

CLAIMING THE CROWN

OWNERS KEN AND SARAH RAMSEY AND TRAINER MIKE MAKER DOMINATE THE CLAIMING CROWN AT GULFSTREAM PARK

By Denis Blake | Photos by Adam Coglianese and Courtney Stafford



Since the first running of the Claiming Crown in 1999 at Canterbury Park in Minnesota, the event to celebrate the blue-collar horses of the sport has undergone a series of changes, but perhaps none as dramatic as those for the latest renewal on December 1. Run at Gulfstream Park in South Florida for the first time, the Claiming Crown offered its richest purse structure ever with seven races for a total pot of \$850,000, exactly double the amount paid out for five races the prior year at Fair Grounds Race Course. Its placement as the opening-day card at the historic oval only added to the appeal, and the end result was a robust on-track handle and attendance and record-breaking betting through Gulfstream's simulcast network. The records did not stop there, as owners Ken and Sarah Ramsey and trainer Mike Maker teamed to win four races, solidly perching them atop the all-time Claiming Crown standings.

"We're thrilled with the way our fans responded to our opening day and the incredible program that our owners, trainers and jockeys put on," said Gulfstream President Tim Ritvo. "It was great partnering with the Thoroughbred Owners and Breeders Association (TOBA) and the National Horsemen's Benevolent & Protective Association on the Claiming Crown."

Gulfstream's total handle came in at \$12.22 million, up 66 percent from 2011's opening day. On-track handle was \$1.44 million, up 84 percent from the previous year, and a reported crowd of 9,112 turned out for the Claiming Crown, compared to 8,524 on opening day the year before. The starting gates were also full, with an average of 11.1 starters per race thanks to broad support from owners and trainers around the country. The total handle more than doubled the previous record of \$4.9 million set in 2007 at Ellis Park. The Claiming Crown has also been held Philadelphia Park (now Parx Racing) and 10 times at Canterbury.

"The Claiming Crown's unparalleled success in 2012 was due to the strong participation from owners and trainers and the incredible response from the fans that resulted in a record amount of handle being wagered," said TOBA President Dan Metzger. "A great deal of credit must also be extended to the management at Gulfstream Park and the Florida HBPA for their unwavering support of the Claiming Crown."

"The Claiming Crown at Gulfstream was a great day of racing for owners, trainers and racing fans," stated Phil Hanrahan, CEO of the National HBPA. "Thanks to Gulfstream Park, the Florida HBPA and TOBA for their support of this



Ken Ramsey celebrates a record four Claiming Crown wins at Gulfstream Park.

exceptional day of racing. A special thanks to Mr. and Mrs. Ramsey for their continued support of the Claiming Crown, and congratulations to them for their success at the Claiming Crown."

On the racetrack, the Ramsey-Maker team scored a superfecta of winners and nearly recorded five victories. The four wins gave the Ramseys a total of 10 Claiming Crown victories to extend their lead in the owner category, and Maker now has 11 wins in the event to take the training lead from Scott Lake with eight.

"I was saying we should be called the King and King and Queen—my wife, we've got to put her in—of the Claiming Crown," said Ken Ramsey, whose previous six Claiming Crown wins had come with just nine starters in the distinctive red and white silks with a capital R.

Ramsey and Maker had made a concerted effort to find a horse for each of the seven divisions, and they succeeded in that challenge, although a late scratch left them out of one race.

"Mike Maker is my chief claiming guy," Ramsey said in an interview on *Bloodhorse.com* before the Claiming Crown. "We claimed about 12 or 13 horses at Saratoga, and we have horses for five of the seven races. We are pounding the *Daily Racing Form* every day looking for ones for the other two races, so we are good to go. Trust us; we are going to come up with a horse for all seven of them. We are supporting this 100 percent."

The Ramseys, who have twice won the Eclipse Award as outstanding owner, have campaigned a long list of top-tier horses, including Kitten's Joy, Roses in May and Stephanie's Kitten, but they seem to take equal pleasure in just about any victory, regardless of the class level.

"He's easy to train for," added Maker about working with Ramsey. "He tells it like it is, and he places them where they're competitive. He loves the game. It makes my job easy."

Following is a recap of the seven Claiming Crown events, which were run under starter allowance conditions for horses that had started at least once for a specified price since January 1, 2011.

\$200,000 JEWEL PARENT'S HONOR

AS THE HORSES WENT TO THE GATE FOR THE \$200,000 CLAIMING CROWN JEWEL, AT 1/8 MILES ON THE MAIN TRACK FOR HORSES THAT HAD STARTED FOR \$35,000 OR LESS, THE DAY WAS ALREADY A SMASHING SUCCESS FOR THE RAMSEYS AND MAKER, AS THEY HAD TEAMED FOR THREE WINS. BUT THEY SAVED THE BEST FOR LAST AS THEY ADDED A FOURTH AND SOMEWHAT UNEXPECTED VICTORY IN THE DAY'S RICH FINALE WHEN 16-1 LONG-SHOT PARENT'S HONOR TURNED A SUPER AFTERNOON INTO A SPECTACULAR ONE.

Piloted by Alan Garcia, who, along with Joel Rosario, took two of the four winner's circle trips for the Ramseys and Maker, Parent's Honor found his way through the field of 11 to get up by three-quarters of a length in 1:50.03.

While the Ramseys and Maker have proven to be among the most astute claimers in the game, the \$35,000 risk they took on Parent's Honor last August at Saratoga Race Course looked a little shaky after the Elusive Quality gelding finished last in each of his first two starts for his new connections, beaten both times by double-digit lengths.

"I've been telling Mr. Ramsey for a while that I've been high on this horse, but every time I've run him he was probably shaking his head or rolling his eyes," said Maker with a smile. "But he came through for me today."



Parent's Honor had spent most of his career in sprints, but he handled the stretch around two turns with aplomb and earned \$110,000 for his effort. The now 5-year-old gelding, who was bred in Kentucky by Rabbah Bloodstock LLC, boosted his career earnings to \$325,395 with seven wins in 19 starts.

"It's nice to win on the big stage down here on opening day with all the people and all the high purses," Ken Ramsey said. "It's fantastic."

Dominant Jeanes, a Pleasantly Perfect gelding running in the colors of Mr. Amore Stable for trainer Jason Servis, rallied well under Joe Rocco Jr. and had a short lead in the stretch before settling for second. The gelding came in from New York after winning two of his last three starts on the turf at Aqueduct and Saratoga, with the latter coming for a \$20,000 tag.

Local horse Flatter This, running for owner Blackacre Farms Inc. and trainer Kathleen O'Connell, closed to take third. The son of Flatter had recently finished third in the Spend a Buck Stakes (G3) at Calder Race Course.

Private Tale, a five-time winner on the year, finished fourth as the 9-5 favorite and was followed by Dan and Sheila, Tuvia's Force, Willey Elliot, American Legend, Tiz Liberty, Kings Over and Trade.

\$125,000 EMERALD NIKKI'S SANDCASTLE

IN THE \$125,000 EMERALD AT 1 1/16 MILES ON THE LAWN FOR HORSES THAT HAD STARTED FOR \$25,000 OR LESS, RICHARD SHERMAN'S HOMEBRED NIKKI'S SANDCASTLE KEPT THE RAMSEYS AND MAKER FROM VISITING THE WINNER'S CIRCLE AS THE GRITTY GELDING HELD OFF MAJOR MARVEL TO PREVAIL BY A HEAD. TRAINED BY DAVID KASSEN AND RIDDEN BY COREY LANERIE, THE SON OF CASTLEDALE (IRE) CLOCKED THE DISTANCE IN 1:43.13 AND RETURNED \$6.80 AS THE SECOND BETTING CHOICE.

Many of the Claiming Crown starters had changed hands several times via the claim box during their careers, but Nikki's Sandcastle has run for his breeder since debuting in a maiden claiming race at Oaklawn Park in February 2010. While the gelding was a capable sprinter on the main track, he did not develop into a stakes-caliber horse until moving to the grass and synthetic surfaces.

Nikki's Sandcastle could have been had for \$25,000 in July 2011 at Arlington Park, and since then the gelding has won six races, including two black-type stakes. Prior to the Emerald, the now 6-year-old gelding had finished second three straight times in six-figure stakes, one on the main track at Remington Park, another on the turf at Hawthorne Race Course and the third in the \$150,000 Fayette Stakes (G2) on Keeneland Race Course's Polytrack.



"It's been a little frustrating to see him finish second the last three times, but this makes up for it," said Kassen. "He runs hard every time and on any surface—dirt, turf, Polytrack—although I think he's a little better on turf.

"I didn't have him when he began his career," added the trainer. "He came to me here in December two years ago. He had a chip in his knee. We didn't have it removed (surgically) but healed it using a magnetic boot. He doesn't have any conditions, so we'll just look for the right stakes to run him in next."

That next spot turned out to be the \$75,000 El Prado Stakes on December 22 at Gulfstream, and Nikki's Sandcastle came through with a driving victory. All told, the gelding has won eight times in 31 starts with a bankroll of \$391,567.

The Ramseys' Major Marvel, winner of a \$100,000 stakes earlier in the year at Mountaineer Racetrack, looked like a winner under Javier Castellano but just could not get by Nikki's Sandcastle. Mr. Amore Stable's Exclusive Strike, conditioned by Jason Servis, beat out Grade 1 winner and betting favorite King David in a photo for third.

Diamondsdiplomat, El Romano, Bingo Bango Bongo, Tom Kitten, The Best Glacier, King Kressa, Katrina's Prince and Livingston Street completed the order of finish.

\$125,000 TIARA STARSILHOUEETTE



WHILE THREE OF THE FOUR RAMSEY-MAKER WINNERS WERE RELATIVELY NEW ACQUISITIONS, THE TEAM CAPTURED THE \$125,000 TIARA GOING 1 1/16 MILES ON THE TURF COURSE FOR FILLIES AND MARES THAT HAD STARTED FOR \$25,000 OR LESS WITH STARSILHOUEETTE, WHOM THEY'VE HAD SINCE CLAIMING THE ORIENTATE DAUGHTER FOR \$20,000 IN AUGUST 2011. SINCE THEN, THE LATE-RUNNING MARE HAS EARNED SEVEN VICTORIES, INCLUDING HER BIGGEST WIN TO DATE WITH A 1 1/4-LENGTH SCORE IN THE TIARA AT ODDS OF 6-1 UNDER JOCKEY ALAN GARCIA.

Starsilhouette also had success during the 2011-12 Gulfstream meet when she won three consecutive starter allowance contests on the turf, but she came into the Tiara with rare off-the-board finishes in back-to-back starts.

"In her last race at Keeneland, she ran a great race, but it was probably a stretch too far," said Maker about her fourth-place finish against allowance foes at 1 1/8 miles. "She had some trouble and got beat just a length-and-a-half against a solid field."

In the Tiara, Starsilhouette dropped back to last in the field of 12 and was still eighth at the top of the stretch before swinging wide and running to victory.



"She was comfortable the way she was going and turning for home, and she did the rest very well," said Garcia.

Starsilhouette, who was bred in Kentucky by Curtis Green, hit the wire in 1:42.85 and earned a \$68,750 paycheck to increase her lifetime total to \$254,766 with 11 wins in 31 starts. She finished 2012 with an impressive record of six wins from nine starts, and the now 6-year-old mare banked more than \$150,000 during that calendar year. Four of those six victories came at Gulfstream, with the other two at Parx Racing and Keeneland. While most of her recent success has come on the turf, where she has won six times in 19 starts, she also has two wins from three starts on synthetic surfaces and three wins from nine trips to the post on dirt.

Family First LLC's Malibu Yankee, who came into the race off a sharp allowance score at Laurel Park for trainer Niall Saville, finished second. Fleur de Lilly, a former \$8,000 claimer who climbed the class ladder to become stakes-placed at Kentucky Downs for owner Band On The Run and trainer William "Buff" Bradley, held on gamely for third.

Falbala, Ainsley, Lemons to Lemonade, Sky Glow, Juanita, Decennial, Silver Screamer, Idle Talk and Witch's Orchard completed the field.

\$100,000 GLASS SLIPPER STARSHIP TRUFFLES



IN THE ONLY CLAIMING CROWN RACE WITHOUT A RAMSEY-MAKER RUNNER DUE TO THE SCRATCH OF THEIR ISABELLE'S THUNDER, STARSHIP TRUFFLES RECORDED AN IMPRESSIVE VICTORY IN THE SEVEN-FURLONG, \$100,000 GLASS SLIPPER FOR FILLIES AND MARES THAT HAD STARTED FOR \$16,000 OR LESS. RACING FOR OWNER CHASING TAILS STABLES AND TRAINER MARTY WOLFSON, THE DAUGHTER OF GHOSTZAPPER TOOK COMMAND IN THE STRETCH AND DREW CLEAR TO WIN BY FOUR LENGTHS. SHE TRAVELED THE DISTANCE IN 1:22.26 WITH LUIS SAEZ ABOARD AT 5-1 ODDS.



Wolfson, a regular on the Florida circuit, made a winning decision to place the filly in the Glass Slipper after the post position draw. "I had her in this race and the mile-and-a-sixteenth race against colts (Iron Horse), but she drew the outside (14) in that one, so I decided that this was a better spot for her even though she's been running in two-turn races," he said. "She had won going 5 ½ (furlongs) early in her career, so I thought she would handle this. We bought her privately (after a September 17 victory at Calder). We love Ghostzapper. She's actually still eligible for 'a one other than' (allowance) conditions."

Starship Truffles returned to the track on January 13 to win a starter optional claiming race at Gulfstream to score her 10th win in 17 trips to the post with earnings of \$160,005. Bred by Sanford and Irwin Goldfarb in Kentucky, Starship Truffles has spent her entire career in Florida with her last three wins coming under Saez.

"I felt like I had a lot of horse, and I knew coming down the stretch that she likes to finish strong," said the jockey. "I saw the five horse (Come Sunday) in front of me and saw Joe Bravo asking, and he didn't have any more horse so I knew I had the race. She felt better today than her previous races."

Starship Truffles broke her maiden at first asking at Calder in a \$25,000 claimer in November 2011 but then won just once in her next six outs before dropping down for a \$6,250 tag. Since prevailing by more than 10 lengths at that level, she has won eight of 10 starts.

Tommy Ligon's Come Sunday, who had been running in Pennsylvania and New Jersey for trainer Diane Alvarado, closed from far back to finish a clear second. Avalon Racing Inc.'s True, who had been competing in Indiana and Kentucky for trainer by Michael Tomlinson, took third.

The remaining order of finish was Cat's Got Legs, Cool Vixen, Brandys Secret, Daddys Jewel, Ann's Smart Dancer, Easy Ending and Tamarin Hall.

\$100,000 RAPID TRANSIT BERNIE THE MAESTRO



THE RAMSEY-MAKER SHOW CONTINUED IN THE \$100,000 RAPID TRANSIT WITH BERNIE THE MAESTRO TAKING THE SEVEN-FURLONG EVENT FOR HORSES THAT HAD STARTED FOR A CLAIMING PRICE OF \$16,000 OR LESS. THE BERNSTEIN GELDING HAS BEEN A POPULAR COMMODITY AT THE CLAIM BOX AS HE CHANGED BARNS FIVE TIMES DURING THE YEAR, MOST RECENTLY FOR A \$35,000 TAG WHEN THE RAMSEYS AND MAKER HALTERED HIM AT SARATOGA.

Bernie the Maestro tuned up for the Claiming Crown with a starter allowance win going seven furlongs at Keeneland in his first outing for his new connections on October 25. The now 6-year-old gelding produced a near carbon-copy effort at Gulfstream on Claiming Crown day as he stalked the leaders before drawing clear to a 2 $\frac{3}{4}$ -length victory in 1:21.60 as the 5-2 second choice with Joel Rosario in the irons.

"That was a perfect trip," said Maker. "Speed was on the inside, and Joel placed him perfect. I really liked him today."

The number 13 turned out to be lucky for Ramsey, as it was the saddlecloth number of both Bernie the Maestro and Brother Bird, who 30 minutes earlier captured the \$100,000 Iron Horse. The coincidence goes a step further as Bernie the Maestro and Brother Bird ran 1-2 in



a \$20,000 claiming event last July at Belmont Park before the Ramseys owned either horse.

"Thirteen is not an unlucky number if you have a horse good enough to wear it... and a jockey good enough," Ramsey said.

The victory was worth \$55,000 for Bernie the Maestro, and when added to his Keeneland victory check, gave the Ramseys a \$70,000 return on their \$35,000 investment just four months earlier.

"He broke well, and we got a chance on the outside," said Rosario. "He did great the whole way and was the best horse I think."

Bred in Florida by Sabine Stable, Bernie the Maestro apparently enjoyed the return trip back to his home state, where he broke his maiden at Calder and scored two stakes wins there earlier in his career. The veteran gelding has won 12 of 48 career starts with a bankroll of \$423,254.

Shivananda Racing's Off the Jak, trained by Shivananda Parbhoo, set the early pace and held on for second. Won Fast Bullet, who the Ramseys and Maker claimed for \$14,000 last time out at Aqueduct, took third.

Clean Shot, Coosada, Homeboykris, Rapid Runner, Peb Hughes, Gospel It Tiz, Indio Rooster and Skinny Peter completed the field.

\$100,000 IRON HORSE BROTHER BIRD



THE \$100,000 IRON HORSE, MATCHING HORSES THAT HAD STARTED FOR \$7,500 OR LESS AT 1 1/16 MILES, FEATURED THE FIRST OF THE FOUR VICTORIES FOR THE RAMSEYS AND MAKER, AND IT ALSO PROVED JUST HOW REGAL A PEDIGREE YOU CAN FIND IN A “CLAIMING” HORSE. IN HIS THIRD START SINCE BEING CLAIMED FOR \$20,000, BROTHER BIRD MORE THAN EARNED BACK HIS PURCHASE PRICE AS HE AND JOCKEY JOEL ROSARIO GOT UP TO WIN BY THREE-PARTS OF A LENGTH AND STOPPED THE TIMER AT 1:43.58 AS THE 7-2 SECOND CHOICE IN THE WAGERING.

As his name might allude, the Yonaguska gelding has a famous older half brother in 2009 Kentucky Derby (G1) winner Mine That Bird (by Birdstone), not to mention a younger half brother in three-time Grade 1 winner Dullahan (by Even the Score). Bred in the Bluegrass State by Lamantia, Blackburn and Needham/Betz Thoroughbreds, Brother Bird and his two famous siblings are all out of the unraced Smart Strike mare Mining My Own.

Brother Bird, now a 6-year-old, began his racing career with a fair amount of promise, as he broke his maiden in July 2010 at Belmont



and then scored an allowance win at Saratoga that same summer. But eventually the gelding dropped down as low as the \$4,500 claiming level at Laurel, and he changed hands several times in Maryland before finding his form again at Pimlico Race Course with two straight starter allowance wins. Then the Ramseys and Maker decided to pay more than four times the going price for the gelding just a few months earlier when they took him at Belmont.

While Brother Bird is not likely to achieve the same level of success as Mine that Bird or Dullahan, his record now sports an impressive nine wins in 26 starts with earnings of nearly \$240,000. Perhaps the most impressive feat for Brother Bird was overcoming the 13 post in a race that starts close to the first turn.

“You just can’t worry too much about things you can’t control,” said Maker about drawing the outside post. “It’s either run or scratch. I thought the jock (Joel Rosario) did a great job getting around the first turn.”

Waverly Acres LLC’s Jazzit, a Patricia Farro trainee who shipped in from Pennsylvania, led for most of the race and held on gamely for second. Favored Follow the Leader, who also made his last start in the Keystone State, took third for owner/trainer Kieron Magee.

Saintly Love, Awesome Mich, He’s Spectacular, Victory Notion, Red Hills, Tritonk, Cunaguaro, Only Boy and Commander Tate completed the order of finish in the field of 12.

\$100,000 EXPRESS TIBAN

THE CLAIMING CROWN CARD KICKED OFF WITH THE \$100,000 EXPRESS FOR HORSES THAT HAD STARTED FOR A PRICE OF \$7,500 OR LESS GOING SIX FURLONGS ON THE MAIN TRACK, AND FAVORED TIBAN CAME THROUGH TO SCORE A MEMORABLE VICTORY UNDER JOCKEY CALVIN BOREL. IT APPEARED AS THOUGH 13-1 LONGSHOT POT OF GOLD WAS GOING TO SECURE THE WIN UNTIL JOCKEY PEDRO COTTO JR. MISJUDGED THE FINISH LINE AND STOOD UP EARLY, ALLOWING TIBAN AND BOREL TO PREVAIL.

"I got confused with the poles," said Cotto. "I feel very bad. I should have been more prepared."

Pot of Gold, a now 7-year-old gelded son of Touch Gold, did hold on for second to earn \$20,000 for owner Blue Top Holdings Stable and trainer Jorge Navarro.

"It's unfortunate (what happened to Cotto)," said Borel. "I've been there. We've all had those days. I had a good trip, and when I saw (Cotto) pull up, I knew I had it."

Tiban, a Flatter gelding owned by Joey Merritt and trained by Tim Glyshaw, hit the wire a half-length in front as the 2-1 favorite in a time of 1:09.91.

The well-traveled Tiban, who was bred in Kentucky by John Baker, only won once in his



first nine career starts—although that victory was a 21-length romp in a maiden special weight affair at Beulah Park. But the gelding appeared to find his stride in March 2012 while still racing for his breeder as he reeled off a four-race winning streak against \$5,000 and \$7,500 claiming foes at Turfway Park and Churchill Downs. He was claimed twice during that streak, and since being taken for \$7,500 by Merritt and Glyshaw they have kept him out of claiming races and run him in starter allowance, optional claiming and allowance company.

Including his Claiming Crown victory and two subsequent wins at Fair Grounds, Tiban has now hit the board in 16 consecutive races with a career record of 23-11-6-1 and earnings of \$180,813.

"He definitely turned out to be a good claim for \$7,500," said Glyshaw. "He ran such a good race last time at Churchill (a second-place finish in a \$52,000 allowance before shipping to Gulfstream). It took a really nice horse to beat him. Calvin gave him a great ride today. I'm glad he flew down to ride him."

IAB Stables' County Gun, a regular competitor on the Florida circuit for trainer Tamara Levy, ran third and was followed by Gibson, Island Sunset, Cover Price, Isn't She Grand, Funny Tide, Nemo Landing and My Place Anytime. [hj](#)