

COUNTDOWN TO THE CROWN

SEASON 9 WEEK 12 – March 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.

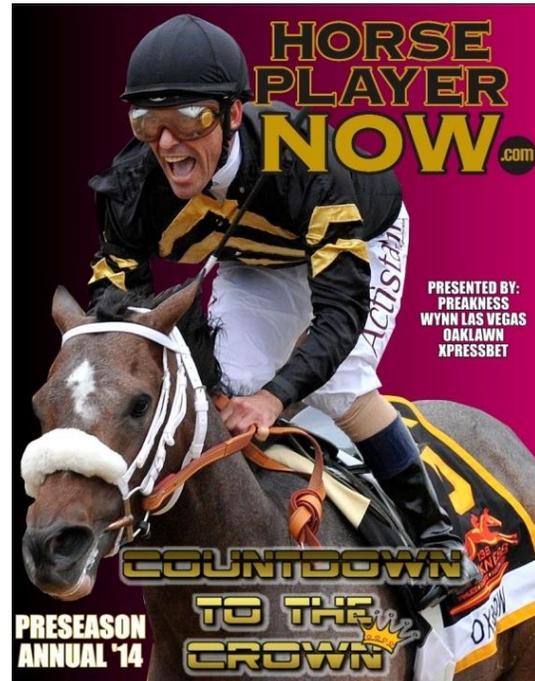
Three Things You Won't Read Anywhere Else

Opinions are like filling out a perfect, billion-dollar bracket. My chances of being right this season are somewhere between slim and 9-quintillion-to-1.

1. I get the dream, the Derby Fever and the negotiating tactics of holding out for more money. But what part of a reported \$8 million don't you understand if you own SOCIAL INCLUSION (Manny Azpurua)? I would have sold him so fast that John Moschitta would have asked me to slow down (punch line: [video](#)).
2. PETA is no friend to horse racing, but all of us in the industry had better search within if even a portion of its investigation of the Steve Asmussen stable rings any chords of truth. Shooting the messenger is easy, and especially in this case. But to deny a hard-line look at what's becoming an increasingly more apparent problem would be additional recklessness.
3. Don't look now, but Bob Baffert has himself a horse for the Triple Crown not beholden on getting the lead in HOPPERTUNITY. Sans the free-agent pick-up War Emblem in 2002, all Baffert-developed TC successes have been done with horses who weren't speed merchants: Silver Charm, Real Quiet, Point Given and Lookin At Lucky.

This Week's Fearless Forecast

This section previews the coming attractions in 3-year-old stakes and undercard races.



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As is custom in *Countdown* each season, once the calendar flips to March, we focus exclusively on stakes races and only touch on undercard races in exceptional circumstances.

We could get some additional barometer on rising star SOCIAL INCLUSION (Manny Azpurua) when his Feb. 22 MSW runner-up TIGER TANK (Tony Dutrow) returns Saturday in a Race 3 MSW sprint at **Aqueduct**.

On the minor stakes front, Saturday's \$75,000 Pasadena at a mile on turf at **Santa Anita** includes G3 El Camino Real Derby third ENTERPRISING (Tom Proctor) on a shrewd cut-back to his best trip, along with DIAMOND BACHELOR (Patrick Biancone) also getting back to what he does best. A couple of CANDY BOY (John Sadler) pursuers from the G2 Lewis return to the green in this one.

At **Oaklawn** on Saturday, the \$100,000 Gazebo Stakes for 3-year-old sprinters doesn't appear to have any Triple Crown aspirants, but a good group of sprinters you could see back on the Preakness or Belmont undercards in the Hirsch Jacobs or Woody Stephens. Keep an eye on this one for help on those big racing days to come.

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COUNTDOWN TO THE CROWN

SEASON 9 WEEK 12 – March 21, 2014

- Spiral Stakes - (Saturday/Turfway Park)



As the more than 72,000 readers of the [Countdown to the Crown Preseason Annual](#) already know, the key place to look for **G3 \$550,000 Spiral Stakes** success is the Gulfstream Park turf. Five of the last six winners of Turfway's big one had spent part of their winter on the GP lawn, including three straight making class rises.

This capacity field of 12 actually over-filled, but without also-eligibles for the Spiral, a top GP turf prospect like DIVINE OATH (Todd Pletcher) was left on the outside looking in. Fear not; the field has an interesting Gulfstream turf injection from the likes of BIG BAZINGA (Katerina Vassilieva), SMART COVER (Dale Romans) and the Todd Pletcher-trained pair of WE MISS ARTIE and ALL TIED UP. History indicates the winner should come from that foursome – though the toteboard might tell a different story.

TAMARANDO (Jerry Hollendorfer) figures to go favored as the G1 Del Mar Futurity and G3 El Camino Real Derby winner on synthetics. Russell Baze, the sport's all-time leading jockey by wins, makes a rare, but always notable, road trip from his Northern California nest. The Calbred's form in recent week's got some flattery when CALIFORNIA CHROME (Art Sherman) dominated open company in the G2 San Felipe. TAMARANDO, a deep closer with one run regardless of sprint or route distances, will need the pace in the Spiral to be strong.

SOLITARY RANGER (Wayne Catalano) emulated his name in the John Battaglia Memorial three weeks ago when a lone leader. He ran his rivals into the ground for his second Polytrack stakes win and never was in jeopardy. He was awfully good in the last and I have no real knock on him – other than a stronger feel for some of the new faces.

The return of pace presser HARRY'S HOLIDAY (Mike Maker) and the additions of horses like ALMOST FAMOUS (Pat Byrne), COASTLINE (Mark Casse) and ASSERTING BEAR (Reade

Baker) figure to make the pace more honest – but this does not look like a fall-apart race shape. Horses from just off the first flight ought to “trip out” with a great chance to tackle the speed that's going to work harder for the money than in the Battaglia.

With TAMARANDO almost certain to be near the rear early, those “first-run” closers, from just off the pace and mid-pack, could get the jump on the likely favorite. Deep closer POKER PLAYER (Wayne Catalano) may also be compromised by such a set-up.

From a race-shape and historical perspective, a Gulfstream turfer who can sit in the front half of the 12-horse field ought to be quite effective. That would appear to be right in the comfort zone for WE MISS ARTIE, who sat five lengths off a fast pace in the G1 Breeders Futurity at Keeneland at age 2 and rolled by late.

WE MISS ARTIE rates the horse to beat from this eye as owner Ken Ramsey tries to split his charges – his BOBBY'S KITTEN (Chad Brown) is aimed at the G1 Blue Grass at Keeneland. Expect BIG BAZINGA to factor in the outcome, but from where in the field, I haven't a clue. He's shown speed, come from the clouds, caused his own trouble at the start and more. From the rail in a big field, who knows where he winds up? But I love DIVINE OATH and he ran him to a neck decision on the GP lawn last time and that's good enough for me in this spot. Also from that same potential key race comes ALL TIED UP, who wouldn't be the worst exotics inclusion at what could be 20-1 odds for the nation's most prolific stable.

COASTLINE will give us some intersectional barometer on the Oaklawn runners this spring. Third in the Smarty Jones and fourth in the G3 Southwest, this is a Polytrack maiden winner from Keeneland who theoretically should be fine with the surface. I just wonder if he wants to run quite this far.

Get more historical trends and significance on the Spiral Stakes by visiting page 96 of the Countdown to the Crown Preseason Annual simply by [clicking this link](#).

Spiral Stakes selections:

W) WE MISS ARTIE; P) BIG BAZINGA;
S) TAMARANDO.

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COUNTDOWN TO THE CROWN

- Sunland Derby - (Sunday/Sunland Park)



Three west coast shippers ensure that Sunday's **G3 \$800,000 Sunland Derby** pace will be quick. Add in a fourth early agitator and this 1 1/8 miles race truly has the chance to wilt. While the reputation for Sunland racing is super-fast and speed-friendly, even a cursory glance of the Sunland Derby history tells you that meltdowns are quite possible.

For every Governor Charlie who showed brilliance in this race, there's a Daddy Nose Best or Twice The Appeal from off the pace who got his picture taken. Even when times are fast, the running styles traditionally have remained fair: pace makes the race even at Sunland.

MIDNIGHT HAWK (Bob Baffert) and stablemate CHITU carry big-time credentials from the west. Baffert's 2 wins in this race's brief 11-year history indicate he brings good fits to the high altitude at Sunland. MIDNIGHT HAWK wheels back quick on 15 days' rest since a potential heart-ripping second behind CALIFORNIA CHROME (Art Sherman). I'm not enamored with this placement or distance, and strongly lean toward CHITU in the head-to-head barn match-up. CHITU is a big-bodied beast and really ran a strong race in the G2 Lewis on Feb. 8. He's got a superb workout tab since then that indicates he bounced out of that race very well and rates the horse to beat if he moves forward at all off his first stakes bid.

GAREN (Peter Miller), the younger brother to Horse of the Year Invasor, and TANZANITE CAT (Cody Autrey), pace player in Oaklawn's Smarty Jones and Southwest, figure to push the Baffert charges early in the Sunland Derby.

Todd Pletcher's Sunland Derby raids have not netted much success – one third-place finish from four attempts – but his duo of COMMISSIONER and GLOBAL STRIKE both are highly equipped for the 9-furlong distance. Both have Gulfstream dirt wins at the trip this season and pedigrees to shine if they can muster the right trip. Neither is a confirmed closer, more so grinders, so they'll need some of the field to come back to them. Each would

SEASON 9 WEEK 12 – March 21, 2014

be susceptible to a brilliant speed horse who can idle just enough late to hold to the wire.

A complete, fall-apart pace would help the likes of BOURBONIZE (Kellyn Gorder) and REBRANDED (Justin Evans) – but that would constitute both Baffert runners wilting and both Pletcher grinders not firing with anything late. If you can get four runners from those two barns all to sputter, be sure you get paid handsome.

If COMMISSIONER can finish with the late pace numbers he posted while topping the since-injured TOP BILLING two starts back, the race should come down to him and CHITU in the final stages. I've been a big COMMISSIONER supporter all season, but my gut and Pletcher's local struggles in this race put me in toss-up mode. Definitely go two-deep in multi-race wagers if you're so inclined.

Get more historical trends and significance on the Sunland Derby by visiting page 97 of the Countdown to the Crown Preseason Annual simply by [clicking this link](#).

Sunland Derby selections:

W) COMMISSIONER; P) CHITU;
S) MIDNIGHT HAWK.

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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).

A tough go continued as top choice STRONG MANDATE mustered only a fourth-place finish while in tight quarters in the G2 Rebel. Third choice HOPPERTUNITY took the lion's share.

Last week's selections: 1: 0-0-0
Season selections: 24: 3-6-4.

HPNOW BUZZ

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3-year-old races – as well as national
horses to watch daily from our
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Everyone's a Critic

This section reviews the week that was in the 3-year-old ranks. As with our preview section, now that we're in March, it takes an exceptional performance or noteworthy tie to include maiden or allowance races.

Stakes Races



Heading into **Saturday's G2 \$600,000 Rebel at Oaklawn**, the *Countdown* over/under was 3 when establishing how many potential Triple Crown starters would emerge from this race. That line looked awfully strong as four runners hit the wire nearly in tandem – in a fast time – led by rising west coaster HOPPERTUNITY (Bob Baffert). It's rare to see just two lengths from first to fourth in a fast time, so that underscores the quality emerging from this historically key Kentucky Derby and Preakness prep.

Let's get the numbers out of the way first. The Rebel splits were :24.06, 23.91, 24.27, 25.34 and 6.32 for a quick 1 1/16 miles in 1:43.90. The track was wet-fast all day, sealed, and so comparing times throughout the card provides some fairly accurate baseline. The Rebel ran almost 3 lengths faster than star filly Close Hatches in the Azeri Stakes; 1-1/2 lengths faster than a Race 6 older allowance that arguably had as good a field as the Razorback Handicap; and only about a length slower than the Razorback Handicap, a race in which Golden Lad won by 6 lengths. These are all positive notes when looking at the Rebel.

So while the overall quality of the Rebel appears firm in my appreciation, each individual's assessment leaving the roughly run race takes on a different light. How we excuse and applaud the individual performances serves a much tougher exercise than looking at the overall race performance and giving it a blanket thumbs up in approval.

Horse-by-horse may be the clearest way to dissect the Rebel post-script. So here goes:

HOPPERTUNITY (Bob Baffert) has been on the *Countdown* radar since a sizzling gallop-out

after his debut loss – who says you can't learn anything from a gallop-out? His versatile style and potential toughness were on display Saturday as he stayed closer to the pace than his form suggested, gave away ground loss to his rivals, fought on game after being bumped in the stretch and prevailed to win. He was strong enough to keep TAPITURE hemmed in when that rival could have bullied his way clear in upper stretch. Once again, he galloped out well beyond the wire and looks to be a 3YO trending in a very positive direction. He was No. 11 in our Top 20 last week and moves all the way up to No. 4 this week. The pedigree to continue on in longer contests is encouraging and as mentioned in this week's lead, this is the style of horse Baffert has gotten trophies engraved for in the Triple Crown races.

TAPITURE (Steve Asmussen) could have bounced off a smashing Southwest Stakes return win, but didn't, and maybe ran even better in defeat. The Rebel runner-up showed versatility and courage; this is a case where fastest doesn't always mean best. There's more to racing than just being fast, and TAPITURE showed in the Rebel that he has some of those additional qualities. Trip-wise, no one had it tougher. He broke in stride, but didn't run off to the lead, and showed initial patience into the clubhouse turn. But pinned behind the leaders, he became rank midway on the first turn and ran with his ears pinned the entire way down the backstretch, never looking situated and calm. TAPITURE never found a good spot, and while stuck behind the leaders, he's also fortunate that they didn't stop in front of him. In upper stretch, jockey Ricardo Santana Jr. had a 50/50 move inside-outside, chose to shove his way outside into HOPPERTUNITY and appeared to have the seam forced open. But as the leaders drifted into his path to the inside, he was squeezed on both sides in mid-stretch. TAPITURE recovered nicely from having his momentum thwarted and I liked how he re-rallied, finished well in second and galloped out slightly best of all.

RIDE ON CURLIN (Bill Gowan) outran my expectations in the Rebel. I thought he was second-tier against solid distance horses, but his Rebel third did cement his legitimacy. He may not win the big Derby, but you will have a hard time finding 19 more deserving horses to make up the field. RIDE ON CURLIN now has a sense of belonging, but the 9-furlong Arkansas Derby will give him a chance to prove he can

COUNTDOWN TO THE CROWN

SEASON 9 WEEK 12 – March 21, 2014

go longer. After left-handed urging, he came out a path and a half in mid-stretch and caused a chain reaction. He likely gets disqualified to fourth for interference if I'm in the steward's booth, but that doesn't alter his evaluation. He ran hard the entire way, broke well enough to secure his inside post from STRONG MANDATE and never got a breather.

STRONG MANDATE (D. Wayne Lukas) broke right on the muscle, as has been his want in past races and in workouts this season. The pacemaker then cornered very well on the clubhouse turn from the 2-path and held that trip just outside RIDE ON CURLIN the entire way. STRONG MANDATE galloped fairly relaxed down backstretch, and didn't run off. In fact, he had the ideal trip you want to see all the way until they turned for home. There, you expected him to get some separation and pull away from RIDE ON CURLIN. But he didn't quicken at that stage. So while we was in a bad spot late in the race, certainly bumped around and compromised in the stretch bumper cars, it was his own fault for being there. That's why his Rebel remains a mixed bag for me. There would be no surprise if he rebounds to win the Arkansas Derby from this eye; but I could also see anyone making the case against it.

KOBE'S BACK (John Sadler) hesitated at the start, which from an outside draw and being a closer, isn't necessarily a game-breaker. But then he blew the first turn as it came up on him way quicker than the one turn of the 7-furlong San Vicente did. KOBE'S BACK spun his wheels on far turn as well, despite being well out of it, and never factored. I would never bet him on a wet track again, and two turns on any footing would have to be coupled with a class drop to get interested for now. The one-mile Derby Trial should be his goal with an elongated run to its only turn, and Sadler has had success in that race in recent years.

STREET STRATEGY (Randy Morse): He wound up 4-5 wide on clubhouse turn despite breaking behind the pacemakers, and didn't get a classic, Calvin Borel tuck-in ride. The flashy meet winner on the class rise was then too close to the pace, chasing 4-wide, and tired.

Get more historical trends and significance on the Rebel Stakes by visiting page 95 of the Countdown to the Crown Preseason Annual simply by [clicking this link](#).

Allowance Races

THE ADMIRAL (Bob Baffert), a half-brother to G1 star filly Madcap Escapade, scored his second straight when taking Sunday's 1 1/16 miles allowance at **Santa Anita**. The son of Giant's Causeway could be an interesting Blue Grass Stakes contender on pedigree and his trainer's need to separate the brigade. But he came home on the slower side and appeared tired while the wire arrived in time. Perhaps he fits better on distance and class for the Lexington at 1 1/16 miles on Keeneland's Poly.

SIX SPOT (Steve Asmussen) also notched his second straight win by capturing an Oaklawn 1 1/16 miles allowance Sunday. The Cowboy Cal colt has developed as well as any during the OP season and won despite drifting late in tandem with THUNDERGRAM (Mark Casse). *Countdown* and BUZZ bet-back special FIRE STARTER (Steve Hobby) was miles the best while screaming out for room for three furlongs and then galloping out much best. C'est la vie.

Where Are They Headed?

This section projects the fields for upcoming key 3YO preps. The lists are a mixture of announced intentions and projected fits of races that would/could work well for particular runners – and is not intended to be a definitive resource from track racing offices, though in some cases racing departments are consulted.

FLORIDA DERBY (GP, 3/29): CAIRO PRINCE, WILDCAT RED, GENERAL A ROD, CONSTITUTION, ANCHOR DOWN (possible), SOCIAL INCLUSION (or Wood), EAST HALL, MATADOR, SPOT.

LOUISIANA DERBY (FG, 3/29): INTENSE HOLIDAY, ALBANO, VICARS IN TROUBLE, GOLD HAWK, COMMANDING CURVE, RISE UP, LOUIE'S FLOWER.

SANTA ANITA DERBY (SA, 4/5): CANDY BOY, CALIFORNIA CHROME, BAYERN (or Arkansas Derby), KRISTO (or Arkansas Derby), SCHOOLOFHARDROCKS, THE ADMIRAL (possible).

COUNTDOWN TO THE CROWN

SEASON 9 WEEK 12 – March 21, 2014

WOOD (AQU, 4/5): SAMRAAT, UNCLE SIGH, IN TROUBLE, NOBLE MOON, HONOR CODE , SOCIAL INCLUSION (or Fla Derby), TONALIST, FINANCIAL MOGUL (or Blue Grass), VINCEREMOS and/or something else from Todd Pletcher barn.

BLUE GRASS (KEE, 4/12): GALA AWARD, BOBBY'S KITTEN, MEDAL COUNT, CONQUEST TITAN (or Arkansas Derby), MR SPEAKER, STORMING INTI, FINANCIAL MOGUL (or Wood), DANCE WITH FATE, GLOBAL VIEW, THEROS, CAN'THELPBELIEVING, DIVINE OATH.

ARKANSAS DERBY (OP, 4/12): TAPITURE, HOPPERTUNITY, STRONG MANDATE, RIDE ON CURLIN, CLASS LEADER, CONQUEST TITAN (or Blue Grass), KRISTO (or Santa Anita Derby), BAYERN (or Santa Anita Derby).

Just Wynn, Baby



Full Wynn Las Vegas Derby odds here.

CALIFORNIA CHROME continues to be a hot commodity, down to 12-1 co-second choice with TAPITURE, now behind CAIRO PRINCE at 8-1. CANDY BOY holds a solid 20-1 price, and figures to be one of the three pari-mutuel favorites in Louisville if he's able to win the Santa Anita Derby (6-1 to 8-1 on average). SAMRAAT at 35-1, if you have faith he'll win the Wood, would be among the top choices in a similar range as well if he gets to Churchill undefeated.

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

High Fives

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

NOTE: *Maidens & Allowances no longer being updated for the season.*

Stakes Race

1. CALIFORNIA CHROME (San Felipe, 3/8)
2. CANDY BOY (Lewis Memorial, SA, 2/8)
3. CAIRO PRINCE (Holy Bull, GP, 1/25)
4. HOPPERTUNITY (Rebel, OP 3/14) * NEW *
5. TAPITURE (Southwest, OP, 2/17)

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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.) Smoked 5F in 59.40 last Fri for SA Derby.	11	<u>SAMRAAT</u> Trainer: Rick Violette Winter Home: Palm Meadows (Fla.) Slow ½ mile Sat in 1 st drill since Gotham.
2	<u>CAIRO PRINCE</u> Trainer: Kiaran McLaughlin Winter Home: Palm Meadows (Fla.) Strong 5F in 1:00.80 Sat for Fla Derby.	12	<u>IN TROUBLE</u> Trainer: Tony Dutrow Winter Home: Palm Meadows (Fla.) Workout this week appears few days late.
3	<u>CALIFORNIA CHROME</u> Trainer: Art Sherman Winter Home: Los Alamitos (Cal.) Smart move to commit to SA Derby.	13	<u>HONOR CODE</u> Trainer: Shug McGaughey Winter Home: Palm Meadows (Fla.) One shot in the Wood to make it right.
4	<u>HOPPERTUNITY</u> Trainer: Bob Baffert Winter Home: Santa Anita (Cal.) He's blossoming at right time; love style.	14	<u>RING WEEKEND</u> Trainer: Graham Motion Winter Home: Palm Meadows (Fla.) Trusted trainer, route genes, class test ???
5	<u>TAPITURE</u> Trainer: Steve Asmussen Winter Home: now based Oaklawn (Ark.) Proved mettle at OP twice now; serious.	15	<u>UNCLE SIGH</u> Trainer: Gary Contessa Winter Home: Belmont Park (NY) Breezed 5F Sat in 1:01.86 for Wood.
6	<u>GENERAL A ROD</u> Trainer: Mike Maker Winter Home: Gulfstream Park (Fla.) Big 5F move in 59.50 Sat as he motors on.	16	<u>WILDCAT RED</u> Trainer: Jose Garoffalo Winter Home: Gulfstream Park (Fla.) Sat 4F 47.98 in first drill since FoY score.
7	<u>COMMISSIONER</u> Trainer: Todd Pletcher Winter Home: Palm Meadows (Fla.) Sticking my head out w/ him at Sunland.	17	<u>WE MISS ARTIE</u> Trainer: Todd Pletcher Winter Home: Palm Meados (Fla.) Nice set-up, smart placement at Turfway.
8	<u>INTENSE HOLIDAY</u> Trainer: Todd Pletcher Winter Home: Palm Meadows Training so strong post-Risen Star; rising.	18	<u>TAMARANDO</u> Trainer: Jerry Hollendorfer Winter Home: Santa Anita (Cal.) Needs 1 st /2 nd Spiral; better dirt than Artie?
9	<u>STRONG MANDATE</u> Trainer: D. Wayne Lukas Winter Home: Oaklawn Park (Ark.) Modest loss of stature; he can rebound.	19	<u>SOCIAL INCLUSION</u> Trainer: Manny Azpurua Winter Home: Gulfstream Park (Fla.) Brilliant & with route pedigree; seasoning?
10	<u>BOBBY'S KITTEN</u> Trainer: Chad Brown Winter Home: Palm Meadows (Fla.) Super talent, question is style/surface.	20	<u>DIVINE OATH</u> Trainer: Todd Pletcher Winter Home: Palm Meadows (Fla.) Was hoping to see at TP, now Blue Grass?