



MARK JOHNSON

Mark Johnson, one of the most popular and acclaimed horse racing commentators in Britain, joined an elite group in the spring of 2009 as only the sixth track announcer in Churchill Downs history. The only announcer to have called the action for both the Kentucky Derby and the Epsom Derby, Johnson brings a unique handicapping perspective to the Spotlight Selections!

As far as track commentators go, he has been described as the complete package. "Mark's passion, descriptiveness, and knowledge of the sport make for a wonderful and entertaining combination," said John Asher, vice president of Communications of Churchill Downs.

RACE 1

Both **Tulita** and **Ecstatic** are open to considerable improvement now that they drop in for a tag for the first time, however, the safer play may be to go with **Daruma's Dream**.

Although at face value there does not appear to be much upside to her form she ran considerably better than the bare results suggest on her last start. On that occasion she tried an extended mile for the first time, had the widest draw in the short run to the first turn, and although she finished only eight and a quarter lengths third, she was only three-quarters of a length behind the second place horse and was well clear of the rest of the opposition.

She is undoubtedly a one paced filly so the extra distance of ground on this occasion will help and it should also be noted that statistically rider Jesse Campbell has a considerably better strike rate in route races as opposed to one-turn events.

Trainer Mark Casse puts Ecstatic, a daughter of Smart Strike, onto the main track for the first time and is 25% with horses through the year dropping from maiden special weight into maiden claiming. I would have liked to see slightly more in her two turf starts (she is all turf breeding on her distaff side) and her five pound Kentucky-bred weight penalty does not help her cause.

Josie Carroll is another trainer who excels in the maiden special weight to maiden claiming drop (33% wins and two runners from every three hitting the board from a decent sample this year) and the barn's representative Tulita also gets blinkers on for the first time. A positive is that she has already hit the board on the main track, but the negative has to be that connections have already tried four different distances with her from four career starts – not a campaign profile I like.

Graded dropper **Haapsalu** has never gone off shorter than 24-1 in any of her four career starts, but has out run those odds on at least two occasions and it would not be surprising if she stayed on for a piece of it here.

Selections:

1. Daruma's Dream
2. Ecstatic
3. Tulita
4. Haapsalu

RACE 2

Two horses really catch my eye in this two-year-old maiden special weight, and it is purely due to the post position draw that I am tentatively siding with **Native Gold** over first-time starter **Grand Cuvee**.

Native Gold represents an angle that I love with two-year-olds of a huge debut run, followed by a slightly disappointing second start, and now a return to the exact conditions of the debut outing for the third appearance. The gelded son of Langfuhr was totally unfancied on debut over course and distance but ran huge, in a race that has worked out well, to finish second, but having been more aggressively ridden next time out did not appear to quite get home over seven furlongs. The drop back to six furlongs should be ideal and he is the speed of those who have already run before.

Of course there are four first-time starters in this field and Grand Cuvee has to be a major player despite his inside post position. Few trainers have a better first time start record in maiden special weights than Robert Tiller, but it should be noted that unlike many other trainers who excel with debutants Tiller rarely uses blinkers for debut.

Mark Casse introduces a John Oxley owned new comer here, **Conquestor**, a February colt by Broken Vow for whom they paid \$475K at the Ocala breeze-up sales in April. The dam Runaway in Love won first time out over 5 ½ furlongs and was stakes placed over 6 furlongs.

Selections:

1. Native Gold
2. Grand Cuvee
3. Conquestor

RACE 3

This is a race totally lacking any depth, in which the standout should be **Tsuper**. This daughter of Niigon is the least exposed filly in the lineup, she has never run a bad race, and she comes here on the back of a solid course and distance success. It is also significant, in a race containing “dead wood,” that she is likely to be ridden forward and therefore clear of any potential traffic problems in such a big field. I am not worried about the fact that she is now stepping up against winners for the first time as she already has the experience of three decent stretch duels under her belt.

Novo was claimed by Steve Attard two starts back and arguably ran her best ever race on debut for this barn when second in an identical race to this at the end of last month. She is woefully one-paced, but does appear to just keep rolling for as long as you ask her. It is interesting that the trainer does tend to improve horses on their second start for him.

Just behind Novo last time out was **Maximum Ride** who certainly looks capable of winning a race of this nature since she was brought back to the main track, and has had the assistance of Lasix for her last two starts.

Selections

1. Tsuper
2. Novo
3. Maximum Ride

RACE 4

DURHAM CUP STAKES (G3), 1 1/8 miles on Polytrack

1 1/8 Miles on Polytrack

The former French-trained **Vertiformer** is the selection here to take his career record to three out of three on the all-weather, having won once on the surface in France and then at Arlington in June. Since his win in Chicago he was twice run on the turf, last time a poor trip in the Grade I Arlington Million—a race that was frankly out of his league on his previous turf form. While this son of Dynaformer has never run the nine furlong distance he has won going a half furlong longer and a half furlong shorter so this “new” distance should not pose a difficult test. It has always been the plan for Vertiformer to have a successful career in America, he is still owned

by Joseph Allen in whose colors he ran in when in France, and therefore unsurprisingly two of his French wins came around tight “North American” style tracks.

Only three times in the last twenty years has a three-year-old won this race (the last one was Leonnatus Anteus in 2007), but **Delegation** has to be a major player for the classic generation this time. Trainer Mark Casse sent out Pool Play to win this in 2009 and this progressive son of Speightstown seems to have the right run style to make him very dangerous. He is almost certainly the only speed in the race, which linked to the fact that he is three-for-three when ridden by Patrick Husbands (who rode Pool Play to victory), could result in an effective easy lead. My major reservation about Delegation is that being by Speightstown there may just be a question about him seeing out the nine furlongs of this race.

The first and second of last year’s renewal re-oppose here – City Wolf beating **James Street** by two and a quarter lengths twelve months ago, but I would not be surprised if James Street reverses the form on this occasion. He comes here on the back of a confidence boosting allowance win and gets John Velazquez in the saddle for the first time.

Selections & wagering strategy

1. Vertiformer
2. Delegation
3. James Street

Given that handicappers tend to overlook horses with a down-the-field run last time (no matter what the grade) I am hopeful that we may be able to get some value on Vertiformer as a solid win bet. Given the way that the race is likely to be run Delegation is a must on any ticket and would certainly use him in a boxed exacta with the top pick.

RACE 5

NEARCTIC STAKES (G1), 6 furlongs on turf

Unfortunately this does appear to be a rather weak renewal of the Nearctic Stakes but offers an excellent opportunity for constant Grade 2 performer **Big Band Sound** to win in the major leagues. His trainer Daniel Vella has already won this race a record four times with Field Commission in 2009 being his most recent success.

Big Band Sound was far from disgraced when sixth in the Grade I Woodbine Mile last time out and there is certainly nothing of the caliber of Wise Dan or Cityscape in this race and a return to six furlongs looks a legitimate move. This son of Bernstein has run his best career figures on the Woodbine turf and he comes here on his third start in his current form cycle. Given the forecast of likely rain in the build up to the race one would certainly not be discouraged about Big Band Sound if it becomes more of a stamina test.

British filly **Night Carnation** looks to be the most interesting of the trio of European raiders. She is very used to racing against the boys (has done so in all six of her starts this year) and in big fields. Her trainer Andrew Balding, and before him his father Ian, has an excellent record of hitting the board with his Canadian raiders, so this is a distaffer certainly worth a second look.

Although much of Night Carnation’s form is over five furlongs she has tended to run at very stiff tracks – a Group 3 winner over the uphill finish at Sandown and decent sixth in Group 1 company at Royal Ascot – and she comes here on the back of a 5 ½ furlong minor stakes win

at Bath on soft ground. Although only one filly has won in the last 20 renewals it was European shipper Serious Attitude in 2010.

Stormy Rush is running for new connections here, having been claimed from Roger Attfield last time out, but having a close fifth place finish in the Grade 2 Highlander in June he would not have to step up a great deal to be competitive here.

Bear Tough Tiger has been supplemented for this race by trainer Reade Baker despite him having only finished sixth in the Grade 2 Highlander on his turf debut. However the post position draw has been kind to this speedy synthetic specialist and he may be able to make good use of the rail and an early lead.

Grand Adventure is running in this race for the fourth time, he was second in 2010 and a close fourth last year, but he is now no longer trained by Mark Frostad. I do not like the fact that having missed nine months he has been off the track once again for another six weeks after his comeback race for new connections.

The other Europeans appear up against it as As De Trebol has never contested a Group race and Irish Group 3 winner Fire Lily is bidding to become only the second three-year-old to win this race in 20 years. Of the two the latter would appeal more, especially if turf conditions deteriorate.

Selections & wagering strategy

1. Big Band Sound
2. Night Carnation
3. Bear Tough Tiger
4. Stormy Rush/Grand Adventure

On current form Big Band Sound is the obvious winner of this year's Nearctic Stakes, but hardly a standout win wager. I think that this is a race that I would want to play with more exotic focus than straight wagering. My must use horses would be Big Band Sound and Night Carnation while using underneath the likes of Bear Tough Tiger, Stormy Rush, Grand Adventure, and Fire Lily if the ground comes up soft.

RACE 6

This race looks to be an ideal opportunity for the grade dropping **Call Me Lou** to record a second career success. Having won a maiden claimer for \$25K over course and distance in July he has twice raced well out of condition, the first time in a non-winner of three and most recently in a high tag turf sprint. His stalk and pounce run style should be effective against a bunch of seemingly weak finishers and a return to the all-weather is a plus.

On paper the only other horse in the race who appears to have any sort of upside is the three-year-old **Candles on Friday** who won a \$16K maiden claimer over course and distance two starts back before finishing second against its own age group in an open \$16K claimer over seven furlongs last time out.

Johnny La Rue gets blinkers back on for the first time since January, but has at least been running constantly, over further, here this season.

Selections

1. Call Me Lou
2. Candles on Friday
3. Johnny La Rue

RACE 7

I thought that this race looked to be an interesting and competitive allowance race for the time of year and eventually got this race down to a coin toss between **Wakeboarder** and **Mount Diablo**.

The vote goes to Wakeboarder whose win came over this exact course and distance and who, after blowing the start, ran much better than his bare finishing position suggests on turf last time out over an inadequate six furlongs. I would look to him to stalk the pace here and therefore perhaps get first run on Mount Diablo who may come from slightly further back to deliver his challenge.

I like the fact that Patrick Husbands gets back aboard Mount Diablo, but he has just come up short in his previous two efforts over seven furlongs and may do so again here.

Committed broke his maiden over course and distance in July (beating Mount Diablo by half a length) and he draws a much better post position now than when stopping abruptly in his final start in August. It is likely however that he may need this race off the shelf and therefore I believe that Mount Diablo will reverse the form here.

Selections & wagering strategy

1. Wakeboarder
2. Mount Diablo
3. Committed

Just to note Wakeboarder, not his entry Chombo is my pick so if Wakeboarder comes out I would use Mount Diablo as my top pick instead of substituting the entry in at number one.

RACE 8

E.P. TAYLOR STAKES (G1), 1 ¼ miles on turf for females

A race that should be totally dominated by European raiders and in the hope that there will be some rainfall in the run up to the race French filly **Siyouma** could take a great deal of beating. The case for the Francois Doumen trained four-year-old is far from rock solid, but given an overview of the European form and the fact that her trainer “the silver fox” Doumen is a brilliant shipper of horses she does set the benchmark here.

In May over 1M 2 ½ F at Saint Cloud she finished three-quarters of a length third to Arc d’Triomphe heroine Solemia. Two more solid runs in Group 1 races were to follow before she took the Group 1 Sun Chariot Stakes over Newmarket’s straight Rowley Mile at the end of last month reversing previous form with Elusive Kate.

Her trainer is insistent that she is at her best on genuine good ground rather than the bottomless surface she has had to run on much of the year, so rain softened Canadian turf should be ideal. It is also a huge plus that top veteran French rider Gerald Mosse continues his successful association with Siyouma – one of the most improved four-year-old fillies this year in the whole of Europe.

Like Francois Doumen, Irish maestro trainer Dermot Weld has few peers when it comes to shipping horses – particularly fillies to North America. When I looked through the original entries for this race I was surprised to see the name of **Princess Highway** on the list, thinking she is a much better filly over a longer distance of ground, but as Weld is such a brilliant placer of his horses since she runs she is a must use. Eleven of the previous twenty winners of this race have been three-year-old fillies, which is a huge pointer to the chances of Princess Highway, but like Siyouma it is possible to knock holes in her form. Her six length romp in the Group 2 Ribblesdale Stakes at Royal Ascot came on soft ground that the runner up The Fugue (current British ante-post favorite for Breeders' Cup Filly and Mare Turf) hated, while the third that day Shirocco Star continually hits the board without winning in Group company. This is her first start at a mile and a quarter since May so it will be interesting to see if she has lost any of her speed during the summer.

Hopefully you were on Barefoot Lady at 7-1 when she won the Grade 2 Canadian Stakes three weeks ago at Woodbine. That was her day in the spotlight and this is not. She is now considerably worse off in the weights than the horses that she previously beat, although she does have a victory at York over this type of distance it was in a non-graded stakes race and up until that last start she has time and time again come up short in graded company. That win came in a below par Grade 2, this is a legitimate Grade 1 and therefore she will be outclassed.

Of the horses that ran in the Grade 2 Canadian Stakes I would be most interested is the German filly **Kapitale**, who is one of the few fillies in the race that 1M2F looks to be her optimum distance, and who may have bounced last time after a decent run the Grade 1 Beverly D, off a long break, last time out.

Former European **Dream Peace** finished a close third in this race twelve months ago when closing from off the pace on yielding ground. Her subsequent placings in the Grade 1 Diana at Saratoga and most recently third to Nahrain in the Grade 1 Flower Bowl Invitational at Belmont suggest a first win in North America is not far away. Her run style hints that she may have to concede first run to Siyouma, but with luck in running she must go close.

There are several other Europeans or ex-Europeans in the lineup – **Pagera** won on desperate ground in Germany last time out in Group 3 company, but does not look as progressive as some in the field. She did beat Siyouma at Saint Cloud in March, but Siyouma has improved leaps and bounds since then. Trois Lunes is a lightly raced three-year-old trained in the French provinces. If the heavens open and it became extremely soft she would be an interesting outsider, but she should not have the pace of some of these on quicker ground. Havant has been beaten in two minor allowance races so far this year, having missed over a year since her run in the Group 1 Epson Oaks in 2011, and simply does not look good enough on any of her form.

The other ex-European in the field is Kissable, now trained by Roger Attfield who won at Saratoga on a yielding turf in August. In Ireland she was a filly who always came up just short in Graded company and on first evidence the same appears to apply in North America. She may be a very similar horse to Barefoot Lady.

Selections & wagering analysis

1. Siyouma
2. Princess Highway

3. Dream Peace
4. Kapitale/Pagera

At the likely prices Siyouma is hardly a strong win bet, so my preferred wager here would be to box up Siyouma, Princess Highway, and Dream Peace in exactas. I would throw in Kapitale, Pagera, and if the rains come Trois Lunes at the bottom of trifectas.

This time I am taking a stance totally against Barefoot Lady – at the weights, distance, and against this quality field I am taking her on.

RACE 9

There are appear to be two horses to concentrate on here, **Laugh Track** and **Clean House**, with the former getting the top vote. This three-year-old son of Distorted Humor made all of the running to win over course and distance in August and was then far from disgraced when third on turf last time. He had the worst draw on that occasion and was therefore unable to use his tactical speed early, something which he should be able employee back on the main track.

Clean House now gets the assistance of John Velazquez, but has not won since making his debut in September of last year and has now run up a sequence of three runner-up finishes in his last three starts. At this time of year, in this type of race, it usually pays to side with the late developing three-year-old rather than the more exposed four-year-old.

I am intrigued by **Simply Smart** as a bigger price on the bottom a ticket on the back of his \$20,000 claiming course and distance win last time out. The time of that race (for the grade) was decent and it was certainly, by far, his best career effort to date. He may be another progressive three-year-old who is slightly under the radar here, although before I get too carried away about him I note that his recent victory came from the inside post and now he is drawn out wide.

Selections & wagering analysis

1. Laugh Track
2. Clean House
3. Simply Smart

RACE 10

Pattison Canadian International (G1), 1 ½ miles on the turf

I am going to put up a horse at a bit of a price here in the shape of British-trained raider **Dandino** at the expense of several much higher profile European counter parts. The James Fanshawe trained five-year-old son of Dansili is one of the few horses in the entire field for whom a mile and a half is his optimum distance and he comes here on the back of two excellent performances.

It is also worth noting that Newmarket-based Fanshawe, who is no stranger to Group 1 success, does particularly well with much older horses. Dandino won a Group 2 at Newmarket over a mile and a half last year and did admittedly go eight races between drinks before his most recent victory in the Group 3 September Stakes over a mile and a half on the Kempton Park polytrack. I called that race and it appeared to be a strong renewal of one of Britain's most prestigious synthetic track races. The form of that race is also working out fairly well, for example the seventh horse home at Kempton, Haya Landa, has subsequently gone on to finish fourth in last weekend's Arc De Triomphe.

Connections report that Dandino shipped really well to Canada and has thrived since he arrived. He is best on a flat track with a long stretch and will be ridden, as at Kempton, by the excellent, but little known outside Britain, Jim Crowley – a former top flight jumps jockey who is one of the strongest in the business. Any appreciable rain to make the track soft would be to Dandino's disadvantage, but otherwise he looks to be a very solid straight play.

The slight fall from grace of Epson Derby winner Camelot has led some European handicappers to suggest that Imperial Monarch may actually be Aidan O'Brien's best three-year-old, and that is why their paths have never crossed. Interestingly all four of his career starts have come on very soft ground, it was almost unraceable when he won the Group 3 Classic Trial at Sandown in April, and it was unseasonably soft at Longchamp in July for his Group 1 Grand Prix de Paris victory. Although that Paris race is normally a very strong form line that was far from the case this year and there must be huge question marks over the validity of any of the form that he brings to this party.

Aidan O'Brien has trained the winner of this race twice, but over the last month his stable has been uncharacteristically out of form and in Ryan Moore they have booked a rider fresh back from a serious wrist injury, who has struggled to ride a winner since his return just before the Arc.

Last year's Group 1 French Derby winner **Reliable Man** was rerouted from last weekend's Arc De Triomphe to come here instead in search of better ground. Although he has won over a mile and a half that victory came in the Group 2 Prix Niel, one of the very slowly run Arc prep races last year and he has finished weakly over this distance in all of his other attempts, including when forth to Danedream in the Group 1 King George at Ascot in July. A true end-to-end gallop here could be his undoing.

Two times Grade 1 Northern Dancer winner **Wigmore Hall** holds the likes of **Al Khali** and Forte Dei Marmi on that form, but this is a higher quality Grade 1. Frankie Dettori comes in for the ride on Joshua Tree, but his Group 2 Prix Kergorlay victory at Deauville in August, over 1M7F, came against a group of very slow horses and his close third to Orfevre in the Group 2 Prix Foy was in another falsely run "Arc Trial."

British trainer Andrew Balding won this race in 2003 with Phoenix Reach and this year he is represented by the four-year-old filly Lay Time, who is bidding to become the 10th filly to win the Canadian International. Her biggest win to date came by a nose in the Group 3 Winter Hill Stakes at Windsor in August on extremely soft ground, over 1M2F. She has never run at a mile and a half and this is a very tough ask over which to try this distance for the first time. German trained Scalo has run well in two Woodbine starts already this year, on ground quicker than he would find ideal. Any appreciable amount of rain would certainly move him up the pecking order, but he would also need those conditions to slow everyone else up. As is so often the case in these sorts of races over the last couple of years Al Khali is the best of the North American contingent.

Selections & wagering analysis

1. Dandino
2. Reliable Man
3. Wigmore Hall

4. Al Khali

I am not a big fan of playing a horse across the board, my usual play is a small win bet and a large show bet on a horse, but however you would want to make that play, make it on Dandino. I am likely to take a stand against Imperial Monarch, who if the hype is right may destroy this field, but the hype appears to be more British media generated rather than coming from Ballydoyle, which suggests to me that they are hopeful rather than confident. If the rain has come in epic proportions it would be foolhardy to not use Imperial Monarch on any ticket as he has proven to have flippers in certain cases.

In exotics I would use Dandino with Reliable Man, Wigmore Hall, and Al Khali.

RACE 11

Having gone with him last time out I am not going to desert **Dbl Barrel Reserve** despite his poor effort last time I like the fact that he is dropping back to 6 ½ furlongs and that Luis Contreras now gets aboard, but obviously one has to be worried about the outside post. The fact that he was very well bet last time suggests that I was not alone in thinking he would run huge and certainly a reproduction of his first two runs would have to see him figure here.

Sorry About That ran in the same race as Dbl Barrel Reserve on his debut, finishing six lengths behind the selection, but had been working well going into that race and was well bet. He has not run since that August debut but his last couple of works have been solid, suggesting connections may fancy their chances again.

Sorry About That is by sprinter Mobil who is also the sire of first time starter **Sleek and Mobil** who is a full brother to stakes winner Welloiledmachine. He will be blinkered for debut and may well be worth a look in the wagering.

Thirteen times raced maiden **Barbasgo** has arguably run his best ever two races on his last two starts and it is also possible that a return to the 6 ½ furlong trip may see him go close again.

Selections

1. Dbl Barrel Reserve
2. Sorry About That
3. Sleek and Mobil/Barbasgo