



## Oaklawn Stakes Race Analysis

Saturday, March 23, 2024

By Jeff "Money" Taylor

**RACE 8 - \$200,000 HOT SPRINGS (4:22 p.m.):** This looks like the perfect warm up act for next Saturday's Arkansas Derby. Most of this group remains nominated to the Triple Crown but running style and/or the demands of going a mile and a quarter against the country's best sophomores in six weeks just isn't in the cards.

Surprising entrant and obvious favorite (**Nash, #6, 7-5 morning line**) apparently has been taken off the Derby Trail if indeed he goes in this spot instead of one of the several major preps that will be run in the next couple of weeks. The 13 points he earned at the Fair Grounds for finishing third in the Gun Runner and second in the G3-Lecomte earlier this season will not be enough to get the Godolphin homebred into the big dance. His connections perhaps tipped their hands by running the son of Medaglia d'Oro in an allowance last month instead of another points producing stakes race. His second-place performance that day proved to be a disappointment for many, considering his shorts odds of 50 cents on the dollar. His frontrunning style is not a good fit in this speed heavy affair, even with the short stretch run, so value players will try and beat him once again.

The rare closer of this group is without a doubt **Footprint (#5, 6-1)**. Also entered in the 8 ½-furlong Rushaway at Turfway on the Jeff Ruby undercard Saturday, the Kenny McPeck charge appears to be a better fit here given his one-run style and the fact that he drew the unenviable 12 post at Turfway. He has posted a couple of thirds locally in as many starts this year, including a near miss at today's distance. He has trained well between starts and McPeck is adding blinkers, which may help his previous lack of a killer instinct in the late going. If he goes, he should be a solid foundation in the gimmicks.

McPeck has been determined to get **Count Dracula (#7, 10-1)** to be a star on the grass. After an indifferent sixth- place finish over the Fair Grounds lawn in his debut, the grandson of the foundation grass sire Dynaformer tried stakes company in his most recent start, the Black Gold, also slated for the infield. Mother Nature intervened however, and the 8 ½-furlong test was rained off to the main track. A solid second-place finish ensued and joined a frontrunning maiden win over dirt sandwiched between his two scheduled turf starts. Sometimes pedigree does not dictate surface preference and that may be the case here.

Certain to be overlooked on the tote board again today as he was in the Southwest (46-1) and the Rebel (88-1), **Magic Grant (#9, 30-1)** joins **Footprint** as the only other late runner in the entire field. His biggest accomplishments thus far have been a win in the seven-furlong Clever Trever and a third in the Springboard Mile, both at Remington late last year. The reduction in distance from the pair of 1 1/16-miles tries here this year appears favorable and while his Beyer Speed Figures have been modest thus far, the potential for a complete meltdown up front could allow him to be along for a share at a hefty price.

**Wagering Strategy -**

**Win: #5; Flyer Win: #9**  
**Exacta Key Box: 5 w/ 6, 7, 9**

**RACE 9 - \$600,000 ESSEX HANDICAP (4:55 p.m.):** Starting high weight likely favorite **First Mission (#9, 5-2)** concedes only two to four pounds to his rivals today so impost assignments are irrelevant. The real elephant in the room is what happened to him in the Pegasus Invitational that saw him clunk home 20 lengths back at 5-2. It could have been the pace which was quicker than what he had been accustomed to as he found himself farther back, both in distance and position, than usual. He basically was never involved and coupled with the fact that he has the feel of being a delicate type with just a half dozen career starts almost a quarter into his 4-year-old season, there are questions. No disputing his talent level when things go his way but there are some negative vibes here.

Turf regular **Wizard of Westwood (#3, 8-1)** blew up the last time he tried the dirt as he ran his career mark to a perfect two-for-two following a successful debut over the surface. This time around, the surface switch is from the synthetic, which often resembles grass form but not always. That pair of dirt scores did come in his only two non-stakes starts so it muddles the question as to which footing his future lies. His work pattern over conventional dirt at the Training Center in Louisville since that last start is solid and his price figures to be fair.

**War Campaign (#6, 9-2)** matched a career best Beyer in the Tinsel last time to keep his perfect record in the exacta over off tracks perfect. He has run equally well over dry footing, so the real question is where has he been since mid-December. One can look back to a year ago, as he made the first start of his 2023 campaign on this very day following a similar layoff. It did take a couple of unplaced efforts before he found the winner's circle again, however, with one of them coming at even-money. Caution is advised but he has been firing bullet works at Keeneland the last month so he might be ready this time around.

In his last three dirt tries around two turns, **Time for Trouble (#7, 12-1)** is a perfect three-for-three, including an eventful starter allowance affair at Fair Grounds when he had to deal with some traffic. He is also a winner locally and while this chase is not as loaded with speedsters like the Oaklawn, it has one stalking sort after another so things toward the front could get a little busy, perhaps sooner versus later in this nine-furlong affair. Few are craftier than the veteran Bejarano in the saddle to exploit such a scenario, so this one does have legitimate spoiler potential.

**Wagering Strategy -**

**Win: #3**

**Trifecta Key Box: 3, 9 w/ 3, 6, 7, 9 w/ 3, 6, 7, 9**