

Belmont Stakes Cheat Sheet

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The Final Leg of the Triple Crown. It is run at the distance of a mile and a half, likely the longest race these horses will ever run. To win the Belmont requires the right pedigree, the right form, the right temperament, and the right jockey. It is very hard to do, even with proper rest. For a horse that won the Kentucky Derby and the Preakness, it's almost impossible—it's only happened 11 times, and not once since 1978.

FACT: CALIFORNIA CHROME IS A TERRIBLE BET.

If California Chrome runs his race, he'll likely win. But he's far from a sure thing. Not only is there risk in every horse race, California Chrome has some significant other risk:

1. California Chrome has had two great trips in the Kentucky Derby and Preakness. Will he get a good trip today?
2. His pedigree doesn't say "Belmont Stakes." But it didn't say "Derby," either.
3. He's running his third route race in five weeks. Only two of his competitors can say the same thing. His campaign also stretches back to December.
4. He's never run on the Belmont surface. Always a question.

Bet him to get a souvenir. Root like mad. But it's possibly among the worst value propositions all year.

FACT: IT'S NOT THE "TRIPLE" CROWN FOR EVERYBODY

Only California Chrome, Ride on Curlin, and General aRod will have faced their third grueling route race in just five weeks.

In the last ten years, the only horse to race in all three Triple Crown Races and win the Belmont Stakes was Afleet Alex in 2005.

FACT: SKIPPING THE PREAKNESS IS SMART

Since 2004, 5 winners of the Belmont have skipped the Preakness: Birdstone, 2004; Jazil, 2006; Summer Bird, 2009; Union Rags, 2012, Palace Malace, 2013). Another (Rags to Riches, 2007) won the Belmont after winning the Kentucky Oaks, which is run the day before the Kentucky Derby and is the comparable race for fillies.

It makes perfect sense. The Derby is a huge task for young horses. Even if they don't finish well, they likely ran harder than at any time in their careers. This can really help to push a horse into top condition, when they receive the proper rest after the exertion. Five weeks may indeed be the ideal amount of rest.

The rested are: Medal Count, Commanding Curve, Samraat, Wicked Strong.

FACT: THIS CAN EVEN BE YOUR ONLY TRIPLE CROWN RACE

Three horses out of the last ten years won in their Triple Crown debut: Ruler on Ice (2010) ran four weeks before in the Tesio. Drosselmeyer (2011) ran four weeks before in Dwyer. Da Tara (2008) ran in Derby Trial six weeks before.

New shooters are: Matterhorn, Matuszak, Commisioner, and Tonalist. Three of the four have come out of the Peter Pan Stakes.

THE KEY QUESTIONS

1. Does California Chrome run his race?

If he does, only Tonalist or an unexpected improvement will get it done. The above-risk factors matter, along with the importance of a good start. It's a long race, but a bad start did in Victor Espinoza and War Emblem.

2. Can Tonalist duplicate his Peter Pan effort?

There's the ever-present mud question coming out of the Peter Pan. But this is a very impressive son of Tapit out of a Pleasant Colony mare. I wouldn't expect to see him on the lead, especially starting from the way outside. A repeat of that effort puts him right there with California Chrome. Wouldn't be shocked to see him catch Chrome in the final strides.

3. Who improves?

Most likely, one of the remaining 9 horses will put a career-best effort together. It's the result of growth, training, and an affinity for the distance. Commanding Curve is getting some buzz in all these regards.

QUICK THOUGHTS & FAIR ODDS

- MEDAL COUNT:** Closing threat needs improvement. Wise guys will like him.
20-1
- CALIFORNIA CHROME:** 36 years. Many disappointments. Hope. But no value.
7-5
- MATTERHORN:** Ambitious placing. Waiting for later in year.
50-1
- COMMANDING CURVE:** Heavy buzz. Another possible closer. Likely overbet.
12-1
- RIDE ON CURLIN:** Word is he's tired. Not surprising.
15-1
- MATUSZAK:** Connections are his biggest asset.
35-1.
- SAMRAAT:** Gutsy NY-bred. Absent bias, too much to expect a win here.
25-1
- COMMISIONER:** Pedigree screams this race. Worth a long look.
12-1
- WICKED STRONG:** Rested. Another possible closer. Is pace hot enough?
10-1
- GENERAL AROD:** Will give a solid try, but better for Indiana Derby.
20-1
- TONALIST:** Potential heartbreaker. Fast enough to do it.
4-1

THE SKINNY: (1) California Chrome (2) Tonalist (3) Commissioner