

COUNTDOWN TO THE CROWN

SEASON 9 WEEK 4 – January 24, 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 drag race with Justin Bieber. It's all well and good until someone gets run over by a yellow Lamborghini.

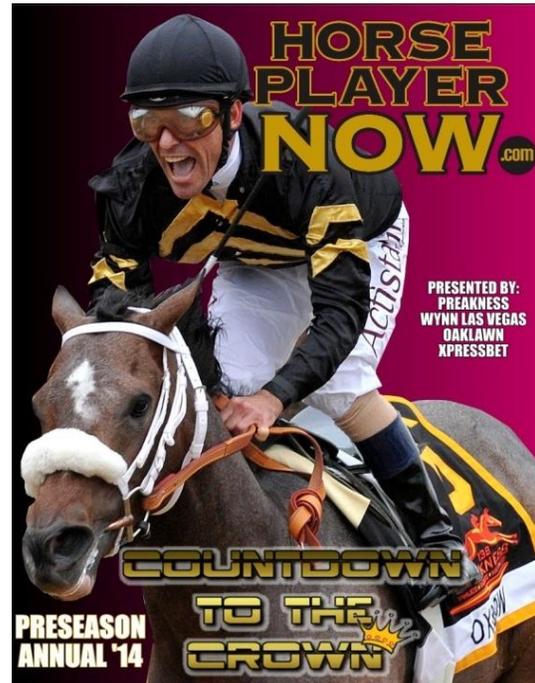
1. While it is productive to scout in January, it is March that matters. Derby/Preakness winners since 2003 are 5-for-8 combined in Jan., 7-for-11 in Feb., an astounding 17-for-23 in March and 9-for-17 in April.
2. Oaklawn consistently lures big fields and big crowds for its big 3YO races. Add in elements like the infield saddling experience, and you quickly realize why these dress rehearsals have been so successful the past decade.
3. John Velazquez's return to the saddle this week will have a bigger impact on Javier Castellano than anyone. Where do the Todd Pletcher stable's A and B-listers wind up, and who can make a move to and from Shug McGaughey when the timing is right?

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.

Undercard Tilts

An extremely busy weekend kicks off with a pair of very interesting offerings later today (Friday). All eyes will be on **Fair Grounds** for



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its Race 5 allowance route that could provide the follow-up act for UNKNOWN ROAD (Al Stall Jr.), a devastating Dec. 19 maiden winner just before the *Countdown* season began. Barn mate PURPLE SKY (Al Stall Jr.) also has a big talent upside, but you wonder if one was entered to help fill the field for the other and will scratch? INTERCHANGE (Thomas Clark) puts his 2-for-2 record on the line in his first outing since September's Whirling Ash Stakes at Delaware Park around two turns.

Friday's **Santa Anita** Race 2 turf mile allowance includes the return of multiple G1-placed juvenile DANCE WITH FATE (Peter Eurton) in his grass debut. He'll meet G3 Sham alum I'LL WRAP IT UP (Doug O'Neill) as well as G3 Hollywood Prevue third BROTHER SOLIDER (Craig Dollase).

Saturday's Holy Bull Stakes undercard at **Gulfstream Park** is loaded with 3-year-old heats. Race 3 is a 6-furlong MSW in which four-time bridesmaid ENDNOWMENT MANAGER (Terri Pompay) tries to finally say "I do." Well-bred LOVEFINDSAWAY (Eddie Plesa Jr.) returns from a Monmouth summer layoff with some talent in the hopper. They'll meet rookie

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ANCHOR DOWN (Todd Pletcher), half-brother to top 2013 3YO filly Sweet Lulu.

Gulfstream Race 4 on Saturday is a 1 1/16 miles allowance where inside speed has the big edge. TOP BILLING (Shug McGaughey) is expertly placed here after a too-good-to-lose second to COMMISSIONER (Todd Pletcher). The TAP barn counters with SURFING USA and MONOPOLIZE, and the track configuration gives SURFING USA an upset shot against TOP BILLING's late move. Saturday's **Gulfstream** Race 6 is a mile MSW around one turn, featuring the likes of I'MBETTERTHANGOOD (Kenny McPeek) and DECISIVE EDGE (Tony Dutrow), whose debut fourth at Laurel looked much better after a promising return run by its winner in Oaklawn's Smarty Jones Stakes on Monday. This appears a deep field worth following.

Race 4 Saturday at **Fair Grounds** puts MSW runners to a route test. STREET PRANCER (Steve Asmussen) and INDIAN RULER (Steve Asmussen) comprise a strong uncoupled entry. IRISH YOU WELL (Wayne Catalano) appears sitting on a big race in his second local start.

Laurel presents a Saturday Race 5 MSW at 7 furlongs on its Miracle Wood undercard. This race also piggybacks that key DECISIVE EDGE race as his Dec. 31 pursuers CENTER ON THE MOON (Graham Motion) and MINERS QUEST (Howard Wolfendale) headline the field. SPARKLING JEWEL (Gary Capuano) makes that all-important second-off-the-layoff start after a decent fourth to next-out Winkfield Stakes winner HOT HEIR SKIER (Ben Perkins Jr.).

Speaking of HOT HEIR SKIER, his Dec. 28 runner-up LOUD CAT (Steve Hobby) makes a barn change for Saturday's Race 7 maiden sprint at **Oaklawn**. Sharp-working firster INDIAN OUTLAW (Danny Peitz) looks ready from the box, while NO DISHONOR (Kenny McPeek) exits a third to GOLD HAWK (Steve Asmussen) at Churchill in November.

Ken Ramsey ships recent claim KOWBOY BOOTS (Mike Maker) to **Sam Houston** for Saturday's \$50,000 Allen's Landing Stakes, a race that appears to have come up very light.

A very interesting cross-section of maidens clashes in Sunday's Race 7 sprint at **Santa Anita**. DUBLIN UP (Peter Miller) changes barns from Dale Romans off a better-than-it-looks debut at Churchill in the fall; CHELIOS (Tom

Proctor) exits a strong debut second; RPRETTYBOYFLOYD (Denise Breuer) debuted runner-up to the best SA maiden winner I've seen this season in BAYERN (Bob Baffert); and we get a blue-blooded debut for COMMANDER LUTE (Bob Baffert), a son of stable stars Midnight Lute and Tough Tiz's Sis. Well-meant SAWYER'S HILL (Kristin Mulhall) also makes his return from a Del Mar debut third.

Aqueduct's Sunday card includes a Race 4 allowance at 1 1/16 miles. MATUSZAK (Bill Mott) and LAWMAKER (Chad Brown) give us our first Jerome Stakes barometers as they drop in class after fourth and fifth-place finishes.

The Sunday action at Gulfstream should provide graduation day for NOTABILITY (Dale Romans) in a Race 8 turf MSW route after running into some heavyweights in his prior tries. Only a rousing firster ready to be uncorked should stand in his way. Candidates include HINES (Todd Pletcher), a half-brother to turf ace Osidy; GOLDEN RUM (Christophe Clement), a half-brother to marathon grass runner Winchester; and JIGSAW (Christophe Clement), a Ghostzapper colt out of a half-sister to Memories of Silver.

Golden Gate Fields offers a pair of routes Sunday, featuring a Race 1 allowance at a mile. GRAZEN'S HOPE (Steve Miyadi) exits a fast debut sprint win and gets the distance test. A Race 7 MSW route at 1 1/16 miles also could put someone on the El Camino Real Derby trail.

Sunday's \$50,000 KHEY Y Country Sprint at **Sunland Park** includes the quick turn-around of fleet Jan. 10 allowance winner ALSONO (Justin Evans) and unbeaten Lost In The Fog Juvenile upsetter MY ROCHESTER (Robertino Diodoro).

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!

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- Holy Bull - (Saturday/Gulfstream Park)

GULFSTREAM PARK

Many pundits and fans have Remsen Stakes winner HONOR CODE (Shug McGaughey) atop their winter book lists at this stage, *Countdown* included. And while he will sit out the Holy Bull in favor of training up to next month's Fountain of Youth, this Saturday's main event will tell us plenty about the pro-tem leader on the east coast even in his absence.

CAIRO PRINCE (Kiaran McLaughlin) and WICKED STRONG (Jimmy Jerkens), the 2-3 finishers in the Remsen ([video](#)), pose the barometer as they compete in an exceptionally deep field of 11 for the Holy Bull. Neither is speed-crazy, but neither is completely devoid of early foot, so how they navigate the typically speed-friendly 1 1/16 miles at Gulfstream will be critical to their success in this stepping-stone. From posts 7 and 8, neither has drawn superb, but leave from posts that aren't impossible. Remsen fourth INTENSE HOLIDAY (Todd Pletcher) also returns, but I much prefer the previous pair from the same race.

I love the pedigrees of both CAIRO PRINCE and WICKED STRONG as the trail ensues. Neither would be a shock to be posing for a classics picture come spring. But from a handicapping standpoint, Remsen turn-backs are usually good bet-against types in their returns and the inside-speed nature of these GP races means COUP DE GRACE (Chad Brown) becomes squarely the horse to beat even with a lesser resume. The highly regarded Tapit colt will make his two-turn debut off a pair of hard-fought wins that will help his battle-tested mettle ([video](#)). But it is notable that Javier Castellano winds up on WICKED STRONG, a horse he's never ridden, while having previously piloted COUP DE GRACE.

ALMOST FAMOUS (Pat Byrne) also has pace and a good post No. 4 to use it Saturday under Calvin Borel. This is the combo that made Take Charge Indy a GP success on the trail a few years ago. But this colt might need a race with only a few works back since missing some time with a foot bruise. His mama Wild Gams was a highly dangerous sprinter. Another impressive CD winner worth watching here is CONQUEST

TITAN (Mark Casse), who's sustained mile run Nov. 30 showed some versatility and will.

On pedigree, there's no reason to think MR SPEAKER (Shug McGaughey) won't handle dirt. The Dania Beach winner on turf ([video](#)) could be out-footed early, however, and what you want to see from him is a nice move in the race that shows he can take dirt in the face and sustain a run, even if it comes up short.

Eight straight Holy Bull winners were exiting a victory and the "now" horse has been better than the "name" horse in recent mild upsets.

Get more historical trends and significance on the Holy Bull Stakes by visiting page 80 of the *Countdown to the Crown Preseason Annual* simply by [clicking this link](#).

Holy Bull Stakes selections:

W) COUP DE GRACE; P) CAIRO PRINCE;
S) WICKED STRONG.

- Miracle Wood Stakes - (Saturday/Laurel Park)



Maryland's Preakness path begins Saturday with the \$100,000 Miracle Wood at a one-turn mile on the dirt. The **Laurel Park** elongated stretch will be in play as the second finish line is used. This could be a key point with much of the field stretching out a bit in distance from traditional sprints.

JOINT CUSTODY (Jerry Robb) ran out more than \$180,000 in earnings after debuting in a \$25,000 maiden claimer at Timonium. The over-achiever finished 2013 with back-to-back stakes wins at Laurel going 7 furlongs and his company lines flattered him as they fanned out in various races around the region.

One of JOINT CUSTODY's stakes came in the Dec. 7 Marylander against Miracle Wood re-matchers EXTRASEXYHIPPIZTER (Mike Trombetta), JESSE THEMARINE (John Rigattieri) and GERMANIC (Tim Tullock). All three have gone on to good efforts since then, affirming the form of that Marylander Stakes ([video](#)) – although held on a sealed muddy track. Every time they made a run at JOINT CUSTODY, jockey Wesley Ho had another gear to let out and keep his speedster comfortable.

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New cast members for the Miracle Wood include MASTER LIGHTNING (Todd Pletcher), who has failed to impress in three stakes tries in New York vs. tougher and seeks a class drop against some talented locals. UNDERTAKER (John Servis) had a breakout maiden win last time at Parx on a sloppy track, but if it's fast, it's reasonable to make him prove it again. He's also cross-entered in a Sunday Aqueduct allowance and could wind up there.

Miracle Wood Stakes selections

W) JOINT CUSTODY; P) JESSETHEMARINE;
S) GERMANIAC.

- California Cup Derby - (Saturday/Santa Anita)



Saturday's California Sunshine Millions Day card at **Santa Anita** includes a bevy of stakes and this \$250,000 headliner for 3-year-old Cal-breds deserves our attention. Any route race with an 11-horse field this time of year provides a good measuring stick, and with G1 Del Mar Futurity winner TAMARANDO (Jerry Hollendorfer) in the favorite's role, this should be a nice test.

TAMARANDO finished third last month in the G1 CashCall Futurity at Hollywood to stablemate SHARED BELIEF (Jerry Hollendorfer), who recently was named 2013 Eclipse Champion 2-Year-Old Male. He would seem an overwhelming favorite against state-breds, but the challenges in the Cal Cup Derby could prove legitimate.

CALIFORNIA CHROME (Art Sherman), AOTEAROA (Leonard Powell) and LUCKY VIEWS (Mike Machowsky) all bring a level of intrigue to the field for various reasons. CALIFORNIA CHROME was exceptionally fast sprinting in the King Glorious last time ([video](#)) and fast synthetic horses often don't have a major transition issue to a dirt route if forwardly placed and avoiding the kick-back.

AOTEAROA has shown a strong turn of foot as a turf miler and will have to overcome a turf pedigree and the kickback to make the transition. LUCKY VIEWS ran very game in the Eddie Logan on turf last time ([video](#)) to next-

out Cal Derby runner-up ENTERPRISING (Tom Proctor). His pedigree says dirt will be fine, but the additional 1/16th of a mile could be a more difficult hurdle.

ELECTRIC EDDIE (Ben Cecil) was second in the Real Quiet vs. open company at 2 ([video](#)), and BETTER BET (Mike Harrington) won the Golden State Juvenile on Cal Cup Day the last time this set of runners got together going long on dirt. With a 7-pound weight break, I'm going to take a shot here with ELECTRIC EDDIE, who got a confidence boost dropping back into the maiden ranks last time and already has proven he fits on the stakes front.

Cal Cup Derby selections:

W) ELECTRIC EDDIE; P) TAMARANDO;
S) CALIFORNIA CHROME.

Last week's selections:

3: 0-2-1.

We keep ourselves honest here all season long with our most recent and cumulative stats for top choices (starts: wins-second-thirds). I don't like the second-itis to start the season, but we're getting beat by our second and third choices and running well, so we're in the mix.

Time to pick it up!

Season selections: 4: 0-3-1.

Everyone's a Critic

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

Stakes Races



Saturday's G3 Lecomte Stakes at **Fair Grounds** looked an awful lot like last year's renewal, won by eventual Preakness champ Oxbow. No one is saying VICAR'S IN TROUBLE (Mike Maker) has a classic trophy in his sight at this stage, but the front-running, drawing-away performance did harken back images from a year ago. VICAR'S IN TROUBLE was never in trouble in this Lecomte edition, leaving no doubt as he opened up 6 ¾ lengths on the field through the wire.

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Jockey Rosie Napravnik had a hard hold down the backstretch as VICAR'S IN TROUBLE could have overtaken early pace target ROMAN UNBRIDLED (Chad Cook) at any point. When called up, the son of Into Mischief assumed command and ran up the score through the lane. For a two-turn debut, you could not have asked for a more professional or fundamental-building score from this Louisiana-bred. The waters will get much deeper with shippers in the Risen Star, guaranteed to lure some California, Florida and Arkansas interest. But a similar effort to the Lecomte would make for a potential repeat.

Runner-up ALBANO (Larry Jones) also was making his route debut and simply could not keep up with VICAR'S IN TROUBLE through the stretch. ALBANO did lose some ground on the turns to his rival, and galloped out with good energy as well. So this was a positive experience for the Istan colt, who ran farther and better than I expected.

Expectations were not met, however, by GOLD HAWK (Steve Asmussen), who was hard to load for the second time in three starts. Perhaps his head wasn't into business coming back on fairly short rest while making his third start in just a seven-week stretch. But GOLD HAWK moved to contention at the quarter-pole and was terribly disappointing in his inability to pass ALBANO with clear aim on the place money. This is a very talented and well-bred Empire Maker-Caressing colt who deserves several more chances before abandoning him. Even so, you have to be disappointed how this race panned out.

The 1-2-3-4 pace players stayed the same throughout, just that the leader faded to fourth while the others held their positions. The splits for the mile and 70 yards were 23.71, 24.09, 25.31, 25.25 and 4.21. The final time was about 3 lengths quicker than the same-day Silverbulletday for 3YO fillies. All in all, this was a productive Lecomte that makes you want to see more, for both positive and negative reasons, from the race's top three finishers.

Check out the historical significance of the Lecomte Stakes by visiting page 76 of the Countdown to the Crown Preseason Annual by [clicking this link](#).

Monday's \$150,000 Smarty Jones Stakes at **Oaklawn** over a two-turn mile provided far more positives coming out of the race than it boasted potential going into it. The field looked modest on paper, hence the heavy 6-5 favoritism on COASTLINE (Mark Casse) despite exiting an 8th-place run in the G3 Delta Jackpot.

But the post-script on this race leaves a positive impression on several runners moving forward, and with this race's short and successful history behind it, it's wise to respect its results. Let's take it from the top.

TANZANITE CAT (Cody Autrey) struck the region's first chord for the Fair Grounds circuit with his ship and win on the road. In fact, FG-based MSW/ALW horses finished first and fourth. TANZANITE CAT pounced with a great, first-run trip from the two-path in overtaking WALT (Chris Hartman). This son of Arkansas Derby winner Graeme Hall obviously showed his papa's fondness for the OP footing. With stablemate PAGANOL (Cody Autrey) also possible for the Southwest at Oaklawn, TANZANITE CAT could be headed back to Fair Grounds for the Risen Star with some options.

Runner-up WALT set honest fractions over a surface that expectedly has been rather slow early in the meet. Race splits were 23.17, 24.20, 24.94 and 26.38. That's not as abrupt a slowing at Oaklawn as you often see. The last furlong clocked 13.17, which isn't too bad for this surface. This race came home a bit faster on the back end than Will Take Charge's all-out win a year ago and much faster than Caleb's Posse over a heavy track in 2011.

WALT proved very game after an aggressive, backstretch move on the inside by jockey Ken Tohill. WALT validated the Springboard Mile result, and specifically its top-two quality finishers, LOUIE'S FLOWER (Bret Calhoun) and NOBLE CORNERSTONE (Wesley Ward).

But the trip notes and positives extend beyond the top pair. The gallop-out for FIRE STARTER (Steve Hobby) was absolutely huge. His race unraveled when he didn't corner the first bend at all, perhaps because he exited a long, one-

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turn mile at Laurel, and the left-hander came up on him quickly. FIRE STARTER continued on a total mess fighting the rider the first three furlongs, then went into a sustained drive for five furlongs. It was pure router style! This is a fascinating prospect for a respected barn.

COASTLINE (Mark Casse) was overbet at 6-5 from that No. 10 post, but had every chance and didn't deliver. He got within the 2-3 path on clubhouse turn, without a huge amount of ground loss. He will have to move forward to contend with the big shippers to come, but has some talent witnessed at Churchill at age 2.

SON OF A PREACHER (Bret Calhoun) didn't handle the infield saddling hubbub as well as he could have, and expended some pre-race energy – but still ran decent. He may improve with this environmental experience next time.

Maiden UNSTOPPABLE COLBY (D. Wayne Lukas) was a bit reluctant to load, didn't break and show his expected speed, and then raced very wide with a middle-move before flattening out. There's more from him than this.

Check out the historical significance of the Smarty Jones Stakes by visiting page 78 of the Countdown to the Crown Preseason Annual by [clicking this link](#).

GULFSTREAM PARK

I love it when good horses show up with their A-games and put on a show. Sunday's \$100,000 Kitten's Joy on the **Gulfstream Park** turf was such a scenario as STORMING INTI (Chad Brown) and WE MISS ARTIE (Todd Pletcher) duked it out. A wafer-thin win margin got STORMING INTI's picture taken, but in reality both of these superstars ran winning races ([video](#)). This race provided my top stakes grade of 2014 so far, no matter which surface.

STORMING INTI settled nicely on the front end for Alan Garcia and registered his fourth straight win (third in a stakes) despite giving up the lead for a few strides in the stretch. WE MISS ARTIE, winner of the G1 Breeders' Futurity at Keeneland, ran a dynamite race in his first turf try since August. If there was any criticism, or reason for defeat, it was that WE MISS ARTIE ran with his head high for much of the stretch and that inefficiency or fatigue

certainly could have cost him the half-inch margin of defeat.

CABO CAT (Mark Hennig) came with a sharp run to be third despite no significant pace help and fourth-place SCORIA (Christophe Clement) also finished up well and galloped out nicely. This looks like an excellent race with quality contenders heading to the exits. Classy, older open \$50,000 claimers – several former stakes types – went about 1 ½ lengths faster over this course/distance earlier in the card.

Check out the historical significance of the Kitten's Joy by visiting p. 77 of the Countdown to the Crown Preseason Annual by [clicking this link](#).



EXIT STAGE LEFT (Jerry Hollendorfer) proved his class in advancing to 3-for-3 lifetime – all stakes – when he beat highly regarded SoCal shipper ENTERPRISING (Tom Proctor) on the money in Saturday's 1 1/16 miles California Derby at **Golden Gate Fields**.

Under North America's all-time leading rider Russell Baze, EXIT STAGE LEFT set a rhythmic tempo with splits of 23.86, 24.34, 24.76, 24.83 and 6.28 when needed late. While his sire Noonmark was all sprints, EXIT STAGE LEFT gets some stamina on the damside the way you like to see it from Peaks And Valleys. The El Camino Real Derby appears next on the docket and will test him at 1 1/8 miles.

ENTERPRISING, without regular rider Gary Stevens (who was at Gulfstream to ride Mucho Macho Man to victory in the Sunshine Millions Classic), moved a bit soon into the far turn, found no room around that bend, but had every shot from the top of the lane home and could not sustain a run like he did in his turf-mile explosions. He never got past EXIT STAGE LEFT even past the wire and was second-best. He looks to be a horse who has a sharp burst, but not a sustained run, and that rarely plays out beyond middle-distances. There's talent, but perhaps not a long run in him. Coming back on three weeks' rest and switching riders could be legitimate talking points in defeat.

This marked the seventh time Baze and Hollendorfer have won the Cal Derby.

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INDIANAPOLIS (Bob Baffert) caught a soft cast in Monday's \$75,000 San Pedro Stakes at Santa Anita and sprinted to his second win in as many tries. He opened up on his own through the stretch without much urging from Martin Garcia and looked dynamite in doing so ([video](#)). The San Pedro final time was a sharp 1:08.80, including a final furlong that went in an impressive 11.86. The impeccably bred Medaglia d'Oro-Pretty 'n Smart colt certainly has every right to route and should get that chance next time. Like Baffert, I loved this performance in the San Pedro.

"He's got that superstar status," Baffert said in the post-race interview with a specific mention of the first Saturday in May and mapping out a plan to get this horse to the Triple Crown.

The three challengers Monday included runner-up PAPA TURF (James Kasperoff), who had been fourth in the Hollywood Prevue.



HOT HEIR SKIER (Ben Perkins Jr.), a *Countdown* tab off his Laurel maiden win in late December, outran his rivals Monday to win the \$100,000 Jimmy Winkfield Stakes at **Aqueduct** ([video](#)). (He was a Horse Player NOW BUZZ report 5-star play, \$7.50 to win.)

But the talented son of Wildcat Heir may have paid a price in doing so. Jockey Jose Ortiz was visibly looking around as his spent colt drifted and shifted late in the race in what was a visually worrisome manner. Keep a close eye on how long it takes HOT HEIR SKIER to return to the workout tab. No doubt, this is one sharp sprinter, but will not run on farther. OLIVER ZIP (Kelly Breen) settled for second for the second straight time in local listed sprint stakes. None of the Winkfield runners project out to routes.

In restricted stakes action, Saturday's \$85,000 Pepsi Cola Stakes at **Sunland Park** showed how sharp top New Mexico-bred PROCEED (Joel Marr) may be. His Hedeman Mile pursuers

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came back to run first, third and fourth in this state-bred sprint stakes, led by REAPER (Todd Fincher), now a three-time stakes winner.

ACES N JACKS (Caroline Dodwell) romped to his second win in three starts in Saturday night's \$50,000 Groovy Stakes for Texas-breds at **Sam Houston**. The sprint-bred gelding, who took some action at Wynn Las Vegas following his Retama debut in November, ran almost 7 lengths slower Saturday than the older horses in the Texas Champions Night featured sprint.

For graduates of the Ocala sales, Tuesday's OBS Sprint at **Ocala** went to PRUDHOE BAY (Eddie Plesa Jr.), flattering the form of his Dec. 15 conqueror COUP DE GRACE (Chad Brown) and bolstering that one's reputation into Saturday's Holy Bull at Gulfstream. Both MIGHTY BROWN (Tim Ice) and GREEN MASK (Wesley Ward) finished well back in disappointing efforts. But all was not lost for WW as HERE'S JOHNNY (Wesley Ward) outdueled CANZONI (Todd Pletcher) in the \$100,000 OBS Championship at 1 1/16 miles on Tapeta. The versatile HERE'S JOHNNY, by Colonel John, would appear on course to return to Keeneland this spring.

Allowance Races

ROMAN FIRE (Tony Dutrow) fired a couple of low 23s on the board on the front end of Sunday's Race 8 **Parx** allowance route and kept on going, upsetting favorite ALEX INC. (Butch Reid). ROMAN FIRE galloped out strong past the wire and was visually sharp in this performance beating a highly respected challenger in ALEX INC, who lost ground on the first turn but wasn't getting to ROMAN FIRE in the lane when it counted. Either one of these horses could be highly competitive in New York this winter and bear watching.

Pasco Stakes third-place finisher GIANCARLO (Efren Loza Jr.) was pummeled to 1-9 favoritism last Friday in a **Calder** Race 7 allowance he wasn't supposed to lose. But it was runaway winner TASHIR (Genaddi Dorochenko) who ran like the 1-9 shot and highly impressed this eye. TASHIR rolled home by nearly 10 lengths in a good time for a normally modest Calder surface. It was his first start since the Keeneland fall meet, and TASHIR was stakes-placed routing at Delaware Park at age 2. We have seen this barn rock the trail in the past. By Afleet Alex out of a Slewacide mare, TASHIR looks like one who could run on farther and

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could be interesting in a variety of stakes dates next at what likely will be an overlooked price.

Odds-on EMMETT PARK (Robert Pincins) put himself on the Spiral Stakes trail Friday by rallying to take a **Turfway Park** Race 8 allowance in the final strides. Pacesetter ARTEMUS COALMINE (Mike Maker) dueled hard on the front end in his route debut before giving way late. A :27.33 final quarter left something to be desired after the swift beginning to this mile test. EMMETT PARK has now won both career starts, both at a mile on Polytrack, and the gelded son of Bob and John will get a stakes test next.

Fast New York-bred LOKI'S VENGEANCE (Mike Hushion), whom we had indentified here in recent weeks based on sharp company lines, dominated his second straight sprint cast in Monday's Race 2 state-bred allowance at **Aqueduct**. Ridden out hard in 1:10.88, he looks like sprints may be his calling for now, but the pedigree should get more distance. The time was faster than the same-day Jimmy Winkfield stakes for open company 3YOs, so this is a pretty nice runner.

RED OUTLAW (Peter Miller) returned from a seven-month break to best three rivals Monday at **Golden Gate Fields** in an entry-level allowance sprint. And at **Tampa Bay Downs** on Wednesday, EARLY ENTRY (Kathleen O'Connell) led virtually wire to wire at 3-5 in winning a slowly run, first-level allowance sprint. EARLY ENTRY had been fourth in the Pasco and second in the Inaugural at Tampa.

Maiden Races

Personal Ensign's great-grandson DIVINE OATH (Todd Pletcher) debuted a **Gulfstream** Race 1 turf maiden route winner on Saturday pounding out the 24s in a rhythmic run. When engaged, and passed briefly in mid-stretch, he re-rallied nicely on the inside and drew clear through the gallop-out. There's a lot to like about this Broken Vow colt on multiple surfaces moving down the line. The TAP stable also had a turf maiden breaker Monday at **Gulfstream** with even-money shot GALA AWARD (Todd Pletcher), a determined, second-start winner by Bernardini. GALA AWARD is half-brother to the fast router Stormello.

Saturday's **Gulfstream** card also included a Race 4 dirt MSW at 1 1/8 miles. TONALIST

(Christophe Clement), exiting a solid debut fourth in a super-tough Aqueduct mile in November, earned high marks for this win. Most 9F early season races are carousels, but TONALIST relaxed, came wide and gave away considerable ground on both turns, yet still drew away from pacemaker GLOBAL STRIKE (Todd Pletcher) in professional fashion. He ran his final 3 furlongs in the mid :37s despite all the ground loss, which is encouraging over a good field on paper. Disappointments included Uncle Mo's little bro SOUPERFAST (Bill Mott) and Kentucky Jockey Club Stakes third-place finisher AWESOME SKY, who ran fifth and seventh, respectively, with little excuse. The Kentucky Jockey Club Stakes continues to be let down by its alumni, not the best of signs for its winner, TAPITURE (Steve Asmussen).

Last Friday's **Santa Anita** Race 6 maiden route could prove an interesting barometer of recent winners who had impressed. EL NINO TERRIBLE (Peter Miller) wired a carousel field that went 1-2-3 throughout, and in doing so flattered the form of his Jan. 4 dominator BAYERN (Bob Baffert). But it was the lackluster showing of three different pursuers of COOL SAMURAI (John Shirreffs) in this reappearance that was particularly stark and perhaps telling in terms of form un-flattery for that Dec. 27 MSW victor. Those rivals ran third, fourth and seventh, the latter being a total flop by THE ADMIRAL (Bob Baffert). Well-bet and well-bred rookie DAY OF FURY (Bob Baffert) ran like a total headcase and will be back to square one.

We mentioned last week about **Santa Anita** winter MSW dashes-past producing the likes of Bodemeister and Paynter, so Saturday's Race 6 event at 5 1/2 furlongs came with some real promise based on its potential. ROGER ROCKET (Bob Baffert) rallied wide to win, closing into a blistering pace that folded the duelers late. But it was hard-luck third LITTLE CURLIN (Jerry Hollendorfer) who likely was best if not for being shut off completely inside the final furlong. Both deserve attention moving forward as ROGET ROCKET is by Pulpit and from a strong female family. He'll run on farther than this. LITTLE CURLIN, the half-brother to Hoh Buzzard, will not be a maiden beyond his next start and certainly is bred to handle more trip than this. Runner-up FEROCIOUS (Ron Ellis) ran a corker up near the lead as the best of the pace players to hang on late in his debut. This has potential key race written all over it.

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COUNTDOWN TO THE CROWN

SEASON 9 WEEK 4 – January 24, 2014

Also at **Santa Anita**, Monday's Race 4 MSW turf route provided a last-to-first whoosh by rookie **TEXAS RYANO** (Carla Gaines). The well-bred son of Curlin and blue hen mare Blending Element was overlooked by the bettors based on workouts, but proved quite eye-catching late. **TEXAS RYANO** was last in a bulky field at the top of the lane, steadied twice looking for a seam and then roared by them all in a few jumps. His siblings Tiz A Blend and Tiz Elemental were awfully good on turf/synthetic sprinting and at middle distances.

BITTERS 'N BOURBON (Ron Moquett) graduated in his second lifetime start Saturday at **Oaklawn** in a Race 5 MSW mile. The Old Fashioned colt applied vastly different tactics in this wire-to-wire effort than in his rallying sprint debut third at Churchill. But a 27.84 final quarter-mile should have invited more closers to the party, and did not. Note that the OP surface was quicker on this day than most we've seen early in the meet. I would stand against **BITTERS 'N BOURBON** if he rises into the stakes ranks off this win, while runner-up **CONQUEST AFLEET** (Mark Casse) did make up ground and likely will be a short price in his MSW return.

CANDY PASSION (Jeff Bonde), a well-bred Candy Ride gelding who is half-brother to graded stakes sprinter Rush With Thunder, wired **Golden Gate** Race 1 MSW sprinters on Saturday to kick off Cal Derby Day. All out to the line, I wouldn't expect this one to return to Santa Anita and be a factor much farther. He did go about 2 lengths faster than the Race 4 split division, won by ex-maiden claimer **GG RYDER** (Jerry Hollendorfer).

Sprint-pedigreed **RY'S THE MAN** (Neil Pessin) rallied to win Sunday's **Fair Grounds** Race 6 MSW turf dash in his fifth lifetime start.

Ballyhooed Jan. 11 Gulfstream debut winner **CONSTITUTION** (Todd Pletcher) got a smidgen of form flattery Saturday when his distant fifth-place pursuer **RIVER PRIDE** (Sal Santoro) returned to his **Calder** home base and easily dispatched a Race 3 MSW sprint group at 7-5.

Impressive Dec. 27 **Aqueduct** NY-bred MSW winner **UNCLE SIGH** (Gary Contessa) got a form boost Saturday when his closest pursuer, **PAX IN TERRA** (Todd Pletcher), returned to break his maiden in a Race 4 state-bred route despite a wide trip.

Just Wynn, Baby



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

HARTFORD (Todd Pletcher) took a big hit from 100 to 40-1 this week, **INDIANAPOLIS** (Bob Baffert) dropped to 50-1 after Monday's win, **TONALIST** (Christophe Clement) debuted at a very low 60-1 for a new offering. **VICAR'S IN TROUBLE** (Mike Maker) fell 50 points to 25-1 after his Lecomte score, while **UNKNOWN ROAD** (Al Stall Jr.) was an interesting mover from 45-1 to 30-1 without running.

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)
2. **BAYERN** (Santa Anita, 1/4)
3. **TONALIST** (Gulfstream, 1/18) *NEW*
4. **CAN'THELPBELIEVING** (GP, 1/11-T)
5. **HARPOON** (Gulfstream Park, 12/26)

Allowance Race

1. **COMMISSIONER** (Gulfstream, 1/3)
2. **GOLD HAWK** (Fair Grounds, 12/27)
3. **ROMAN FIRE** (Parx, 1/19) *NEW*
4. **TASHIR** (Calder, 1/17) *NEW*
5. **RIDE AWAY** (Tampa, 1/3-T)

Stakes Race

1. **STORMING INTI** (Kitten's Joy, GP, 1/19-T) *NEW*
2. **VICAR'S IN TROUBLE** (Lecomte, FG, 1/18) *NEW*
3. **INDIANAPOLIS** (San Pedro, SA, 1/20) *NEW*
4. **MIDNIGHT HAWK** (Sham, SA, 1/11)
5. **TANZANITE CAT** (Smarty Jones, OP, 1/20) *NEW*

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

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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: INDIANAPOLIS, VICAR'S IN TROUBLE, STORMING INTI, WE MISS ARTIE

1	<u>HONOR CODE</u> Trainer: Shug McGaughey Winter Home: Palm Meadows (Fla.) Breezed 3F Sat in 38.10 (1 st since 12/31).	11	<u>HAVANA</u> Trainer: Todd Pletcher Winter Home: Palm Meadows (Fla.) Swale more likely 1 st target? No works yet.
2	<u>STRONG MANDATE</u> Trainer: D. Wayne Lukas Winter Home: Oaklawn Park (Ark.) Strong 5F Mon in 1:00.60 for Southwest.	12	<u>VICAR'S IN TROUBLE</u> Trainer: Mike Maker Winter Home: Fair Grounds (La.) LA-bred answered class ??? in Lecomte.
3	<u>SHARED BELIEF</u> Trainer: Jerry Hollendorfer Winter Home: Santa Anita (Cal.) Expected return to worktab any day now.	13	<u>STORMING INTI</u> Trainer: Chad Brown Winter Home: Palm Meadows (Fla.) If he handles fast dirt, this turfer is serious.
4	<u>CANDY BOY</u> Trainer: John Sadler Winter Home: Santa Anita (Cal.) Sharp 5F Sat in 59.60 pointing to Lewis.	14	<u>GOLD HAWK</u> Trainer: Steve Asmussen Winter Home: Fair Grounds Rest & rebound needed after flat Lecomte.
5	<u>COMMISSIONER</u> Trainer: Todd Pletcher Winter Home: Palm Meadows (Fla.) FoY next. Off since 1/3 win; drill looms.	15	<u>CAN'THELPBELIEVING</u> Trainer: Graham Motion Winter Home: Palm Meadows (Fla.) 1/11 turf winner back working soon; Poly+
6	<u>BOBBY'S KITTEN</u> Trainer: Chad Brown Winter Home: Palm Meadows (Fla.) Consecutive Tues drills, up to 4F this wk.	16	<u>TAPITURE</u> Trainer: Steve Asmussen Winter Home: Fair Grounds (La.) Strong FG breezes; Ky JC form looking iffy.
7	<u>CAIRO PRINCE</u> Trainer: Kiaran McLaughlin Winter Home: Palm Meadows (Fla.) Fresh a.m. for Holy Bull – not easing in.	17	<u>MEXIKOMA</u> Trainer: Rick Mettee Winter Home: Palm Meadows (Fla.) Easy 5F breeze Wednesday in 1:02.75.
8	<u>INDIANAPOLIS</u> Trainer: Bob Baffert Winter Home: Santa Anita (Cal.) San Pedro "wow," pedigree for more.	18	<u>WICKED STRONG</u> Trainer: Jimmy Jerkens Winter Home: Palm Meadows (Fla.) Holy Bull gives us Remsen barometer.
9	<u>HARTFORD</u> Trainer: Todd Pletcher Winter Home: Palm Meadows (Fla.) 1/16 debut winner awaits next work.	19	<u>BOND HOLDER</u> Trainer: Doug O'Neill Winter Home: Santa Anita (Cal.) Another 6F move Mon 1/20 for Risen Star.
10	<u>UNKNOWN ROAD</u> Trainer: Al Stall, Jr. Winter Home: Fair Grounds (La.) Friday ALW route at FG w/ circumstance.	20	<u>WE MISS ARTIE</u> Trainer: Todd Pletcher Winter Home: Palm Meadows (Fla.) Sharp return vs. 'Inti'; takes Kee route.