

COUNTDOWN TO THE CROWN

SEASON 9 WEEK 9 – February 28, 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

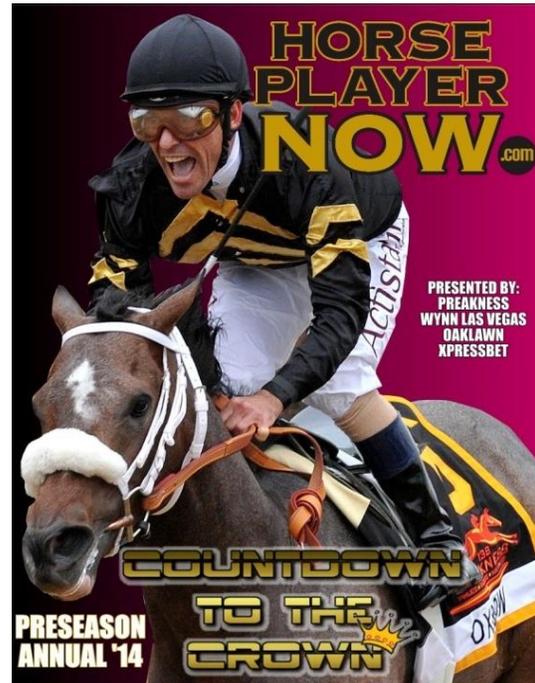
Opinions are like a six-hour rain delay to watch the Daytona 500. If you wait around long enough, eventually something good will come down the pike.

1. YOGI BERRA (Dennis Griffith) won his debut last Friday at Tampa Bay Downs, proving, as his namesake once said, "You can observe a lot just by watching."
2. Too slow? I keep hearing and reading people say about some proven winners on the trail being too slow. Fast horses so very rarely win Triple Crown races. Leave the too fast or too slow discussions to races and distances that are simple enough to whittle to that one factor. These aren't sprints with fields of seven, folks.
3. The best bet in all of racing may be this week with the "All Others" in the Kentucky Derby Future Wager Pool 3. The field has a 40% win rate over its 15-year history during this wager's timeslot – and an ROI that more than triples your money.

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.

Also note that my complete, horse-by-horse KDFW Pool 3 analysis and suggested wagers are included exclusively in the Horse Player NOW BUZZ report this week. Keep your focus in the high 20s to 30-1 range this far out for minimum value.



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Undercard Tilts

In action later today (Friday), all eyes will be on **Fair Grounds** and its turf course condition for Race 7 as main-track only hopeful THE TRUNK MONKEY (Larry Jones) hopes for yet another surface change in New Orleans. Meanwhile, Friday's **Aqueduct** Race 6 is a MSW mile featuring LONG WATER (Kieran McLaughlin), the son of BC Distaff winner Round Pond who exits a very strong Jan. 18 turf allowance at Gulfstream won by next-out victor DIVINE OATH (Todd Pletcher). And for pedigree fans, Friday's **Oaklawn** Race 7 features the debut of SONG GOLDEN (Michael Raidt), an Unbridled's Song-Golden Ballet blue-blood. Impressive *Countdown* tab STREET STRATEGY (Randy Morse) rises to the allowance ranks in Friday's Race 8 at **Oaklawn** where he's even-money against elders.

Saturday's undercards include a trio of 3YO tilts at **Gulfstream** on the Swale-Palm Beach program. G2 Saratoga Special third-place finisher DANZA (Todd Pletcher) makes a long-awaited return in a Race 3 allowance sprint; Race 6 appears a pretty wide-open turf mile MSW; and Race 7 offers a pedigree paradise.

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The latter race includes Tapit-Bird Town colt TAPIT TOWN (Nick Zito), Distorted Humor-Mushka colt HEYAARAT (Kieran McLaughlin) and the half-brother to Sightseeing and Sea Island named PETER ISLAND (Shug McGaughey).

If that pedigree isn't enough, how about a Derby-Oaks double at **Oaklawn** in Race 7 on Saturday? PEGASUS PROTOCOL (D. Wayne Lukas) debuts in that mile MSW boasting Fusaichi Pegasus and Pike Place Dancer on the first line of his gene pool. This solid race for 3YO & up also includes DYNAMIC IMPACT (Mark Casse) and west coast transplant KNOCK EM FLAT (Donnie K. Von Hemel).

On the minor stakes front Saturday, **Sam Houston** features the \$50,000 Texas Heritage Stakes for open company milers. Also, **Delta Downs'** \$100,000 Pelican Stakes for Louisiana-breds includes IDE BE COOL (Henry Dunn), seeking to advance to 6-for-6 lifetime.

On Sunday, I look forward to a **Parx** Race 7 allowance mile with UNDERTAKER (John Servis) and HONORABLE JUDGE (Butch Reid) in what could be a Wood Memorial springboard for one of those two talented sophomores.

Oaklawn Race 7 on Sunday is a MSW sprint that features second-timer SHATHOOR (Danny Peitz). The half-brother to My Miss Aurelia showed good speed in his debut and should graduate against a modest cast.

And finally on Sunday, **Calder's** \$75,000 Smooth Air Stakes for milers on the dirt includes Hutcheson also-ran TASHIR (Gennadi Dorochenko) and Gulfstream Derby also-ran GONE AS WIND (Efren Loza Jr.) competing over a track they've relished in recent tries. They'll meet one or two from the Todd Pletcher barn, come-backing KING CYRUS and/or cross-entered MONOPOLIZE.

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!

- Gotham Stakes - (Saturday/Aqueduct)

The logo for Aqueduct, featuring the word "AQUEDUCT" in white, bold, sans-serif capital letters on a dark teal rectangular background.

Solid cases can be made for eight of the 11 entrants in **Saturday's G3 \$500,000 Gotham Stakes at Aqueduct**. The 2014 purse has been inflated to a half-million bucks, which lured quite a bit more interest and depth than we saw in the Feb. 1 G3 Withers. So while a Withers rematch between New York-breds SAMRAAT (Rick Violette) and UNCLE SIGH (Gary Contessa) makes for a tidy storyline, the post-script could read something totally different.

Six of the last seven Gotham winners came from out of town losses against strong-level stakes competition. (Last year's winner Vyjack faced nearly all fellow Aqueduct-based winter runners to end that streak).

SAMRAAT and UNCLE SIGH dominated the Withers from gate to wire and both are speed horses expected to once again renew their acquaintances near the front of the Gotham. But the 1 1/16 miles prep for the Wood Memorial figures to have many partners to the pace. IN TROUBLE (Tony Dutrow) draws the rail in his first start since the unbeaten colt won September's G2 Futurity at Belmont around one turn. EXTRASEXYHIPZSTER (Mike Trombetta) – visually impressive against a good field in Laurel's Miracle Wood – also makes his two-turn debut with excellent tactical speed. And, Floridian HARPOON (Todd Pletcher) wired an Aqueduct maiden mile the last time he was in the Big Apple, and will have to be used early from a post 11-hole draw.

None of these aforementioned five speed-types are toss-outs in the Gotham. All have proven capable of running big races even with some heat. For a closer to beat them all, he will have had to really turn in a corker from the back. Late-running FINANCIAL MOGUL (Rick Violette), MONOPOLIZE (Todd Pletcher) and NOBLE CORNERSTONE (Wesley Ward) are the trio that appear to be most capable of making a final statement. All three come north from Florida and exit disappointing runs against tough competition. That's been a successful profile in the Gotham in recent years.

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NOBLE CORNERSTONE garnered much respect to this eye late in the 2YO season, and was a head case before the Sam F. Davis at Tampa last time and never showed up for work. Kent Desormeaux remains loyal and comes back east to ride again, and a pair of solid works since the Davis tell me that NOBLE CORNERSTONE stands a big chance to show us more what he's about Saturday than he did at Tampa – if he keeps his head on straight. But from a gambling standpoint, he's coupled in the wagering with fellow My Meadowview Farm runner SAAMRAAT, the likely favorite. That makes for a powerful early-late entry in terms of style and ability, but deflates betting value for those looking to bet (aren't we all?).

IN TROUBLE must answer the two-turn and layoff questions, but obviously comes with ability. He's been working strong at Palm Meadows in Florida for the return, but curiously has spaced his workouts 9 days apart throughout February and perhaps may be a horse pretty tough on himself. If he runs too big Saturday, might that knock him out for the next, more important run? You wonder if Tony Dutrow squeezes the lemon Saturday or gets an easier run in the Gotham to set up for the Wood? Recent Gotham winners Stay Thirsty and Awesome Act were able to do so off of autumn layoffs.

I'm torn as torn gets. The only closer in the race I like is NOBLE CORNERSTONE and his mind cannot be trusted completely. And with his mutuel pairing to SAMRAAT, that's probably not the best lean. I'll go with HARPOON despite the wide draw in a Gotham that puts me on a very low confidence scale.

Get more historical trends and significance on the Gotham Stakes by visiting page 91 of the Countdown to the Crown Preseason Annual simply by [clicking this link](#).

Gotham Stakes selections:

- W) HARPOON;
- P) SAMRAAT/NOBLE CORNERSTONE entry;
- S) EXTRASEXYHIPZSTER.

- Swale Stakes - (Saturday/Gulfstream Park)



The Saturday stakes that DOES look like a two-horse, either-or, situation is **Gulfstream Park's G2 \$200,000 Swale** at seven furlongs. Any way you slice this field, it's hard to envision HAVANA (Todd Pletcher) or NO NAY NEVER (Wesley Ward) missing a winner's circle photo op. The two G1 winners tower over the field but have vastly different resumes.

HAVANA debuted a poorly kept secret at Saratoga with an easy win at 2-5 before going on to outgame HONOR CODE (Shug McGaughey) in a thrilling G1 Champagne Stakes at Belmont. The pair of one-turn wins made him the 5-2 favorite for the Breeders' Cup Juvenile, where he drew a terrible post 12 and still ran his eyeballs out to finish second. Jockey Gary Stevens gave him a fast-break move at the top of the stretch to try and bust the race open, only to be nabbed by the now-retired New Year's Day. The company lines for HAVANA are unquestioned and it's quite possible he's better around this one-turn distance than two. You would expect him to get one shot after the Swale to find out if he's a Derby-type distance horse – so the Swale won't be the season's big enchilada for HAVANA.

NO NAY NEVER debuted a winner at Keeneland in April on the Polytrack, then blitzed Europe to win the G2 Norfolk at Royal Ascot and the G1 Prix Morny at Deauville. The historic run for the juvenile spanned three countries, but ranged from only 4 ½ to 6 furlongs. We know the Scat Daddy colt was a fast and early developer. And while he's been away since August, his spring training workout tab at Gulfstream indicates he hasn't lost any speed off of his fastball. Pedigree and preparation-wise, you would not think NO NAY NEVER has major classic distance success etched in his future. A race like the Swale figures to not be just a starting out point for NO NAY NEVER, but more in line with what his destination races should be. Given his tremendous early foot, I would not be overly concerned with a lack of dirt experience on raceday – there will be little or no kickback for which he will have to dodge.

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The Swale field also includes the 1-2-3 finishers in the restricted Ocala Breeders Sale Sprint – PRUDHOE BAY (Eddie Plesa Jr), BREITLING FLYER (Leo Azpuru Jr.) and CAN'T STOP THE KID (Donna Green). The latter owns a good win over the GP track since the OBS Sprint.

In a tight call, I'll go with the more extensive workout tab, propensity to sprint and hot riding hand of Javier Castellano aboard NO NAY NEVER.

Swale Stakes selections:

W) NO NAY NEVER; P) HAVANA;
S) CAN'T STOP THE KID.

**- Palm Beach -
(Saturday/Gulfstream Park)**



Even without Kentucky Derby qualifying points, **Saturday's G3 \$150,000 Palm Beach Stakes at Gulfstream Park** is one of the season's more important destinations to date. The rising grass race has become a favorite stop for horses en route to Keeneland's G1 Blue Grass and therefore is almost a de-facto, one-off prep on the major Kentucky circuit. The timing also works perfect to make the G3 Spiral at Turfway. Horses like Paddy O'Prado and Dullahan have given the Palm Beach legitimacy on the trail and in the Triple Crown series itself.

And this year's capacity field brings some proven power. STORMING INTI (Chad Brown) has won 4 in a row on turf and dirt – 3 of them stakes, while MR SPEAKER (Shug McGaughey) tallied the G3 Dania Beach earlier in the meet. CABO CAT (Mark Hennig) has chased both of those rivals in recent tries with some repute.

Both STORMING INTI and last-out maiden breaker CAN'THELPEBELIEVING (Graham Motion) have graced my Top 20 for the past several weeks. The latter caught my eye at Keeneland last fall when he showed a run-all-day type style upon his export from Ireland. His local MSW win at Gulfstream underscored my appreciation and he makes the class rise Saturday with a legitimate chance. A good effort sets him up for Turfway or Keeneland.

The Palm Beach's depth digs farther. MORNING CALM (Michelle Nihei) really impressed in his debut win and exits a super-strong allowance behind THEROS (Kieran McLaughlin), who was a front-end superstar that day and gave no one a chance with sensational come-home splits. And the Donegal Racing success in the Palm Beach has a chance to continue with SMART COVER (Dale Romans), runner-up in the G3 Iroquois in September and back from some shin issues. They've picked a pretty ambitious spot for the return considering he's eligible for first-level allowances.

PLEUVEN (Chad Brown) gives his barn a strong 1-2 punch Saturday as the two-time listed French stakes winner exits a late-running third in the G3 Dania Beach and changes to a more aggressive early rider in Joe Bravo. GALA AWARD (Todd Pletcher) has done little wrong in 2 starts and the \$1.5 million buy is brother to Stormello and My Best Brother. He has every license to be a stakes success and gets his first shot at that in the Palm Beach. You may be looking at Pletcher-Johnny V at 10-1 or more, which tells you how tough this race appears.

Get more historical trends and significance on the Fountain of Youth Stakes by visiting page 92 of the Countdown to the Crown Preseason Annual simply by [clicking this link](#).

Fountain of Youth Stakes selections:

W) STORMING INTI; P) CAN'THELPEBELIEVING;
S) MR SPEAKER.

**- John Battaglia Memorial Stakes -
(Saturday/Turfway Park)**



Saturday's **\$100,000 John Battaglia Memorial at Turfway Park** serves as the major local prep for the G3 Spiral in three weeks. Say what you want about Polytrack, but the surface's stakes often lure runners from all corners. This group of 11 includes no less than 8 different last-prep locations for its runners.

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HARRY'S HOLIDAY (Mike Maker) dominated the 6 ½ furlong 96 Rock Stakes on the front end leading up to the Battaglia. Now he figures to be part of a potentially wicked pace and was cast widest of all in the post position draw. Fleet-footed LADDIE BOY (Chuck Peery) was a classy and determined front-runner at age 2, while G3 Arlington-Washington Futurity winner SOLITARY RANGER (Wayne Catalano) has done all his best work on the engine. Local MSW dynamo CHESTER'S PARK (Claude Godsey) also exits a wire-to-wire score by 12 that impressed the numbers gang. GENERAL JACK (Mike Maker) also had plenty of early tempo at age 2 and could help a rapid pace develop. RED RIVER RISING (Kellyn Gorder) is progressing nicely and also capable of forcing the early pace scenario.

LADDIE BOY and SOLITARY RANGER have the class and Polytrack experience to perhaps best withstand the early pressure. But a pace handicapper almost has to look at the closers in this race with a deep appreciation. The two later runners who catch the eye are POKER PLAYER (Wayne Catalano) and possibly KIDS RULE (Mike Stidham).

KIDS RULE is cross-entered Friday at Fair Grounds in a turf allowance and TP officials expect him to run in New Orleans unless the FG race comes off the turf. If so, then he would travel eleventh hour to Turfway for the Battaglia. On paper, I really like his chances in this spot if he were to show up.

But POKER PLAYER has the Battaglia squarely on his radar and a pace scenario that begs for his late run. He won the G3 Bourbon on Keeneland's Polytrack in the Fall and Channing Hill likely brings him with a wide rally that will be hard to stop if he fires.

Battaglia Memorial selections:

W) POKER PLAYER; P) KIDS RULE;

S) LADDIE BOY.

Alternate if KIDS RULE scratches
– SOLITARY RANGER

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

Top choice PROCEED (Joel Marr) rolled home in the Mine That Bird Derby, but we weren't

nearly as tuned in with COMMISSIONER (Todd Pletcher) in the Fountain of Youth and HOPPERTUNITY (Bob Baffert), both off the board in disappointing, well-bet efforts.

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

Season selections: 16: 3-4-2.

Everyone's a Critic

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

Stakes Races



Saturday's **G2 \$400,000 Fountain of Youth Stakes at Gulfstream** ([video](#)) typically would serve as the first "major" on the Triple Crown trail most seasons. But with leading Floridians like CAIRO PRINCE (Kiaran McLaughlin) and HONOR CODE (Shug McGaughey) back at the barn, this FoY had more of a proving-ground feel to it. And, it had plenty of filler as six in the 13-horse field were dismissed at 40-1 odds or more. Add in the fact that five of six dirt races on the card were won wire-to-wire (only 1-5 shot Normandy Invasion "rallied" from 3 lengths back to win). All this conspires to drain the Fountain of Youth of validity on its face and makes a horseplayer need to see the follow-up starts to get a good line on this particular result.

WILDCAT RED (Jose Garoffalo) and GENERAL A ROD (Mike Maker) did their part in putting on quite a show. The front-running winners of the G2 Hutcheson and listed Gulfstream Park Derby already had made noise at the meet, and were attached to one another from the outset of the FoY. They duelled through quarters in 23.03, 23.22 and 23.88 before slowing to a fourth quarter 25.11 and final sixteenth of 6.61. The final time was a fast 1:41.85, only .85 off the 1 1/16 miles track record. The final time was about 2 lengths faster than CONSTITUTION (Todd Pletcher) ran in a key same-day 3YO allowance of stakes quality.

The FoY result by a nose mirrored the Gulfstream Derby on Jan. 1, just flipping the result and tightening the margin from a head that day. With a start in-between and a tad

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more early foot Saturday, WILDCAT RED had the advantage in form cycle in the FoY – but that turns squarely in favor of GENERAL A ROD when the distance elongates another sixteenth of a mile in the Florida Derby. Pedigree-wise, the damside stamina for GENERAL A ROD should rule the day in the rubber match – and he ran on past the wire with good energy. WILDCAT RED, earning 50 points in Kentucky Derby qualifying, would appear squarely in the field by that measure and is being pointed to the first Saturday in May. So, he belongs in any Top 20 as a near-certain part of the field if healthy. But I can't help but point the finger at this past Saturday as his Derby Day – I just can't project him any farther than the FoY trip.

TOP BILLING (Shug McGaughey) received a pretty smart ride by Joel Rosario from a wide post and didn't cover nearly as much ground as many had feared – including yours truly. He ran on well enough to be third, racing against a bias heavily tilted away from his style. But do note there was no monster gallop-out as you might think; in fact, it was pedestrian beyond the wire. Still, this was a positive effort in his first stakes foray and really TOP BILLING loses nothing in stature. I'm not sure I can make the leap some have and say that I love him even more for running third against a bias, but I'm firm in that this remains a very serious Triple Crown prospect. Even if the Florida Derby Day track comes up a paved highway for speed, at 1 1/8 miles and more seasoning, you'd expect TOP BILLING to be an exacta player and make his way to Louisville. He could venture out of town for the Wood Memorial or Arkansas Derby, too, races that that McGaughey has utilized in the past.

Beyond the top three in the FoY, let's address sixth-place finisher COMMISSIONER (Todd Pletcher). While he certainly is a grinder and bred to run distances with as much stamina as anyone in the crop, we can't forget the monumental difference between this 1 1/16 miles race and the goals on the horizon. The energy he was forced to use to chase and pursue here is far more taxing than he'll need to apply in longer races. Even in a blistering pace like the Kentucky Derby, horses of this ilk will be allowed to settle 8-10 lengths off the lead and not worry about the race being stolen up front. This is a half-mile in :49-:50 kind of horse who will keep knocking the entire 10-12 furlongs. Trakus caught him in 47.11 for the first half-mile of the FoY, and left him empty. I still

have faith in COMMISSIONER as a Triple Crown prospect of strong repute; he reminds me a ton of Drosselmeyer, another WinStar Farm runner who many said was too slow, but wound up a Belmont Stakes and Breeders' Cup Classic champion despite finishing off the board in the 2010 Risen Star when we all anticipated much more out of his stakes debut. COMMISSIONER will head out of town for his final prep, with the Wood Memorial or Arkansas Derby very logical targets, but the Blue Grass on Keeneland's Polytrack might be within his pedigree, and certainly would play out more likely, pace-wise, to his liking. Of course, that's a one-shot deal risk at making the Derby on a foreign surface, but he's in a one-shot situation to prove worthy of the dance no matter what.

WE MISS ARTIE (Todd Pletcher) falls in the same boat as stablemate COMMISSIONER. He ran a half-mile in a way-too-fast 47.05, according to Trakus, and wound up empty and eighth under the wire. His third quarter in 23.69 was fastest of anyone in the race, and too much asked too soon after a solid first half-mile. He's just not a middle-distance type of horse capable of running fast. But as the theme of this *Countdown* can't remind you enough – fast is not the lone quality, or most important quality, needed to win classic-distance races. Look for WE MISS ARTIE to reappear on the Polytrack at Keeneland and owner Ken Ramsey will give him every chance to land in Louisville. The Blue Grass might also get MEDAL COUNT (Dale Romans), who didn't embarrass while fifth in the Fountain of Youth and certainly can use the track bias argument as a reason to press on the path. He's a pretty talented individual.

EAST HALL (Bill Kaplan), third in the Gulfstream Derby, proved that race's depth went beyond GENERAL A ROD and WILDCAT RED when he finished fourth in the FoY at 72-1 odds. He's an 11-start, late-running stamina type that kind of reminds you of former Kaplan trainee IMAWILDANDCRAZYGUY, who surprised most all of us with a fourth-place finish in a star-studded 2007 Kentucky Derby.

In the end, GENERAL A ROD and TOP BILLING move on as legitimate Triple Crown prospects for me, while COMMISSIONER, WE MISS ARTIE and perhaps even MEDAL COUNT deserve another look in different circumstances. MEDAL COUNT had a huge gallop-out, better than anyone in the field and could be a factor the farther they go. And while I respect WILDCAT

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RED up to 1 1/16 miles, he will have to prove to me he's capable going farther.

Check out the historical significance of the Fountain of Youth by visiting page 87 of the Countdown to the Crown Preseason Annual. [Click here.](#)



Saturday's **G2 \$400,000 Risen Star Stakes at Fair Grounds** would be ecstatic to emulate last year's fallout. Will any of the 2014 alumni come near the Triple Crown success of predecessors Oxbow, Palace Malice, Mylute, Normandy Invasion or Golden Soul?

Rail-skimming ALBANO (Larry Jones) continued to show front-end fortitude, doing all the dirty work before succumbing by a dirty nose to classy Florida raider INTENSE HOLIDAY (Todd Pletcher). If you've been reading the [Countdown to the Preseason Annual](#) you would know that 'HOLIDAY became the fourth Florida shipper to win the Risen Star in the past 5 years – and the third trained by Todd Pletcher.

ALBANO set a consistent tempo of 24.30, 23.84, 24.86 and 24.42 before a final sixteenth in 6.44. None of the quarters were super-taxing, but none were cakewalks, and that kind of grind can get you many paces down the Triple Crown trail. I'm still waiting on distances to catch up with ALBANO, but increasingly he's becoming one who defies convention.

INTENSE HOLIDAY's final winning time of 1:43.86 was more than a length slower than powerhouse 3YO filly Untapable ran in the same-day Rachel Alexandra Stakes. But she crushed by 9 lengths, so don't think the Risen Star's clocking is an indictment on the boys' fortunes, but rather a celebration of one filly's dominant day. INTENSE HOLIDAY continues his ascent after minor checks in the Champagne, Nashua, Remsen and Holy Bull vs. company lines that would make any horse in this crop shiver. He had lost four races in a row, and none by heart-stopping margins, so we realize we're not dealing with a superstar. But we do have a very solid, representative member of this class who likely will continue earning his way to the bigger dances. He's got a little bit of Giacomo in him that way and in resume, which

means he'll need a face-melting pace to open the floodgates for a grinder to win a race like the Derby – and likely be less-brilliant than your typical needs to win a Preakness.

The Risen Star's third and fourth-place finishers, VICAR'S IN TROUBLE (Mike Maker) and HOPPERTUNITY (Bob Baffert) both merit another long look on the trail before any abandonment. A wide draw for VICAR'S IN TROUBLE did him no favors Saturday, and he ran on fairly well until becoming rubber-legged late. His Lecomte throttling of ALBANO has to be respected when you consider how well that rival ran in the rematch even if post position circumstances conspired for part of the reason. Meanwhile, HOPPERTUNITY showed just enough closing interest to engage me further. I like his pedigree and always appreciate the Baffert closers much more than the raw, pure speedballs. Look at Baffert's Triple Crown race winners and they're not the blazers (Silver Charm, Real Quiet, Point Given, Lookin At Lucky et al). HOPPERTUNITY gets the opportunity to show if he's got what it takes one more time, or else be relegated to something like what we saw a year ago with Code West – a nice, middling 3YO. I think he can be better than that, though.

As for others in the Risen Star, GOLD HAWK (Steve Asmussen) and RISE UP (Tom Amoss) both were exposed as fringe players on the trail with disappointing runs. GOLD HAWK – who can't get his gate act together – just hasn't kicked home with pizzazz in stakes company, while RISE UP, even after a significant layoff and fairly light training regiment, likely reminded us why he debuted at 4-1/2 furlongs at Presque Isle Downs during June of his 2YO season. COMMANDING CURVE (Dallas Stewart) ran on fairly even while splitting the field and should move forward some off this race. BOND HOLDER (Doug O'Neill) suffered body soreness after his flight from California and was scratched. Instead of returning to the west coast, he was re-routed to a trip to the G2 Tampa Bay Derby instead after further flight complications at his Florida layover. I'm a BOND HOLDER fan, but this does not look good for his mental makeup.

Check out the historical significance of the Risen Star by visiting page 89 of the Countdown to the Crown Preseason Annual. [Click here.](#)

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Slick New Mexico-bred PROCEED (Joel Marr) ran off with Saturday's **\$120,000 Mine That Bird Derby at Sunland Park**. One of the more intriguing horses-from-nowhere this *Countdown* season, we've been tooting the PROCEED horn for some time now and he underscored that promise when he pulled two lengths clear of ex-Todd Pletcher trainee REBRANDED (Justin Evans).

PROCEED, a son of Desert God, earned his way to the G3 Sunland Park Derby with this performance where the waters no doubt will be deeper. But he's now 3-for-3 by more than 20 combined lengths and shows a patient-and-pounce style that translates well to most situations. A timer malfunction denied splits being available, but the 1 1/16 miles final clocking was an outstanding 1:42.47. Expect there to be a heavyweight or two in the Sunland Derby field looking for riches and points, but don't dismiss this NM-bred until you give the field a thorough evaluation at the next stopover.

Check out the historical significance of the Mine That Bird Derby by visiting page 90 of the Countdown to the Crown Preseason Annual. [Click here.](#)

Minor Stakes

LOTSA MISCHIEF (Dan McFarlane) wired Saturday's \$75,000 **Turf Paradise Derby** by 3 ½ lengths despite dawdling home in 27.67 and 7.33 splits that should have been his ondoing. This winner often resurfaces in the G3 Sunland Park Derby, but likely would not provide more than some field filler and early pace presence in 2014 based on Saturday's result.

Allowance Races

The season's most anticipated allowance race took place Saturday at **Gulfstream** on the Fountain of Youth undercard when four stakes-tested 3YOs were among the field of nine in a Race 6 route at 1 1/16 miles. But it was wire-to-wire class riser CONSTITUTION (Todd Pletcher) who blitzed his more experienced rivals to go 2-for-2 lifetime ([video](#)). The Tapit colt improved on his sprint debut to this eye in

scoring by 3 ¼ lengths with high-quality fractions of 24.31, 23.40, 23.32, 24.64 and 6.52. The final time was about 2 lengths slower than the Fountain of Youth. The speed-friendly track and course configuration obviously carried this colt some, but to what degree we won't know until he runs back again. His gallop out was the best of this talented bunch. TONALIST (Christophe Clement) was a good second and has a run-all-day style and damside pedigree that makes you want to see him in the Florida Derby. MEXIKOMA (Rick Mettee) was last early, closed about 5 lengths on the front runner in the final half-mile and got what you want to see out of a comeback race in which the race simply didn't set up for him. If you liked MEXIKOMA before, and I did, you still should. WICKED STRONG (Jimmy Jerkens) didn't move forward off this race like you would have hoped after a Holy Bull no-show, but was at least competitive. MATTERHORN (Todd Pletcher) didn't get away cleanly but also offered nothing at all in his return and seems more hype than substance at this stage.

One could argue that the TAP Stable's best allowance prospect from Saturday at **Gulfstream** wasn't CONSTITUTION, but rather Race 1 turf route allowance victor DIVINE OATH (Todd Pletcher). In fact, I'd make that case. No doubt CONSTITUTION beat a better field and did so on dirt, but the upside for DIVINE OATH really lures me in. The Broken Vow colt is a maternal grandson of the great Personal Ensign and this one has a tenacity I appreciate. Wins by a half-length and neck in two starts, he will battle you and probably gets a chance on the Polytrack next. This race had an insane second quarter in 22.45 that cooked everyone near the pace except CHART TOPPER (Brian Lynch), who should go immediately into a horses to watch list of yours ([video](#)).

At **Oaklawn**, CONDO CLOSING (Mac Robertson) helped an ice-cold barn shake off a slump Saturday with a visually sharp allowance sprint score. The Offlee Wild colt had been away since a Delaware maiden breaker in September and overcame traffic in upper stretch to out-finish the stakes-placed RIVERS RUN DEEP (Cody Autrey).

SCHIVARELLI (Eddie Kenneally) sliced through the **Aqueduct** fog last Friday to destroy a mile allowance cast by 12 lengths. What we didn't see with the eyes, the clock confirmed for us as a 27.07 fourth quarter should have invited

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someone to the party and didn't. This race lost luster when MONOPOLIZE (Todd Pletcher) scratched – and the result was negative for alumni of the Withers Stakes as STREET GENT (Leah Gyarmati) offered little on the class drop.

Speaking of class drops, I'm not sure how the public missed BETTER BET (Mike Harrington) at 13-1 vs. just four rivals in last Friday's **Santa Anita** turf mile allowance. {Horse Player NOW BUZZ customers got him as a \$28 winning horse to watch.} After seven straight stakes bids, the lone speed angle was enough to outlast the field with a strong 23.01 final quarter-mile after walking the dog on the front end. The big thud was TEXAS RYANO (Carla Gaines), fourth at 6-5 odds after his late-running, pace-aided debut upset at 24-1. As they say, if you missed the wedding, you don't go to the funeral – especially at 6-5 odds.

ALERT BAY (Blaine Wright) captured a slow-late **Golden Gate Fields** allowance mile on Sunday as odds-on favorite G.G. RYDER (Jerry Hollendorfer) offered little resistance in third.

My man ALEX INC (Butch Reid) has been a heartthrob since Fall, and on Tuesday at Parx he delivered on the promise with a dazzling mile allowance win in 1:35.41. He ran like a runaway train in the lane, swerving and correcting quickly as he was going so fast. Consider his final quarter in 23.95 and final eighth in 11.92. That's amazing around two turns. Granted, he beat absolutely nothing (4 former claimers and a 1-for-12 type), but his run against FAVORITE TALE (Lupe Preciado) on Feb. 8 was a much stronger class measuring stick. If this Tuesday race had an ounce of quality underneath the winner it would rank among my Top 5 allowances on the trail this season. ALEX INC has something of repute in him, stakes-wise, and I would not be surprised to see the cagey Reid bite off a piece of the Wood Memorial.

Maiden Races

GLOBAL STRIKE (Todd Pletcher) was part of a huge Saturday at **Gulfstream** for the nation's power stable, adding a 1 1/8 miles MSW route win in front-end style. But a final three furlongs in a sun-dial slow 40.25 make you want to run for cover away from this one next time, and especially those who ran behind him. The win, at the least, helps support the form of his Jan. 18 conqueror TONALIST (Christophe Clement),

who helped his own cause in allowance company on the same program by running second.

SOCIAL INCLUSION (Manny Azpurua) debuted with his running shoes tied tight **Saturday** in a Gulfstream MSW sprint. The Pioneer of The Nile colt wired a suspect field by 7 ½ lengths in a sharp 1:09.35 over a fast and speed-friendly track. Runner-up TIGER TANK (Tony Dutrow) will appreciate more distance and is one to keep tabs on for next time. Also at **Gulfstream** on Saturday, a 1 1/16 miles turf MSW route went to seventh-time starter SMOOTH DADDY (Tom Albertrani) at 16-1 odds. He exited a fourth behind one of my wiseguy runners on the trail, CAN'THELPBELIEVING (Graham Motion). This was a deep race on paper and look for PALACE GATE (Todd Pletcher) to graduate next time after a dastardly trip from a wide draw.

BREWING (D. Wayne Lukas) showed some super early wheels to beat a soft **Oaklawn** maiden sprint cast Saturday by 4 ½ lengths. The final time of 1:10.62 was about 5 lengths faster than 3YO allowance winner CONDO CLOSING (Mac Robertson) went in the very next race. But BREWING is bred to run short and should stay around one turn.

In that same vein of very fast MSW sprinters in the region, Saturday's **Fair Grounds** graduate GLACKEN TOO (Bret Calhoun) took out his frustrations by 5 ½ lengths in a sharp 1:10.18. He had faced bears UNKNOWN ROAD (Al Stall Jr.) and THE TRUNK MONKEY (Larry Jones) in two previous runner-up tries. This pedigree is all sprint, but he's a good one worth tabbing on the rise as long as he stays around one turn.

Saturday's **Fair Grounds** card also saw Giacomo's son GIACALLURE (Richie Scherer) put it together in this third start and first bid on turf. He uncorked a nice rail rally to draw away by 3 ¾ lengths despite a very slow opening half-mile that didn't flatter his chances. The Lure in his damside pedigree shined bright. Debut runner-up TURF KITTEN (Mike Maker) won't be a maiden long after catching the wrong hombre on the wrong day in this one.

Aqueduct had a pair of MSW sprints last Friday in which debut romper GROUND CONTROL (Tony Dutrow) stole the show. An 8 ¾ length victory at first asking clocked about 6-7 lengths faster than the split division won by HANDSTAND (Tom Albertrani), a 23-1 upsetter

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and fellow debut artist. GROUND CONTROL is bred top and bottom for stamina and deserves our attention for the Fog City Stable, which has run some good horses on both coasts.

Just Wynn, Baby



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

INTENSE HOLIDAY had his price halved to 15-1 after the Risen Star, but the Fountain of Youth 1-2 of WILDCAT RED (50-1) and GENERAL A ROD (40-1) didn't exactly cause a traffic jam among futures bettors. Value can be had with COMMISSIONER raised to 65-1 if you have faith in him rebounding next time out.

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!

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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. CONSTITUTION (Gulfstream, 2/22) * NEW *
5. THEROS (Gulfstream, 2/7-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)
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.

1	<u>CANDY BOY</u> Trainer: John Sadler Winter Home: Santa Anita (Cal.) Worked Wed 4F in 48.20 for SA Derby.	11	<u>BOBBY'S KITTEN</u> Trainer: Chad Brown Winter Home: Palm Meadows (Fla.) Skips the Palm Beach but continues drills.
2	<u>CAIRO PRINCE</u> Trainer: Kiaran McLaughlin Winter Home: Palm Meadows (Fla.) 2 drills since Holy Bull, 49.90 last Sat.	12	<u>STORMING INTI</u> Trainer: Chad Brown Winter Home: Palm Meadows (Fla.) One to beat in the Palm Beach while hot.
3	<u>STRONG MANDATE</u> Trainer: D. Wayne Lukas Winter Home: Oaklawn Park (Ark.) Bullet work Mon post-Southwest; hearty.	13	<u>CAN'THELPBELIEVING</u> Trainer: Graham Motion Winter Home: Palm Meadows (Fla.) On cue w/consistent 5Fs for Palm Beach.
4	<u>TOP BILLING</u> Trainer: Shug McGaughey Winter Home: Palm Meadows (Fla.) Valid reasons for FoY 3 rd , no love lost.	14	<u>MEXIKOMA</u> Trainer: Rick Mettee Winter Home: Palm Meadows (Fla.) Hard time w/wide draw ALW 3 rd Sat at GP.
5	<u>BAYERN</u> Trainer: Bob Baffert Winter Home: Santa Anita 59.80 drill Mon, 11 days after huge win.	15	<u>VICAR'S IN TROUBLE</u> Trainer: Mike Maker Winter Home: Fair Grounds (La.) Regressed some in Risen Star; talented.
6	<u>HONOR CODE</u> Trainer: Shug McGaughey Winter Home: Palm Meadows (Fla.) 3 works back since 25-day gap in drills.	16	<u>KOBE'S BACK</u> Trainer: John Sadler Winter Home: Santa Anita (Cal.) Maybe strongest Cali raider for Rebel.
7	<u>TAPITURE</u> Trainer: Steve Asmussen Winter Home: Fair Grounds (La.) Back-to-back graded route stakes wins.	17	<u>CONQUEST TITAN</u> Trainer: Mark Casse Winter Home: Palm Meadows (Fla.) Sharp 48.30 drill Sat; wisely skipped FoY.
8	<u>GENERAL A ROD</u> Trainer: Mike Maker Winter Home: Gulfstream Park (Fla.) Dangerous to label him just bias-aided.	18	<u>HOPPERTUNITY</u> Trainer: Bob Baffert Winter Home: Santa Anita (Cal.) Risen Star 4 th wanting distance/seasoning.
9	<u>COMMISSIONER</u> Trainer: Todd Pletcher Winter Home: Palm Meadows (Fla.) Drosselmeyer-feel about him, not done.	19	<u>BOND HOLDER</u> Trainer: Doug O'Neill Winter Home: Santa Anita (Cal.) Tampa Bay Derby now the re-slated goal.
10	<u>INTENSE HOLIDAY</u> Trainer: Todd Pletcher Winter Home: Palm Meadows Seems a reliable Mission Impazible-type.	20	<u>WILDCAT RED</u> Trainer: Jose Garoffalo Winter Home: Gulfstream Park Points to play now; real distance doubts.