



Handicapping Analysis

Sat February 18th, 2023

Stakes Spotlight

Fair Grounds Race 13

Analysis by Emily Gullikson

The full field of fourteen makes this race deep on story lines and competitive in terms of race shape and dictating a trip. That includes morning line favorite, **#13 VICTORY FORMATION**, a horse that has done everything ask of him to this point bringing a perfect three-for-three record. This is without question his biggest test to date. He will face solid competition and must prove "best" with his forwardly placed running style to overcome the outside draw and the other pacesetters (Sun Contention/22 SpeedRate) in this field. Those other projected pacesetters (Quad I/III runners) include **#3 SHAQ DIESEL**, **#4 DETERMINEDLY**, **#5 HARLOCAP** and potentially (lack of Surface/Distance data) **#14 PRIVATE CREED**. Cox stablemate and prior rival **#6 ANGEL OF EMPIRE** finished second behind Victory Formation in the Smarty Jones recording a new top 90 OptixFIG, a softer number especially to justify the morning line in this race and must be noted the gate issues present with the slow (SLOG) break in each of his four starts.

Victory Formation will be joined by the other Brad Cox runner, the likely second choice (popular public alternative) **#8 TAPIT'S CONQUEST**. Brad Cox had considered running Tapit's Conquest in the Lecomte (G3) though took a different path running in an allowance earlier on that card noting the barn sent out the Lecomte winner, Instant Coffee. While Tapit's Conquest did not win his allowance race, the effort was still game making an inside MOVE against the race flow (X_FLOW) and finished in a BLANKET at the wire (alongside pacesetting FLOW winner, Determinedly) and GALLOP+ out in front, an effort (B OptixGRADE/95 OptixFIG) that should not deter the public from following him into this stakes race.

Rival **#11 SILVER HEIST** also wheels back from that January allowance and part of the BLANKET finish. Based on the complexion of the field, Silver Heist was required to track closer to the pace than perhaps his ideal trip given the rail draw and compact five horse field. A case can be made for another forward move as a lightly raced progressive type in just his third career start though will give up seasoning and experience to others. **#2 SINGLE RULER** earned a similar OptixFIG breaking his maiden on the January 21st card, though will find a significant class test stepping up in today's graded stakes event.

#10 TWO PHIL'S will return as the lone participant from the Lecomte (G3) and look to build off his place finish as he makes his second start back off the layoff. That 83-day layoff was one of the concerns heading into the Lecomte, making a first start of the season. The race is under his belt, though perhaps the other concern still remains in play of improvement as Two Phil's stepped up number wise recording a new top 93 OptixFIG in the Lecomte, a number that still must be improved on to compete in today's 96-90 OFR and with the others in this field and does not appear to hold a pace advantage as a Quad II Circle.

#9 CURLY JACK comes into this race light number wise, though a case could be made for improvement as he starts off the sophomore campaign. As noted on previous race analysis and in the OptixEQ "Road to the Derby" race video series, the KY JC (G2) has a history of being a productive race and has shown similar this year producing next out allowance winner, Cyclone Mischief as well as the Southwest (G3) place finisher, Red Route Road and Lecomte (G3) winner, Instant Coffee. Those three improved around 10 OptixFIG from their OptixFIG in the KY JC (G2), a speed figure improvement jump that Curly Jack would require in order to compete today.

#7 SUN THUNDER comes into this race as a developing type and one with fitness on his side as he will make his fourth start in as many months since making his debut back in November. He has shown progression without yet turning in that "breakthrough" number and if he has that race in him, this could be the time and place. His debut suggested ability and projected improvement with added (STRETCH) ground which he showed breaking his maiden dominantly (B+ OptixGRADE) overcoming adversity (TROUBLE) to win by open lengths on December 31st at Oaklawn Park. The connections were quick to bring him back for the Southwest (G3) a race that did not seem the "goal" given the timing though a useful race as far as class experience. Noting Sun Thunder did not run back to his top 92 OptixFIG (90 in Southwest) it is reasonable to project he can still present a move forward in this "hidden" third start of the form cycle. Hernandez also will jump back aboard, a rider that was up for the debut and upgrade overall.

#12 CRUPI ships in for Todd Pletcher as an improving type despite still holding maiden status. Number wise he fits with today's group and has the surface/distance (EX - EXCUSE trip on 11/20) experience and overall physicality of a two-turn runner. His progression is noted as well as the place finish on January 21st noting the top two finished together and clear of the others and Crupi showed a lot of run making a sustained middle MOVE into a solid pace and still had to show run late with the race shape remaining Fast (F OfS) late.

Fair Grounds Race 13 - PLAY OF THE DAY

Post Time 6:14 PM CST

Analysis by Jim Miller

13 Victory Formation - 3/1 10 Two Phil's - 8/1 5 Harlocap - 8/1

The first of the 50 point Derby preps takes place in Louisiana as a full field is slated to line up in the Risen Star. This is easily the most talented field we have seen in this year's three-year-old season as nearly the entire field is in with a chance.

Trainer Brad Cox has a trio entered, led by 13-VICTORY FORMATION, who looks to remain undefeated. He possesses good early speed, which he will need to use to clear from the outside draw. The stretch to the mile was no issue for him last out, but this 1 1/8 miles will be the toughest test in his young career.

Local eyes will be on trainer Larry Rivelli and jockey Jareth Loveberry as 10-TWO PHIL'S comes off a big effort in the Lecomte last out. He has been training tremendously well and looks to be maturing with each and every start.

Steve Asmussen also has three in the Risen Star as 5-HARLOCAP is a new arrival to his barn, after racing out West for Baffert. The connections chose to switch trainers in search of valuable Derby points. Distance seems to be no issue as he faces winners for the first time.