

WEEK 02
Withers Stakes . Winkfield Stakes

February 3, 2023

Tomorrow, everyone with any interest in the US Triple Crown will have their attention turned to the 14th race at Gulfstream Park which is the Grade 2, 8.5 furlong Fountain of Youth Stakes. You know why. He was last years US Champion Two Year Old Colt after winning 4 of his 5 starts and this will be his 2013 debut, his first step on the road to the Kentucky Derby.

His name is Forte. Last year, prior to one of his races, I listened to two color commentators discussing him. One was of the opinion that his name was pronounced FORT (as it Fort Marcy, a wonderful racehorse of the past). The other said FOR-TEY. And the second would, of course, be correct. Chat about the reasons why he was named this but my 1950s self remembers a good looking guy that a rival record company pulled from obscurity to supposedly give Elvis a run for his money. His Top Tens included "Turn Me Loose" and "Hound Dog Man" and his name was Fabian. Single name to obviously show up the other one-named star of his day (Mr Presley, that would be). His full name was Fabian Forte. But I digress...

Forte will take on 9 others, will undoubtedly go off as favorite, and his best competition will be Chad Brown's colt, Blazing Sevens.

Forte is trained by Todd Pletcher who won the Fountain of Youth in 2015 with Itsaknockout, in 2010 with Eskendreya and in 2007 with Scat Daddy. None went on to win any of the Triple Crown races. Last year, Pletcher had Emmanuel in the Fountain of Youth and he ended up 4th and did not start in the Derby. Last year's Fountain of Youth winner was actually won by Ky Derby pic and that was Simplification (he ended up 4th), ridden by Jose Ortiz and trained by Antonio Sano. Jose and Antonio will be back in the pre-Derby picture in this year's renewal as well. Trainer Sano will start Il Mirocolo, a son of Gun Runner out of a Tapit mare. He was a \$70,000 two year old and has won one of 7 starts, a one mile maiden at Gulfstream in November. Since then, he's started in (and finished unplaced in) three stakes. He will be ridden by Edgar Perez. Jose Ortiz is mounted on a somewhat better opportunity and that is in the form of Bill Mott's New York bred Shadow Dragon, a son of Army Mule. He's won at 6 furlongs and in his last start, was a mildly impressive second in the Holy Bull Stakes to Rocket Can, who will also be in the starting gate on Saturday. Army Mule was unbeaten in 3 starts (none beyond 7 furlongs) before injury ended his racing career. His sire was a Louisiana Derby winner, Fresian Fire.

Rocket Can is a Bill Mott-trained son of Into Mischief which has won 2 of 5 and has won at this distance. Put Junior Alvarado on board and I like him. (He was ridden in the Holy Bull by Johnny Velazquez who will stay in California and is committed to ride National Treasure in the San Felipe -- part of the musical barns program, out of Baffert's barn and into Yakteen's temporary care). I have great respect for Forte, of course, but can't play favorites.

Others entered are General Jim (by Into Mischief and winner of half of his 6 starts, very impressive), Legacy Isle (by Shackleford, won his first 3 at Gulfstream (DQd from one); Mage (a son of Good Magic which won his only start at the end of January and is being rushed into much tougher company), Cyclone Mischief (another Into Mischief, trained by Dale Romans, and winner of 2 of his 5 starts but had nothing in his last start as favorite in the Holy Bull) and Dangerous Ride (a Florida Bred son of Lord Nelson who appears overmatched).

Lets go back a week to the sloppy course at Oaklawn Park and the G2 Rebel Stakes (also at 8.5 furlongs). The eventual winner, Confidence Game, apparently had a hissy-fit in the paddock but by the time he got out onto the track, he settled down thanks to the calmness of jockey James Graham. Trainer Keith Desormeaux selected this son of Candy Ride (Arg) as a \$25,000 yearling. Red Route One was second by a length, ridden by the very promising Cristian Torres who was a length and a half in from of Reincarnate, ridden by Johnny V (another Baffert to Yakteen) while favored Verifying was fourth.

Candy Ride (Arg) has been a perennial leading sire in the US but has not sired a winner of any of the Triple Crown events. Will this be his year? He sires distance and durability. Dam of Confidence Game is Eblouissante and light up the board, Virginia! This mare is a million dollar half sister to US Racing royalty, none other than Horse of the Year Zenyatta. Be still my heart! Eblouissante is by Preakness winner, Champion Bernardini.

Meanwhile, on the 18th of February, at Fair Grounds, Angel of Empire wove thru a field of 14 to win the Risen Star Stakes (G2) at 9 furlongs. Piloted by Luis Saez and trained by Brad Cox, this son of Classic Empire is out of the To Honor and Serve mare, Armony's Angel.