

COUNTDOWN TO THE CROWN

SEASON 9 WEEK 8 – February 21, 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 polar vortex. Most people have no earthly idea what you're saying, but will repeat something that sounds cool.

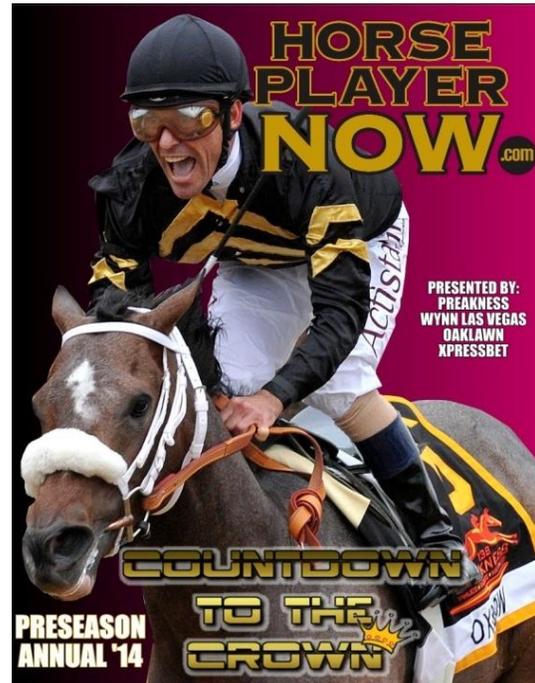
1. Monday's Southwest at Oaklawn was such a roughly run race it had everything short of Mike Tyson ordering the "ear of Evander" appetizer.
2. Racing can be a tough "pill" to swallow. TOP BILLING (Shug McGaughey) and VICAR'S IN TROUBLE (Mike Maker) were treated like outsiders in the random, pill-pull post draws for the Fountain of Youth and Risen Star. Bettors love it; horsemen and jockeys reach for the Pepto.
3. Layoffs are becoming so common they've even slid into the sport of curling. I heard the Canadian captain say the other day that his squad really improved with a few days off. Curlers need a break? Really? What next, a Derby contender with one prep?

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

A busy Friday (later today) tips the iceberg of a titanic weekend. Deep-rallying debut winner TEXAS RYANO (Carla Gaines) lands Friday in a Race 3 **Santa Anita** turf mile allowance that could have next-out stakes implications for the son of Curlin. Meanwhile, **Aqueduct** offers a



[Click to read the FREE 134-page Countdown Preseason Annual!](#)

trio of sophomore races to tab on Friday in Races 4, 5 and 7. MONOPOLIZE (Todd Pletcher) returns north in a Race 4 allowance mile after chasing heavyweight TOP BILLING (Shug McGaughey) at Gulfstream to no avail. Races 5 and 7 are split divisions of an open company MSW sprint at 6 furlongs. The Race 7 event looks considerably tougher on paper while trainer Tony Dutrow appears to have live bullets in both races – GROUND CONTROL and ONTHEWHISTLE, respectively.

Saturday's Fountain of Youth Stakes Day undercard at **Gulfstream Park** presents no less than five additional and compelling races within the division. Race 1 is a turf route allowance featuring barnmates DIVINE OATH (Todd Pletcher) and ALL TIED UP (Todd Pletcher) aiming for back-to-back grass wins at the meet. The former really has my attention. Race 2 is a 6-furlong dirt sprint where interesting firsters abound like ALEXNDEED (Nick Zito), half-brother to last year's Virginia Derby winner War Dancer and whose dam Deed I Do also was grand dam of Paddy o' Prado – this one will want distance and grass likely. TIGER TANK (Tony Dutrow) debuts as half-brother to Louisiana Derby runner-up A Little Warm and hails from an immaculate

Visit Countdowntothecrown.com and Horseplayernow.com for TRUSTED information.

COUNTDOWN TO THE CROWN

SEASON 9 WEEK 8 – February 21, 2014

female family of classy routers. DELTA WARRIOR (Ralph Nicks) is out of a half-sister to superstar filly and win-early specialist Stardom Bound. He might be the most-ready at first-asking to run 6 furlongs.

Gulfstream's Saturday card continues with a Race 5 MSW route where STRONG STIPULATION (Graham Motion) figures to want the added distance while BLARP (Bill Mott) and GLOBAL STRIKE (Todd Pletcher) exit highly respected races on the *Countdown* charts. Race 8 also is a MSW route, but on turf, where STROLL TO VICTORY (Kenny McPeck) returns from the sidelines following a second-place run to eventual stakes winner BOBBY'S KITTEN (Chad Brown) last summer at Saratoga. This is a tremendously deep field of maidens.

All that Saturday at **Gulfstream** action brings us to a must-see Race 6 allowance at 1 1/16 miles. This could be run as a graded stakes and you wouldn't get much argument. MEXIKOMA (Rick Mettee) makes his 3YO return from a wicked post 10, just to the outside of G2 Remsen third-place finisher WICKED STRONG (Jimmy Jerkens), who is trying to recover from a mystifying no-show in the G2 Holy Bull but will have his own postal issues with which to deal. The TAP pair of MATTERHORN (Todd Pletcher) and CONSTITUTION (Todd Pletcher) own two combined wins in two starts and considerable hub-bub about them. MATTERHORN opened at 250-1 at Wynn Las Vegas last year and has been bet to 75-1 with only a modest Aqueduct maiden breaker in November on the resume. And it's plausible TONALIST (Christophe Clement) actually goes favored off a commanding 4-length win routing at the meet. He was in MATTERHORN's rear-view mirror in their Big A debuts. No matter the result, big Florida Derby implications are on the line in this race Saturday.

Saturday's other undercards include **Fair Grounds'** Risen Star Day with MSW events in Races 6 and 7. The former is a turf mile in which a half-brother to \$600k-earner Cannonball debuts for the Ramseys in TURF KITTEN (Mike Maker). In Race 7, GLACKEN TOO (Bret Calhoun) returns after a gutty second to highly rated maiden breaker THE TRUNK MONKEY (Larry Jones) and will give us more of a line on that prospect.

Oaklawn doubles down on 3YO events Saturday with a Race 5 allowance sprint and

Race 6 MSW sprint. Stakes-placed stablemates GUNS LOADED and RIVERS RUN DEEP (Cody Autrey) headline the allowance while exiting efforts behind eventual G3 Southwest Stakes third-place finisher RIDE ON CURLIN (Bill Gowan). As for the Race 6 MSW, speedster BREWING (D. Wayne Lukas) hopes to finish the deal against what appears a soft cast of 3YO & older runners.

Sunday's Race 4 allowance mile at **Golden Gate** includes G.G. RYDER (Jerry Hollendorfer) for a barn that could land another 3YO stakes prospect if this Cal-bred can win his third straight. His form has been flattered in recent weeks and will be making his two-turn debut.

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!

**- Fountain of Youth -
(Saturday/Gulfstream Park)**

GULFSTREAM
P A R K
RACING & CASINO

Arguably Florida's two-best Triple Crown hopes, CAIRO PRINCE (Kiaran McLaughlin) and HONOR CODE (Shug McGaughey), are noticeably absent from Saturday's **G2 \$400,000 Fountain of Youth at Gulfstream**. So while the FoY may be the most prestigious event on the trail so far in 2014, what we learn from it may take some time to digest. The only graded stakes winners in the 13-horse affair scored in sprints – WILDCAT RED (Jose Garoffalo) – or on Polytrack – WE MISS ARTIE (Todd Pletcher). Both are talented, no doubt, and will get a proving ground in a dirt route Saturday.

But if the FoY lacks a graded stakes heavyweight, fear not. Truth is, the race has been dominated in recent years by horses rising out of the Gulfstream Park allowance

Visit Countdowntothecrown.com and Horseplayernow.com for TRUSTED information.

COUNTDOWN TO THE CROWN

SEASON 9 WEEK 8 – February 21, 2014

ranks. Names like Orb, Soldat, Eskendereya, Quality Road and Cool Coal Man all made that exact local class leap in just the last 6 years. So it's really fitting that this year's Fountain of Youth discussion begins with recent allowance punchers COMMISSIONER (Todd Pletcher) and TOP BILLING (Shug McGaughey). As a handicapper, the race appears to run through those two to me, and as a historian, that would appear more than plausible as well.

COMMISSIONER maybe had a better trip / pace set-up when he measured TOP BILLING in their Jan. 3 allowance at 9 furlongs ([video](#)). Even with a full stretch run, TOP BILLING could not get to the 'COMMISH. The FoY will employ the sixteenth pole finish line, a situation that would, in theory, make TOP BILLING's task even harder to reel in his rival in the rematch. Throw in the rail post for COMMISSIONER and the nearly impossible 12-hole for TOP BILLING, and you can see where the opinion tilts. But TOP BILLING has a more recent win on his resume, could be fitter for the particular date, and like his former stablemate Orb, cannot be discounted merely on the pace and track configuration. He's won at this trip, a Jan. 25 score that was as good as any 3YO has posted this year. Separating this pair isn't easy, but for the purpose of this particular Saturday, I'm giving super-slight lean to COMMISSIONER – due to the track layout and posts.

WILDCAT RED was outstanding in the Hutcheson ([video](#)), but it was my feeling then and now that he should remain sprinting. Still, with a good post 4 draw and a track layout that will favor speed, I totally understand the pursuit of the FoY – especially with two major heavyweights sitting this race out. This absolutely is "Derby Day" for a horse like WILDCAT RED; it's his best chance to win a "major" before the tests get simply too far and too tough on the Triple Crown trail. A win Saturday would not be a surprise; he's capable. Beyond that, I'd be very standoffish to his chances in subsequent distance preps.

WE MISS ARTIE has the tools to be a good one. He's versatile in terms of pace and surfaces. His trip in the Breeders' Cup was compromised some at the start and without Lasix he tired late after a strong middle portion of the race that more than showed he can handle dirt – as did his Belmont debut last July. He gives Pletcher a powerful 1-2 punch with COMMISSIONER, and I think you're going to see an outstanding race

from a horse who figures to keep making noise down the line. And, he figures to be a bit overlooked in the wagering in the FoY.

Beyond these four key players mentioned, you have to give a long look to GENERAL A ROD (Mike Maker). He's got a slick pedigree of speed on top and stamina on the damside that should be perfect around two turns as he makes that leap from the one-turn mile in his GP Derby win ([video](#)). The musical jockeys have seen Joel Rosario depart for TOP BILLING, but the meet's leading rider Javier Castellano becomes an A-list replacement, and in doing so he jumps off of WE MISS ARTIE for his TAP mealticket. That's pretty significant in the saddle. GENERAL A ROD has a big chance Saturday and beyond.

I'd be surprised if the top three finishers Saturday aren't among that quintet. Of the remaining players, ALMOST FAMOUS (Pat Byrne) lacks stamina on the bottom of his pedigree for true distances and figures to be part of a solid early pace; MEDAL COUNT (Dale Romans) has more of a Florida Derby-type profile for a longer trip than this; and CASIGUAPO (Mario Morales) mystified with a non-effort in his allowance return after showing such road-warrior promise at age 2. He needs to prove to me that he's back before I invest.

Get more historical trends and significance on the Fountain of Youth Stakes by visiting page 87 of the Countdown to the Crown Preseason Annual simply by [clicking this link](#).

Fountain of Youth Stakes selections:
W) COMMISSIONER; P) WE MISS ARTIE;
S) TOP BILLING.

- Risen Star Stakes - (Saturday/Fair Grounds)



If a field of 13 in the Fountain of Youth didn't catch your fancy, Saturday's **G2 \$400,000 Risen Star Stakes at Fair Grounds** went ahead and kicked the extra point to put 14 on the board. Even with the scratch of BOND HOLDER (Doug O'Neill) due to body soreness after his

Visit Countdowntothecrown.com and Horseplayernow.com for TRUSTED information.

COUNTDOWN TO THE CROWN

SEASON 9 WEEK 8 – February 21, 2014

flight from California to Louisiana, a capacity field is expected with also-eligible EMMETT PARK (Robert Pincins) ready to offer his unbeaten record from Turfway.

The top three finishers from last month's local G3 Lecomte return, which is good news for familiarity. But when you consider that 7 of the last 10 winners of this race shipped in from out-of-town preps, it's fair to wonder if the Lecomte quality will match up with the invaders. Let's start by looking at the locals.

VICAR'S IN TROUBLE (Mike Maker) went from impressive Louisiana-bred to bona fide La Derby contender when he blitzed the field in the Lecomte. Even with some room for polish, his raw ability ran roughshod by nearly 7 lengths that day. Maker appears to have kept him on edge in-between and I expect no drop-off in performance Saturday. However, he will start in post 13 and have a tough task. Plus, this field figures to be much deeper.

ALBANO (Larry Jones) ran well in the Lecomte and exceeded my pedigree expectations for a route. He draws the rail in the Risen Star and figures to be part of a large brigade of runners who want to be among the first flight. While I have more respect for him routing than I once did, I still see too many other quality options in the Risen Star to back him. GOLD HAWK (Steve Asmussen), third as the favorite in the Lecomte, is one I expect to turn the tables. The impeccably bred Empire Maker-Caressing colt came out of the Lecomte working strongly, and I like when barns start coming together like Asmussen's highly impressive Monday win at Oaklawn with stablemate TAPITURE. Jockey Corey Nakatani, among the very best finishing jockeys in the country, is a good fit for this horse's style and I expect we'll see the real GOLD HAWK on Saturday.

I count six legitimate win contenders in this field of 14, including two from the Lecomte mentioned above. COMMANDING CURVE (Dallas Stewart) has trained locally all winter with some notoriety and comes out of a series of very solid company lines in Kentucky. He will be a big price on the board and worthy of inclusion in the exotics.

Three key contenders exit races from out of town, led by RISE UP (Tom Amoss), the Delta Jackpot winner who is based locally this winter with his prominent FG stable. He crushed his

rivals in December from a wide post draw and now gets the 2-hole with perhaps the best early foot in the race. I can see a scenario where RISE UP breaks best and gets clear of a huge cluster of horses who all want to sit second and third. He's only had four workouts since a freshening in Ocala, and his pedigree is fair to question some for true route distances beyond a mile or so. He could be susceptible late, but also appears capable of putting a major scare into the chasers with a front-end assault. Tough call.

The two invaders that interest me big-time are HOPPERTUNITY (Bob Baffert) from the west coast and INTENSE HOLIDAY (Todd Pletcher) from the east. Three of the last 4 Risen Star winners came via Florida, and Pletcher has had success here with this move in the past. With barnmates COMMISSIONER and WE MISS ARTIE penciled in for the Fountain of Youth, the G2 Holy Bull third-place finisher INTENSE HOLIDAY appears a smart road-tripper given his deep-closing style. He certainly fits the profile for the Risen Star and must be respected on Saturday, but I'm not sure he's a Top 20-type horse on talent for the Triple Crown scene.

HOPPERTUNITY was a *Countdown* bet-back special after a monster debut gallop-out in a sprint, and turned heads with a rousing route win Jan. 30 by three lengths. His debut loss to BAYERN (Bob Baffert) looked even more reasonable when that stablemate came back to whistle an allowance group by 15 lengths. And, HOPPERTUNITY beat a very solid cast handily in his reappearance that sets him up well for the stakes rise. I loved the more tactical speed he showed routing, and that figures to put him in that pressing flight behind RISE UP and perhaps another runner or two on Saturday. Given it's Baffert, you probably won't get the direct value you deserve on this runner in the Risen Star, but I also can't see him being any lower than a moderate third or fourth choice in the wagering.

Get more historical trends and significance on the Risen Star Stakes by visiting page 89 of the Countdown to the Crown Preseason Annual simply by [clicking this link](#).

Risen Star Stakes selections:

- W) HOPPERTUNITY; P) GOLD HAWK;
- S) VICAR'S IN TROUBLE.

Visit Countdowntothecrown.com and Horseplayernow.com for TRUSTED information.

COUNTDOWN TO THE CROWN

- Mine That Bird Derby - (Saturday/Sunland Park)



Ten locals with sights on the G3 Sunland Derby next month take to the track Saturday in the **\$120,000 Mine That Bird Derby at Sunland Park**. Because there are no Kentucky Derby qualifying points on the line, the race has not lured any out-of-town influence.

I've been awfully impressed by New Mexico-bred PROCEED (Joel Marr), crushing winner of both starts to date by more than 18 combined lengths. His Dec. 28 romp in the Hedeman Mile as well as his mile debut win both have been flattered by returning alumni quantifying that form. A bullet workout Sunday at Sunland indicates that the Desert God colt remains on edge and should be dangerous in his first foray into open company racing.

The top three finishers of the Riley Allison Futurity are re-matched, led by REBRANDED (Justin Evans), the ex-Todd Pletcher trainee who tallied that 1-mile stakes in December upon his sale and relocation. REBRANDED was third at Saratoga last summer in his debut behind eventual G1 Hopeful winner STRONG MANDATE (D. Wayne Lukas) to give you some perspective to his talents. The Tiznow colt has a much better pedigree than his rivals for distance and will be a deserving favorite.

Interestingly, stablemate ALSONO (Justin Evans) also will be in the Mine That Bird Derby lineup. He's an exceptionally quick runner who also has relocated to New Mexico after racing on the bigger circuits. He sprinted with some success in the MSW ranks at Keeneland and Churchill as an early 2YO before moving south and west. ALSONO is a Limehouse colt who figures to set a strong tempo on Saturday.

And it wouldn't be the Mine That Bird Derby if we didn't mention GOT YOUR BACK (Chip Woolley). A rallying MSW sprint winner in his second start, he's owned by Double Eagle Ranch and trained by the same hombre that brought us the 2009 Kentucky Derby winner.

SEASON 9 WEEK 8 – February 21, 2014

Knowing full well that REBRANDED is going to be extremely difficult to beat, I'm going to back my eyeballs and what I've seen with PROCEED and give the state-bred a shot to pull the minor upset at what should be second or third choice in the wagering.

Get more historical trends and significance on the Mine That Bird Derby by visiting page 90 of the Countdown to the Crown Preseason Annual simply by [clicking this link](#).

Mine That Bird Derby selections:

W) PROCEED; P) REBRANDED;
S) ALSONO.

\$\$\$

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

Top choice KOBE'S BACK (John Sadler) delivered the paper in the G2 San Vicente, while top pick ENTERPRISING (Tom Proctor) mustered only a third-place finish in the G3 El Camino Real Derby. Good to see the picks at least heating up in February.

Last week's selections: 2: 1-0-1

Season selections: 13: 2-4-2.

Everyone's a Critic

This section reviews the week that was in the 3-year-old ranks. Cancellations wreaked havoc on many scheduled events.

On the minor stakes front, RED OUTLAW (Peter Miller) advanced probably the most unnoticed 3-for-3, stakes-winning record Sunday when the Cal-bred gelding beat open company turf sprinters in Santa Anita's \$75,000 Baffle Stakes. It marked his third win on three different surfaces, all sprints, and in doing so overcame a very roughly run event. This result didn't go out of its way to flatter CALIFORNIA CHROME (Art Sherman) or Cal Derby winner EXIT STAGE LEFT (Jerry Hollendorfer), the latter a similar refrain in the result of the El Camino Real Derby this past weekend as well.

Visit Countdowntothecrown.com and Horseplayernow.com for TRUSTED information.

COUNTDOWN TO THE CROWN

Stakes Races



Sunday's **G2 \$200,000 San Vicente at Santa Anita** ([video](#)) belonged to the late-running favorite **KOBE'S BACK** (John Sadler). When the best horse in a race gets the race shape he also prefers, it's as close to a tap-in putt as you can ask for as a horseplayer. A blistering second quarter split of 22.27 (more than 2 lengths faster than the opening quarter) just set this race up on a silver platter for the long-striding **KOBE'S BACK**.

Jockey Joel Rosario's confidence in the Flatter colt was rewarded after a cross-country journey to ride. Rosario and agent Ron Andersen knew a disastrous trip in the Hollywood Futurity was not the real **KOBE'S BACK**, and Saturday's San Vicente proved them right. It still answered no two-turn questions for a horse with a questionable damside pedigree on stamina. But visually **KOBE'S BACK** has a long-reaching stride that takes a while to get uncorked and finished up visually "wow" late in this race. The final time of 1:21.84 catches the eye as well. **KOBE'S BACK** galloped out well enough and there's no doubt that he's headed for a two-turn date. Logically, the G2 Rebel at Oaklawn on March 19 makes a lot of sense if stablemate **KRISTO** (John Sadler) continues to train well toward the local San Felipe on March 8.

As for the San Vicente also-rans, there simply are no route prospects here for the trail. Fleet **CHERUBIM** (Simon Callaghan) earned the place as four of the five challengers to **KOBE'S BACK** finished in a clump more than five lengths behind the runaway winner. Maiden **RPRETTYBOYFLOYD** (Denise Breuer) managed third money and now has chased buzzsaws **KOBE'S BACK**, **CHELIOS** (Tom Proctor) and **BAYERN** (Bob Baffert) while wondering what he has to do to catch the right field. A measuring stick of note here perhaps could be the tiring fourth by **PAPA TURF** (James Kasparoff). He was a distant second to my highly regarded San Pedro winner **INDIANAPOLIS** (Bob Baffert), but did little to flatter that race in this performance.

Check out the historical significance of the San Vicente by visiting page 85 of the Countdown to the Crown Preseason Annual. [Click here.](#)

SEASON 9 WEEK 8 – February 21, 2014



Monday's **G3 \$300,000 Southwest at Oaklawn** showed once again why these Arkansas Derby trail races are such telling dress rehearsals. A large field of 12 spread 10 lengths first to third at the wire, but not before a cross between bumper cars and Rock'em Sock'em Robots played out on the track. Traffic, hot pace and a hot mess. If it wasn't so darned cold outside, I'd swear it was the first Saturday in May. And when the smoke cleared, the race's two best horses overcame it all and melted the rest of the challengers.

TAPITURE (Steve Asmussen) had the training edge going into the Southwest from his Fair Grounds home base. With four days of training cancelled in the time leading up to Monday's race, locally based horses were behind the eight ball to some degree. **TAPITURE** not only got in his paces in New Orleans, but once shipped to Oaklawn even timed it out brilliantly to get a workout Thursday afternoon between races in Hot Springs. Trainer Asmussen and crew get a double gold star for the generalship.

Given the likely fitness edge, **TAPITURE** then proved good enough to make his trip. From the rail draw, he was fast enough to secure position into a wicked bend around the clubhouse turn for most of his challengers. But his trip was not easy, just clean. Multiple challengers made runs down the backstretch, but with each, the rail-riding **TAPITURE** hung tough and visually always appeared to be going easy – even with multiple pressures to his outside. His ears stayed up and his stride fluid, and in the lane he kicked on well despite drifting out and proceeded to gallop out with aplomb. At no point did he look haggard or in any danger, even coming back for the winner's circle picture. **TAPITURE** defeated a super Triple Crown trail contender **STRONG MANDATE** (D. Wayne Lukas) with room to spare, totaling more than four lengths.

STRONG MANDATE proved easily second-best in the Southwest in what also was his 3-year-old debut. More than six lengths gapped back to a six-way scrum for the show money. No doubt, **STRONG MANDATE** had a much tougher

Visit Countdowntothecrown.com and Horseplayernow.com for TRUSTED information.

COUNTDOWN TO THE CROWN

SEASON 9 WEEK 8 – February 21, 2014

journey at Oaklawn. He bumped soundly at the start with RIDE ON CURLIN (Bill Gowan), the eventual third-place finisher. That gate action caused both potential pace players to be out of their element into the clubhouse turn, and they spiraled wide because of it and lost tons of ground. STRONG MANDATE then nearly ran into WALT (Chris Hartman) into the first turn and was forced to follow RIDE ON CURLIN wide around the turn and down the backstretch. STRONG MANDATE never got a chance to tuck in, wound up four-wide to RIDE ON CURLIN's three-wide journey on the far turn and easily outran that rival from the quarter-pole home. RIDE ON CURLIN visually was going completely up and down with his stride much of the stretch, yet somehow none of the closers, also mired in a roughly run rodeo, brought any punch to the party.

STRONG MANDATE wandered in and out in the lane and was rough trying to change leads on multiple occasions. He had that drunken sailor wobble about him, but given the deep and tiring racetrack and missed days of training, all off a 3-1/2 month layoff, they are more than excused – actually expected.

Splits for the Southwest were 23.45, 24.47, 25.14, 25.53 and 6.36 for 1 1/16 miles in 1:44.95. That's slightly faster than Will Take Charge and Oxbow ran in last year's Rebel at this same distance – and just a length or so off super older mare Don't Tell Sophia's time the previous day in the Bayakoa Stakes.

The bottom line to the Southwest is that winner TAPITURE and runner-up STRONG MANDATE both are serious racehorses and those wishing to ship in for the Rebel Stakes will have their work cut out for them. With equal training time and equal trips, the duo figures to be much closer next time, with the runner-up capable of turning the tables. None of the 10 behind them in the Southwest illicit any forward-reaching major trail success in my estimation. Even with Oaklawn's superior ability to draw big fields in its 3YO series, I would be surprised if there's a full gate for the Rebel. These two, deservedly, will send some rival trainers looking for an easier spot.

Check out the historical significance of the Southwest by visiting page 86 of the Countdown to the Crown Preseason Annual. [Click here.](#)



TAMARANDO (Jerry Hollendorfer) collared DANCE WITH FATE (Peter Eurton) late in Saturday's **G3 \$200,000 El Camino Real Derby at Golden Gate Fields**. Now a winner of the Del Mar Futurity on Polytrack, Real Quiet on Cushion Track and El Camino Real Derby on Tapeta, TAMARANDO captured the synthetic Triple Crown of sorts.

The surface-versatile TAMARANDO owns a very credible 3: 0-1-2 mark on the dirt at Santa Anita as well, all in stakes company. And while his 9-furlong win in the ECR Derby and late-running style will hint at being a route specialist, his turn of foot reminds me much more of a closing sprinter as his pedigree suggests. He made an eye-popping move on the turn at Golden Gate reminiscent of what he does in one-turn events. He is such a cool throwback that you have to love him, earning more than \$600,000 with 10 starts under his belt. He reminds a bit of Rousing Sermon on the 2012 trail, a late-running youngster by the eye, but really a bit challenged at classic distances. TAMARANDO likely remains at Santa Anita for the remaining preps as stablemate and 2YO champion SHARED BELIEF (Jerry Hollendorfer) appears headed for a one-prep synthetic date in Kentucky at Turfway or Keeneland.

The ECR Derby runner-up DANCE WITH FATE arguably could be the better Triple Crown prospect of the two, but is yet to be nominated to the series. The runner-up ran his eyeballs out in a commendable effort and sports a more route-friendly pedigree than TAMARANDO. A wide trip, premature backstretch move and softer spot in his form cycle all conspire to give horseplayers a reason to like DANCE WITH FATE over TAMARANDO next time. When the two met in the FrontRunner at Santa Anita, it was DANCE WITH FATE two lengths the better.

ENTERPRISING (Tom Proctor) likely returns to turf-miler status. He simply rejected a perfect trip for the second straight race beyond a mile. He's got talent, but distance is the issue.

Check out the historical significance of the ECR Derby by visiting page 84 of the Countdown to the Crown Preseason Annual. [Click here.](#)

Visit Countdowntothecrown.com and Horseplayernow.com for TRUSTED information.

COUNTDOWN TO THE CROWN

SEASON 9 WEEK 8 – February 21, 2014

Allowance Races

SHELTOWEE'S BOY (Brad Cox) threw his hat in the Rebel Stakes ring Monday at **Oaklawn** when rallying to win a fall-apart allowance mile. A suicidal pace by OP standards (23.10, 23.52) sent the dueling leaders to finish last and next-to-last, while the eventual top three finishers were the last three runners early in the race. I would not be interested in this runner stepping into a major stakes based on this effort. Z LUCKY (D. Wayne Lukas) loped in for second coming out of a \$30,000 maiden claimer.

GIANCARLO (Efren Loza Jr.) easily dispatched a 7-furlong allowance cast Saturday at **Tampa Bay Downs** by 4 widening lengths. The 6-5 chalk made amends for a surprising defeat at 1-5 prior. The Pasco Stakes third-place finisher could work back toward the Tampa Bay Derby on March 8 and give hot sire Tapit another player on the trail. GIANCARLO rubs me more as a sprinter, however.

GONE AS WIND (Efren Loza Jr.) drew away at 1-5 odds to tally a **Calder** allowance mile last Friday in a slow time, one that clocked nearly 4 lengths slower than \$6,250 claimers on the same card. In doing so, he became the second next-out winner from the Gulfstream Park Derby, joining Hutcheson champ WILDCAT RED (Jose Garoffalo). All that is at least positive spin for GP Derby hero GENERAL A ROD (Mike Maker).

Maiden Races

DANCE CHAMPION (Christophe Clement) easily dispatched a promising crew of **Gulfstream Park** MSW turf milers Saturday by three widening lengths. The regally bred Medaglia d'oro- Dance Away Capote colt had exited a debut third to IRONICUS (Shug McGaughey). Runner-up CHARGE NOW (Bill Mott) turned in a highly promising debut after early trouble as the half-brother to 2010 Kentucky Derby winner Super Saver appears to have some upside. H TOWN BROWN (Wesley Ward) once again settled for minor awards in third, and thus continued an unflattering run of alumni who chased home HARTFORD (Todd Pletcher) in that one's Jan. 16 MSW romp. Look for a few to move forward out of this potential key race won by DANCE CHAMPION.

VICTORY NOR DEFEAT (Ralph Nicks) debuted a 3-length winner Saturday in a 7-furlong **Gulfstream** MSW. The well-bred son of Unbridled's Song and solid turf stakes performer Daisyago bested what appeared one of the softer MSWs of the meet on paper, and the final three furlongs took nearly :38 while flattering his late-running margin. Also this past week at **Gulfstream**, Thursday's debut win by ESCAPIST (Peter Pugh) in a turf sprint MSW caught the eye, scoring by more than 4 lengths.

The immaculately bred Ghostzapper-Spoken Fur colt SERENDIP (Ron Moquett) returned from an August layoff and rallied to win an **Oaklawn** MSW route on Sunday. The closers had their way in this race that was fast-paced by OP route standards (47.50 opening half). This looked like one of the deeper MSW fields of the season at OP, even with the scratch of likely horse to beat DYNAMIC IMPACT (Mark Casse). SERENDIP certainly appears an interesting new face to the Arkansas trail out of this race. The final time was about 6 lengths slower than star older mare Don't Tell Sophia ran in stakes company the same day, so not too shabby.

Fair Grounds produced a promising prospect Monday when CLASS LEADER (Neil Howard) returned from an October debut and layoff to score a MSW route by 1 ½ lengths. Talk about route breeding! He's sired by Smart Strike and out of the Kris S mare Class Kris, who earned more than \$500,000 nearly all going distances of ground. CLASS LEADER broke much sharper than his sprint debut, settled nicely for his rider and stalked, and unfurled a long, sustained, three-furlong move to victory. That's the kind of style – along with that pedigree – that can play at classic distances. He beat a pretty decent maiden in IRISH YOU WELL (Wayne Catalano).

THE ADMIRAL (Bob Baffert) turned back in distance from a pair of routes Saturday to win a **Santa Anita** MSW at 7 furlongs. Victories against large field sizes (10) at this demanding distance always merit extra credit. THE ADMIRAL ran them off their feet early with a pair of upper :22s and then visually rebroke in the stretch in a visual masterpiece. His mama was a top-notch Illinois-bred sprinter and this one appears to be a different animal around one turn. Keep him there. Runner-up ROUGH PASSAGE (Kristin Mulhall) won't be a maiden long. Bet him back at a mile and he'll fit perfectly.

COUNTDOWN TO THE CROWN

SEASON 9 WEEK 8 – February 21, 2014

Oaklawn's Saturday card boasted a nice sprint MSW debut win by **TEXAS TWO STEP** (Kellyn Gorder), a half-brother to Pacific Ocean. The Distorted Humor colt took action as the 9-5 favorite and delivered with a wide run to win going away late. On pedigree and timing, expect him to keep sprinting for now. **SHATHOOR** (Danny Peitz), a debuting half-brother to My Miss Aurelia, set the tempo and tired to finish fourth.

Also at **Oaklawn**, Thursday's Race 6 MSW route offered an impressive front-end winner in class-dropping **UNSTOPPABLE COLBY** (D. Wayne Lukas). Seventh in the Smarty Jones as a maiden, he went wire-to-wire Thursday and had another gear late when the rallying runners came on the scene. The Pulpit colt likely earned a return to the stakes ranks for connections that will give the well-bred runner a shot back in the big leagues. **WIZARDLY** (Steve Asmussen) gave up a lot of ground and narrowly missed while galloping out well. He'll graduate next time. **INDIAN OUTLAW** (Danny Peitz) deserves a mulligan after being horribly wide throughout and tiring in the final furlong.

GAREN (Peter Miller) led a short-field carousel to victory in Monday's **Santa Anita** MSW route. The Street Cry colt stretched out from two prior sprints and walked the dog on the front end against four rivals. He sealed the deal with a 24.21 fourth quarter and 6.49 final sixteenth leaving the closers no hope. Stablemate **DUBLIN UP** (Peter Miller) disappointed with an erratic early trip and flat late performance while third. **GAREN** was hard to pull up afterwards in a breakout performance, but one hard to quantify given the small field size and lack of any early pace pressure whatsoever.

QUOTIENT (Tom Proctor) scored one for the east coast Saturday at **Santa Anita** when the Stormy Atlantic colt shipped to the Pacific and throttled a MSW turf sprint cast by nearly four lengths. A better-than-it-looked debut fifth at Gulfstream to Personal Ensign's promising grandson **DIVINE OATH** (Todd Pletcher), **QUOTIENT** easily outran Saturday's 2-3-4 finishers who all exited the same Jan. 20 loss to **TEXAS RYANO** (Carla Gaines).

TRUE TEN (Vladimir Cerin) made a prompt debut Sunday in a **Santa Anita** Cal-bred MSW sprint on the San Vicente Stakes undercard. The half-brother to Notional is by Rock Hard Ten and stopped the clock in a solid 1:09.69.

But with little form going into the race among the challengers, it's difficult to assess what he beat. The pedigree and debut do encourage.

Curlin colt **WOELF DEN** (Kiaran McLaughlin) shipped from New York to **Laurel Park** to win Thursday's Race 3 maiden mile in determined fashion. He outslugged fellow Big A alum **PROFLUENT** (Tony Dutrow) by a head in a roughly run race. He got the win and check, but not sure it was the confidence booster they sought with the road trip to move him forward.

ON DRAFT (Peter Eurton) shipped north with his more renowned stablemate **DANCE WITH FATE** for some "beer money" Saturday by winning a **Golden Gate Fields** maiden route on the El Camino Real Derby Day undercard. The route-bred Milwaukee Brew colt, off the board in 3 SoCal forays prior, held off disappointing **TIME JUMPER** (Jerry Hollendorfer), who had every chance and just can't put it together.

Maryland's locals for the Preakness perhaps picked up a hopeful Wednesday at **Tampa Bay Downs** when Sagamore Farms' **I WILL** (Ignacio Correas) broke his maiden in a turf route. The consistent knocker has continued to improve and shown some form on the dirt as well.

Just Wynn, Baby



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

With so many big races late Saturday, if you want to get ahead of the futures, it's a great weekend to play before the big preps. **GENERAL A ROD** at 85-1 and **WE MISS ARTIE** at 85-1 offer some real intrigue at what could be 25-ish if they win Saturday, for instance. **HOPERTUNITY** at 65-1 pre-Risen Star also catches the eye. **REBRANDED** is 250-1 before his Sunland date.

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

Visit Countdowntothecrown.com and Horseplayernow.com for TRUSTED information.



SEASON 9 WEEK 8 – February 21, 2014

High Fives

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

Maiden Race

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

Allowance Race

1. TOP BILLING (Gulfstream, 1/25)
2. COMMISSIONER (Gulfstream, 1/3)
3. BAYERN (Santa Anita, 2/13)
4. THEROS (Gulfstream, 2/7-T)
5. DANCE WITH FATE (Santa Anita, 1/24-T)

Stakes Race

1. CANDY BOY (Lewis Mem'l, SA, 2/8)
2. CAIRO PRINCE (Holy Bull, GP, 1/25)
3. TAPITURE (Southwest, OP, 2/17) *NEW*
4. STORMING INTI (Kitten's Joy, GP, 1/19-T)
5. VICAR'S IN TROUBLE (Lecomte, FG, 1/18)

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

NEW THIS WEEK: KOBE'S BACK

1	<u>CANDY BOY</u> Trainer: John Sadler Winter Home: Santa Anita (Cal.) Must keep him on tilt 'til Apr 5 SA Derby.	11	<u>STORMING INTI</u> Trainer: Chad Brown Winter Home: Palm Meadows (Fla.) Consistent drills, this Sunday 4F 48.40.
2	<u>CAIRO PRINCE</u> Trainer: Kiaran McLaughlin Winter Home: Palm Meadows (Fla.) Sat 4F in 48.75, 1 st drill since Holy Bull.	12	<u>GOLD HAWK</u> Trainer: Steve Asmussen Winter Home: Fair Grounds Tell-tale race for him in Risen Star on Sat.
3	<u>STRONG MANDATE</u> Trainer: D. Wayne Lukas Winter Home: Oaklawn Park (Ark.) Lost no stature in rugged Southwest 2nd.	13	<u>CAN'THELPBELIEVING</u> Trainer: Graham Motion Winter Home: Palm Meadows (Fla.) Easy 5F breeze Monday in 1:02.55.
4	<u>COMMISSIONER</u> Trainer: Todd Pletcher Winter Home: Palm Meadows (Fla.) Rail draw a certain boost in FoY at trip.	14	<u>MEXIKOMA</u> Trainer: Rick Mettee Winter Home: Palm Meadows (Fla.) Good, but tough, allowance spot Saturday.
5	<u>TOP BILLING</u> Trainer: Shug McGaughey Winter Home: Palm Meadows (Fla.) Must overcome tough post on Saturday.	15	<u>WE MISS ARTIE</u> Trainer: Todd Pletcher Winter Home: Palm Meadows (Fla.) Will learn to take dirt from 2-hole in FoY.
6	<u>BAYERN</u> Trainer: Bob Baffert Winter Home: Santa Anita San Felipe may be right for stakes bow.	16	<u>SHARED BELIEF</u> Trainer: Jerry Hollendorfer Winter Home: Santa Anita (Cal.) Dicey path to Derby but undeniable talent.
7	<u>HONOR CODE</u> Trainer: Shug McGaughey Winter Home: Palm Meadows (Fla.) Rebel bid looks tougher post-Southwest.	17	<u>KOBE'S BACK</u> Trainer: John Sadler Winter Home: Santa Anita (Cal.) Master in San Vicente, Rebel route next.
8	<u>TAPITURE</u> Trainer: Steve Asmussen Winter Home: Fair Grounds (La.) Took heat in Southwest & visually sharp.	18	<u>BOND HOLDER</u> Trainer: Doug O'Neill Winter Home: Santa Anita (Cal.) Reported body soreness after FG flight.
9	<u>BOBBY'S KITTEN</u> Trainer: Chad Brown Winter Home: Palm Meadows (Fla.) Big bullet Monday 5F in 58.40 on turf.	19	<u>CONQUEST TITAN</u> Trainer: Mark Casse Winter Home: Palm Meadows (Fla.) Given his style sitting out FoY looks smart.
10	<u>VICAR'S IN TROUBLE</u> Trainer: Mike Maker Winter Home: Fair Grounds (La.) He's so sharp now, but post 13 Risen Star.	20	<u>INDIANAPOLIS</u> Trainer: Bob Baffert Winter Home: Santa Anita (Cal.) Super talent, but no room to miss races.