



Oaklawn Stakes Race Analysis

Monday, January 1, 2024

By Jeff "Money" Taylor

RACE 9 - \$300,000 SMARTY JONES (4:14 p.m.): Now that the long and arduous road to the Kentucky Derby is officially under way with the calendar turning over, things begin to get serious. One of the more interesting subplots along the journey is the ballet by the nation's top jockeys and their agents to secure what they think will be the best chance to score in the biggest horse race in the world. Today's headliner could be a perfect example of the intricacies of that dance.

Why would Joel Rosario, who has ridden **Just Steel (#7)** in both of his career wins with Beyer Speed Figures of 88 and 90 respectively, numbers that stand out in this field, opt to ride **Lagynos (#3)** instead? Good question, since the latter's only two wins have come in races originally scheduled for the turf, while his lone defeat came in an entry level optional on the main track. Perhaps only the inner connections know, but it is worth noting that the third-place performance on the Churchill main track in early November did produce the son of Kantharos' best speed fig and he followed it up with a win in an off-the-turf affair at the same 1 1/16-miles distance he catches today. This is one evenly matched field and a potential angle, any angle that might work, promises to produce a fair reward.

Just Steel certainly enjoys an experience advantage, having been out seven times as a 2-year-old which is a busy campaign by today's standards. After gutting out a narrow nose maiden score at Saratoga going six furlongs, with Rosario aboard, the D. Wayne Lukas pupil appeared overmatched in the Saratoga's G1-Hopeful and Keeneland's G1-Breeder's Futurity in his next two. A return to the conditioned ranks produced an even third-place performance at seven furlongs before a big rebound in winning the 6 1/2-furlong Ed Brown at Churchill in late November to the tune of a \$27 mutuel, with Rosario once again in the saddle. As a son of Triple Crown winner Justify, one would think he would be well-equipped to handle some additional real estate, but with an exclusively Australian bottom side to his pedigree, some doubts emerge. It is worth noting Normandy Hero's effort in Sunday's six-furlong Renaissance Stakes, as that one finished a troubled third behind **Just Steel** in the Ed Brown, although we may still be talking apples and oranges between races with one turn and two.

Informed Patriot (#1) is one of three that will represent trainer Brad Cox. The Hard Spun colt has shown up in each of his four starts, none of which have come at any distance shorter than seven furlongs. He appears better suited than many to manage today's middle distance and he is graded stakes-placed with a third-place performance in the Street Sense at Churchill in late October in his only start at two turns. He has not run as fast as some, with an average mid 70 Beyer, but that should allow him to contend.

Also mired in that Beyer range is **Catching Freedom (#2)**. Hammered down to even money in his coming out party at Churchill in early October, the Constitution colt rewarded his many backers with a 3 3/4-length win at the difficult one-mile debut distance. Equally bet in his subsequent non winners of two try, he failed to produce an equivalent rally with the move to two turns. Much depends on price, but as with most of those trained by Cox, the value may be on the short side.

Yet another Cox trainee, **Gettysburg Address (#6)**, cannot be overlooked as he finished right behind **Informed Patriot** in the Street Sense. Cox is taking the blinkers off the speed conscious sort who is another Win Star-bred son of Constitution and the barn enjoys a terrific 32-percent strike rate on such an equipment change. Flavien Prat retains the mount from last time, which says a lot.

Not to be left out, **Mystik Dan (#4)** comes in sporting the highest Beyer number of the entire field, a 96 he earned in graduating going 5 1/2-furlongs at Churchill in mid-November. He failed to back that up, however, in his first trip against winners two weeks later. He does seem to have a high turn of early foot, which means his impact may come early versus late.

Wagering Strategy - **Win: #3**
Trifectas: 1, 3 w/ 1, 2, 3 w/ 1, 2, 3, 6, 7