had missed key training days to weather when he shipped in from Fair Grounds to score last time. He once again may have to take heat from the rail every step of the way as he did Feb. 17, but would be no surprise to rebuff that and carry on in a similar fashion. Bounce theorists may worry if he ran too well last time off the 2 ½ month layoff, and that's reasonable to ponder. That concern should make us demand a point or two higher in fair odds than what he looks strictly on paper – but it's not a big enough concern for me to think he won't run very well Saturday. Even if he regresses, he's in the superfecta.

KOBE'S BACK is the most accomplished of the shippers, an eye-popping winner of the G2 San Vicente sprinting last time out. He's part of a Sadler-trained troika this year that includes last week's G2 San Felipe third KRISTO and Countdown's current No. 1 rated contender, G2 Lewis Memorial winner CANDY BOY.

Drawn widest in the field of 8, it will be very compelling to see the trip KOBE'S BOY can muster. The Rebel pace scenario looks like several front-end types, but none absolutely dead-set on going for the lead. If they all want to sit second or third, a cluster of horses could keep KOBE'S BOY wide throughout, which will make his sprint-to-route assignment noticeably tougher. I like his talent a lot, but am not certain KOBE'S BOY will route with the same sizzle he showed late in his sprint win. Fans of KOBE'S BACK could not have liked the result of last Friday's Santa Anita MSW mile in which San Vicente Stakes third RPRETTYBOYFLOYD managed to lose a nose decision as the 6-5 favorite on the class drop -- to a sixth-start maiden, no less. And, San Vicente second CHERUBIM (Simon Callaghan) finished second in a three-horse allowance sprint Thursday at Santa Anita.

HOPPERTUNITY suffered a wide trip in his road trip to Fair Grounds when fourth in the G2 Risen Star. His appearance at Oaklawn and not the Louisiana Derby in two weeks may be pretty telling. This looks like Baffert's best route prospect to my eye and on pedigree, and while not brilliant, he might need two chances to get into the Derby field. By moving the calendar to the Rebel vs. awaiting the La Derby, Baffert will have another shot to get HOPPERTUNITY to his best in something like the Arkansas Derby based on spacing. Baffert's success in Oaklawn raids has been sensational in recent years – but most often with brilliant speed-types. Unless the pace comes back to him, at 1 1/16 miles, HOPPERTUNITY might be up against it Saturday on the win end, but could be set up very nicely for the 9-furlong Arkansas Derby on April 12. If he's advanced enough, and brilliant enough, to beat these horses at 1 1/16 miles in the Rebel, then you can put this horse in your Top 5 Derby prospects for the main event in Louisville.

These "big 4" should have the rule of the Rebel, though locals RIDE ON CURLIN (Bill Gowan) and STREET STRATEGY (Randy Morse) have some license to drive. Calvin Borel jumps off the former, third in the Southwest, to ride the

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latter, a razor-sharp maiden breaker in his second start on Jan. 30. And that might not be the most interesting rider move of the Rebel.

Joel Rosario opts for STRONG MANDATE on the return call after a loss, despite traveling west to ride KOBE'S BACK to victory in the San Vicente for a Sadler barn that he's had a long history with over the years. Meanwhile, Hall of Famer Mike Smith comes in to ride HOPPERTUNITY in what should be a much better stylistic fit than former pilot Martin Garcia, who rides much better on speed horses than closers.

Get more historical trends and significance on the Rebel Stakes by visiting page 95 of the Countdown to the Crown Preseason Annual simply by [clicking this link](#).

#### Rebel Stakes selections:

W) STRONG MANDATE; P) TAPITURE;  
S) HOPPERTUNITY.

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We keep ourselves honest here all season long with our most recent and cumulative stats for top choices (starts: wins-seconds-thirds).

And being honest, the results have been embarrassing. Historically we're 28-30% at this time of year – and this season it's nowhere near that in the stakes ranks. The maiden and allowance analysis and horses to watch have been spot on with a strong ROI, but my assessment of this stakes class has fallen far short of acceptable. Last week, we were third with KRISTO (John Sadler) in the San Felipe and missed badly with faders COUSIN STEPHEN (Chad Brown) in the Tampa Bay Derby and ROMAN FIRE (Tony Dutrow) in the Private Terms.

Last week's selections: 3: 0-0-1  
Season selections: 23: 3-6-4.

## HPNOW BUZZ

**Get Jeremy's best bets on top 3-year-old races – as well as national horses to watch daily from our respected team of handicappers – in the BUZZ report!**

## Everyone's a Critic

This section reviews the week that was in the 3-year-old ranks. As with our preview section, now that we're in March, it takes an exceptional performance or noteworthy tie to include maiden or allowance races.

### Stakes Races



The coolest part about CALIFORNIA CHROME (Art Sherman) in Saturday's **G2 \$300,000 San Felipe Stakes at Santa Anita** didn't happen in his blowout run to the wire. It happened as he passed the wire the *first* time around the 1 1/16 miles race ([video](#)). The Lucky Pulpit gelding broke like an absolute Quarter Horse from the gate – his Los Alamitos training must be rubbing off on him – but within a few jumps, he came right back to jockey Victor Espinoza and relaxed. He was able to zap and clear, lay off the gas and settle like a video game.

CALIFORNIA CHROME cornered the clubhouse turn beautifully from the rail and when speedy MIDNIGHT HAWK (Bob Baffert) tried to engage him midway around the first bend, he just kind of flicked his ears like he was Dikembe Mutombo wagging his finger after a rejection.

MIDNIGHT HAWK was not about to let his Cal-bred counterpart get an easy go of it in the San Felipe. After a 23.09 first quarter, the pair quickened rapidly to 22.46 the second quarter. As I've written here a hundred times, when the second quarter goes decidedly faster than the first quarter in a dirt route, it's more often a recipe for a meltdown. Instead, this fleet pair just ran away from the San Felipe field.

Nearing the quarter-pole, MIDNIGHT HAWK tried to tackle CALIFORNIA CHROME one more time, and again the pacemaker just rejected the advance and let out another gear. The come-home splits in 23.90, 24.49 and 6.65 over the back end of the San Felipe were strong on the clock and resulted in a fast 1:40.59 final time. CALIFORNIA CHROME opened up at will by 7 ¼ lengths, while MIDNIGHT HAWK put another 6 ¼ lengths on the disappointing KRISTO (John Sadler) in third. The winner looked sharp running through the wire and strong in the lane.

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While he did not offer much gallop-out, it would be nit-picky to find much critique in this run.

MIDNIGHT HAWK is a more brilliant miler than perhaps I gave him credit for, but still does not project to win a major at any distance beyond this trip. He may get a shot in the Santa Anita Derby or Arkansas Derby out of this, but the map would be best-served circling the Breeders' Cup Dirt Mile in the autumn and developing a plan to get there instead. KRISTO was very flat and also failed to offer much beyond the wire. You'd hope that he was just speed-popped here and would have galloped out with something to make you want to see him the next time. Alas, that did not happen.

SCHOOLOFHARDROCKS (David Hofmans) was outrun in fourth and split the field in his first start since Del Mar in August. He probably deserves a chance to improve in the Santa Anita Derby as much as any of the others in the San Felipe – but he's got some work to do to bridge the gap between him and the winner.

CALIFORNIA CHROME moves right to the top of the west coast brigade alongside G2 Lewis Memorial champ CANDY BOY (John Sadler). Those two figure to plot a super showdown in the G1 Santa Anita Derby on April 8. I would not expect a very large field to want a piece of that throw-down after this performance – which I've rated the top stakes of the season to this point. While Sherman has intimated he may await the Kentucky Derby with CALIFORNIA CHROME, that certainly would be a dubious sign to me as a horseplayer and I would prefer to see him in the SA Derby for a further class and distance test.

No doubt, there's some west coast Smarty Jones about CALIFORNIA CHROME that I dig. Yes, he's from the wrong side of the tracks; the pedigree wouldn't bring much in the ring; and he's outrunning distance expectations. But what I like about him most in comparison to Smarty Jones is that versatility and gears he shows. I wasn't too sure about Smarty Jones until late in the Spring of 2004, and while CALIFORNIA CHROME didn't dent my Top 20s before this week, I can say he's having that kind of impression. Still, he must blossom over the next coming weeks to keep that magical momentum going that comes along only so often.

*Check out the historical significance of the San Felipe by visiting page 94 of the Countdown to the Crown Preseason Annual. [Click here.](#)*



Saturday's **G2 \$350,000 Tampa Bay Derby** did not develop as planned. So much for scripts! RING WEEKEND (Graham Motion), who had never made the early lead in five previous starts over five different footings, zipped right to the front from the rail and blew the lid off this 1 1/16 miles race from the outset. Local riding kingpin Daniel Centeno clearly had a plan; it's just that few of us had the same imagination.

RING WEEKEND ran through solid 23.62 and 23.06 opening splits and did so reaching out nicely with his head down and competition fading in his rear-view mirror. The lead ballooned to more than five lengths heading into the far turn. Stablemates SURFING USA and VINCEREMOS had no answers in closest pursuit as they tried to land a second straight TB Derby for the Todd Pletcher barn.

RING WEEKEND had the race wrapped by the quarter-pole with a big lead and left little doubt in the lane. He posted 24.73, 25.63 and 6.67 splits in the back half of the race for a final time of 1:43.71, which was about 4-5 lengths off the track record. RING WEEKEND galloped out with vigor and pizzazz and you had to like what you saw. VINCEREMOS forged by SURFING USA to narrowly get second as the Sam F. Davis winner validated his February performance to some degree while simply rating second-best on this day.

No doubt the visuals impressed with RING WEEKEND, and the fact that he could run a race like that – against what was his previous style – showed indicates a horse who is not simply a speedball and incapable of the classic distances. White-hot sire Tapit has it cooking right now, and damsire Cryptoclearance is as good of a distance influence as you'll see in a dirt pedigree. RING WEEKEND is in the hands of one the very most elite horsemen in America, Graham Motion.

The big question will be competition as he didn't beat much at Tampa, and only exited a maiden win. If the owners head to the Calder Derby in April as expected, he'll come to Louisville with few barometers to evaluate on class. The key horse that RING WEEKEND has

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faced could very well be his maiden rival DIVINE OATH (Todd Pletcher), a horse I have a ton of respect for and am hoping to see in a Polytrack stakes in Kentucky next. Maybe DIVINE OATH can give us a read on the class of RING WEEKEND in the coming weeks?

As for the others in the Tampa Bay Derby, VINCEREMOS has earned another shot on the trail with his second-place finish, but he's yet to elicit a top-shelf presence in my mind. CONQUEST TITAN (Mark Casse) managed only fourth money as the 5-2 favorite, and it's fair to wonder if this performance did not flatter his G2 Holy Bull second to CAIRO PRINCE (Kiaran McLaughlin). But it appears more an indictment of CONQUEST TITAN to me than CAIRO PRINCE, given that Holy Bull third INTENSE HOLIDAY already had returned to win the G2 Risen Star at Fair Grounds. CONQUEST TITAN did not have as much traffic issues as some have intimated in my opinion and actually had a great rail trip for a closer; you can argue a speed bias working against him perhaps more tangibly to me than a terrible trip. The TITAN now needs a huge performance in a final prep to become Kentucky Derby material, both in reality and on the points scale. If he can muster it, he deserves to dance; if not, he'll have proven to be short of the bar.

*Check out the historical significance of the Tampa Bay Derby by visiting page 93 of the Countdown to the Crown Preseason Annual. [Click here.](#)*



**Saturday's \$100,000 Private Terms Stakes at Laurel Park** ([video](#)) looked like the sequel to last year's event won by Mr. Palmer. The wide, sweeping blitz from the back of the pack by KID CRUZ (Linda Rice) turned heads and turned back the clock a year when we saw a similar whoosh move in from Aqueduct.

Mr. Palmer would go on to finish fourth in the G1 Wood Memorial out of the Private Terms, and you'd expect KID CRUZ to be headed that same direction following his 4-length score. And while KID CRUZ may have emulated – and even exaggerated – the deep rally of last year's victor, the 2014 race was completed almost 20 lengths slower – yes, 20 lengths. Saturday's 1-

1/8 miles went in splits of 25.18, 24.75, 24.99, 26.70 and 13.20 for a final time of 1:54.82.

Applying the come-home times to KID CRUZ, specifically, we're looking at an estimated 24.45 and 12.50 over the final three furlongs, very strong, indeed. That's a sub-37 last three-eighths. The son of Belmont Stakes winner Lemon Drop Kid certainly has stamina up top, but his damside pedigree leans more to sprints and may explain his explosive final three furlongs. By losing complete touch with the field early and falling 20-plus lengths behind, jockey Julian Pimentel basically blitzed three furlongs late to pick up the pieces. You can do that when three-quarters are on the board in 1:14.92, but not in faster early fractions that tougher competition sure are to post in the next stop. This was a neat move, but maybe more circumstantial than substantial. Still, KID CRUZ looks like a worthy new addition to the final round of preps. Given damside Tale of the Cat's affinity for Polytrack at Keeneland and the way races are run slow early and blitz late over that surface, I'd consider the G1 Blue Grass more so than the Wood Memorial if this was my horse.

JOINT CUSTODY (Jerry Robb) dueled three wide on the clubhouse turn, settled off the leader and maintained a three-wide run on the far turn. He looked clearly the one to beat in the upper stretch and proved second-best. He's going to be a top stakes horse in the region for a long time if he stays sound, ala a runner like an Eightfasttocatch.

My top choice ROMAN FIRE (Tony Dutrow) cleared the field turning onto the backstretch and had it his own way through very modest splits. He simply could not get the distance. BARATTI (Kiaran McLaughlin) had a rail run as part of the soft early pace, despite a mild brush at the start that had no impact on his situation. The 8-5 favorite disappointed badly off a sharp maiden victory in New York. MATUSAK (Bill Mott) was part of that bumpy start, but was a deep closer anyway and while losing some ground didn't really threaten while third. He's just not very brilliant.

### **Minor Stakes**

OLIVER ZIP (Kelly Breen) cruised to a daylight win in wire-to-wire fashion Saturday in the **\$100,000 Caspessela Stakes at Aqueduct**. The sprint-bred son of City Zip tallied his second victory in 15 days and first stakes score. The

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news here may be that 9-5 favorite LONG ON VALUE (Bill Mott) was a well-beaten third after finishing fourth in the G3 Hutcheson to WILDCAT RED (Jose Garaffalo).

## **Allowance Races**

Wednesday's **Gulfstream Park** card took on extra pizzazz when HONOR CODE (Shug McGaughey) made his first start since winning the G2 Remsen in November. In what could have been an easy spot, a 1 1/16 miles allowance with a short field, we were reminded of so many handicapping lessons as SOCIAL INCLUSION (Manny Azpurua) spurted away and soared home an easy winner (**video**).

*Trainer Intent:* Was McGaughey tipping a weak hand by going the allowance route vs. the previously discussed G2 Rebel?

*Pace Makes the Race:* No one on paper had any interest in the front except the stretch-out debut sprint winner SOCIAL INCLUSION.

*Pre-race Visuals:* HONOR CODE, who missed some training time with reportedly bruised ankles, became warm behind the starting gate and was perturbed when asked to load – often a sign of a horse not wanting to run.

*In-Race Visuals:* HONOR CODE looked rough-gaited down the backstretch, his head bouncing quite a bit and not efficient. Jockey Javier Castellano had to scrub on him three furlongs out to try and catch up...to no avail or response. And there was no wonderful gallop-out you'd expect if this truly was a "he's back, just needed a race" kind of performance.

So what are we to believe from the most curious allowance of 2014? SOCIAL INCLUSION set the track afire and lowered the track record, which was all of a few weeks old, over a blazing strip. The connections immediately began to field offers to sell the unbeaten riser. Pedigree-wise, he's got plenty of genes to be a player if time doesn't catch up with him – as in lack of it. Is SOCIAL INCLUSION a star in the making, or a creature of circumstance, catching a fast track in a lone-speed situation that will be difficult to ever emulate? I know this: If I own him, there's no better time ever to sell. Anyone remember Mudflaps freaking on a wet track and selling privately on last year's trail?

Luckily for horseplayers, and fortunately for HONOR CODE and SOCIAL INCLUSION, each will have another start before any Kentucky Derby or Triple Crown discussions have to be made with real zeal. I'd love to draw more conclusion from Thursday's race, which was as intriguing as could be, but potentially misleading on either behalf. If you made me declare my concrete thoughts, I'd say HONOR CODE ran like a horse with something bothering him and that makes him more likely to not make the trail than to be forced there by a master, conservative horseman. And SOCIAL INCLUSION should be sold to the highest bidder immediately if you're looking at it from a pure, business standpoint and not the glory of the Derby dream.

Two other notable, but less fascinating, allowances bear mentioning this week.

BOBBY'S KITTEN (Chad Brown) punched his ticket to the G1 Blue Grass Stakes when he successfully returned Saturday at Tampa Bay Downs. The Breeders' Cup Juvenile Turf third-place finisher took his customary position on the pole and led every jump of Saturday's turf mile allowance, holding G3 Generous Stakes winner GLOBAL VIEW (Tom Proctor) at bay. It was a good performance by both promising 3YOs, and could lead to a Keeneland rematch.

CLASS LEADER (Neil Howard) may have earned a G1 Blue Grass or G1 Arkansas Derby berth in Thursday's Fair Grounds Race 3 allowance score. Now 2-for-2, he's a pure router with a wonderful style and pedigree for the classic distances. Don't be surprised if this late bloomer becomes a Belmont Stakes player.

## **Maiden Races**

It's likely not relevant to the trail, but it was an awfully good week for Feb. 6 maiden breaker MELATONIN (Jeff Bonde). The sprint-bred colt saw his closest pursuers LOS BORRACHOS (since moved to Bill Mott) and EXCESSIVE KID (Carla Gaines) both return to win strong MSW races at Aqueduct and Santa Anita, respectively, this past weekend. It's a rare, bicoastal form-flattery worthy of mention.

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## Where Are They Headed?

This section projects the fields for upcoming key 3YO preps. The lists are a mixture of announced intentions and projected fits of races that would/could work well for particular runners – and is not intended to be a definitive resource from track racing offices, though in some cases racing departments are consulted.

**SPIRAL** (TP, 3/22): WE MISS ARTIE, ALMOST FAMOUS, TAMARANDO, SOLITARY RANGER, ASSERTING BEAR, HARRY'S HOLIDAY, BIG BAZINGA, ALL TIED UP, TOURIST, Z LUCKY, COASTLINE, CAN'THELPBELIEVING (possible), DIVINE OATH (possible) EAST HALL (or Fla).

**SUNLAND DERBY** (SUN, 3/23): PROCEED, REBRANDED, VICARS IN TROUBLE (more likely La Derby), TANZANITE CAT (or Northern Spur), a Baffert representative such as CHITU, TAP IT RICH or THE ADMIRAL, also BOURBONIZE, LOTSA MISCHIEF and possibly a Todd Pletcher charge in COMMISSIONER or GLOBAL STRIKE.

**FLORIDA DERBY** (GP, 3/29): CAIRO PRINCE, WILDCAT RED, GENERAL A ROD, CONSTITUTION, ANCHOR DOWN (possible), SOCIAL INCLUSION (possible), EAST HALL (or Spiral), MATADOR, SPOT.

**LOUISIANA DERBY** (FG, 3/29): INTENSE HOLIDAY, ALBANO, VICARS IN TROUBLE (or Sunland), GOLD HAWK, COMMANDING CURVE, RISE UP, KENDALL'S BOY (possible), LOUIE'S FLOWER.

**SANTA ANITA DERBY** (SA, 4/5): CANDY BOY, CALIFORNIA CHROME, BAYERN (or Arkansas Derby), MIDNIGHT HAWK (or Arkansas Derby), KRISTO (or Arkansas Derby), CHITU (or Sunland), SCHOOLOFHARDROCKS.

**WOOD** (AQU, 4/5): SAMRAAT, UNCLE SIGH, IN TROUBLE, COMMISSIONER (or Sunland), NOBLE MOON, HONOR CODE, MEXIKOMA (possible), ALEX INC (possible), TONALIST.

**BLUE GRASS** (KEE, 4/12): GALA AWARD, BOBBY'S KITTEN, MEDAL COUNT, CONQUEST TITAN (or Arkansas Derby), MR SPEAKER, STORMING INTI, BOND HOLDER (possible), FINANCIAL MOGUL, DANCE WITH FATE, GLOBAL VIEW, POKER PLAYER, THEROS.

**ARKANSAS DERBY** (OP, 4/12): More clarity following Rebel this weekend.

## Just Wynn, Baby



### Full Wynn Las Vegas Derby odds here.

CALIFORNIA CHROME dropped 20 points to 15-1 this week after his San Felipe dominance. CAIRO PRINCE continues to be the favorite at 8-1 in the lead-up to his Florida Derby reappearance. HOPPERTUNITY may be the most interesting futures play this weekend, offered at 50-1 in advance of the Rebel on Saturday. He may still be a race or two away from announcing his serious candidacy, but the price is right at the moment. I also like COMMISSIONER at 65-1, capable of improving next time out – which could come in the Sunland Derby next week.

When visiting Vegas, no one takes better care of players than John Avello and staff at Wynn. Stop by and tell them *Countdown* sent you!

## High Fives

Jeremy Plonk's Top-5 rated performances by class so far this season (Dec. 26-present).

### Maiden Race

1. BAYERN (Santa Anita, 1/4)
2. HARTFORD (Gulfstream, 1/16)
3. HOPPERTUNITY (Santa Anita, 1/30)
4. TONALIST (Gulfstream, 1/18)
5. CAN'THELPBELIEVING (Gulfstream, 1/11-T)

### Allowance Race

1. SOCIAL INCLUSION (Gulfstream, 3/12) \*NEW\*
2. TOP BILLING (Gulfstream, 1/25)
3. COMMISSIONER (Gulfstream, 1/3)
4. BAYERN (Santa Anita, 2/13)
5. CONSTITUTION (Gulfstream, 2/22)

### Stakes Race

1. CALIFORNIA CHROME (San Felipe, 3/8) \*NEW\*
2. CANDY BOY (Lewis Memorial, SA, 2/8)
3. CAIRO PRINCE (Holy Bull, GP, 1/25)
4. TAPITURE (Southwest, OP, 2/17)
5. SAMRAAT (Gotham, Aqu, 3/1)

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# Jeremy Plonk's Top 20

Each horse name links to his Equibase.com biography and stats page.

<b>1</b>	<b><u>CANDY BOY</u></b> Trainer: John Sadler Winter Home: Santa Anita (Cal.) Showdown looms w/ California Chrome.	<b>11</b>	<b><u>HOPPERTUNITY</u></b> Trainer: Bob Baffert Winter Home: Santa Anita (Cal.) Like the move to OP for 2 possible starts.
<b>2</b>	<b><u>CAIRO PRINCE</u></b> Trainer: Kiaran McLaughlin Winter Home: Palm Meadows (Fla.) Florida Derby really falling into his lap.	<b>12</b>	<b><u>KOBE'S BACK</u></b> Trainer: John Sadler Winter Home: Santa Anita (Cal.) Rebel tells the sprint or route future tale.
<b>3</b>	<b><u>STRONG MANDATE</u></b> Trainer: D. Wayne Lukas Winter Home: Oaklawn Park (Ark.) Stunned if he doesn't run big in Rebel.	<b>13</b>	<b><u>IN TROUBLE</u></b> Trainer: Tony Dutrow Winter Home: Fair Hill (Md.) Taxing Gotham; back on tab Wed + sign.
<b>4</b>	<b><u>CALIFORNIA CHROME</u></b> Trainer: Art Sherman Winter Home: Los Alamitos (Cal.) Like his San Felipe the more I watch it.	<b>14</b>	<b><u>HONOR CODE</u></b> Trainer: Shug McGaughey Winter Home: Palm Meadows (Fla.) If healthy, he's better than this; tenuous.
<b>5</b>	<b><u>TAPITURE</u></b> Trainer: Steve Asmussen Winter Home: now based Oaklawn (Ark.) May bounce a bit in Rebel; still respect.	<b>15</b>	<b><u>RING WEEKEND</u></b> Trainer: Graham Motion Winter Home: Palm Meadows (Fla.) Calder Derby likely next w/ points secure.
<b>6</b>	<b><u>GENERAL A ROD</u></b> Trainer: Mike Maker Winter Home: Gulfstream Park (Fla.) Easy ½ mile 51.26 Sat; 1 <sup>st</sup> drill since FoY.	<b>16</b>	<b><u>TAMARANDO</u></b> Trainer: Jerry Hollendorfer Winter Home: Santa Anita (Cal.) California Chrome flattered; Spiral threat.
<b>7</b>	<b><u>COMMISSIONER</u></b> Trainer: Todd Pletcher Winter Home: Palm Meadows (Fla.) Breezed ½ in 49.35 Sat; route player.	<b>17</b>	<b><u>UNCLE SIGH</u></b> Trainer: Gary Contessa Winter Home: Aqueduct (NY) Will he continue am bullets after Gotham?
<b>8</b>	<b><u>INTENSE HOLIDAY</u></b> Trainer: Todd Pletcher Winter Home: Palm Meadows Fast ½ in 47.90 Sat w/ eye on La Derby.	<b>18</b>	<b><u>WILDCAT RED</u></b> Trainer: Jose Garoffalo Winter Home: Gulfstream Park (Fla.) General A Rod got back on tab quicker.
<b>9</b>	<b><u>BOBBY'S KITTEN</u></b> Trainer: Chad Brown Winter Home: Palm Meadows (Fla.) Blue Grass on tap after solid return win.	<b>19</b>	<b><u>DIVINE OATH</u></b> Trainer: Todd Pletcher Winter Home: Palm Meadows (Fla.) Unbeaten turfer w/ big shot at TP or Kee.
<b>10</b>	<b><u>SAMRAAT</u></b> Trainer: Rick Violette Winter Home: Palm Meadows (Fla.) Will continue to train in Fla for NY return.	<b>20</b>	<b><u>VICAR'S IN TROUBLE</u></b> Trainer: Mike Maker Winter Home: Fair Grounds (La.) Shine coming off the apple in a.m.?