

COUNTDOWN TO THE CROWN

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

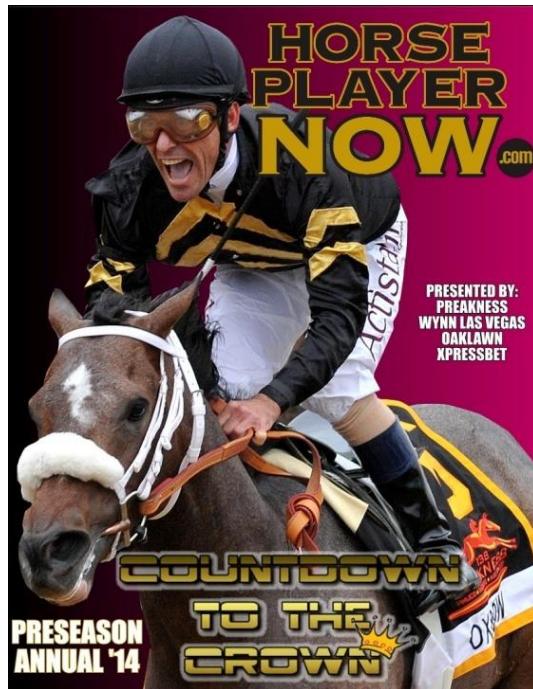
Opinions are like the gravy at a truck stop diner. The worse they get, the more lumps you have to take.

1. A missed workout here and there is downplayed to the public by trainers in January, but it's a source of sleepless nights if/when the lights go out. SHARED BELIEF (Jerry Hollendorfer) is the latest to tear open a roll of Tums. A foot abscess has turned into a quarter-crack this week.
2. Churchill Downs takes a lot of heat for strong-arming tactics and its manipulation of the Derby trail. But it's undeniable the positive moves they've made with the Louisiana Derby placement and local prep path at CDI-owned Fair Grounds, which begins Saturday with the Lecomte. Recent results have been highly encouraging.
3. And speaking of Fair Grounds, let me be clear that leading local rider Rosie Napravnik has all the tools to be a Triple Crown race winner. The fact that she was nearly shut out of 2013 Breeders' Cup mounts is an unexplainable situation unless you care to play the gender card. I won't be surprised if she gets there faster than many of her "name" male counterparts.

This Week's Fearless Forecast

This section previews the coming attractions in 3-year-old stakes and undercard races. As is custom, we'll outline some undercard races of note before diving into stakes analysis & picks.

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Undercard Tilts

Later today (Friday), the action heats up with a **Santa Anita** Race 6 maiden special weight. **THE ADMIRAL** (Bob Baffert) figures to be an odds-on candidate in the 1 1/16 miles test after finishing second to the highly respected **COOL SAMURAI** (John Shirreffs). Rookie **DAY OF FURY** (Bob Baffert) deserves some attention as the Street Sense colt hails from the classy female family of Chris Evert and Confessional.

Turfway Park looks to put a Spiral Stakes trail contender in motion in Friday's Race 8 allowance mile. **ARTEMUS COALMINE** (Mike Maker) aims for a second score in 21 days while stretching out around two turns.

Calder's Friday action boasts a Race 5 turf maiden mile that should give us a better barometer on Dec. 27 MSW route winner **COPA DEL REY** (Sal Santoro) with several of his pursuers reunited. The same program also features a Race 7 allowance at 7 furlongs, in which Pasco Stakes 3rd **GIANCARLO** (Efren Loza Jr.) meets the aforementioned **COPA DEL REY**.

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Santa Anita's Saturday card includes a Race 6 maiden dash at just 5 1/2 furlongs. And while that might sound foolhardy on the road to the classics, west coast stalwarts like Paynter and Bodemeister in recent years have propelled themselves from this 3YO dash launching pad to greater glory. So it's no shock to see no less than three Bob Baffert trainees try this spot given that brief history lesson. Rookies SUPERLOOPER and ROGER ROCKET book-end the field, while PIMPERNEL returns for his second bid in three weeks. While the 11-hole will do him no favors, ROGER ROCKET intrigues with a strong female family and there's upside to him even if he loses the dash debut like Bodemeister did. Former Graham Motion trainee LITTLE CURLIN (Jerry Hollendorfer) makes his west coast unveiling as a well-bred half to Hoh Buzzard. His promising Keeneland debut looked even better when GENERAL A ROD (Mike Maker) went on to win the Gulfstream Park Derby.

A pair of two-turn maiden races adds to the Sunshine Millions Day card at **Gulfstream Park** on Saturday. Race 1 presents a deep grass cast. First-timer QUOTIENT (Tom Proctor) gets Gary Stevens on a rare eastern junket and hails from the female family of Preakness winner Louis Quatorze. RING WEEKEND (Graham Motion) showed some life at 2 and pedigree-wise can run as long as they ask. LONG WATER (Kiaran McLaughlin) mystified on the dirt last time out and the blue-blooded son of Round Pond tries turf for the first time. Consider this a fun one to watch and tough one to bet! The Race 4 MSW route goes at 1 1/8 miles on the dirt. AWESOME SKY (Mark Casse) was third in the G2 Kentucky Jockey Club last time and may be the best of the barn's many sophomore bullets. Uncle Mo's little bro SOUPERFAST (Bill Mott) has been training well at Payson for the return, while TONALIST (Christophe Clement) exits a highly key race at Aqueduct against respected Todd Pletcher stablemates MATTERHORN and HARPOON.

Race 5 Saturday at **Oaklawn** presents a mile maiden event that doesn't look like one of the meet's strongest we'll see on paper. Churchill rebound hopefuls abound, including LEXINGTONIAN (Helen Pitts), who has worked strong since being outrun by GOLD HAWK (Steve Asmussen) et al in his debut.

California Derby Day at **Golden Gate Fields** should produce some El Camino Real Derby

players not only in the main event, but perhaps with a pair of MSW events in Races 1 and 4. In the first division, CANDY PASSION (Jeff Bonde) is a well-bred Candy Ride rookie who is half-brother to graded stakes sprinter Rush With Thunder. HE'S ON HIS TOES (Jerry Hollendorfer) exits a solid debut third. The Race 4 split division includes Santa Anita-based rookie J KAT (Craig Dollase) for a barn known to ship north and unveil in a well-placed manner.

Saturday's listed stakes action includes New Mexico-bred sprinters in **Sunland Park's** \$85,000 Pepsi Cola Stakes. Impressive NM riser PROCEED (Joel Marr) isn't here, but many of his Hedeman Miler chasers are, including 2-3 finishers DE LOVER (Tony Sedillo) and REAPER (Todd Fincher).

In that same vein, Texas-bred sprinters meet during the opening Saturday of the **Sam Houston** meeting. The \$50,000 Groovy Stakes matches Clever Trevor Stakes third TIME IZ FLYIN (Allen Milligan) in his quest for back-to-back state-bred stakes tallies against Churchill maiden breaker ME COMMANCHE (Steve Asmussen).

Parx re-offers a 1-mile dirt allowance on its Sunday card, one week after a similar race was canceled due to thawing track conditions. ALEX INC (Butch Reid) remains high on my radar and smartly drilled Monday in-between dates. The new lineup includes Remsen seventh AFLEET ACCOMPLI (Kelly Breen) and ROMAN FIRE (Tony Dutrow).

Fair Grounds presents a Sunday Race 6 turf MSW route with an interesting main-track only entrant, GLACKEN TOO (Bret Calhoun). He exits a distant second to impressive FG crusher UNKNOWN ROAD (Al Stall, Jr.).

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3-year-old races – as well as
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handicappers – in the BUZZ report!*

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- Lecomte - (Saturday/Fair Grounds)



The Louisiana Derby trail begins in earnest with the G3 \$200,000 Lecomte Stakes at a mile and 70 yards. Five of the nine entries have competed at the current Fair Grounds meet, while two are coming in from out of town and two more are exiting layoffs since the Breeders' Cup. The Lecomte makes for a diverse mix in that regard and, therefore, a challenging handicapping task.

The BC alumni include GOT SHADES (Danny Pish), fifth in the Juvenile Turf at Santa Anita after an adventurous trip, and SMARTY'S ECHO (Anne Smith), 10th in the Juvenile while making his dirt debut and also experiencing plenty of trouble along the way. Both have been working extremely well leading up to the Lecomte and had deep enough fall campaigns to handle the two-month break on works alone. Neither route specialist will be "short" in the return.

But favoritism figures to lean to a pair of sharp FG meet performers, GOLD HAWK (Steve Asmussen) and ALBANO (Larry Jones) for connections who have had a strong presence on this 3YO prep path for years. GOLD HAWK has been one of my most anticipated runners of this crop, a son of Empire Maker-Caressing. He's got the pedigree and connections to be any kind, and his second start proved much more professional from a mental standpoint. This looks like a natural class rise and comes on 22 days' rest with two works in-between. That activity level tells you he's doing very well right now. Given his light 2YO season, it could have been under-working GOLD HAWK by awaiting February's Risen Star and having only two preps for a potential Kentucky Derby run. I like this spacing the more I look at it.

ALBANO has won twice at the stand sprinting, including the Sugar Bowl Stakes at 6 furlongs. His pedigree tilts to sprints, and trainer Jones doesn't score at as high of a percentage with first-time routers as he does overall – so it's not his prime forte to squeeze something out of a horse that may not be there in the first place. Even saying that, I've liked what I've seen going short from him and that respect carries

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over to Saturday. I'd be surprised if he can beat these routing, but not overwhelmed.

If you like GOLD HAWK, and I do, his Dec. 27 third-place pursuer PLUG CATCHER (Bret Calhoun) figures to be an overlay price in the Lecomte. He was hung wide last time, and will have to avoid that similar trip from a rough post No. 9. But he ran well in defeat that day.

Jockey Rosie Napravnik rode three of these runners last time out and lands on dominant Louisiana-bred MSW graduate VICAR'S IN TROUBLE (Mike Maker). The son of Into Mischief was third to the filly Ruslana at Keeneland before crushing state-breds in his FG debut Dec. 14 by 13 lengths. Speed figure players will be all over this guy, but class and distance questions remain legitimate. There's reason to like VICAR'S IN TROUBLE, just get a fair price of 5-1 or more before accepting.

Get more historical trends and significance on the Lecomte Stakes by visiting page 63 of the Countdown to the Crown Preseason Annual simply by [clicking this link](#).

Lecomte Stakes selections:

W) GOLD HAWK; P) GOT SHADES;
S) VICAR'S IN TROUBLE.

- California Derby - (Saturday/Golden Gate Fields)



When you invade Northern California, you had better bring some legitimate artillery if you want to dethrone the Jerry Hollendorfer-Russell Baze dynasty. The 1 1/16 miles California Derby runs through the 'Dorf-Baze duo once again as unbeaten EXIT STAGE LEFT (Jerry Hollendorfer) puts his 2-for-2 career mark on the line. Both wins came in stakes company over this Tapeta surface at Golden Gate, sprinting in the Golden Nugget and around two turns in the Gold Rush. EXIT STAGE LEFT has worked in vintage 'Dorf fashion every 6-7 days since the week after his last win. It's a clock-work operation, and execution, in this case.

But the California Derby does include a serious out of town challenge. ENTERPRISING (Tom

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Proctor) was visually impressive in his Eddie Logan Stakes win at Santa Anita three weeks ago and that SA turf to GG main has been a big-time avenue for success in the NoCal 3YO stakes. With Gary Stevens on the road to ride Mucho Macho Man at Gulfstream, Aaron Gryder lands the job of timing this quick turn of foot just right.

The Cal Derby lines up as an either-or in my estimation and anyone but the big two contenders outlined would be a major surprise to me. ROYAL BANKER (Eoin Harty) continues to get better and better for a barn that takes its time developing horses. His Eddie Logan second on paper wasn't as close as the margin suggests in my eyes the way ENTERPRISING kicked, but it's more than enough to get him a good check in the Cal Derby.

California Derby selections

W) ENTERPRISING; P) EXIT STAGE LEFT;
S) ROYAL BANKER.

- Kitten's Joy Stakes - (Sunday/Gulfstream Park)



Races like Sunday's \$100,000 Kitten's Joy have taken on importance on the trail as stepping stones to the Polytrack stakes in Kentucky later in the Spring. While no Kentucky Derby qualifying points are offered in turf stakes, this race remains no less important. A performer moving on to the Spiral and/or Blue Grass would acquire more than enough status there to earn starting credentials in any system.

G1 Breeders' Futurity winner WE MISS ARTIE (Todd Pletcher) obviously would be a return candidate to Keeneland for the Blue Grass in April if things go as planned. He ran a better-than-it-looks seventh in the Breeders' Cup Juvenile on dirt last time and starts his season in this most logical of spots. While he has not been the most consistent of colts, the son of Artie Schiller served notice for his Kitten's Joy readiness with a big work Jan. 7. Owner Ken Ramsey has presented the trophy to himself in this race before and looks to have a big chance to do it again as the owner of the original Kitten's Joy and this year's deserving favorite.

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STORMING INTI (Chad Brown) storms into the Kitten's Joy on a three-race win streak and possesses a wonderfully useful, pressing running style. On turf, it reminds you a bit of Rydilluc from a year ago in that he can make his first-over trip and outkick the others in the lane. He may get first run over WE MISS ARTIE and make his rival pass him for the money.

CABO CAT (Mark Hennig) will appreciate the extra distance after a closing second in the Dania Beach Stakes earlier in the meet. By the aforementioned Kitten's Joy, he's out of a Swain mare and fired a bullet Sunday for this test.

A trio of runners from the same Dec. 14 Gulfstream turf allowance returns, including winner ROPE A DOPE (Wayne Catalano). The race did not overly impress on the clock or visuals, but from a wide post ROPE A DOPE rates the best of that cast.

DROVER ROAD (Antonio Sano) wheels back on a week's rest after dead-heating with MEDAL COUNT (Dale Romans) in a race reviewed below in this edition of *Countdown*.

Get more historical trends and significance on the Kitten's Joy Stakes by visiting page 64 of the Countdown to the Crown Preseason Annual simply by [clicking this link](#).

Kitten's Joy Stakes selections:

W) WE MISS ARTIE; P) STORMING INTI;
S) CABO CAT.

Last week's selections:

1: 0-1-0.

We keep ourselves honest here all season long with our most recent and cumulative stats for top choices (starts: wins-seconds-thirds). Sham top choice KRISTO (John Sadler) was second-best to the odds-on favorite.

Season selections: 1: 0-1-0.

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Everyone's a Critic

This section reviews the week that was in the 3-year-old ranks.

Stakes Races



Fields of four do little to prove a horse's Triple Crown trail mettle, but even so, Saturday's G3 \$100,000 **Sham Stakes at Santa Anita** ([video](#)) did expose the public to a pair of potentially significant sophomores. MIDNIGHT HAWK (Bob Baffert) and KRISTO (John Sadler) both displayed some of their promise in what turned out to be a public workout of sorts and a rehearsal for something more meaningful.

Tiny field sizes often play to speed horses and cat-and-mouse rider tactics on the front end. The Sham was no exception. The race's two main players both had the speed, and jockeys Mike Smith and Rafael Bejarano are among the first chosen in any pick-up game of jockeys.

The second-quarter split (23.02) was significantly quicker than the first (23.31), typically a recipe for a meltdown up front in route races. But given the talent edge and only two rivals, MIDNIGHT HAWK and KRISTO easily maintained their advantages despite slowing down to 24.17 and 25.96 on the back end.

Smith wisely got MIDNIGHT HAWK to the pressing, two-path and forced the beat for KRISTO much of the way. That's rarely a comfortable spot to be in when you're zipping 23s. In fact, it wasn't until MIDNIGHT HAWK went by KRISTO and the latter was able to get away from the rail in mid-stretch that KRISTO appeared comfy while in a futile late chase. Head-to-head, MIDNIGHT HAWK was the better horse on this day and earned the victory. But this May 14 foal still remains a true route-distance question to me given his pedigree. It's not that he's by the versatile Midnight Lute that bothers me, it's that he's out of speedy sprinter Miss Wineshine, and the bottom of the pedigree is from where the stamina often comes. Removing blinkers Saturday did help settle his natural speed and that's a mental plus.

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When the final script on MIDNIGHT HAWK is written, however, he just strikes me much more of a Secret Circle-type, a sharp 3-year-old miler who will be a much better sprinter in time. He's a big-bodied colt and that physique belies sprinters more so than routers. Let's also not forget this race has been a boon for milers like Goldencents and Tapizar in recent years.

KRISTO tells a very similar pedigree tale, though my gut told me this horse would be more capable up to the 1 1/8 miles of the Santa Anita Derby or comparable races. But I'm not so sure after the Sham. Reverse the trips on Saturday and KRISTO may have won, but that's conjecture. The purse money is in the bank and that check has cleared for MIDNIGHT HAWK.

ONTOLOGY (Simon Callaghan) will be best-suited back on turf and with more space between races, while I'LL WRAP IT UP (Doug O'Neill) looked short on class vs. these. TOP FORTITUDE (Kory Owens) missed the race after a fouled shoe replacement earlier in the day.

Kentucky Derby qualifying points were awarded 10-4-2-1 in this contest 1st through 4th.

Check out the historical significance of the Sham by visiting page 62 of the Countdown to the Crown Preseason Annual by [clicking this link](#).

Allowance Races

Win margins always are skewed on wet tracks as some horses simply dig it, while others can't dig into it. So Friday's **Oaklawn** Race 9 mile allowance win by BOURBONIZE (Kellyn Gorder) will take another race reappearance for us to truly digest. The son of Tiz Wonderful swept by 3-wide on the turn with a "decisive" move as called by Frank Mirahmadi in a fitting use of prose. The unbeaten gelding, now 2-for-2, passed all visual exams in this performance and stylishly galloped-out past the wire. He appears headed to the stakes ranks with some promise after beating a good field that included SON OF DIXIE (Bret Calhoun), who tired to third in his two-turn debut and left me disappointed in what I thought was a stronger prospect for middle-distance races. Both of these sophs would appear candidates for the Feb. 17 Southwest at OP. But after throwing 27s on the board the last two quarters, it's difficult to trust the result at face value; you wonder how much of it was an excruciatingly slow surface?

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RIDE ON CURLIN (Bill Gowan) has had a few sitters on his bandwagon since last summer at Churchill Downs. I never fully bought a ticket for that ride, but the son of Curlin returned with a comfortable Race 6 allowance sprint win Sunday at **Oaklawn Park**. Neither the time nor visuals was particularly impressive, and the damside sprint pedigree for this colt and soft gallop-out make him a stand-against when he tries to route in a stakes next time. The G1 Champagne third-place finisher moved nicely while wide on the turn but was unfocused in the lane and didn't stride with a flair you'd like to see from a 6-5 shot on the class drop. RIVERS RUN DEEP (Cody Autrey) closed from Little Rock to be third, but has a closing sprinter's pedigree and may be a mirage play for some stretching out around two bends. GUNS LOADED (Cody Autrey) made a menacing, wide middle-move after a tangled break and wasted all his energy mid-race in make-up mode. He, too, is a sprinter by trade.

A turf allowance melee Sunday at **Gulfstream Park** in Race 9 didn't come easy for MEDAL COUNT (Dale Romans), a horse I had high hopes for in the fall. The BC Juvenile alumnus flashed late foot to dead-heat for the win with 53-1 last-out Calder maiden breaker DROVER ROAD (Antonio Sano). The top five finishers were within three-quarters of a length in a field that looked weak on paper. That's not a good sign. A terribly slow pace kept the field compact and MEDAL COUNT never found an avenue to accelerate but for about 100 yards, and made the most of it. It's very difficult to assess what he got out of this race with so little expended. The jury remains out, but you can't leave this race thinking "wow!" Let's see the talented colt one more time to get a better feel.

KENDALL'S BOY (Tom Amoss) out-sprinted a good field Saturday at **Fair Grounds** to win a Race 8 allowance sprint in solid order. Second to HAVANA (Todd Pletcher) in his debut at Saratoga, this Sky Mesa colt has some legitimate sprint tools, but doesn't harness his speed professionally quite yet. He was hard-held early in this 6-furlong affair, but dragged his rider to the front. Splits of 22.58, 23.51 and 24.82 don't encourage a return to routes, but this was a commendable, one-turn effort for a horse that certainly projects some class about him. Runner-up BE WELL (Steve Margolis) exited a second-best try in the Sugar Bowl and his effort here rates fair enough. DIVINE VIEW (Larry Jones) appears to have gone off form

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now in two straight and I wouldn't be surprised if there's something physical, under the surface, keeping him from running to his potential.

Thursday's downhill turf sprint allowance at **Santa Anita** in Race 7 was won by strong-finishing STREET ICON (Jerry Hollendorfer). His second on dirt prior to CHITU (Bob Baffert) looks like an increasingly legitimate effort at the young SA meeting. I have to admit serious disappointment with BOURNE HOT (Doug O'Neill), who chased a wicked pace and tired when it counted. This was not an effort that could have propelled him to more important routes the way it played out.

The **Sunland Park** trail has some pace to it with ALSONO (Justin Evans), who won for the third time in his last four starts with Friday's 6-furlong allowance victory. The Riley Allison Futurity's third-place finisher won completely geared down late in this local tune-up. ALSONO, a son of Limehouse, has earned another two-turn bid and has proven a great fit in New Mexico after solid Kentucky tries.

Maiden Races

HARTFORD (Todd Pletcher), after an awkward break, dueled and discarded his rivals Thursday at Gulfstream in a Race 5 MSW sprint at 7 furlongs. The 1-2 favorite scratched from a heat Saturday with this spot in mind and dominated by 5 ¾ lengths. HARTFORD spread a field of just six nearly 11 lengths from first to fourth in the way you like to see it done. A strong final 3 furlongs in 36.83 made this a more impressive race than its ballyhooed predecessor a few days prior. The Tapit colt is out of an Editor's Note mare and should appreciate longer challenges. This huge, beautiful gray goes to the top of watch lists. HARTFORD looks like he's not even moving and running along at a good clip, the sign of a horse with talent.

The maiden race everyone wanted to see last week was Saturday's Race 4 MSW at **Gulfstream**. The 7-furlong sprint had promising pedigrees and proven company lines to pique interest. Every year there's a race or two that the world marvels over that I simply don't buy into, and I might have found it early in the Countdown '14 season. CONSTITUTION (Todd Pletcher) earned rave morning reviews and was bet like it in the

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debut. After hopping at the start, he rushed up the rail like a locomotive and engaged a promising JUBA (Jimmy Jerkens) as a duel ensued between the two around the turn. Those two put on a decent enough show, but their legs were up-and-down the entire stretch drive and their 38.54 over the final three furlongs did not impress, nor did the gallop-out. Consider that the 1-2-3 leaders didn't really change much during that time, so where were the quality closers? This might have been a bad bunch underneath. First-time starters lit the bottom four slots in a nine-horse field and maybe just weren't any good? CONSTITUTION is about to be bet back like he's this year's Verrazano or Travelin Man from TAP seasons past. I'm not saying he's a fraud, because overcoming his start was something lesser horses cannot do, but I would have to evaluate the competition in the next start before CONSTITUTION was an automatic play on any of my tickets.

On that same GP Saturday card, a Race 6 MSW on turf at 1-1/8 miles provided a perfect 3YO return spot for CAN'THELPBElIEVING (Graham Motion). We've labeled him a "run-all-day" type in *Countdown* early this season and he proved that with a wide sweep and 11-and-change final furlong. The European import quickly has taken on the look of a serious Spiral candidate at Turfway, a race Motion won in recent years with Animal Kingdom and Went the Day Well. There's enough dirt in the pedigree of sire Duke of Marmalade to start getting a bit excited about this runner's potential on various surfaces. Runner-up NOTABILITY (Dale Romans) ran well enough to win, coming out of the G2 Kentucky Jockey Club Stakes. He chased a steady tempo for the distance and out-lasted the other front-end types but didn't have an answer for the winner's late explosion.

Flashy Friday **Aqueduct** Race 2 MSW route winner BARATTI (Kiaran McLaughlin) was a different horse with Lasix in his second start. After beating one rival in his sprint debut, the Medaglia d'Oro colt lambasted one of the deeper Big A winter MSWs you'll see on paper. Despite climbing a bit in his stride early like a turf runner, he rationed out superb splits on the clock and re-broke like a good horse in the upper stretch. When you go 23.57, 24.71, 24.73, 23.93 and 6.03, that's an impressive 1 1/16 miles with a 6-length margin of victory to boot. This rates as one of the top MSWs on the young season. Runner-up GOODNEWSISNONEWS

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(Todd Pletcher) keeps improving and was a clear second-best on this day with a solid gallop-out. He won't be a maiden long and is bred to handle some distance. Favored blue-blood TOURIST (Bill Mott) was hard-held tracking the leader and resented it with no late interest.

Last Friday's **Oaklawn** Race 5 MSW route was tainted some by wet track conditions and the scratch of DYNAMIC IMPACT (Mark Casse). But stablemate THUNDERGRAM (Mark Casse) picked up the baton and ran with it. While the pacemakers held 1-2-3 with little change, THUNDERGRAM was able to stalk & pounce to upset WIZARDLY (Steve Asmussen) and BRO RODRIGEAUX (D. Wayne Lukas) in a professional manner. THUNDERGRAM had appeared a bit distance-limited to me before this race and I'm not sure the visuals and clock make me any more confident in his long-range ability. Times were slow at Oaklawn all weekend, but this race really did slow down late -- even over a dull surface. The horse to watch here may be second-time starter PENOBSCOT (Ken McPeek), the only closer to make any dent while fifth under the wire. He galloped out like a freight train past everyone.

Form flattery is something I mention often in *Countdown*, and its essence is to draw some conclusions about a horse's ability by the company they keep. Sometimes we don't get to see head-to-head match-ups until very late on the trail. Saturday's Race 9 MSW turf sprint at **Santa Anita** gave us a good line on a horse we thought was awfully good at the end of 2013, BOURNE HOT (Doug O'Neill). He got that proverbial form flattery when his Dec. 15 pursuer HOME RUN KITTEN (David Hofmans) came back to post an impressive, rail-skimming victory on Saturday. HOME RUN KITTEN, by Kitten's Joy out of a Grand Slam mare, is bred to relish the Polytrack at Keeneland and might deserve a shot in the Blue Grass if her progresses. Runner-up FOOTSTEPSINBRONZE (Simon Callaghan) continued a pretty good run of 3YOs for an unheralded barn and this one has a super turf route pedigree for a stretch-out.

Oaklawn's Saturday Race 9 maiden sprint provided a thrilling finish in tight quarters as firster PAGANOL (Cody Autrey) won the bob over *Countdown* rookie tip STREET STRATEGY (Randy Morse). Both made menacing, wide moves on the turn and showed debut promise.

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The runner-up remains the better route prospect on pedigree to this eye. The race did not come home particularly fast on the clock or impressive to the eye, however.

Sunday's scheduled Race 8 **Tampa Bay Downs** turf MSW lost its worthiness when it was washed off the grass to the main track. Second-timer HERTZALOT (Arnaud Delacour) was among eight who stayed in the race and flattened out late to be third, failing to show the turn of foot he did on grass in his debut and as his mama, Megahertz, once did. TWO JACKS WILD (Dennis Manning) ran to his versatile Colonel John sire line and scored in his second start.

They also were off the turf in Sunday's Race 7 MSW at **Fair Grounds**, where seven of the 12 remained to compete on the dirt. TENIENTE CORONEL (Paul McGee) – just as we saw at Tampa – showed the versatility of sire Colonel John in a slow-paced win vs. a soft field.

Giant's Causeway debut artist CUT THE NET (Mike Maker) loped home in a fall-apart **Turfway** Race 9 MSW on Saturday that paled in comparison to faster races on the card. While he's bred to run longer on both sides of the gene pool and has a nice, long stride, he needed nearly a :27 final quarter in this 6-furlong race to snatch victory by a head at 6-5.

Monday's **Aqueduct** card offered two MSW sprints and the New York-bred THE RHYTHMISRIGHT (Mike Hushion) clearly was superior in his Race 6 domination of state-breds. The 7 1/2-length winner in 1:11.88 went almost 5 lengths faster than open company MSW runners in Race 2. THE RHYTHMISRIGHT is a late May 19 foal by Into Mischief, and this win makes you wonder how fast his stablemate LOKI'S VENGEANCE (Mike Hushion) might be after handling this one easily in their Dec. 21 NYB MSW dash. For the record, Monday's Race 2 MSW open winner SCHIVARELLI (Eddie Kenneally) went about par with conditioned claimers on the card and has nothing but sprint on his pedigree.

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Just Wynn, Baby



Here we divulge this week's movers and shakers in the Wynn Las Vegas Futures. [Full, updated odds here.](#)

CONSTITUTION (Todd Pletcher) proved the week's huge dropper. The horse who opened at 200-1, sat at 125-1 going into last Saturday's debut win, plummeted all the way to 40-1 in this week's updated Derby Futures prices. Stablemate **COMMISSIONER** (Todd Pletcher) continued to be a hot commodity at the Wynn, as Johnny Avello dropped him from 35-1 a week ago to 28-1. **BAYERN** (Bob Baffert), who opened at 125-1 after his debut win, dropped to 75-1 this week. **MIDNIGHT HAWK** (Bob Baffert) dropped 20 points to 40-1 following the Sham.

High Fives

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

Maiden Race

1. HARTFORD (Gulfstream Park, 1/16) *NEW*
2. BAYERN (Santa Anita, 1/4)
3. CAN'THELPBELIEVING (GP, 1/11-T) *NEW*
4. COOL SAMURAI (Santa Anita, 12/27)
5. HARPOON (Gulfstream Park, 12/26)

Allowance Race

1. GOLD HAWK (Fair Grounds, 12/27)
2. COMMISSIONER (Gulfstream, 1/3)
3. RIDE AWAY (Tampa, 1/3-T)
4. CHITU (Santa Anita, 12/27)
5. KENDALL'S BOY (Fair Grounds, 1/11) *NEW*

Stakes Race

1. MIGHTY BROWN (Pasco Stakes, Tampa, 1/4)
2. ENTERPRISING (Eddie Logan, SA, 12/28-T)
3. MIDNIGHT HAWK (Sham, SA, 1/11) *NEW*
4. GENERAL A ROD (GP Derby, Gulfstream, 1/1)
5. GOLDEN MOON (Jerome, Aqueduct, 1/4)

Jeremy Plonk is owner of the handicapping-based website HorseplayerNOW.com and Countdowntothecrown.com. You can E-mail him at Jeremy@Horseplayernow.com.



SEASON 9 WEEK 3 – January 17, 2014

Jeremy Plonk's Top 20

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

UPDATED COMMENTS ON EACH CONTENDER THIS WEEK!

New: HARTFORD, CAN'THELPBELIEVING

1	HONOR CODE Trainer: Shug McGaughey Winter Home: Palm Meadows (Fla.) Worked 12/31, but not next 2 weeks.	11	HAVANA Trainer: Todd Pletcher Winter Home: Palm Meadows (Fla.) FoY target, but absent of winter works.
2	STRONG MANDATE Trainer: D. Wayne Lukas Winter Home: Oaklawn Park (Ark.) 5F in 1:04.20 Sunday on deep OP track.	12	CAN'THELPBELIEVING Trainer: Graham Motion Winter Home: Palm Meadows (Fla.) Loved 9F GP turf win; TP/Kee prep player.
3	SHARED BELIEF Trainer: Jerry Hollendorfer Winter Home: Santa Anita (Cal.) Foot issues forced to miss recent work.	13	TAPITURE Trainer: Steve Asmussen Winter Home: Fair Grounds (La.) Repeat good 5F 1:00.80 breeze Mon at FG.
4	CANDY BOY Trainer: John Sadler Winter Home: Santa Anita (Cal.) 5F in 1:01.40 Sat at SA w/ Lewis next.	14	MEXIKOMA Trainer: Rick Mettee Winter Home: Palm Meadows (Fla.) 4F breeze Thursday in 48.70, 3 rd of winter.
5	GOLD HAWK Trainer: Steve Asmussen Winter Home: Fair Grounds Big stakes test Saturday in Lecomte.	15	WICKED STRONG Trainer: Jimmy Jerkens Winter Home: Palm Meadows (Fla.) Breezed 1M Saturday at Pmm in 1:40.05.
6	COMMISSIONER Trainer: Todd Pletcher Winter Home: Palm Meadows (Fla.) Fountain of Youth likely next target.	16	BOND HOLDER Trainer: Doug O'Neill Winter Home: Santa Anita (Cal.) Consistent 6F SA drills for Risen Star date.
7	BOBBY'S KITTEN Trainer: Chad Brown Winter Home: Palm Meadows (Fla.) Back on tab Tues w/ easy 3F in 38.45b.	17	WRY Trainer: Gary "Red Dog" Hartlage Winter Home: Oaklawn Park (Ark.) Talented colt needs to get back on tab.
8	CAIRO PRINCE Trainer: Kiaran McLaughlin Winter Home: Palm Meadows (Fla.) Bullet Pmm 5F drills past 2 Mondays.	18	CULPRIT Trainer: Dale Romans Winter Home: Gulfstream Park (Fla.) Breezed 5F Thursday in 1:02.08 at GP.
9	HARTFORD Trainer: Todd Pletcher Winter Home: Palm Meadows (Fla.) This Jan. 16 debut winner deserves hype.	19	RISE UP Trainer: Tom Amoss Winter Home: Fair Grounds (La.) Ocala vacation, returns to work soon.
10	UNKNOWN ROAD Trainer: Al Stall, Jr. Winter Home: Fair Grounds (La.) Seeking an allowance before stakes bid.	20	COOL SAMURAI Trainer: John Shirreffs Winter Home: Santa Anita (Cal.) 4F drill Sat in 49.40 following 12/27 score.