By Jeff "Money" Taylor

RACE 9 -$200,000 BATHHOUSE ROW (4:32 p.m.): Nobody in this group of "not quite ready for prime time" players is going to the big dance at Churchill Downs in a couple of weeks. A win today, however, puts them squarely in the spotlight with an automatic berth in the Preakness a fortnight later.

Informed Patriot's (#4) effort in the Arkansas Derby was not terrible as he did manage to pick up a small share at almost 70-1. That performance earned the Steve Asmussen-trained charge a career-high Beyer Speed Figure of 84, a number that stands to do more damage today in this more modest field. He has kept good company previously, including eventual Santa Anita Derby winner Stronghold as well as Louisiana Derby victor Catching Freedom, whom he ran third to in the Smarty Jones here on New Year's Day. He is well-connected with multiple champions Asmussen and Santana and has an ideal pedigree for the nine furlongs.

Morning line favorite **Militant (#5)** also sports some high-profile connections, which is one of the reasons for his short price. Although he has only a maiden win to his credit, he has the look of a late-blooming type that often goes on to bigger and better things as the summer progresses. His stalking type of running style is a good fit in here and could add to his trainer's sparkling record in stakes events here the last few seasons.

Imperial Gun (#3) is another exiting the Arkansas Derby and had one of the toughest trips. Slow to settle in mid pack that day, he was bothered and carried very wide onto the backstretch, taking the worst of it as a very rank Liberal Arts bore out badly. Despite finishing a distant eighth, he matches his best previous best Beyer, an 80 when graduating in late December. A clean trip today likely puts him closer early and he may be in position to strike.

The dirt form that **Count Dracula (#8)** has displayed has been solid thus far in his career as he remains perfect in the exacta in three tries. Back-to-back near misses make him an attractive longshot in this chase that lacks a bona fide stakes performer. He is another who should be lurking just off the early pace, as he did in earning his diploma at Fair Grounds early in the year. At double digits on tote, he merits a look in the gimmicks at the very least.

Wagering Strategy   -   Win: #4 (if 5-1 or higher)
Trifecta Key: 4 w/ 3, 4, 5, 8 w/ 3, 5, 8

RACE 10 - $200,000 VALLEY OF THE VAPORS (5:12 p.m.): Making her first on dirt today, **Winnable (#11)** is likely to be overlooked in a field of more accomplished runners over the surface. Looking at her pedigree that has Triple Crown winner Justify on top and juggernaut Curlin on the bottom, that might be a mistake. She has also been training very well over the Churchill Downs and Keeneland surfaces since a near miss in the Bourbonette Oaks over the Turfway synthetic in late March. With a couple of sprinters stretching out to two turns along with some confirmed route speed, she should sit a good trip from the second flight. Trainer Kenny McPeek has already enjoyed a couple of big Saturdays at the current stand and might be poised for another.

Neom Beach (#1) has been the most consistent of this group which is why many bettors are likely to gravitate to her. No worse than fourth in her three previous stakes attempt this season, she made the move into conditional optional company a winning one in her most recent trip postward. She will be reunited with Joel Rosario today and together they nailed down trifecta finishes in both the Year's End and Martha Washington early this meeting. She appears to be a must-use in that gimmick once again.

McPeek will also be represented by **I'm a Mess (#7).** Making her first start of the year, she reported home fourth to **Neom Beach** three weeks ago and with the benefit of a recent start, should make things more interesting today. A lively pace would seem to favor the daughter of American Pharoah. As with stablemate **Winnable,** a price in the 6 to 8-1 range may be worth an investment.

Blue Squall (#3, 10-1) makes her two-turn debut for trainer Randy Morse following consecutive runner-up finishes in the six-furlong Dixie Belle and Purple Martin. She brought $300,000 at auction as a 2-year-old last spring, far outpacing the

modest stud fee of $7,500 that her sire Tapwrit commands. She is a well put together filly who might just relish a bit more real estate. Leading rider Christian Torres aboard only adds to the intrigue.

Wagering Strategy   -   Win & Place: #11
                                Exactas: 11 w/ 1, 3, 7
                                Saver Exactas: 1 w/ 3, 7, 11

RACE 11 - $1,250,000 G2-OAKLAWN HANDICAP (5:52 p.m.): Starting high weight **Skippylongstocking (#10)** has been installed as the tepid 3-1 favorite which tells you how wide open this race is. Like First Mission did in winning the G3-Essex here a few weeks ago, he put a poor performance in January's G1-Pegasus behind him by winning the G3-Challenger at Tampa in his return. The son of Exaggerator enjoyed a solid campaign in 2023, also accounting for the Challenger as well the G2-Charles Town Classic. The well-traveled 5-year-old usually brings his "A" game and is a good place to begin when assembling a betting strategy.

Trainer Bob Baffert will be attempting a sweep of the meeting's three marquee events after winning the G1-Apple Blossom last week with Adare Manor and the G1-Arkansas Derby with Muth two weeks prior. The hat trick certainly seems within reach as **Reincarnate (#6)** comes in off a third-place performance in the G1-Santa Anita Handicap early last month. The Good Magic colt is no stranger to Oaklawn, having finished third in both the Rebel and Arkansas Derby last season while under the care of former Baffert assistant Tim Yakteen. Juan Hernandez, aboard both of Baffert's ship-in winners this season, once again is slated to ride over an oval he is beginning to know quite well.

Red Route One (#5) posted a career best Beyer of 101 in winning the G2-New Orleans Classic at the Fair Grounds in his last start, firmly stamping himself as one of the elites in the Midwest handicap division. Last year's Rebel runner-up returns to the strip that has produced a 1-2-0 mark from four local starts. Only a sixth-place performance in the Arkansas Derby kept him from being perfect in the exacta. His one-run style does not always produce results, but he certainly belongs with these.

Right behind **Reincarnate** last time in the Big 'Cap, **Highland Falls (#1)** will be making just his sixth career start for trainer Brad Cox. Not a regular on the West Coast, Cox thought enough of this Curlin colt to ship halfway across the country off a pair of conditioned wins in allowance company at the Fair Grounds to make his first stakes start. While his rally came up a bit short with a fourth-place finish, he did show up and the added experience should serve him well today. Florent Geroux, aboard for those two wins in New Orleans, will once again be in the saddle.

The pacesetting chores could fall to G3-Razorback winner **Octane (#4).** Although he stalked the early leader before challenging late in the final turn in that race, the Brethren gelding has successfully controlled the pace previously and few others in here appear to want anything to do with running on the front. He has the benefit of a start over the local strip and if left to his own devices, a gate to wire score certainly appears possible.

Of the remaining runners, all are double digits on the morning line. **Magic Tap (#3)** looks the most attractive off a fourth-place finish to First Mission in the recent Essex. He gave **Octane** all that one wanted in the late going of the Razorback after encountering traffic turning for home. The Asmussen trainee was favored that day and should be a much better value in this spot.

Wagering Strategy   -   Win: #4
                                Flyer Win: #3 (if 8-1 or higher)
                                Exacta Key Box: 4 w/ 1, 3, 5, 6, 10