

all grown up



THE 18TH RUNNING OF THE CLAIMING CROWN PROVES HOW FAR THE EVENT HAS COME

THE CLAIMING CROWN CELEBRATED its 18th renewal on December 3 at Gulfstream Park, and just like a young adult, the event for the sport's blue-collar horses seems to have reached maturity after debuting in 1999 at Canterbury Park in Minnesota. Hosted for the fifth time at the South Florida track, the \$1.1 million event set an all-time handle record of \$11,115,864 with perfect weather conditions, continuing the trend of increased wagering every year at Gulfstream while becoming an increasingly important fixture on the national racing schedule.

A joint venture between the National HBPA and Thoroughbred Owners and Breeders Association, the Claiming Crown has reached new heights over the past five years thanks in large part to the efforts of the Florida HBPA and Gulfstream Park in making it the signature event to kick off the Championship Meet at the Hallandale Beach oval. Earlier this year, it was announced that Gulfstream will host the Claiming Crown through at least 2018.

This marked the first Claiming Crown since the passing of NHBPA First Vice President Tom Metzen Sr., one of the founding fathers of the event. The richest race on the card, the \$190,000 Claiming Crown Jewel won by Royal Posse for the second consecutive year, was presented as the Tom Metzen Sr. Memorial in the track program.

By Denis Blake
Photos by Coglianese Photos/Lauren King, Leslie Martin, Kenny Martin

"The success of the Claiming Crown is a testament to the vision of Tom and all the others who helped launch this event at Canterbury Park," said NHBPA CEO Eric Hamelback. "It wasn't easy to establish a new program like this from scratch, but it has proven to be a very important day of racing to recognize the horses and horsemen who are so vital to our industry."

One of the constants in recent years has been the participation—and winning—of owners Kenneth and Sarah Ramsey and trainer Mike Maker. The all-time leading Claiming Crown owners and trainer added another victory to their tally, as they teamed to win the final race on the card, the Emerald, with Keystoneforvictory to run their total to 15 wins apiece.

This year also marked an expansion of the races leading up to the Claiming Crown as three tracks—Kentucky Downs, Laurel Park and Gulfstream Park West (formerly Calder Race Course)—held preview races with the winners earning free entry and transportation expenses to the main event.

The Claiming Crown races were run under starter allowance conditions for horses who had started for a specified claiming price since January 1, 2015, save for the Express and Iron Horse, which were open to horses who started at the \$8,000 level or below anytime in their careers. With nine races on dirt and turf at a variety of distances and for both sexes, there was an option for virtually any kind of racehorse.

"We're extremely pleased with the opening of what promises to be an historic Championship Meet," said P.J. Campo, vice president of The Stronach Group and general manager of Gulfstream Park. "The support from horsemen throughout North America for the Claiming Crown was extraordinary. We had full, competitive fields and some spectacular performances by horses and riders."

DISTAFF DASH | SPECTACULAR ME



The first of the Claiming Crown races, the \$106,700 Distaff Dash for fillies and mares who had started for \$25,000 or less, featured a Claiming Crown Preview Day winner putting on an encore performance for the big money as Spectacular Me followed her Laurel Park victory with another at Gulfstream. Ridden by Jose Ortiz for trainer Steve Klesaris and owner Winning Move Stable, the 6-year-old daughter of Catienus came from off the pace to win by 1 ¾ lengths in a time of :56.91 for five furlongs on the turf.

“I really had no instructions,” said New York-based Ortiz, the leading North American rider in 2016 by wins with 335 after the Claiming Crown card. “I talked to Steve last Tuesday at Parx when I saw him there. He told me that I know the filly well and to ride her with confidence and that she is ready.”

Ortiz had ridden the mare to victory twice last summer at Saratoga Race

Course in turf sprints, but this marked his first trip aboard her in more than a year.

Bred by the University of Kentucky in the Bluegrass State, the 9-5 favorite easily towered over the field in terms of starts, wins and earnings, and she extended that margin by picking up her 15th career victory from 47 starts. Her bankroll now stands at \$471,234. Not bad for a horse who originally sold for just \$1,600 as a yearling.

Steven Bertrando and Paul Trapani’s My Sister Caro, a West Virginia-bred daughter of Bop trained by Clyde Martin, had the lead in the stretch and held on to finish a game second. Lady Coventry, running for Zoom and Fish Stable Inc. and trainer Ralph Nicks, rallied late to take third.





RAPID TRANSIT | SHAFT OF LIGHT

Monster Racing Stables' Shaft of Light came into the \$105,600 Rapid Transit with a history of winning races by open lengths, and the 5-year-old gelding continued that tradition with an impressive 6 $\frac{3}{4}$ -length score in the seven-furlong contest for horses who had started for \$16,000 or less.

Jockey Emisael Jaramillo hustled the Ontario-bred to the lead right out of the gate, and the Jorge Navarro-trained runner cruised home with a final clocking of 1:21.84 as the 7-5 betting choice.



"My horse had a hard campaign for the summer, and we backed off running him because of this race," Navarro said. "He had some issues and we worked on him, and he came around. He was training really good in the morning."

The gelding was bred by Sam-Son Farm, the storied Canadian operation that has bred and raced notable horses like Dance Smartly, Sky Classic and Smart Strike, the sire of the Rapid Transit winner.

Shaft of Light began his career in his native country but really didn't flourish until this spring in South Florida, where he won a conditioned \$12,500 claimer by 9 $\frac{1}{4}$ lengths and a \$16,000 optional claimer by 11 $\frac{1}{2}$ at Gulfstream. This win improved his record to 15-6-2-2 with earnings of \$211,280.

"The main focus was to break well, and we had to be on the lead," Jaramillo said. "That's the way I wanted to ride him and the way the trainer told me to ride. The fractions were fast but he was going very easy and was very comfortable on the lead, and when I called on him at the eighth pole, he exploded. The faster the better."

Flashy Jewel, who was claimed out of his last start for \$25,000 by owner/trainer Eddie Kenneally, nearly earned back that purchase price with a second-place effort. Patrick Maguire's Day of Fury, a Street Sense gelding conditioned by David Fawkes who was claimed in five consecutive starts this year, crossed the wire third.

GLASS SLIPPER | TORMENTA DE ORO



The biggest upset on the Claiming Crown card came in the \$110,000 Glass Slipper for fillies and mares who had started for \$12,500 or less when Tormenta de Oro prevailed by a neck at odds of 44-1. Owner/trainer Patrick Marcondes claimed the Benny the Bull filly for just \$6,250 in August at Gulfstream and earned a return of \$60,500—nearly 10 times her claiming price—for the victory at one-mile timed in 1:38.53 under jockey Luca Panici.

This was easily the biggest career win for Marcondes, who moved to the United States with his family from Brazil in 1995 and interrupted his racing career to study for a civil engineering degree at Barry University near Miami. He always wanted to train Thoroughbreds, but in his first year as a trainer in 2015, he failed to find the winner's circle in 15 starts. His record improved in 2016, but he entered the Claiming Crown with just five career wins from 65 starts.

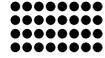
"I worked for a few guys here and then stopped for college," he said. "I came back and quit everything. I said, 'This is going to be my profession.' "

Bred in the Sunshine State by the University of Florida Foundation, Tormenta de Oro has won seven of 33 starts with earnings of \$145,345.

"I had a perfect trip; I could save ground, and this filly, the last time, ran huge against Esken Lady and Arella Princess, and they were both favorites in this race," said Panici about the November 6 starter allowance at Gulfstream Park West that produced four starters in the Glass Slipper. "I was pretty confident. I was able to save ground and when she got between horses, she had more heart. She ran huge."

Esken Lady, who was also taken for \$6,250 over the summer at Gulfstream, just missed out on the victory for trainer Saffie Joseph Jr. and owner Drawing Away Stable. Roger Moore's Amaluna, trained by Aubrey Maragh, came from far back to take third.





EXPRESS | DEFER HEAVEN

Trainer Jorge Navarro, jockey Emisael Jaramillo and owner Monster Racing Stables scored a Claiming Crown double as Defer Heaven captured the \$108,900 Express exactly one hour after those connections teamed to win the Rapid Transit with Shaft of Light. This was another decisive win with a favorite, as Defer Heaven defeated by 1 ¾ lengths a field of horses who had started for \$8,000 or less in their lifetimes. The Defer gelding covered six furlongs in 1:09.77.

"I tried to make the lead, but when I saw those other two horses hook up, I decided to just lay right behind them and try to come get them at the head of lane," Jaramillo said. "He ran a great race."

"[Emisael] knows him better than me, and he made the right move," Navarro said. "I told him, 'Send, send, send.' I guess he couldn't make the lead. He did make the right choice. Also, the horse loves this track. This is a cool horse all around; he's got 19 wins now."

Bred in Kentucky by Kenneth and Sarah Ramsey, the 6-year-old gelding won for the eighth time in 11 starts on the year while racing at Gulfstream, Monmouth Park, Delaware Park and Parx Racing. Defer Heaven was claimed for \$16,000 at Keeneland Race Course in his last start of 2015, and he banked \$195,690 in 2016 alone. While the gelding seems to win everywhere he goes, Gulfstream might be his favorite after picking up his sixth win there in seven trips to the post. All told, he has won 19 of 35 starts with earnings of \$324,678.

Proper Freud, who came in off consecutive victories at Parx Racing and Laurel Park, grabbed second for trainer and owner David Jacobson. Bersalu Farm Inc.'s Express Jet, who was a maiden until this past July and had won two of his last three starts, rallied to finish third for trainer Bernardo Campos.



IRON HORSE | CHEPSTOW



The \$110,000 Iron Horse lived up to its name as the two favorites, Chepstow and Goodtimehadbyall, with a combined 20 career wins, battled almost right from the start of the 1 1/16-mile contest for horses who had started for \$8,000 or less at any time. At the wire, Chepstow and rider Edgard Zayas prevailed by a half-length in a time of 1:43.90.

"I hoped he would be on the lead," said winning trainer Ralph Ziadie, who saddled the 6-year-old Harlington gelding for GLAB Racing Stable LLC. "When he was being pressed, I thought he was going to be beat. I was worried my horse was going to be tired when he straightened up for home, but he had a big heart and he ran super."

Chepstow, who was bred by Eugene Melnyk and became the second Ontario-bred winner in this year's Claiming Crown, improved his lifetime bankroll to \$205,284 with his eighth career win from 34 starts. He started his

career at Woodbine in Canada but has raced exclusively in South Florida since the end of 2013. The gelding raced well mostly in sprints through the end of last year, but running exclusively in two-turn events this year he has had even greater success with four wins, a second and two thirds from nine starts.

"My horse, he loves to fight," Zayas said. "Whenever he gets the lead, he's just a different horse. You have to ride him and ride him. He looks like he's always beat, but he always keeps trying. Whenever they get close to him, he's a grinder. He just keeps going."

Goodtimehadbyall, an earner of nearly \$600,000 trained by Jorge Navarro and owned by Ten Strike Racing, finished a clear second after coming in off a victory at Monmouth Park. GTG Racing LLC and Intuition Racing's Chiseled, trained by Fernando Abreu, got third.





CANTERBURY | SUPER SPENDER

Six years after his sire Super Saver won the Kentucky Derby (G1), Super Spender rallied to win a race that could not be any different than the 1 ¼-mile classic on the Churchill Downs dirt. The \$107,800 Canterbury for horses that had run for a tag of \$25,000 or less was over in just :56.54 when Super Spender and jockey Nik Juarez hit the wire a neck in front after running five furlongs on the turf at odds of 5-1.

“He’s kind of a funny horse because he runs like he’d like 5 ½ or 6 furlongs, but every time you stretch him out, he doesn’t run well,” said Jane Cibelli, who conditions the 4-year-old gelding for Goodwood Racing V. “So I think I’ll stop trying to reinvent the wheel and keep him at five-eighths. That’s what he wants to do.”

Super Spender, a \$30,000 Keeneland September yearling bred by Three Lyons Racing LLC, has won six of 11 starts at five furlongs on the turf but is just one-for-nine in other situations. That still adds up to a solid record of 20-7-3-1 with earnings of \$218,320. His most recent victory before the Canterbury came on Claiming Crown Preview Day at Gulfstream Park West, making him one of three horses to win a preview race and come back to win the big money.

“He responded so well coming out of his last race,” Juarez said. “We know he is a come-from-behind sprinter. Jane told me to let him do his thing and settle and make one run. Luckily, everything opened up in the lane. Jane told me to be patient until we turned for home and then to pop to that lead. I was waiting for the opportunity, and he just shot right through there.”

Kenneth and Sarah Ramsey’s Partly Mocha, from the Mike Maker barn, rallied from the back of the pack to run second as the 5-2 favorite. Divine Warrior, owned by Carl Hurst and trainer William “Buff” Bradley, took the show position.



TIARA | MARABEA (GB)



The \$125,000 Tiara at 1 1/16 miles on the grass for fillies and mares who had started for \$25,000 or less had a distinct international flavor as a horse bred in Great Britain that broke her maiden in Italy ended up in the winner's circle. Farfellow Farm Ltd.'s Marabea, trained by Maryland-based Lacey Gaudet, closed with a rush to win by a neck at odds of 6-1 with Jose Lezcano aboard.

"I was nervous," said Gaudet after winning her first-ever race at Gulfstream. "She broke fine, but then they kind of came over on her. I thought she was going to be in trouble, but you've got to be confident with a rider like Lezcano. He put her in the spot where he knew she needed to be, and he figured out the right moment and got there in time. He did a great job."

Gaudet's first Gulfstream victory was even sweeter as she shared it with her sister Gabby, the on-air host for the Maryland Jockey Club who was also making her Gulfstream debut as an on-air host for the Championship Meet.

Although Marabea, who was bred by Charley Knoll Partnership, showed promise as a 2-year-old with two easy wins and a Group 3 placing in Italy, she went out of form in the United States and dropped to the \$25,000 claiming level this summer at Saratoga. But the 4-year-old found her form again at Laurel Park, where on November 6 she won a Claiming Crown Preview race for her first win in more than a year.

"I'm not sure what kind of filly she is," said her trainer. "She's a very, very nice filly. She clearly ran a race back to what she did last time. She could be any kind of filly."

William Cubbedge's Lobelia, conditioned by Carlo Vaccarezza, hit the board for the eighth time in 10 starts with a runner-up finish. Seeking Treasure, owned by Steven Frum and trained by Doug Matthews, finished third.





EMERALD | KEYSTONEFORVICTORY

Trainer Mike Maker and owners Kenneth and Sarah Ramsey have made no secret of the fact that they are constantly on the lookout for potential Claiming Crown horses, and 14 times prior to the \$125,000 Emerald they ended up in the winner's circle with a Claiming Crown winner. But Keystoneforvictory was a little different in that he wasn't a horse that the powerful connections claimed or one that was bred by the Ramseys, who are

Eclipse Award winners as Outstanding Breeders and Owners. Instead, their 15th Claiming Crown win came via a \$25,000 Keeneland September yearling sale purchase who subsequently ran for that same price in a Gulfstream maiden claiming race in January.

The 3-year-old colt by Shakespeare, who was bred in Kentucky by Dell Ridge Farm LLC, quickly developed into a stakes horse after that maiden win and took the \$75,000 Forty Niner Stakes at Gulfstream in June. The Emerald, run at 1 1/16 miles on the turf for horses who had started for \$25,000 or less, included the added challenge for Keystoneforvictory of facing older horses for the first time, but the colt passed the test with a neck victory as the tepid 3-1 favorite under Jose Ortiz.

"Every race we win is important, obviously, but we love the Claiming Crown," Maker said. "We love coming to it and love being part of it. I'm glad we didn't get shut out again this year. I thought I had won a couple earlier today and it didn't work out so I was due, I guess."

The Ramseys and Maker have won at least one Claiming Crown race every year since 2008, except for 2011 and last year.

Bruce McCrea's Flashy Chelsey, a Churchill Downs invader trained by Robert O'Connor II, surged to take second at odds of 23-1. Another horse coming from Churchill, Market Outlook, finished third for owner Hot Scot Stable and trainer Gary Contessa.



JEWEL | ROYAL POSSE



The words “claiming horse” and “millionaire” normally do not go together, unless you are talking about Royal Posse, who won the \$190,000 Jewel for the second consecutive year and pushed his bankroll into seven-figure territory. Of course, it could be argued that the New York-bred son of Posse is not the same horse taken for \$20,000 out of a May 2015 race at Belmont Park, and he’s unlikely to see the claiming ranks again anytime soon.

Since being claimed, the gelding has turned into a bonafide star with a total of six stakes wins, including three straight coming into this renewal of the Claiming Crown. He benefited from his status as a New York-bred, with four of those six stakes wins coming against state-bred foes, headlined by the \$300,000 Empire Classic Handicap at Belmont. After the Rudy Rodriguez trainee crossed the finish line a half-length in front at Gulfstream as the 7-10 favorite in the Jewel, his earnings stood at \$1,011,245 with a record of 34-11-10-0. He covered 1 1/8 miles in 1:49.84 under Luis Saez. Racing’s newest millionaire was bred by Richard Troncone and Richard Troncone Jr.

“We claimed him at the right time,” said Rodriguez, who trains the 5-year-old for Michael Dubb, Bethlehem Stables LLC and Gary Aisquith. “When we got

him, he was a pretty sound horse. He’s like an ATM. You put him in [a race], and he gives it to you. You don’t have to put much back, just keep him happy.”

The outcome of the Jewel, however, looked far from certain on the far turn as the favorite still had plenty of work to do from fifth place.

“I wasn’t worried,” Rodriguez said. “I know when he’s outside, he’s a grinder. Luis said as soon as he took him outside, he started grinding and grinding. That’s what he does most of the time.”

A three-peat in the Jewel is highly improbable for Royal Posse, as he would have to be entered again for a tag of \$35,000 or less to become eligible to defend his title.

Diamond Bachelor, a two-time stakes winner on the Gulfstream turf for Diamond 100 Racing Club LLC, Robert Trussell and co-owner/trainer Patrick Biancone, put in a valiant effort but came up just short of pulling off a 38-1 upset. John Jones, a winner of four straight races including a Claiming Crown Preview race at Laurel Park, took third for owner Matthew Schera and trainer Lacey Gaudet. 

