



Oaklawn Stakes Race Analysis

Saturday, April 13, 2024

By Jeff "Money" Taylor

RACE 8 - \$300,000 G3-COUNT FLEET SPRINT HANDICAP (3:56 p.m.): The expected presence of international sprint star **Skelly (#4)** was widely thought to produce a small field for this, but seven rivals answered the bell making this event respectably sized by modern standards. Beaten only twice in the last two seasons, and those were runner-up finishes, **Skelly** has visited the winner's circle seven times during that span. Six of those victories have come at Oaklawn so he has shown particular fondness for the local oval. His 125-pound weight assignment also speaks highly of his ability in this age of modest weights in the handicap division. As impressive as his resume reads, there is one nagging angle that more than a few handicappers will attempt to exploit. Second in the \$1.5 million Riyadh Dirt Sprint in Saudi Arabia February 24, a race he was expected to win, he returns to the races in just six weeks after what can often be grueling travel experience. Trainer Steve Asmussen, however, has sent several runners to the Middle East during the last 1 ½-decades and most have come back to run as expected. Others choosing to participate on that day of fabulously lucrative purses as well as in Dubai in late March, have not fared as well in their return efforts. At below even money, perhaps a gamble against is in order.

Jaxon Traveler (#2) joined the ranks of graded winners with a gutty nose victory over **Tejano Twist (#6,)** in the G3-Whitmore last month. Successfully staking the pace that day, unlike his gate to wire win in the Thomas Memorial at Sunland the start before, he posted a career best Beyer Speed Figure of 97. He will once again be ridden by Flavien Prat and will likely once again be lurking just off the pace. If **Skelly** does indeed have a chink in his armor, he will probably be the one to get first crack at him.

There is not much more to say about **Tejano Twist**. The nine-time winner simply shows up every time they lead him over. His erstwhile rallies have sometimes come up a bit short, as they did in the Whitmore and in the King Cotton when second to today's favorite, but it is certainly not from lack of effort. He is likely to get a quicker half-mile split to run at today than the low :46 he got in the Whitmore and if the fractions are quick enough, he might just be up in time. Regardless of pace, it looks unlikely he misses at least a spot in the Trifecta.

Fellow closer **Happy Is a Choice (#8, 20-1)** would be another beneficiary of a protracted battle up front. A winner of his last two in late running fashion, he will be making his stakes debut today. A tall order indeed (thus his big price), but he could just be the kind to gallop along late and pick up a goodly amount of the pieces if a pace meltdown does occur.

Wagering Strategy - **Win: #2 (if 3-1 or higher)**
Exacta Box: 2, 6, 8

RACE 11 - \$1,250,000 G1-APPLE BLOSSOM (5:46 p.m.): A long time stalwart on the stakes schedule both recently and in the Racing Festival of the South era, this Grade 1 fixture for fillies and mares has once again drawn a fascinating cast.

Adare Manor (#4) was a big fish in a shallow pond for most of last season, feasting on small fields of outgunned opponents in Southern California while odds-on time and time again. When trying the deeper waters of the Breeder's Cup Distaff at her home oval of Santa Anita last fall, however, she managed only an also ran performance at a much heftier price (9-2). In her lone start in 2024, she settled for a runner-up finish in the G1-Beholder five weeks ago while returning to the role of favorite. She did manage a career best 102 Beyer in the Beholder, however, and it is worth noting that after finishing as the bridesmaid in her first start in 2023, she

promptly reeled off those five wins in a row. Not an easy call as it can be pure folly to sell trainer Bob Baffert short, but another price around even money makes the choice to find an alternative more tempting.

Flying Connection (#5) has also made a habit out of beating up on outclassed rivals, winning her last three in her home state of New Mexico while ultra short in price. While it would be foolish to compare the competition to that of what **Adare Manor** has defeated, there is more to the story, not the least of which is the vast difference between the two on the tote board today. Trained by the underrated Todd Fincher, this well-bred daughter of Nyquist brought \$250,000 at the Keeneland Fall Sale as a yearling in 2021. She also just happened to be the pacesetter in last year's Kentucky Oaks after winning the Sunland Park Oaks with ease. Toss in a G3 placing in the one-mile Torry Pine at Del Mar late last summer and you have a legitimate contender at a super price.

Trainer Brad Cox sends out **Wet Paint (#4, 3-1)** for her first start of the year after a lengthy freshening following an eighth-place performance (one spot behind **Adare Manor**) in last November's BC Distaff. The Blame filly had a very productive campaign when facing fellow 3-year-olds, including the three-race series here-the Martha Washington, Honeybee and Fantasy-that led to a fourth-place finish as the favorite in the Kentucky Oaks. She trained very steadily over the Fair Grounds oval over the winter, but as a relatively short priced second choice, she too might be worth taking a stand against.

Many will dismiss Louisiana-bred **Free Like a Girl (#1)** but may do so at their own risk. Sure, the daughter of little-known sire El Deal has accumulated the vast majority of her \$1.3 million when facing fellow Cajuns, but she has also stepped up when entered against open company. She was a tough-luck second in the G3-Houston Ladies Classic at Sam Houston in late January and displayed excellent tenacity in getting up to win her local prep for this in optional company a month ago.

Of equal intrigue is **Taxed (#2)**. Claimed by trainer Randy Morse for \$50,000 when breaking her maiden at Churchill late in her 2-year-old year, the daughter of Collected attempts to scale the summit of the class ladder. After pulling off the upset in the G2-Blackeyed Susan at Pimlico late last spring, her form gradually tailed off afterward before heading to the sidelines early in the fall. Returning as a more mature and robust 4-year-old, Morse was forced to make her seasonal bow in a six-furlong sprint after failing to find a route with conditions she fit to fill with sufficient entrants. While she did make her debut in a one-turn mile at Churchill, three quarters was something she had never attempted previously. Breaking a step or two slow under reigning Oaklawn riding champ Christian Torres, she launched a powerful rally through the stretch to win going away. Morse had Torres work her out an additional furlong, covering seven panels in 1:23 2/5's, before galloping out with good energy past the three-quarter marker where the race began. She was a two-time runner-up to **Wet Paint** here last season and looks like she has turned the corner as a 4-year-old in fine fashion.

The well-traveled **Honor D Lady (#7)** should also represent herself well for trainer Saffie Joseph. Pulling off the minor upset in the G3-Royal Delta at Gulfstream in her last start, she too looks the part of a more mature 4-year-old after a useful sophomore campaign that saw her post a solid 2-1-2 record from six starts while racing exclusively in stakes company. She seldom gets the kind of respect on the tote board that she deserves and if overlooked today, she is another who could offer some value.

Wagering Strategy - **Flyer Win Play: #5**
Exacta Box: 2, 5, 7