Handicapping Analysis
Fri May 5th, 2023

Stakes Spotlight

Churchill Downs Race 11

Post Time 4:51 PM CST

Analysis by Emily Gullikson

The Kentucky Oaks (G1), features a full field and handicapping puzzle that begins with the expected favorite in #7 WET PAINT and will take a similar approach when assessing the Derby. As far as WET PAINT she comes into this race arguably the most accomplished (similar to Forte) though in terms of a race shape and field, will still be tested. Trip and RunStyle (Quad IV Square) are the main hurdles as closer often not only must be "much the best" but also must have the right pace to close into and with a full field, WET PAINT must also navigate traffic as she could be expected to pass every other horse in order to win.

As far as the early pace assessment, OptixPLOT has this race as a "Sun" Contention paired with a lower 6 SpeedRate, suggesting there are many in this field that can race on or bear the lead (6-7 EP runners) though the pace (fractions) itself does not expect to be fast.

#10 FLYING CONNECTION is one that likely will look for the lead with her RunStyle and outside draw and likely carry to #12 DORTH VADER as she remains at the two turn distance with some stamina limitations. #1 MIMI KAKUSHI could also be forced into a similar role based on her draw at the rail. #2 THE ALYS LOOK to her inside has overall class concerns and another that seems to require the ideal setup for a top effort. The other Cox trainee #6 BOTANTICAL has recorded front running wins over the Turfway synthetic and one that does not necessarily "need the lead" though does expect with the surface switch to be forwardly placed (or pushing pace outside horses) to avoid kickback, something she has yet to deal with on the dirt.

#4 SOUTHLAWN has the buzz as the "now" horse coming into this race off back-to-back open length wins and improved figures this season at the Fair Grounds. Holding that form and transferring into this spot should be assessed as she did have favorable trips and race shapes as well as the recent progress that will be required to transfer back to Churchill Downs, a course she struggled over as a juvenile. As far as her rival **#14 PRETTY MISCHIEVOUS**, she is proven here at Churchill Downs keying off the series of races to start her career. In terms of current form, she could rebound in this race, a third start off the layoff, noting a stumble (TROUBLE_S) and even some regression in the FG Oaks (G2) after recording a new top 94 OptixFIG with the Rachel Alexandra (G2) win coming off a 54-day break.

#5 WONDER WHEEL could get overlooked with the 6th place finish in the Ashland (G1) sitting on top of her past performances. There was enough adversity in the trip to take the race with some upside going forward and her previous progressive form and class as a multiple graded stakes winner is tough in this group to ignore.

#11 DEFINING PURPOSE also brings with her competitive form and figures recorded here at Churchill Downs. She progressed with each race from the debut and even her 5th place in the Golden Rod (G2) was a competitive B-OptixGRADE and 87 OptixFIG - a juvenile number. The 20-1 in the Ashland (G1) was probably the right time/number to jump back in as she had a subtle excuse (TROUBLES+) stumbling inside the gate, a pretty rare occurrence and something missed in the chard that did appear to impact her performance on the day and behind WET PAINT. Keying off the Ashland (G1) **#16 JULIA SHINING** (AE) earned the same B OptixGRADE for her third place run and should be considered should she draw in.

Both #3 GAMBLING GIRL and #11 AFFIRMATIVE LADY might not be the "best" or the "most accomplished" in this race though could be overlooked and have races that make them competitive with this group. Their foundation, consistency and RunStyle (first run on WET PAINT) give them consideration, especially if overlaid.

#8 PROMISEHER AMERICA jumped up with a big race and much improved 95 OptixFIG in the Gazelle (G3) win though must show she is now that horse as her prior numbers sat on the softer side.

Similar number wise for **#9 AND TELL ME NOLIES** as she has yet to take a step forward from her juvenile figures. With that said, she expects to be one of the longer shot runners in this race and has been class tested in graded stakes company and holds the Del Mar Debutante (G1) win. She could be a sneaky player in this race that is sitting on a peak effort in this third start off the layoff, exiting smaller/compact fields out in California that might not have allowed her the best chance to compete and record a top number.

Circling back to playing the race, value should always be considered and especially in this race and with a shorter priced favorite. As a player asking ourselves the question "is WET PAINT that much the best over the others to overcome the hurdles; or is she becoming the default selection as one that seems most likely."

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Analysis by Jim Miller

16 Julia Shining **7** Wet Paint **4** Southlawn

The Oaks is a really, really tough race which is made even tougher by the fact that the favorite is a deep closer and the second choice has never run on a conventional dirt surface. A field of 14 and a points system where poor racing luck left two very talented horses on the outside looking in could have this race going until Friday morning before we know who is running. She's going to need some racing luck, but I believe 16-JULIA SHINING wins this race, if she gets into the race. She has never been worse than third in four career starts. Her largest margin of defeat is 1 1/2 lengths and because if the points system, ending up a neck behind Punchbowl in the Ashland for 2nd sticks her on the outside looking in. The winner of that race, 11-DEFINING PURPOSE got a dream trip in that spot but I don't think she stands any shot to win the Oaks. If Julia Shining can get in, she should get a perfect trip from the second flight and get the jump on the late rushers in the lane. 7-WET PAINT is who I believe is the most talented 3yo filly in the country coming into the Oaks. My only concern for her is her running style as she tends to rate at the back of the back and rally in the lane. She could very easily repeat her last three performances and it wouldn't surprise me, but her price is going to be very short and in a field of 14 it makes it tough to endorse on top from a value standpoint. 4-SOUTHLAWN could be one of those fillies that just matured with time. She was decent as a two-year-old but nothing incredible. A four month rest prior to the start of her three-year-old season seemed to help as she returned looking like a different racehorse. With showing the ability to repeat performances, she has to be given a look as her running style should give her a chance the entire way too.

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Analysis by Ron Uchman

5 Wonder Wheel - 12-1 **7** Wet Paint - 5-2 **4** Southlawn - 8-1

The Kentucky Oaks is an interesting race. Wet Paint is obviously the one to beat after three commanding victories in a row and finishing like she can run all day. But is she unbeatable? I don’t think so. Like that filly, Southlawn, who showed little last year, returned from a two-month layoff and dominated in two races, again like top choice with little reason for the dramatic improvement. Wonder Wheel to me is the intriguing runner. Her poor race in the Ashland was an aberration. She was a multiple Grade 1 winner at two and she is two-for-two at Churchill and there are many runners that just don’t like that track. She had two dynamite drills over the Churchill surface since that poor race at Keeneland. Think she’s going to bounce back in a big way.