Handicapping Analysis
Sat May 6th, 2023

Stakes Spotlight

Churchill Downs Race 12

Post Time 5:57 PM CST

Analysis by Emily Gullikson

As discussed in the Oaks (G1) the assessment of the race favorite and in the Kentucky Derby (G1), the favoritism falling on #15 FORTE. As far as FORTE coming into this race, he is the most accomplished runner from the graded stakes wins as a juvenile (juvenile champion) and pairing graded stakes wins returning this year as a sophomore. While he is the "most accomplished" and has been at the top of the crop this year, one of the concerns for this race is whether or not he has reached his "top" and peaked, which could open the door for the developing types to catch up to him with maturity. As far as trip, FORTE might not be as pace dependent as Wet Paint in terms of RunStyle, with his class/versatility, still he must overcome a trip and timing key with his run. In terms of this course he has been training here and one that has been able to transfer his form around to the varied tracks, he is still lacking race day experience at Churchill Downs. These are all factors to consider with a favorite as the assessment of a legit favorite should check every box in that role.

As far as progression with racing his Todd Pletcher trained stablemate, #5 TAPIT TRICE (underneath) arguably has shown a move forward this year and with each start. Stamina does not appear to be any limitation, though as an individual he does have his habits from a tendency to break slow (a hurdle in a 20 horse field) and can often turn his head and lack focus in the stretch even in races he does wind up winning. His Run Style, stamina and assertive rider in Saez might give him his best chance to hit the board, while a win will take a lot in his favor.

Locally based, **#3 TWO PHIL'S** checks the boxes as far as a horse that is accomplished; he has graded stakes wins, including the Street Sense (G3) over the Churchill Downs main track and two-turn distance; he is fast enough speed figure wise by any figure maker to compete in this field, and has the right RunStyle (a favorable OptixPLOT position above the ParLine - a rare, successful designation and the only runner in this field with that position) and form as he has trained as well and consistent as a racehorse can be.

The conversation on workouts is crucial this time of year and with the individual players in the race, each horse is looking for something different. A horse like TWO PHIL'S that checks all the boxes already, works are a matter of keeping the horse fit, happy and healthy. For a runner like **#17 DERMA SOTOGAKE** it is about acclimation to Churchill Downs bringing in form from overseas. As far as his form, he is contender off those races; he is fast enough by respected (OptixEQ and Timeform) figure makers and the class of the races fit with today's level of competition. Derma Sotogake, has his quirks while training, that appears to be who he is and his overall demeanor is positive in the mornings with the weeks he has been on the grounds for this race.

Workouts are also key with layoff runners and especially for #4 CONFIDENCE GAME making his first start in more than two months (70-days) giving up recency to the others in the field. For him working well, is not enough, he must show that those works have him fit, race ready and sitting on the best race of his career in order to win. Pace is also noted for Confidence Game as he did come from just off the pace to run the Rebel (G2) prior form and success had been from making the lead and would consider that running style for him in this race.

#11 DISARM is another runner that as far as works leading up to this race is tough to knock. Overall he has been a good work horse and shown run/talent in the morning with the main question mark when he will transfer that to the afternoon as his races to date have been good (lacking "red" in the OptixGRID) he must show up on Saturday with an improvement effort from anything he has yet to run on the track to date to win -- and looking to get creative at a price, he could just be that progressive type.

#13 SUN THUNDER is another given a follow with the morning works as he also requires a new top to compete on Sunday and has the equipment change with the blinkers added both in the morning and for the race. Following this horse since his debut, he has shown ability at times and a case can be made he has yet to show his best. His debut over this Churchill Downs course was merely a "prep" for a route race where he exploded B+ OptixGRADE overcoming a lot of adversity in his December 31st Oaklawn Park win. McPeek coming back off that race in the Southwest (G3) was also a "prep" given the recent maiden win, the Derby Trail season just beginning and letting Sun Thunder gather experience. The race he was peaked for was the Risen Star (G2) a race where he recorded a 100 OptixFIG and place finish behind a quality runner and rival in #14 ANGEL OF EMPIRE on the day. SUN THUNDER just needing points in the Louisiana Derby (G2) and again a spot in his form cycle where he was not expected to record a top came up just short of that objective. The approach to keep Sun Thunder closer early on and just eek out points was too conservative and the race shape playing against that tactical decision with #6 KINGSBARNS walking (FLOW) on the lead (the type of trip he is unlikely to ever receive again) to score. He will return after doing just enough to earn the necessary points in the Blue Grass (G1) and returning to the top effort from the Risen Star (G2) has him right back into competitive form here.

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Analysis by Peter Galassi

3 Two Phil's - 12-1 **17** Derma Sotogake (JPN) - 10-1 **15** Forte - 3-1

3 TWO PHIL'S come off his best effort yet with a sparkling late rally to win The Ruby Stakes at Turfway Park. Best last race of all the contenders. Won over the Churchill oval as a 2 year old. He will be an inviting price and here's hoping for the local connections.

17 DERMA SOTOGAKE not easy to win when your last race was in Meydan but he was by the far most impressive performer during that week. Japan horses have been winning a lot of big races across the world this year. Winning rider returns and may prove best with the right journey.

15 FORTE has done nothing wrong in 7 lifetime starts. Won the Breeders' Cup Juvenile and followed that with a sharp win in Fountain Of Youth in his 3 year old debut. I thought the Florida Derby win was most impressive because he won despite adversity. The post time favorite and will be the one to beat.

Churchill Downs Race 12 - PLAY OF THE DAY

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Analysis by Jim Miller

3 Two Phil's - 12-1 **14** Angel of Empire - 8-1 **10** Practical Move - 10-1 **17** Derma Sotogake (JPN) - 10-1 **5** Tapit Trice - 5-1 **22** Mandarin Hero (JPN) - 20-1

The biggest race in the World and one that has so much intrigue each and every year. After we saw Rich Strike win last year after coming in from the Also Eligible horses I cannot say that there is ever a horse with no chance to win. These are three-year-old horses, many relatively lightly raced, and there is so much that can happen. Let's start with the morning line choice Forte. He is an extremely talented racehorse. He's the Eclipse Award winner at two. He's won six of seven lifetime races and five in a row. With that in mind, I thought he should have dominated the Florida Derby. I didn't feel that was a great bunch and I felt he had to work really hard to win that race. His speed figures have regressed in his last three starts and at somewhere around 3-1 I just don't see the value. For sentimental reasons as well as handicapping reasons I'm picking 3-TWO PHIL'S to win the Derby. Of course I love that he was stabled at Hawthorne but I also really like his races this year. This Risen Star has proven to be a key prep race. His race in the Jeff Ruby Stakes was a monster win and getting to see him train in person, he does it all with such ease that the distance won't be an issue either. The three hole doesn't scare me because there's so much speed surrounding him that they will rush away and he should be perfectly positioned early. The price should be right as well. With liking Two Phil's I have to like 14-ANGEL OF EMPIRE too. He was the winner of the Risen Star and followed that race up with and impressive win in the Arkansas Derby. He may be a bit further back early but I think we get more than the 8-1 morning line he was laid at. #10-PRACTICAL MOVE is a monster of a racehorse. We don't know how good the California crew was this year but he has posted back to back triple digit Beyers and will be in a similar spot to Two Phil's early. Those two could run alongside one another the entire way. #17-DERMA SOTOGAKE (JPN) won so easily in Dubai that he has to be given consideration. Japanese horses continue to impress and this year they dominated the entire Dubai World Cup card. He may be a part of the early pace but he may also be the one who emerges clear when others drop off. #5-TAPIT TRICE is a horse that I like off his Blue Grass win as that was a game victory. I don't like his morning line as 5-1 is too short for me. Not sure how I will use him from a wagering standpoint. Lastly, if he gets into the race, #22-MANDARIN HERO (JPN) is a must use for me. He got horribly unlucky that the Derby Points System this year worked against him as he is probably more talented than half the horses in the race, if not more. Sadly he may not make it into the starting gate.

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Analysis by Ron Uchman

10 Practical Move - 10-1 **15** Forte - 3-1 **6** Kingsbarns - 12-1 **5** Tapit Trice - 5-1 **3** Two Phil's - 12-1 **22** Mandarin Hero (JPN) - 20-1

This is never an easy race to handicap but that's what makes it so fun. And no matter how well you handicap, there is so much luck involved. With a 20-horse field, the trip can be all important.

That being said, let's see what we can figure out.

Forte is a very good horse. But is he a great horse? It's true that he has an almost unblemished record with six wins from seven starts but he wasn't all that highly regarded until this year. He drew the 15 hole but with his swooping style of running, he's probably going to have to go around a lot of horses and with every length he is off the rail, he's going to have to cover far more ground. Will he have enough left for that grueling run down Churchill's stretch?

Kingsbarn is one of the more lightly-raced members of this field and he's the only one coming into the race unbeaten. Is he seasoned enough to tackle this task? Will he become only the 10th unbeaten horse to capture the Run For the Roses?

Tapit Trice, like the above two runners, is trained by Todd Pletcher. He's riding a four-race win streak. Like Forte, he seems to be at his best when coming from off the pace. He's likely to be placed more forwardly than Forte but that could also mean he'll have to weave his way through traffic.

I, like most of Chicagoland, want Two Phil's to win this race. He does own the single highest speed figure of any in here. However, that figure, and the win that got him entry into this race, came on the synthetic track of Turfway. None of his dirt races came close. But, he always shows an outstanding late move and dynamite works since that start show that he's coming into this race as good as can be.

However, I'm going to select Practical Move. I believe his good tactical speed will enable him to get in perfect striking distance of the early leaders and he's not likely to face too much traffic from that forward position. He won his last three races and although he was all out to hold on in last going nine furlongs, I believe he'll have plenty left for the finish.

A side note, the Japanese runner Mandarin Hero impressively lost to Practical Move in the Santa Anita Derby. He could be the real deal.