

COUNTDOWN TO THE CROWN

SEASON 9 WEEK 5 – January 31, 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 playing the Super Bowl in northern New Jersey in February. Cold and stupid are no way to go through life.

1. The internet hullabaloo about the testicles of UNKNOWN ROAD (Al Stall Jr.) became entertaining weekend banter after his disastrous loss Friday at 1-5 odds. It was the most anticipated ball-drop since at least New Year's Eve.
2. Jerry Hollendorfer, trainer of ill-footed champion juvenile SHARED BELIEF, may not owe the media a thing as he's made it obvious. But he does owe Santa Anita publicists – the media notes writer and in-house television commentators – a fair and accurate news update. Free housing for his horses at Santa Anita and checks in the horsemen's bookkeeper account paid for by wagering handle give them plenty of right to know what's going on with the west coast's leading Triple Crown hopeful.
3. Stating the Orb-vious, TOP BILLING (Shug McGaughey) will start looking a whole lot like last year's same-barn Kentucky Derby winner to a whole lot of people. These are the same people who will tell you historical trends and anecdotes mean nothing – until one fits their narrative.

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

It's an awfully busy Friday (later today), so let's get to it! Friday's **Aqueduct** Race 3 allowance mile for NY-breds could give us some Withers Stakes barometer for SAMRAAT (Rick Violette). His Damon Runyon Stakes third-place pursuer DECEIVED (Leah Gyarmati) returns. The same card includes a Race 6 MSW mile that includes the improving WOELF DEN (Kieran McLaughlin) and READ THE MIRAGE (Jeremiah Englehart), the latter exiting a key race.

GLACKEN TOO (Bret Calhoun) reappears Friday in a **Fair Grounds** Race 7 MSW sprint after a distant second to fleeting comet UNKNOWN ROAD (Al Stall Jr.). Read more about that rival in this week's review section. This heat includes several sharp-working, big-barn types and could be interesting to follow.

Oaklawn Race 6 on Friday is a 3-year-old & older MSW sprint in which sophomore KNOCK EM FLAT (Donnie K. Von Hemel) makes a barn switch from Jeff Mullins and was last seen second at Del Mar.

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Well-bred TOURIST (Bill Mott) has shipped south from the NYRA winter and will seek a maiden breaker Friday in a **Tampa Bay Downs** Race 7 turf mile – if he can draw in off the also-eligible list. Firster SO KITTEN (Graham Motion) would appear to have some run.

On the minor stakes front Saturday at **Turfway Park**, the 96 Rock Stakes (formerly Turfway Prevue Stakes) kicks off the local road to the Spiral. Sharp Indiana-bred BISQUE (Tom Amoss) meets speedy ARTEMIS COALMINE (Mike Maker) in this 6 ½ furlong affair.

Saturday's **Gulfstream Park** undercard on Hutcheson Day features a pair of 3YO tilts. Race 5 could give us a better line on Jan. 11 maiden winner CONSTITUTION (Todd Pletcher), as his third-place chaser GREYFELL (Bill Mott) returns after a series of close nibbles. First-time starter SASSICAIA (Chad Brown) brings his \$1.6 million pricetag to the track as a son of Bernardini from the female family of Timber Country. Race 7 at GP offers MSW runners a two-turn turf test. None of the experienced horses look like world-beaters. Rookies include the Medaglia d'Oro colt TRECATTLE (Tom Albertrani), from a splendid female turf family.

The fastest Iowa-bred since John Wayne's draw, BOJI MOON (Chris Richard), makes his 3-year-old debut in a curious Saturday Race 7 allowance sprint at **Oaklawn**. The event is a second-level allowance for 3-year-olds and up and a pretty salty spot. BOJI MOON was brilliant at 2, but proven short of legitimate route distances against top horses.

CASIGUAPO (Mario Morales), one of the more battle-hardened juveniles of his crop, returns Sunday in a **Gulfstream** Race 10 allowance sprint at 6 furlongs. Second in the G1 Hopeful and G3 Delta Jackpot, the turn-back in distance is surprising for an advanced colt making his sixth start.

Super Bowl Sunday at **Parx** offers a Race 4 MSW mile where well-bred rookie CEE NO MORE (Tony Dutrow) may be worth watching. The Tiznow colt hails from a strong female family.

Fair Grounds' Sunday Race 6 offers turf milers a MSW date, including re-matched Dec. 22 rivals GALTON (Andrew McKeever) and COLONEL KRENZ (Jimmy Baker).

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!

**- Withers Stakes -
(Saturday/Aqueduct)**



AQUEDUCT

New York-breds SAMRAAT (Rick Violette) and UNCLE SIGH (Gary Contessa) combined to win their most recent starts by 30 lengths and will put their gaudy resumes on the line vs. open company rivals in Saturday's **G3 \$250,000 Withers at Aqueduct**. It's a field of six lacking an open stakes winner to date, making it a perfect launching pad for a class riser.

With G2 Jerome winner NOBLE MOON (Leah Gyarmati) back at the barn, the Withers will accept the 2-3 Jerome finishers among its favorites, CLASSIC GIACNROLL (Lisa Guerrero) and SCOTLAND (Tony Dutrow). Parx shipper HONORABLE JUDGE (Butch Reid) invades for a highly respected barn and is well-meant for distance. STREET GENT (Leah Gyarmati) looks like an overmatched substitute for barnmate NOBLE MOON.

The Jerome alumni have been impotent in their returns of late, and that race came home visually poor and on the clock ([video](#)). I will take my chances against CLASSIC GIACNROLL and SCOTLAND in this spot even with what might look like a class edge on paper. I don't think it's an edge in reality, however.

So, which NY-bred do you like ... or will it be 'JUDGE-ment day from Parx?

SAMRAAT, winner of the Damon Runyon ([video](#)), hit the road to South Florida in mid-December to train and will be returning home to New York for this engagement. With the weather in the northeast iffy this time of year,

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you can't fault the intent to get south, but you also have to consider some mileage on the mental odometer for SAMRAAT in travel. He's never trailed in 3 starts, but has yet to be tested late for guts. That could change Saturday.

UNCLE SIGH won't let SAMRAAT run free early, and his 14-length maiden route romp Dec. 27 was no less impressive than what we've seen from SAMRAAT. He's been firing bullets at nearby Belmont and the feeling here is that he could engage SAMRAAT in earnest down the backstretch. If that's the case ...

HONORABLE JUDGE, a son of Afleet Alex out of a Wild Again mare, will appreciate all the pace he can get in front of him. Trainer Reid can be deadly, and he could have taken the road to Maryland last week for the Miracle Wood. The confidence to bring his Parx runner north for \$250,000 does not go unnoticed here. Visually I like what I saw from this colt at Parx and actually picked him to win at Churchill when he laid an egg in the Iroquois. I'm doubling down in the Withers.

Get more historical trends and significance on the Withers Stakes by visiting page 82 of the Countdown to the Crown Preseason Annual simply by [clicking this link](#).

Withers Stakes Stakes selections:

W) HONORABLE JUDGE; P) SAMRAAT;
S) CLASSIC GIACNROLL.

- Sam F. Davis Stakes - (Saturday/Tampa Bay Downs)



The **G3 \$250,000 Sam F. Davis at Tampa Bay Downs** on Saturday looks to be a clear-cut, either-or situation to this eye. While 8 have entered, the inside pair of HARPOON (Todd Pletcher) and NOBLE CORNERSTONE (Wesley Ward) stand out.

NOBLE CORNERSTONE ran a winning race in the \$250,000 Springboard Mile at Remington, only to come up a neck short with zero pace help. The New York-bred gelding possesses more talent than those labels might suggest. Under a resurgent jockey Kent Desormeaux, the son of Noble Causeway will be the horse to

beat if he takes to the Tampa surface. He's only had limited works in Florida and could be a race short of his absolute best. Still, his B-effort could win this race in my estimation. Desormeaux and Ward opt to team here instead of with PABLO DEL MONTE at Gulfstream in the Hutcheson.

HARPOON, yet another rising Tapit on the '14 trail, impressed in his Dec. 26 maiden breaker at Gulfstream around one turn. His company lines have been exceptional and so while this looks like a big rise in class, he's taken on horses who fit at this level and beyond, including CAIRO PRINCE (Kiaran McLaughlin). Tampa road trips for Todd Pletcher trainees have been a mixed bag of disappointments and successes over the years, so it's never a tap-in putt to assume the TAP sticker on the window automatically means success at this venue.

COUSIN STEPHEN (Chad Brown) will take considerable hype and money – all of the Brown trainees seem to – but he might be a bit pedestrian for this 1 1/16 miles. He reportedly was under the weather when the beaten favorite in the year's big Gulfstream allowance loss to COMMISSIONER (Todd Pletcher) and TOP BILLING (Shug McGaughey). He's worked strongly since then, and makes this a put up or shut up kind of race. I'll make him beat me.

ASSERTING BEAR (Reade Baker) and MATADOR (Mark Casse) represent Canada and high-class stables of repute. But both made hay in Ontario-bred races and must prove themselves worthy in open company state-side. Demand fair odds of 8 or 10-1 on either if you have the faith.

VINCEREMOS (Todd Pletcher) was just okay in his maiden breaker Jan. 4 in which the runner-up came back to be a flat third last week. He would need a huge move forward to beat stablemate HARPOON. He's cross-entered at Gulfstream in the same-day Hutcheson.

SCHOOL ON A HILL (Wayne Catalano) showed some talent at 2, and the turf-based runner appearing in this spot looks like an aggressive placement by "The Cat Man" that we ought to respect. His pedigree certainly plays on dirt, and given no Kentucky Derby qualifying points are on the line here, you have a horse entered curiously for the \$250,000 purse more than any Triple Crown pipedreams.

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Get more historical trends and significance on the Sam F. Davis Stakes by visiting page 81 of the Countdown to the Crown Preseason Annual simply by [clicking this link](#).

Sam F. Davis Stakes selections

W) NOBLE CORNERSTONE; P) HARPOON;
S) SCHOOL ON A HILL.

- Hutcheson Stakes - (Saturday/Gulfstream Park)



The **G2 \$200,000 Hutcheson at Gulfstream** measures only 7 furlongs, and it's not the steppingstone to routes it once was on the trail. But what's intriguing about this year's 'Hutch is the number of former routers who have turned back to sprints, resigning themselves to dash.

WILDCAT RED (Jose Garafolo) and PABLO DEL MONTE (Wesley Ward) shorten 220 yards from the Gulfstream Park Derby ([video](#)) – also around one turn – in hopes of finding their sweet spot. The former ran a dynamite race in defeat, maybe too good, in an effort that makes you worried about his ability to replicate it (read: "bounce"). The brilliance PABLO DEL MONTE exhibited on Polytrack at Keeneland went missing in his subsequent turf and dirt attempts. Perhaps he's a few steps better on Poly, and there's no shame in that.

TRAIL BLAZE (Todd Pletcher) was the beaten favorite in the Spectacular Bid against a softer field a month ago. He's yet to break sharply, but an outside draw and 7 furlongs will give him his best chance to overcome a repeat of that flaw. CEE ZEE (Stanley Gold) outran TRAIL BLAZE in the 'Bid when second and returns from his Calder home base with a puncher's chance for a respected outfit.

But the Calder comet I want to see is TASHIR (Gennadi Dorochenko). As outlined here in *Countdown*, he really caught our attention two weeks ago with a monster maiden performance. Yes, two weeks' rest is not the norm, but the mad Russian's tactics are not to be mistaken for the norm at any point. I like the "strike while the iron is hot" possibilities and price on the class rise. Could he bounce? Sure. But it was not a taxing win, just a dominant one.

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Bouncing back is what MIGHTY BROWN (Tim Ice) must do. He delivered a total non-effort 10 days ago in the OBS Sprint Championship on the Tapeta surface in Ocala. This versatile colt is better than that, and when a respected trainer brings a horse back quickly off a non-effort, I follow that trail. It's similar to a coach putting in hard practices after a bad performance in team sports. Get-back-to-work mode, if you will.

Hutcheson Stakes selections:

W) TASHIR; P) MIGHTY BROWN;
S) WILDCAT RED.

Last week's selections:
3: 0-1-0.

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

Everything we pick this month seems to run second, or gets beaten by the second or third choice. It's frustrating early, but we're not far off and it's a long season.

Season selections: 7: 0-4-1.

Everyone's a Critic

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

Stakes Races



Saturday's **G2 Holy Bull at Gulfstream** deserves some post-script explanation. Handicapping and ranking horses are two different deals. Some wondered why I picked COUP DE GRACE (Chad Brown) to win, yet he wasn't rated in my Top 20. Meanwhile, CAIRO PRINCE was No. 7 a week ago in my national outlook, and yet I went against him to win.

The inside speed advantage at Gulfstream can be so strong at 1 1/16 miles that it can sway even the most ardent of horseplayers. COUP DE GRACE figured to make the lead from the fence, and that appeared good enough for me as a horseplayer on this given day. Further, the handicapping axiom is that you never fear just one fellow speed horse as you can't assume a duel will ensue. ALMOST FAMOUS (Pat Byrne)

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didn't oblige any axioms, and his pressure on COUP DE GRACE proved too much for both. While your humble counselor makes a valid case, I humbly submit I should have just played the best horse in the race.

That, no doubt, proved to be CAIRO PRINCE. The Holy Bull winner shoots up near the top of most national rankings now if he wasn't already (see my new Top 20 at the end of Countdown). Everything about this win turned out positive.

CAIRO PRINCE ([video](#)) raced 4-5 wide into the clubhouse turn, and pressed close up to a 23.12 second quarter that was hot while still unable to tuck in and gain position. But by the time he coasted past the quarter-pole, Luis Saez could almost name his margin as the Pioneer of The Nile colt rolled to the front. CAIRO PRINCE looked strong and true through the lane in a performance without any knocks. Trakus had both CAIRO PRINCE and the seemingly fast-closing CONQUEST TITAN (Mark Casse) coming home in 6.75 the final sixteenth, and they ran almost identical fourth quarters, too.

It marked easily the best stakes performance of the young Countdown season, so let's look at what was behind the impressive winner.

Runner-up CONQUEST TITAN turned heads with his sensational rally at Churchill Downs in November and brought a similar kind of kick here in a two-turn stretch-out. The Birdstone colt has plenty of pedigree on either side to appreciate the classic distances. One mistake some people are making is to call him a Churchill lover. Longtime CD players know that the surface in the spring and fall meets are drastically different, maintenance-wise, due to cold autumn temperatures and less water used on the track. CONQUEST TITAN relished the loose and cuppy fall surface at the Downs, but don't make a blanket assumption he would love the heavily-watered, superhighway we see Derby week. Either way, he's an exciting hope.

INTENSE HOLIDAY (Todd Pletcher) earned third money from a terrible post 11 draw and further flattered the G2 Remsen win by HONOR CODE (Shug McGaughey) – along with CAIRO PRINCE, of course. The ledger now reads 3-0 for CAIRO PRINCE in matchups with INTENSE HOLIDAY, and Saturday's margin of 6 1/4 lengths was the biggest spread between the pair to date. This continues to be a very useful

horse who may not be brilliant, but will keep on the trail for another few shots to get that spark.

ALMOST FAMOUS did well to hold fourth after a trio of 23-second quarters in unison with COUP DE GRACE, who bobbled nearing the quarter pole while inside and readily backed up to 10th from there. ALMOST FAMOUS comes up short on damside pedigree out of sprinter Wild Gams. COUP DE GRACE was taken off the Derby trail in the days after this race by his connections. MR. SPEAKER (Shug McGaughey) also will leave the trail after an unsuccessful turf-to-dirt attempt. It helps that his stable already has two major league TC hopefuls.

WICKED STRONG (Jimmy Jerkens) easily rates the most befuddling Holy Bull alumnus to evaluate. This is a talented colt, proven by his Remsen finish and validated success of his past rivals, but his ninth-place run Saturday was lethargic and without visible excuse. This could be a Shackelford-type, who simply tossed us a clunker and will be heard from again. Shack was beaten 23 lengths in the Fountain of Youth and then nearly upset the Florida Derby before going on to corks in Louisville and Baltimore. No doubt you will get a severely inflated price next time if you keep the faith with WICKED STRONG. Perhaps he worked too fresh for this and will bounce back. I still like him a lot.

Kentucky Derby qualifying points were awarded on a 10-4-2-1 basis from 1st to 4th. Do note that Holy Bull alumni are 16: 0-1-1 in the Triple Crown events in the five years since this race was moved back on the calendar to January, so early season success does not guarantee laurels in spring.

Check out the historical significance of the Holy Bull Stakes by visiting page 80 of the Countdown to the Crown Preseason Annual. [Click here.](#)



Saturday's inaugural **California Cup Derby at Santa Anita** ([video](#)) may have been restricted to state-breds, but it did not lack star power coming into – or out of – the race. G1 Del Mar Futurity champ TAMARANDO (Jerry Hollendorfer) was a deserving and proven favorite, but rendered second-best by a

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runaway performance from CALIFORNIA CHROME (Art Sherman).

CALIFORNIA CHROME, a long-legged looker, really catches the eye. He showed some subtle athleticism going into the clubhouse turn maneuvering into the clear, something with which a horse of his size can sometimes have trouble. Victor Espinoza had him under a tight hold and the colt's experience showed. He didn't fight the rider, but rather rated and showed why he's a three-time stakes winner with eight races under his belt. He made that classic west coast tour de force at the head of the stretch that wins races, spurting clear in a few jumps, reminiscent to me of fellow Cal-bred star Caracortado on the trail a few years ago. If there's any knock, it's that he shut it down past the wire and didn't gallop out with much, making you wonder if he'll max out in distance very soon ala Caracortado and be an explosive miler-type. Either way, he's really good right now.

Splits were rock-solid 23.47, 24.00, 24.48, 24.78 and 6.49 for 1 1/16 miles in 1:43.22.

TAMARANDO fell behind by double-digit lengths early for the fourth time in his last five starts. The late-running dynamo simply did not have a retreating target to enhance his solid move. CALIFORNIA CHROME was not stopping, in other words. But TAMARANDO came with a high-quality run and was clearly second-best in a race that continues to prove him to be more distance-worthy than his pedigree might suggest.

Both of these horses should provide depth to the west coast open company preps with a chance to make some noise, depending on the match-ups. It will be interesting to see if the Hollendorfer barn changes its tune with TAMARANDO if stablemate and 2YO champ SHARED BELIEF continues to struggle with foot problems. Funny how that happens.



New York's prep roster may soon have a Maryland re-infusion. Saturday's one-mile **Miracle Wood Stakes at Laurel Park** provided a sharp homecoming ([video](#)).

EXTRASEXYHIPZTER (Mike Trombetta), based in Maryland and a last-out winner of the Don Rickles at Aqueduct, looked like a clear leader of the local pack with an authoritative score by 3 3/4 lengths. The son of Stroll broke sharply, but quickly came back to the patient hands of Julien Pimentel in a very professional performance. That's not easy to do for a horse previously versed only in sprints.

EXTRASEXYHIPZTER runs with his head cocked outward, but traveled straight as a string through the lane once he found a seam in upper stretch. From there, he easily measured the consistent and talented JOINT CUSTODY (Jerry Robb), who was aiming for his third straight Laurel stakes win. While not bred to run much farther than this mile, Trombetta has earned the right to dream a little with this one and consider the Gotham at The Big A.

MASTER LIGHTNING (Todd Pletcher) offered no bid while finishing 4th and continued a poor weekend showing for Jerome Stakes alumni.

Allowance Races

The comparisons to 2013 Kentucky Derby winner Orb couldn't come in fast enough following Saturday's **Gulfstream Race 4** allowance route win by TOP BILLING (Shug McGaughey). Horses aren't supposed to rally from last, nine lengths off the lead, going 1 1/16 miles at GP with its inside, speed-favoring layout. But TOP BILLING did ([video](#)), and with style, and harkens back to the big January '13 local allowance win from his former stablemate. He's got the pedigree, connections, stamina and developmental pattern to do big things. Big enough to win the roses for Team Shug two years in a row? The easy answer is to say "no," because thousands try and only one wins the big Derby. The more difficult answer, of course, is "yes!" I absolutely loved the way TOP BILLING cornered while 4-5 wide on Saturday and straightened out superbly in drawing away late over a good horse, SURFING U S A (Todd Pletcher). Visually, this win was perhaps better than Orb's a year ago. Splits were solid in 23.88, 23.35, 23.78, 24.99 and 6.66 for a final time of 1:42.66, about 2-1/2 lengths slower than the Holy Bull Stakes. Trakus caught TOP BILLING in an excellent 24.39 fourth quarter, much of it around the far turn. He ran 35 feet farther than the runner-up. Closers like TOB BILLING get so much more education many times than front-runners, and this was no

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exception: bounced around a bit early, dirt in the face behind horses, giving away ground on the far turn, and then finishing with a flourish to the wire. Check all the boxes. Now, **TOP BILLING** just has to blossom like **Orb**, which truly becomes the unknown and fun factor to watch over the next few starts – and it won't be easy to replicate such ascension.

TOP BILLING's performance saved **UNKNOWN ROAD** (Al Stall Jr.) from the lead headline in the week's allowance races. "What the heck happened?" in Friday's **Fair Grounds Race 5** allowance route would have been a legitimate marquee. Sent away at 1-5 following a Dec. 19 maiden win by 11 lengths, the Bernardini colt showed absolutely none of the promise he offered a month prior. After chasing a sole longshot leader down the backstretch while under restraint from Shaun Bridgmohan, **UNKNOWN ROAD** came up completely empty and finished fourth of five and sent bridge jumpers deep into Lake Pontchartrain. **QUICK INDIAN** (Merrill Scherer) tallied the victory in last-to-first fashion, which nearly never happens from 8-1/2 lengths back in a field of five, and underscores how badly this race fell apart (fourth quarter 26.92 and almost 52 seconds for the third/fourth quarters). The post-race talk centered on **UNKNOWN ROAD** being a ridgling and the potential discomfort he may have suffered from undescended testicles. He subsequently was gelded this week and his Triple Crown trail pursuits turned upside-down. The Feb. 22 **Risen Star** would be out, timing-wise, leaving him a precarious path with perhaps one shot on the prep trail, or two close-together attempts. Observation will have to be the tact moving forward for horseplayers. See how he works and performs next time before making any declarative thoughts to this obviously talented horse's future upside.

DANCE WITH FATE (Peter Eurton), one of the most exciting west coast juveniles a year ago with his late-running style, returned a sharp turf mile allowance winner last Friday in Race 2 at **Santa Anita**. The two-time G1 runner-up showed multiple stop and go gears in this grass test that featured no less than four runners dropping out of stakes engagements. The 6-5 favorite sizzled home the final furlong in just over 11 seconds impressively. **DANCE WITH FATE** leaned all over the gate coming out and will have to correct that once he gets in bigger fields where such a move can set off a bad chain of events. This allowance – which rates

one of the strongest of the SA season – did not flatter the G3 **Sham** result, in which **Sham** fourth-place finisher (last of four) I'll **WRAP IT UP** (Doug O'Neill) failed to light the board here, albeit with some traffic woes in deep stretch.

Credit his connections for good placement as **UNDERTAKER** (John Servis) wired **Aqueduct**'s Sunday Race 4 allowance route. The improving son of **Unbridled's Song** scratched from Saturday's **Miracle Wood Stakes** at Laurel for a different roadtrip from his Parx home. As he did in Philly in his maiden breaker, **UNDERTAKER** opened a nice lead early and held sway late. He ran strong internal quarters of 23.45 and 23.90 in the second and third splits. This result deflates some excitement for the G2 **Jerome** result as that stakes' fourth and fifth-place finishers – **MATUSAK** (Bill Mott) and **LAWMAKER** (Chad Brown) – could muster no better than third and fifth money, respectively, in this return engagement. **UNDERTAKER** likely earned a spot in the **Gotham**, where things obviously will get much tougher.

Friday's Race 5 turf route at **Gulfstream** was an optional claimer/starter that probably won't mean much to the end-game, but it is notable that its top three finishers all exited the Jan. 14 GP dead-heat between **MEDAL COUNT** (Dale Romans) and **DROVER ROAD** (Antonio Sano). Give that pair a plus-sign when they return as they could be exiting a fairly key race.

At Golden Gate Fields, **GRAZEN'S HOPE** (Steve Miyadi) ran his unbeaten mark to 2 with a Race 1 allowance route on the distance stretch-out. But don't look for an **El Camino Real Derby** impact from this one, who did not impress after a modest 25.88 fourth quarter on **Tapeta** and a perfect, first-over trip reeling in a maiden claiming dasher trying to negotiate a mile.

GOOD TIME HENNY (Tim Keefe) scored back-to-back wins when he tallied Wednesday's Laurel Race 7 allowance dash. By sprinter **Henny Hughes**, he's out of a **Stephen Got Even** mare and may have earned a route chance next after drawing away to win by 3 lengths. **MY CORINTHIAN** (Dane Kobiskie) failed to sustain a bid in his first start since a pair of 2013 summer stakes placings, including **Churchill's G3 Bashford Manor**.

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Maiden Races

The week's best maiden winner got the last laugh Thursday (yesterday) when *Countdown* watch-lister HOPPERTUNITY (Bob Baffert) showed just how huge his debut gallop-out was by crushing a Race 6 mile MSW at Santa Anita. The win also underscored how good stablemate BAYERN (Bob Baffert) may be after his Jan. 4 score over HOPPERTUNITY. The son of Any Given Saturday was patient, professional and explosive Thursday in romping past hot-fancied barnmate DAY OF FURY (Bob Baffert) and consistent, hard-luck bridesmaid SNUGGLEY BEAR (Julio Canani). HOPPERTUNITY was in a bad spot trapped inside the top pair turning for home, but seized the seam when it presented and powered away late. He galloped out like a freight train once again, this time 10-12 lengths in front of the rest. It pays to watch replays, gallop-outs and read *Countdown* when it comes to stretch-out sprinters.

CHELIOS (Tom Proctor) had to use considerable early speed from a rail draw in Sunday's Race 7 MSW sprint at **Santa Anita**. Still, the talented and well-bred *Countdown* watch-lister had the stuff to graduate in his second try. The Distorted Humor colt rationed his speed nicely and was able to hold off the impressive late run from RPRETTYBOYFLOYD (Denise Breuer). The latter galloped out much better and ran a similar race in his debut behind the much-respected BAYERN (Bob Baffert). Simply put, 'FLOYD won't be a maiden long and should relish two turns on pedigree. Also keep tabs on this race's third and fourth-place finishers, SAWYER'S HILL (Kristin Mulhall) and DUBLIN UP (Peter Miller). The former was very live on the tote in the early wagering and simply flattened out late in his first start since Del Mar. The latter, DUBLIN UP, was on my watch list after his better-than-it-looked debut in Kentucky and this was a better-than-it-looks fourth while even the entire way and galloping out best of all horses. Nail him when he stretches out at a very fair price. This race could produce 3-4 next-out winners.

Yet another *Countdown* watch-lister, STREET STRATEGY (Randy Morse), dominated his second lifetime start Thursday at **Oaklawn Park**, winning a Race 5 MSW mile by 6 ½ widening lengths. The front-running winner by Street Sense hails from a fabulous damside family and his win here certainly gives some

boost to his Jan. 11 debut conqueror PAGANOL (Cody Autrey) as that one aims toward the Southwest.

On the same Thursday card at **Oaklawn**, a Race 7 MSW route at 1 1/16 miles saw RED RIVER RISING (Kellyn Gorder) fend off multiple challenges to win by a neck. He had been fourth in a pair of 2YO starts at Churchill to the likes of GOLD HAWK (Steve Asmussen) and ALMOST FAMOUS (Patrick Byrne), who recently have cashed graded stakes checks. Keep third-place PENOBSOT (Kenny McPeck) on your watch lists another race or two after a troubled break and deep close for third; he's a real finisher. The disappointment here was COMMANDMENT (Mark Casse), off the board at short odds after finishing second at Gulfstream to HARPOON (Todd Pletcher) in late December. That's a quality knock perhaps against HARPOON heading into Saturday's Sam F. Davis Stakes at Tampa.

As the years go by, I get more into the 3-year-old turf route maiden races. They just seem to be more truly run affairs with measurable consequences in the stakes ranks down the road. Sunday's Race 8 MSW route at **Gulfstream** could be such an event. EDISON (Todd Pletcher) wired this 1-1/8 miles cast by 4 ¼ lengths in his second start. With a slow second quarter in 24.27, Luis Saez rationed the Bernardini colt perfectly. Third-place finisher NOTABILITY (Dale Romans) had no excuse with a two-path trip, pressing in second, and the G2 Kentucky Jockey Club's fifth-place finisher fired yet another slanderous result in the face of that stakes and its fellow alumni. The horse to watch out of this race is fourth-place finisher HINES (Todd Pletcher), the only closer to make any dent and easily the best gallop-out in the group. The debuting half-brother to Osidy has turf and dirt in his bloodlines.

Lost in Saturday's prime performances at **Gulfstream Park** – rightly so – was a humdrum Race 6 MSW mile score by BIG GUY IAN (Michael Dilger). The race had modest splits yet came home unimpressively on the clock and visually with the Birdstone colt running up and down with his head high and drifting a bit. Third-place I'MBETTERTHANGOOD (Kenny McPeck) may want to consider a name-change after a no-excuse performance once again. The same-day GP Race 3 MSW sprint at 6 furlongs also failed to impress this eye. ANCHOR DOWN (Todd Pletcher) debuted a winner at 6-5 odds

COUNTDOWN TO THE CROWN

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against a bad bunch that scattered 18 lengths from first to fifth. He's bred to keep sprinting.

Sire Cowboy Cal's first-time starters ran 1-2 in Saturday's Race 7 MSW sprint at **Oaklawn**, led by pace-setting ALL CALL (Chris Richard). But the slow final time of 1:12.95 paled in comparison to an allowance (1:11.95) and American Beauty Stakes (1:11.43) the same day.

FLAT GONE (Keith Desormeaux) reeled in loose-leading GENERAL IKE (Larry Jones) in a **Fair Grounds** Race 4 maiden route Saturday. Off the board in the G3 Delta Jackpot and G1 FrontRunner, the well-traveled FLAT GONE took advantage of a race that totally fell apart, pace-wise, with a 27.20 fourth quarter. It was easily fastest of 3 MSWs on the card at a mile and 70 yards, however.

Laurel's Saturday Race 5 maiden sprint at 7 furlongs, won by class-rising PROSPECTOR'S HEART (Gary Capuano), clocked nearly 3 lengths faster than the same-day Wide Country Stakes for 3YO fillies. The damside pedigree here leans heavily to sprints, however.

At **Aqueduct**, Monday's Race 3 MSW sprint flattered the form of Dec. 31 winner FATHER JOHN'S PRIDE (Eddie Kenneally), who saw a trio of his pursuers return to run 1-2-4 in this contest, led by winner AMERICAN PROGRESS (Leo O'Brien). Meanwhile, TESTOSTERONE (Pat Kelly) returned from a Saratoga layoff to wire **Aqueduct** Race 6 maiden sprinters on Sunday. The NY-bred cast appeared modest in 1:11.56.

Also among the state-breds, **Saturday's Santa Anita** Race 1 MSW proved no secret. First-timer WELL MEASURED (Peter Miller) was crushed to 1-2 favoritism and earned a hard-fought duel on the rail to prevail by a neck over Cal-breds.

Sunday's **Golden Gate** Race 7 MSW route provided a dead-heat between BLACKFORD (Lloyd Mason) and THREE STRIKE RULE (Steve Miyadi), giving the latter barn two 3YO wins on the card. But these runners barely went faster than pedestrian \$4,000 claimers the same day.

Just Wynn, Baby



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

CAIRO PRINCE was shrunk in half this week to 12-1 after his Holy Bull score, and now is the winter book favorite at Wynn. CALIFORNIA CHROME can still be had for a juicy 85-1, but was 275-1 before his Cal Cup Derby tally.

Among the other favorites, HONOR CODE spiked from 10-1 to 18-1 midweek after news of his ankle bruise broke. Meanwhile, stablemate TOP BILLING dropped from 35-1 to 14-1. On the flipside, SHARED BELIEF's tender tootsie bumped him up 4 points this week to 18-1.

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. HOPPERTUNITY (Santa Anita, 1/30) *NEW*
4. TONALIST (Gulfstream, 1/18)
5. CAN'THELPBELIEVING (GP, 1/11-T)

Allowance Race

1. TOP BILLING (Gulfstream, 1/25) *NEW*
2. COMMISSIONER (Gulfstream, 1/3)
3. DANCE WITH FATE (SA, 1/24-T) *NEW*
4. GOLD HAWK (Fair Grounds, 12/27)
5. ROMAN FIRE (Parx, 1/19)

Stakes Race

1. CAIRO PRINCE (Holy Bull, GP, 1/25) *NEW*
2. STORMING INTI (Kitten's Joy, GP, 1/19-T)
3. VICAR'S IN TROUBLE (Lecomte, FG, 1/18)
4. INDIANAPOLIS (San Pedro, SA, 1/20)
5. MIDNIGHT HAWK (Sham, SA, 1/11)

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

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: TOP BILLING, CONQUEST TITAN

1	<u>CAIRO PRINCE</u> Trainer: Kieran McLaughlin Winter Home: Palm Meadows (Fla.) Trained hard for Holy Bull, sustain it?	11	<u>VICAR'S IN TROUBLE</u> Trainer: Mike Maker Winter Home: Fair Grounds (La.) Risen Star next as FG cast takes shape.
2	<u>STRONG MANDATE</u> Trainer: D. Wayne Lukas Winter Home: Oaklawn Park (Ark.) Bullet 5F Mon at OP – gaining stature.	12	<u>STORMING INTI</u> Trainer: Chad Brown Winter Home: Palm Meadows (Fla.) Kitten's Joy champ totes 4-race win streak.
3	<u>CANDY BOY</u> Trainer: John Sadler Winter Home: Santa Anita (Cal.) Lewis hopeful w/ another good Sat work.	13	<u>GOLD HAWK</u> Trainer: Steve Asmussen Winter Home: Fair Grounds Back working 9 days post-Lecomte; + sign.
4	<u>COMMISSIONER</u> Trainer: Todd Pletcher Winter Home: Palm Meadows (Fla.) Back on worktab Sun, 23 days after win.	14	<u>CAN'THELPBELIEVING</u> Trainer: Graham Motion Winter Home: Palm Meadows (Fla.) Yet to work back since sharp 1/11 score.
5	<u>TOP BILLING</u> Trainer: Shug McGaughey Winter Home: Palm Meadows (Fla.) Impressive rally against bias in GP ALW.	15	<u>MEXIKOMA</u> Trainer: Rick Mettee Winter Home: Palm Meadows (Fla.) Watch his latest workout from Tues here .
6	<u>HONOR CODE</u> Trainer: Shug McGaughey Winter Home: Palm Meadows (Fla.) Morning setback, now Gotham-Wood?	16	<u>TAPITURE</u> Trainer: Steve Asmussen Winter Home: Fair Grounds (La.) Bullet 6F Mon, big-time works for return.
7	<u>SHARED BELIEF</u> Trainer: Jerry Hollendorfer Winter Home: Santa Anita (Cal.) Foot issues stalling his campaign early.	17	<u>BOND HOLDER</u> Trainer: Doug O'Neill Winter Home: Santa Anita (Cal.) 6F drill every Mon like clockwork; FG trip.
8	<u>BOBBY'S KITTEN</u> Trainer: Chad Brown Winter Home: Palm Meadows (Fla.) Mon breezed 4f in 50 flat; consistent drill.	18	<u>WE MISS ARTIE</u> Trainer: Todd Pletcher Winter Home: Palm Meadows (Fla.) Proven goods for proven barn, versatile.
9	<u>INDIANAPOLIS</u> Trainer: Bob Baffert Winter Home: Santa Anita (Cal.) Fast 47.40 drill Thur w/San Vicente eyed.	19	<u>CONQUEST TITAN</u> Trainer: Mark Casse Winter Home: Palm Meadows (Fla.) Closer has that ability to keep coming.
10	<u>HARTFORD</u> Trainer: Todd Pletcher Winter Home: Palm Meadows (Fla.) Back from win w/ Tues drill 12 days later.	20	<u>HAVANA</u> Trainer: Todd Pletcher Winter Home: Palm Meadows (Fla.) Talented 2YO but time ticking w/o works.