

COUNTDOWN TO THE CROWN

SEASON 12 WEEK 14 – April 7, 2017

By Jeremy Plonk
Exclusive to
Countdowntothecrown.com



Editor's Note: The 12th 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. 1 through the Belmont Stakes, and Countdown keeps you apprised of the rising stars in the sophomore class from the maiden ranks through the Grade 1 stakes.

Three Things You Won't Read Anywhere Else

Opinions are like John Cena proposing to his girlfriend at Wrestlemania 33. Be careful what you say and do after smashing your head into a turnbuckle.

1. The Kentucky Derby points system has been largely irrelevant and a great talking point/marketing tool. But let's just say McCRAKEN (Ian Wilkes) has some traffic issues or gets DQ'd to fourth in the Blue Grass. Can of worms wide open ...
2. Brian Hernandez, Jr. hailing a ride from New Orleans to Lexington overnight after winning the Louisiana Derby on GIRVIN (Joe Sharp) to work out the unbeaten Blue Grass hopeful McCRAKEN (Ian Wilkes) tells you all you need to know. The guy has his game face on with a career opportunity – and he thinks the world of the one at the end of that long roadie, McCRAKEN.
3. Saw folks on Twitter bemoaning the four 100-1 shots in the Florida Derby and how they cluttered the field. Then saw others bemoan just 7 entries in the Blue Grass, all of which fit and belong. So which is it, people?

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This Week's Fearless Forecast

This section previews the coming attractions in 3-year-old stakes and undercard races. As is custom, since the turn of the calendar to March, we focus on the stakes players.

The workout patrol continues for CLASSIC EMPIRE (Mark Casse) as last year's champion 2-year-old continues his cross-your-fingers march toward next week's G1 Arkansas Derby. He is set to breeze either Saturday or Sunday in Ocala, Fla. before heading to Hot Springs, Ark. on Monday. He's been drilling in company from the gate in recent weeks with major stakes player Airoforce as Casse fights the clock. CLASSIC EMPIRE missed more training time than did fellow trail favorite McCRAKEN this winter/spring, but both of their end-game, prep-race resumes are going to look very similar if the plan to Arkansas remains on track.

Saturday's Wood Memorial Day undercard at Aqueduct includes the traditional G3 Bay Shore at 7 furlongs. It marks the return of THEORY (Todd Pletcher), winner of the G3 Futurity at Belmont last October. There aren't a lot of direct company-line comparables of trail repute, but YOU'RE TO BLAME (Chad Brown) could at least give Remsen winner and Wood hopeful MO TOWN (Tony Dutrow) a little pep talk.

COUNTDOWN TO THE CROWN

- Santa Anita Derby - (Saturday / Santa Anita Park)



Some years the Santa Anita Derby looks like a free bingo space. But there are no California Chromes in the 2017 west coast class, and that's why everyone has jumped into the pool for Saturday's \$1 million test at 1-1/8 miles. The 13-horse field is the largest in the Santa Anita Derby since 1981, when Fernando Valenzuela was the Dodgers' staff ace and Magic Johnson was in his second season developing Showtime with the Lakers.

The season-ending injury to MASTERY (Bob Baffert) did not even allow for a winner's circle photo before snuffing out any dreams of another California dynamo. Now he recovers from surgery while 3 of his stablemates – and 4 from trainer Doug O'Neill – line up to test their worthiness. This is the least-defined Santa Anita Derby since 2011, when the top 3 wagering choices were Silver Medallion, Mr. Commons and Anthony's Cross. Feel free to check out the chart if you don't believe me – I had to do a double-take myself.

Seven of the baker's dozen were beaten by 6 lengths or more in their most recent start, including the field's quartet of existing graded stakes winners – ILLIAD (Doug O'Neill), TERM OF ART (Doug O'Neill), ROYAL MO (John Shirreffs) and GORMLEY (John Shirreffs). Add in G3 Sham runner-up AMERICAN ANTHEM (Bob Baffert) to the last-out blasted list, beaten 13 lengths in the G2 Rebel at Oaklawn.

There's no shortage of speed when you get 13 west coast runners in the gate, and the Santa Anita Derby will be no exception. Expect a hot pace where the closers will have every chance if they get a clear trip.

Let's take a look at the contenders by their natural clusters.

The O'Neill barn sends out ILLIAD, TERM OF ART, SO CONFLATED and MILTON FIREWATER – and incidentally has IRAP going in the Blue Grass at Keeneland. One could easily reason that the 2-time Kentucky Derby-winning barn is selling the dream to owners and taking a shot to see if anything sticks and points its way – literally – to Louisville.

ILLIAD and TERM OF ART are legitimate entrants coming off a 2-3 finish in the San Felipe. ILLIAD looks to me the most brilliant 3-year-old currently in California, but one with distance limitations. He was bottomed-out chasing MASTERY last out at 1-1/16 miles, and while it will be a boost not to see that rival in the gate, will ILLIAD still want the additional sixteenth of a mile against this level of competition? He's a very tepid 7-2 morning line choice. I like him a lot as a horse; but trust precariously to keep firing distance-wise. TERM OF ART has that Giacomo feel to me as a keep-

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coming, solid type who will appreciate things as the trips lengthen. Look for him to save ground under Tyler Baze and then try to circle on the far turn. A top 3 finish makes him a sneaky-player on the first Saturday in May at huge odds. The other O'Neill entrants look like big-time reaches to me.

Baffert counters with a trio of his own, also known as Plan B, C and D. His recent allowance runner-up REACH THE WORLD is the subject of solid hype and jockey Mike Smith wanted this mount. Baffert commented at the post draw that they're waiting for the lightbulb to come on completely with this one, but he's bubbling with promise. I think he could be bet to second choice or co-favoritism as interest swirls. He's a big, well-bred Tapit who reminds me a bit of Paynter based on resume to this point.

AMERICAN ANTHEM is the most accomplished of the Baffert trio, having run a promising second in the G3 Sham to fellow SA Derby rival GORMLEY. He's been bet to favoritism in all 3 career starts and probably won't offer value Saturday either after an excuse-riddled 10th in the Rebel at Oaklawn. He's worked well since reportedly losing a shoe and could be sitting on a rebound. But I would want at least 6 or 8-1 off of that last non-effort to find out. Stablemate IRISH FREEDOM looks like a syndicate-owned horse entered to sell a dream.

Stablemates ROYAL MO & GORMLEY exit disappointments, but both have had local stakes success. Neither has shown any penchant for passing horses, however, and could get caught up in the pace. ROYAL MO is in a terrible 13-post, but has Mr. Santa Anita Derby in the irons, Gary Stevens. The Bionic Man has won this race a record 9 times, including 2003 with Buddy Gil when Baffert fielded a meager hand of recent duds in Indian Express, Kafwain & Domestic Dispute.

The "loose ends" that appeal on form would be KIMBEAR (Eric Kruljac) and BATTLE OF MIDWAY (Jerry Hollendorfer). Both make stakes debuts while exiting solid victories. The Sunland Derby was to be KIMBEAR's trail mixer, but when the SA Derby started to look light on stars at home, his barn pulled the plug on the roadie. BATTLE OF MIDWAY beat REACH THE WORLD last out in a contested allowance route, but had the much easier trip that day. But he's got pedigree.

MIDNIGHT PLEASURE (Mick Ruis) showed promise at 2 and was third in his only start this year in allowance company. Normally, second off the layoff may appeal, but this barn has been a black hole in personnel turnover and results at the meet. It's hard to trust he's going to move forward at all. COMMA SISTER (George Papaprodromou) just graduated on turf and appears over his head.

Santa Anita Derby selections:

W) TERM OF ART; P) ILLIAD S) REACH THE WORLD

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COUNTDOWN TO THE CROWN

- Blue Grass Stakes - (Saturday / Keeneland)



Saturday's G2 \$1 million Blue Grass Stakes at Keeneland drew one of its most important fields in years, ironic since it was downgraded from G1 status after back-to-back existing G1 winners Carpe Diem and Brody's Cause had won it. But it's worth max Derby qualifying points (100) and it boasts the No. 1 horse in many Top 20s, including *Countdown*, in the unbeaten McCRAKEN (Ian Wilkes). A field of 7 was entered with absolutely no filler or fluff.

Winner of the G2 Kentucky Jockey Club and G3 Sam F. Davis, McCRAKEN has shown a wonderful turn of foot in shorter routes to date. He had a tweaked ankle in late February that caused him to miss a few days of training – and more importantly the Tampa Bay Derby. He comes to Keeneland off an 8-week layoff and with just 1 start in the past 133 days. His trainer Ian Wilkes has not been this close with a Triple Crown contender in his name, but he spent decades alongside the great Carl Nafzger helping nurture Derby winners Unbridled and even more so Street Sense.

Street Sense struggled with the Polytrack in the 2007 Blue Grass and went to Louisville off a sub-par effort. Still, he was as rousing a Derby winner as we've seen in some time when the ship righted. It's that memory of Street Sense that may hold the handicapping key on Saturday. Wilkes knows that the Blue Grass is not the end game. He's seen it. He's lived it. His talk leading up to Saturday's race indicates that he's not asking McCRAKEN for his life to win this 1-1/8 miles race. If he's good enough, he'll win on his own; and that's just fine with Wilkes. At 7-5 in the morning line and a nation clamoring to find Mr. Right on the trail, how low will you go to see if McCRAKEN can win this race off the layoff and without being knuckled down on 100-hundred percent?

Three of the last 4 winners of the Blue Grass, including the last 2 editions since Keeneland returned to dirt, have exited the Tampa Bay Derby. So, that's a natural place to start the discussions once you get below McCRAKEN.

TAPWRIT (Todd Pletcher) was second-best to McCRAKEN in the Davis and then returned to blitz the Tampa Bay Derby field by 4 ½ lengths. The \$1.2 million Tapit purchase has a brilliant pedigree, but not one on the damside that screams for classic trips. He looked at the Tampa wire like an extra 1/16 of a mile would not be any big deal. But he quickly shut down in the gallop-out and leaves some curiosity still on the table. Since that race March 11, he's logged only 1 half-mile workout for the Blue Grass in 28 days. Still, you can't help but respect the Pletcher results on the trail so far in 2017, and TB Derby runner-up STATE OF HONOR (Mark Casse) came back last week in the Florida Derby to run well enough to validate this race's form so far.

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The 'other' Tampa transition comes via WILD SHOT (Rusty Arnold). Fourth in the Davis and third in the TB Derby, the former speed merchant was campaigned curiously both times in Florida without utilizing his best weapon. Arnold said he was tired of "piddling" with making WILD SHOT a 1 ¼ miles horse and vowed to put him on the lead Saturday. Corey Lanerie takes over in the saddle and WILD SHOT could get loose on the front unless California maiden IRAP (Doug O'Neill) is put on a speed mission. But his rider, Julien Leparoux, is not apt to make early assertions. WILD SHOT ran a very good third in last year's Breeders' Futurity. Note: the 2 recent Blue Grass winners on dirt both were winners of the Breeders' Futurity, carrying local affinity.

Still beyond McCRAKEN and the Tampa twosome lie a series of quality options for horseplayers. PRACTICAL JOKE (Chad Brown) won the G1 Champagne at 2, and exits a runner-up in the G2 Fountain of Youth. He's not finished with aplomb around 2 turns yet in his career, a point even trainer Brown publicly mentions as something he must prove. The FoY form was knocked down a peg when its alumni failed to land in the Florida Derby exacta last week. Still, PRACTICAL JOKE must be respected. His sire Into Mischief burst onto the horse-for-course scene here at the 2016 Fall Meet by unleashing 5 winners at the short stand. Observers of horse flesh rave about how he looks coming into the Blue Grass. I am certain he is going to run a fantastic 1-1/16 miles. It's the last sixteenth that riddles over this 9 furlongs.

J BOYS ECHO (Dale Romans) visually impressed this eye at Keeneland last fall, even though his maiden victory looked better than it clocked. But if you're worried about those sort of things, the speed fig folks gushed over his last victory in a breakout G3 Gotham performance. I think he would be favored in the Wood Memorial if he had returned to Aqueduct, yet could be third or fourth choice in the Blue Grass. Kentuckian Dale Romans has his eyes on Louisville and the ability to make 1 ship from Gulfstream to his home stall at Churchill Downs, and then take the simple van ride to and from Lexington for the Blue Grass. I really liked this guy at 2, felt a bit disappointed over the winter, and now have swung back toward solid appreciation. Respect him even if you're like me and slightly prefer others.

IT'S YOUR NICKEL (Kenny McPeck) is another like J BOYS ECHO in that his trainer picked the much tougher spot than the obvious first choice. As good as this dude looked in the John Battaglia Memorial, he would have been an extremely tough out in the G3 Spiral back at Turfway on Polytrack. But McPeck wants the Blue Grass in his hometown of Lexington and he's got a talented horse who is improving. The knock is that SENIOR INVESTMENT (also McPeck) was not a factor out of their Fair Grounds ALW matchup when he stepped up in class for the G2 Louisiana Derby.

Blue Grass Stakes selections:

W) WILD SHOT; P) McCRAKEN; S) TAPWRIT

COUNTDOWN TO THE CROWN

- Wood Memorial -
(Saturday / Aqueduct)



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The G2 \$750,000 Wood Memorial has felt the historical pinch of races like the Florida Derby and Louisiana Derby shifting their calendars to become last-*prep* destinations. Now instead of getting the best of the NYRA snowbirds each year, the Big A's big *prep* gets horses trying to find their way.

Perhaps no two horses on the 2017 trail lost their way last time out more than IRISH WAR CRY (Graham Motion) and MO TOWN (Tony Dutrow). Had either delivered as 6-5 and 3-2 favorites in the Fountain of Youth and Risen Star, respectively, they would have come into April among the top of the Kentucky Derby leaderboard. Instead, they were beaten 21 and 10 lengths, respectively, in efforts so bad that it's hard to trust them back even in a race where they've managed to duck the division's best.

IRISH WAR CRY rates the more likely rebounder to this eye because his Holy Bull Stakes was so impressive. That day he whipped up on 2YO champ CLASSIC EMPIRE (Mark Casse) and eventual Fountain of Youth winner and Florida Derby third GUNNEVERA (Antonio Sano). We know what the good IRISH WAR CRY looks like. Trainer Motion guesses he bounced after running back on 4 weeks' rest, and that's why he's here vs. the Florida Derby – an extra week of preparation between starts. As for MO TOWN, his signature score in the Remsen has offered no sort of legitimacy on the trail this year with disappointing *alumnus* after disappointing *alumnus*. So even if MO TOWN gets back to the good MO TOWN, just how good is that? I am comfortable on passing on him *parimutuelly* and willing to find out.

G3 Gotham winner J BOYS ECHO (Dale Romans) jumps ship to run in the G2 Blue Grass at Keeneland. Add in the injury to winter Big A warrior EL AREEB (Cal Lynch), and there's not much leftover from the local 4-race series. CLOUD COMPUTING (Chad Brown) stepped to the fore with a very good second in the Gotham and assumes the role of top

local. I like his damside pedigree for distance and with only 2 career starts on his ledger, there's obviously more ceiling. But too much too soon can also work against a developing 3YO. He picks up 7 pounds from the Gotham and figures to be shorter than the 7-1 price he was that day.

BATTALION RUNNER (Todd Pletcher) should wrestle for favoritism with his more accomplished, stakes-winning rivals. He's 2-for-2 this winter at Gulfstream and makes his stakes debut for a barn that's already won the Florida Derby, Rebel and Southwest, while finishing second in the Louisiana Derby, on the 2017 trail. Pletcher has stepped up in class successfully in recent weeks with all of those race's winners and BATTALION RUNNER looks to be cut in a similar mold of talent. He would be absolutely no surprise to be the Wood winner based on recent returns. And, the barn has won this race 4 times in the last 7 years with Outwork, Verrazano, Gemologist and Eskendereya. For support, stablemate and G3 Jerome runner-up BONUS POINTS (Todd Pletcher) also joins the fray.

The balance of the Wood lineup includes March 5 maiden winner GLENNRICHMENT (Rudy Rodriguez), hoping to get team American Pharoah back to the Derby; TRUE TIMBER (Kieran McLaughlin), the only 4-race veteran of NYRA's series this year; and New York-bred STRETCH'S STONE (Bruce Levine) on a big class hike.

Wood Memorial selections:

- W) BATTALION RUNNER;
- P) CLOUD COMPUTING S) IRISH WAR CRY



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Everyone's a Critic

This section reviews the week that was in the stakes ranks.

GULFSTREAM PARK

We posed a pair of questions to summarize the whole Florida Derby enchilada last week in our preview. Just how cranked would GUNNEVERA (Antonio Sano) be in a race he didn't need to have? And just how good is ALWAYS DREAMING (Todd Pletcher)?

Turned out..."not very" and "plenty."

THREE RULES (Jose Pinchin) set the Florida Derby tempo through splits of 23.28, 23.80, 23.67, 24.19 and ALWAYS DREAMING brought it home in 12.53 for a fast final time of 1:47.47 for the 9 furlongs. It was the fastest Florida Derby since Alydar in 1978 in 1:47 flat.

ALWAYS DREAMING turned in a Cadillac performance by sitting just off the solid pace of THREE RULES and overpowering this cast by 5 widening lengths. He galloped out far ahead of the rest in what would appear to be the kind of performance we've been spoiled by on the trail in recent years, but have been waiting to see in 2017. Well, it's arrived in the form of ALWAYS DREAMING. Now comes the trust factor. When have you ever – and I do mean ever – seen a horse run 2 races consecutively at the same distance over the same track and they clock 6 seconds apart??!! Is ALWAYS DREAMING legitimately Alydar fast, or more the horse who ran 1:53-2/5 on the Fountain of Youth Day undercard? Like most debates, the answer most likely lies somewhere in-between.

STATE OF HONOR (Mark Casse) was very quick into stride from the rail draw and secured his position into the clubhouse turn. Removing the blinkers did not appear to have any noticeable change in his style or temperament. STATE OF HONOR still fought Julien Leparoux for much of the race. He appeared to be swimming upstream into the far turn, but somehow managed to run second in what was a fast race. He's in a Derby quandary. He's earned the right to be there with runner-ups in the Tampa Bay Derby and Florida Derby. But can you realistically expect him to repel the lead challenges if sent to the front in Louisville? And, will he settle? If stablemate CLASSIC EMPIRE (Mark Casse) comes back well in the Arkansas Derby, STATE OF HONOR will be looking for a new pilot. He may not be the best fit for Leparoux and could appreciate a new tag team partner.

Javier Castellano tore a page out of the Calvin Borel playbook with GUNNEVERA, breaking from the far outside post and just letting the field leave and taking an immediate left-hand turn to the rail. He brushed the fence on the clubhouse turn in a minor dusting and just let the field do

their thing ahead of him while biding his time at the rear. There was no sense of urgency and GUNNEVERA appeared to be ridden to instructions. Not that trainer Sano did not want to win the \$1 million Florida Derby; but this was a very 1990s-like prep – old school – in hopes of saving something for Louisville. That worked well over the years for countless Derby winners, but the most recent trend has been horses firing bullet after bullet through the Derby winner's circle. Consider the last 5 Derby winners not only were coming off victories in their final preps, but were unbeaten in all of their 3-year-old races. One step back to go two forward has not been the recent recipe. Moreso than any horse so far on the trail, I will be watching closely how GUNNEVERA gallops, trains and works over the next few weeks. If he's bursting like a Smarty Jones or Barbaro, then he's still among the very best Kentucky Derby hopefuls. If he just looks average, he could be on the south side of his best form and peaked. Stay tuned because I can see this one either direction.

IMPRESSIVE EDGE (Dale Romans) gave some ground on the first turn and that's not an easy giveaway for a sprinter making his 2-turn stretchout. He looked to be moving better than STATE OF HONOR when abreast on the far turn, but simply did not sustain his run. IMPRESSIVE EDGE had dead aim on second inside the 3/16ths and nearly wound up fifth. His damside pedigree leans sprinter/miler and probably would be best that way. On a class drop, he could be an effective router in the Matt Wynn at Churchill, but certainly the Pat Day Mile makes plenty of sense.

THREE RULES went quick, but he's fast. He simply found the distance and competition and a bad cocktail. He can beat mid-level stakes horses going long. And he can beat top-level stakes horses going short. I think you'll see him spotted up toward the King's Bishop at Saratoga this summer if all goes well and he doesn't need an extended break. You could also push on to the Pat Day Mile on Derby weekend. There's a lot of money out there for a durable Fla-bred in that stakes program, so why force it now?

TALK LOGISTICS (Eddie Plesa) figures to match up better with some class relief and will be a consideration in the 3YO stakes at Monmouth this summer. His trouble comment in midstretch did not appear to have much if any impact on his overall finish. He did not appear to be going anywhere at the time, but was just finishing evenly when having to steer out.

The 4 horses sent off at 100-1 or more brought up the year and served their purpose to add some wagering value to the exotics. Nearly \$1.4 million was bet into the trifectas and superfectas. Compare that to \$500,000 in the same pools for the 9-horse Louisiana Derby. Filler helps so long as they don't get in the way; and they had hiccups here.

Unless someone steps up and pops a big fly in the final 4 preps, the image of ALWAYS DREAMING in the Florida Derby will carry us into Louisville thinking that maybe we've found a star milling amongst the villagers all along.

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Service held. From the G3 Lecomte to the G2 Risen Star to Saturday's G2 \$1 million Louisiana Derby, the homeboys from New Orleans protected their turf. And in a year in which you're trying to figure out just how they all stack up around the country, you have to appreciate this cast denying any party crashers. While Lecomte winner GUEST SUITE (Neil Howard) did not continue to develop through the meet, no one can argue that GIRVIN (Joe Sharp) ascended through the Risen Star and Louisiana Derby on a seriously good arc.

So how did GIRVIN get there on Saturday?

Toss an extra carrot to the rabbit HOTFOOT (Joe Sharp) who more than did his duty on the front end. He hooked Floridian MONACO (Todd Pletcher) and they tussled to mutual submission. They also took a few a mph off the fastball of LOCAL HERO (Steve Asmussen), who inherited the lead on the turn but was left vulnerable in the long Fair Grounds lane. Louisiana Derby splits unfolded in 23.46, 23.54, 24.14, 25.65 and 12.97 for a final time of 1:49.77. It was the fastest Louisiana Derby edition since the race extended from 1-1/16 miles back to 1-1/8 miles in 2010.

Instead of the ground-saving beeline he made in the Risen Star, GIRVIN this time was ridden more like a 6-5 shot than an 8-1. And he ran like it, too. Jockey Brian J. Hernandez kept the Tale of Ekati colt in the clear in the 3-4 path and never had to break momentum. He knew what he had after the Risen Star. GIRVIN ran an eerily similar race in terms of positioning from the leader, and in doing so proved that it was not the ground-saving run that catapulted him to the top of the local division. He went overland equally as successful and now has shown twice in top company that he can fire from 5-6 lengths off a solid pace. In theory I like that position in commonsense handicapping over 1 ¼ miles. But looking at the past performances of Derby winners, very few roses are won from this flight; it's the horses pressing 2-3 lengths off the pace or the meltdown closers who find success. This is an Animal Kingdom-Super Saver trip that's been the exception and not the rule over the last dozen or so years.

PATCH (Todd Pletcher) accounted himself well from Florida in just his third start and first around 2 turns. The runner-up by 1 ¼ lengths has an all-day pedigree by Union Rags and from the same female family as Banshee Breeze. Like former Pletcher charge Pollard's Vision, PATCH has only one operable eye. That hasn't been a problem so far, but in a field of 20 in the Kentucky Derby, it has to be at minimum a concern. He's missing his left eye and may be a horse you'd want to have drawn inside in the Derby to see out his right with less activity to his inside. The January 15 debut artist has come an awfully long way in a short amount of time.

LOCAL HERO once again did not embarrass himself, but did not advance his cause while third. The Risen Star pacemaker did not have to set the tempo Saturday with HOTFOOT in the lead role. But you would have wanted to see more out of him late than the 38.63 final 3 furlongs and his 5-length ground loss to GIRVIN during that span. He's sitting right on the points cusp and has earned his way in with placings in the Risen Star and Louisiana Derby if the math works out. I'm just not sure how he works out a trip to beat 19 others in Louisville off of what we've seen in the last 2. LOCAL HERO has yet to pass a horse in 5 starts and owns just 1 win despite making the lead at some point in each of his last 4 bids. He may be a better Preakness horse and we've seen Derby exclusions do very well in that mold in recent middle jewels.

HOLLYWOOD HANDSOME (Dallas Stewart) pulled a typical 3YO longshot rally for his trainer. The Golden Soul, Commanding Curve, Tale of Verve train came up a nose short of the show dough in the Louisiana Derby at 36-1. He's another that could be looked at for the Preakness and Stewart will give one every chance to compete if they have this kind of late style.

Behind the superfecta finishers, a clump of no-bidders crossed the with SORRY ERIK (Keith Desormeaux), SENIOR INVESTMENT (Kenny McPeck) and GUEST SUITE in order. Only a half-length separated the trio, but none of them had any significant trouble to report and all failed to take advantage of the solid pace set-up. They should have been following GIRVIN home and none offered their services with any seriousness. I have to admit that I have swung and missed countless times on the 2017 *Countdown* season, and GUEST SUITE will be on my greatest hits album. He had so much promise coming into the year for a patient trainer and a route pedigree to shine. I thought the Lecomte may be too short and a race he would not be primed for his best, setting up the next 2. As it turned out, he won that one and then proceeded to regress exponentially in his next pair. Maybe it was too much too soon in January? Or, more likely, I overrated him (as did the betting public as the 3-1 second choice). GUEST SUITE may go on to a nice handicap career like stablemate Eagle, etc. But there's no love here for him in the immediate upper levels of the 3YO crop.

The 1,346-foot stretch run at Fair Grounds will serve GIRVIN and PATCH well moving forward to Churchill's march of 1,234 ½ feet. Consider that Gun Runner, Revolutionary, Commanding Curve and Golden Soul have lit the trifecta in the Kentucky Derby in just the last 4 years coming out of this race. Throw in Belmont winners Drosselmeyer and Palace Malice in the current decade of the 2010s. GIRVIN was a horse I didn't play on Saturday because of the downward value from 8-1 to 6-5, but that script easily could and likely will flip in Louisville. GIRVIN could be a decent overlay and a bit on the forgotten side. And PATCH likely will be among the longest prices of the Pletcher Posse given his light amount of accomplishment compared to some barnmates.

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Where Are They Headed?

This section looks to possible fields/targets for upcoming stakes. The lists are projections that include declared intentions, plausible next steps and some intuition.

ARKANSAS DERBY / OP (April 15): MALAGACY, CLASSIC EMPIRE, PETROV, SILVER DUST, SONNETEER, UNTRAPPED, LOOKIN AT LEE, ONE LINER, CONQUEST MO MONEY, BLUERIDGE TRAVELER (possible).

High Fives

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

Stakes Race

1. ALWAYS DREAMING (Fla Derby, GP, 4/1)
2. MASTERY (San Felipe, SA, 3/11) - *injured*
3. McCRAKEN (Sam F. Davis, Tam, 2/11)
4. GIRVIN (Louisiana Derby, FG, 4/1)
5. TAPWRIT (Tampa Bay Derby, Tam, 3/11)

Keeping Ourselves Honest

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

Top choice GUNNEVERA was third in the Florida Derby as the favorite, while GUEST SUITE did not fire at all in the Louisiana Derby as the pick. If this was a boxing match, they would have called it a few rounds ago ...

Season selections: 25: 4-4-4.



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JEREMY PLONK'S TOP 20 – 4/7/17

1	<u>McCRAKEN</u> <i>Trainer: Ian Wilkes Winter Home: now Keeneland (Ky) via PmM Doesn't need to win Blue Grass, but could.</i>	11	<u>BATTALION RUNNER</u> <i>Trainer: Todd Pletcher Winter Home: Palm Beach Downs (Fla.) Stakes debut in Wood; one to beat there.</i>
2	<u>GIRVIN</u> <i>Trainer: Joe Sharp Winter Home: Fair Grounds (La.) 3 really good preps in rock-solid rehearsal.</i>	12	<u>TERM OF ART</u> <i>Trainer: Doug O'Neill Winter Home: Santa Anita (Cal.) Gets great pace set-up for SA Derby rally.</i>
3	<u>ALWAYS DREAMING</u> * <i>Trainer: Todd Pletcher Winter Home: Palm Beach Downs (Fla.) Brilliant Fla Derby winner; foundation the ?</i>	13	<u>UNTRAPPED</u> <i>Trainer: Steve Asmussen Winter Home: now Oaklawn Park (Ark.) Must sort himself out in Ark Derby scrum.</i>
4	<u>GUNNEVERA</u> <i>Trainer: Antonio Sano Winter Home: Gulfstream Park West (Fla.) Must offer big works post-Fla Derby 3rd.</i>	14	<u>PATCH</u> * <i>Trainer: Todd Pletcher Winter Home: Palm Beach Downs (Fla.) Lightly raced but promising La Derby 2nd.</i>
5	<u>ILIAD</u> <i>Trainer: Doug O'Neill Winter Home: Santa Anita (Cal.) He's very good – SA Derby distance hurdle.</i>	15	<u>PRACTICAL JOKE</u> <i>Trainer: Chad Brown Winter Home: Palm Meadows (Fla.) If he handles distance Saturday, he's legit.</i>
6	<u>TAPWRIT</u> <i>Trainer: Todd Pletcher Winter Home: Palm Beach Downs (Fla.) Expect that he'll fire a solid Blue Grass shot.</i>	16	<u>PETROV</u> <i>Trainer: Ron Moquett Winter Home: Oaklawn (Ark.) Must fend off deep cast of Ark invaders.</i>
7	<u>CLASSIC EMPIRE</u> <i>Trainer: Mark Casse Winter Home: Palm Meadows (Fla.) Working back into consideration; Ark awaits.</i>	17	<u>STATE OF HONOR</u> * <i>Trainer: Mark Casse Winter Home: Palm Meadows (Fla.) Points to play; running style hurdle for KD.</i>
8	<u>MALAGACY</u> <i>Trainer: Todd Pletcher Winter Home: Palm Beach Downs (Fla.) Horse to beat in Ark Derby off current form.</i>	18	<u>THUNDER SNOW</u> <i>Trainer: Saeed bin Suroor Winter Home: Meydan (Dubai) Confidence tempered until he trains at CD.</i>
9	<u>J BOYS ECHO</u> <i>Trainer: Dale Romans Winter Home: Gulfstream Park (Fla.) Gotham winner squarely in Blue Grass mix.</i>	19	<u>HENCE</u> <i>Trainer: Steve Asmussen Winter Home: Oaklawn Park (Ark.) Part of a Calumet revival; longshot.</i>
10	<u>ONE LINER</u> <i>Trainer: Todd Pletcher Winter Home: Palm Beach Downs (Fla.) Out of sight/mind since Feb; AR Derby next.</i>	20	<u>FAST AND ACCURATE</u> <i>Trainer: Mike Maker Winter Home: Turfway /Gulfstream Salute the \$200k supplemental gamble.</i>

ON THE BRINK: REACH THE WORLD, WILD SHOT, LOCAL HERO, IRISH WAR CRY, CLOUD COMPUTING

* denotes new this week to rankings

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