



STILL RISING

By Denis Blake
 Photos by Coglianese Photos/Lauren King,
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ALTHOUGH THERE HAVE BEEN SOME UPS AND DOWNS DURING THE NEARLY TWO-DECADE HISTORY OF THE CLAIMING CROWN, THE EVENT SHOWCASING THE SPORT'S BLUE-COLLAR HORSES HAS BECOME A FIXTURE ON THE NATIONAL RACING SCENE. LIKE A HARD-WORKING CLAIMING HORSE WHO TURNED INTO A STAKES WINNER, THE CLAIMING CROWN POSTED SOLID RETURNS IN ITS EARLY RENEWALS, MOSTLY AT CANTERBURY PARK IN MINNESOTA STARTING IN 1999, AND NOW AFTER SIX CONSECUTIVE RUNNINGS AT GULFSTREAM PARK, IT CONTINUES TO HIT NEW HIGHS.

The nine-race Claiming Crown on December 2 again offered \$1.1 million in purses for horses who had started for a specified claiming price since January 1, 2016, save for the two races with a lifetime claiming condition. In its days at Canterbury, the Claiming Crown often attracted a robust handle in excess of \$3 million—a hefty number for the Midwest track—and this year it topped out at a record \$11.925 million for the entire card, up 7 percent from last year when \$11.141 was wagered. Handle in 2015 was \$10.362 million.

“We’re extremely pleased with the opening day of our Championship Meet and the Claiming Crown program,” Gulfstream General Manager Bill Badgett said. “The crowd was fantastic, the support from horsemen throughout North America was once again terrific, and we witnessed some incredible performances from our equine and human stars.”

Handle on the Claiming Crown, which is put on by a partnership of the National HBPA, Thoroughbred Owners and Breeders Association and Gulfstream Park with the Florida HBPA, has gone up every year since Gulfstream began hosting the event in 2012.

“It’s gratifying to see the tremendous response from bettors and horsemen to the Claiming Crown,” said Eric Hamelback, CEO of the National HBPA. “We had horses from the West Coast, Midwest and East Coast, including many from smaller stables, and the quality of competition seems like it gets better every year. We are already looking forward to the 20th running of the Claiming Crown in 2018.”



THE CLAIMING CROWN'S
 PROFILE AND HANDLE
 CONTINUE TO TREND UP
 AT GULFSTREAM PARK



GLASS SLIPPER

MENDED

The Claiming Crown card kicked off with the \$110,000 Glass Slipper for fillies and mares who have started for \$12,500 or less, and it featured what turned out to be the most decisive victory of the day with Troy and Maritza Onorato's Mended rolling to an easy 6 ³/₄-length win. With Ricardo Gonzalez up for trainer John Martin, the 4-year-old daughter of Broken Vow grabbed the early lead in the one-mile contest and was never headed before stopping the timer at 1:36.42 for her 10th consecutive win.

Perhaps even more impressive than her win streak is the fact that not a single photo finish has been required to declare her the winner and that this marked her first start outside of California, where she was claimed for \$12,500 on January 6 at Golden Gate Fields. She finished fourth that day, and she hasn't been beaten since.

"The ship was tough," Martin said about the even-money favorite. "She had to ship eight or nine hours from Golden Gate to Santa Anita, lay over there and ship maybe six or seven hours on the airplane to here. We did



all that three days out, but she made the trip fine. Nothing went wrong since I've been here.

"When I first got her she had a sore foot, and I thought it was a bad claim to tell you the truth," Martin added. "We worked on her for a few weeks and the sore foot went away and I started training her, and ever since then she started getting better and better and better."

Her 10 wins through early December put her in a tie with Cantchaco for the most in North America in 2017, and Mended has earned \$186,620 this year compared to Cantchaco's \$31,959. All told, Mended, who was bred in Kentucky by Sheltoewe Farm, Mariah Thoroughbreds LLC and Pin Oak Stud LLC, has won 13 of 26 outs with earnings of \$231,690.

Sugar Cube, a 6-year-old mare owned and trained by Rick Hiles, finished second to be part of the exacta for the ninth time in 10 starts this year. She had wins at Oaklawn Park, Churchill Downs and Indiana Grand during her 2017 campaign with two wins on dirt and two on the turf.

Looch Racing Stables Inc.'s Moonshine Promise, a veteran of 75 races with 21 wins who shipped in from JACK Thistledown in Ohio, took third for trainer Peter Walder.

Delusional K K, Battle Tale, Amaluna, Ventina, Untrue, Tormenta de Oro, Northern Screamer, Star Eighty, Falina's Song, Babie Monster and Arella Princess completed the order of finish.



EXPRESS

FIRST GROWTH

First Growth, a consistent performer on the Ohio circuit this year, apparently enjoyed his first trip to Florida as he captured the \$110,000 Claiming Crown Express by 3 ½ lengths with Gerardo Corrales riding for trainer Odin Londono Jr.

It was a homecoming of sorts for Londono and also a lucrative win for the Candy Ride (Arg) gelding haltered for \$5,000 early in the year at Mahoning Valley Race Course.

“My father rode here, so I’m from here,” he said. “I was born and raised here. I haven’t been here for a long time. I took a shot, and we were able to take it.

“It was a perfect ride. I told [Corrales], ‘If we’re three lengths, four lengths off of it, we’ve got it,’ because I know what he’s capable of. He’s a horse that has improved every race, so I took a shot.”

Owned by Michelle Winters, First Growth earned \$60,500 for the win after banking \$58,384 with five other wins during the year. The 5-year-old clocked six furlongs in 1:09.61 and had the respect of the bettors at odds of 9-2 in the race for horses who have started for \$8,000 or less lifetime.



Although it took First Growth nine tries to break his maiden, his record now stands at 21-8-2-3 with earnings of \$150,604. He was bred in Kentucky by Alexander Groves Matz LLC.

Averill Racing LLC and CCF Racing Stable’s Blings Express, making the 75th start of his career, finished a clear second for trainer Ralph Ziadie. The 8-year-old Too Much Bling gelding is closing in on \$500,000 in earnings. This marked the fourth consecutive year for Blings Express in the Claiming Crown Express, and it represented his best finish yet.

Kentucky invader and seven-time winner this year Ship Disturber, running for John Impellizeri and trainer Charles Dickey, rallied from far back to take third. The Sky Mesa gelding recorded wins this year at Oaklawn Park, Kentucky Downs, Churchill Downs and Ellis Park.

Doodle Hopper finished fourth, followed by Mr Manning, Starship Apollo, Harryhee, Helloitsme, Express Jet, Electrifying, Donegal Hall, The Son Wind, Great Lou and Pachanga Party.



DISTAFF DASH

BLUE BAHIA

The first of jockey Paco Lopez's three Claiming Crown wins came on Blue Bahia in the \$110,000 Distaff Dash for fillies and mares who have started for a price of \$25,000 or less. Sent off as the 8-5 favorite with seven wins in 10 previous turf sprints, the 4-year-old Wildcat Heir filly sat just off the pace and then pounced at the top of the stretch to prevail by 2 $\frac{3}{4}$ lengths in :56.89 for five furlongs on the turf.

"We really didn't want to go right to the lead," said Carlos David, assistant to trainer Jason Servis. "She's got speed, but we wanted to keep her in the pocket and it just went perfect. I was a little worried they were going a little fast, but [Lopez] was patient and she got the job done, so we're happy."

Owner Dennis Drazin bred Blue Bahia in Florida and campaigned her until March of this year, when she was claimed for \$25,000 at Gulfstream. But less than a month later, Drazin and Servis claimed her back for \$30,000, and that proved to be a shrewd move as she won the \$64,200 Blue Sparkler Stakes at Monmouth



Park in her next start and then took an allowance/optional claimer at Parx Racing. She now has eight wins in 15 career starts with earnings of \$240,594. Her only off-the-board finishes in turf sprints have come in a \$125,000 stakes and an allowance/optional claimer at Saratoga Race Course.

Stars Racing LLC's My Sweet Dove, who had won three of her last four starts, put in a game effort to grab second for trainer Ralph Ziadie. The runner-up money put her over the \$300,000 mark in career earnings.

My Sister Caro, who finished second in last year's Distaff Dash, got third for owners Steven Bertrando and Paul Trapani and conditioner Clyde Martin. She came in from Laurel Park in Maryland.

Island Reward, Imnaha, World Gone Wright, Eila, Kasuga, In Mid Heir, Ring Knocker, Shakakan, Heart Astray and Mojo's Queen completed the field.



IRON HORSE

TWOCUBANBROTHERSU

The \$110,000 Iron Horse, at 1 1/16 miles for horses who have started for \$8,000 or less lifetime, had perhaps the most fitting name of all the Claiming Crown races. The 13 runners had combined to win 143 races, with seven of the entrants having double digits in the win column. But none had more than Twocubanbrothersu, who came in from Laurel Park with a record of 19 wins from 48 starts, and after a trip timed in 1:42.22 under Daniel Centeno, the 7-year-old Harlington gelding posted win number 20.

Trained by John Rigattieri, who also co-owns the gelding with Stephen Derany, Twocubanbrothersu set a solid pace as the 4-1 second choice and refused to let favored Rich Daddy go by in the stretch.

"I know this horse very well; he's been training very well," said Centeno, who this year has ridden the gelding to wins at Laurel, Delaware Park and Tampa Bay Downs. "Today was a big field, and he likes to be clear on the lead. The plan was to try to get him up close. He broke sharp, and I sent him a little bit and he responded great. I saw the favorite and I thought he was



going to fight for second, but my horse likes to fight and he ran big today."

Derany and Rigattieri claimed Twocubanbrothersu for \$6,250 at Tampa, and since then he's won 13 races. For his career, Twocubanbrothersu, who was bred in Kentucky by Greenwich Cattle Company, has earned \$358,545.

Rich Daddy, owned by HRH Racing and trainer Eddie Kenneally, again proved his affinity for Gulfstream with a runner-up finish. The 6-year-old gelding by The Daddy now has eight wins, two seconds and five thirds in 20 Gulfstream races.

Solve, who just two starts earlier was claimed for \$5,000 at Canterbury Park, ran third for owner Rodney Paden and trainer Charles Dickey.

Lieutenant Seany O, Social Stranger, Fourth of July, Goodtimehadbyall, Chiseled, Jaiden's Best, Cheech Thunder, Enders Cat, Bama Bound and Mal Guapo completed the order of finish.



CANTERBURY

PAY ANY PRICE

While plenty of Claiming Crown horses over the years have proven themselves against stakes and even graded stakes company, few have targeted the Breeders' Cup World Championships as the connections of Pay Any Price did. Trainer Ralph Ziadie and owners Averill Racing LLC and Matties Racing had hoped to run the 7-year-old Wildcat Heir gelding in the \$1 million Breeders' Cup Turf Sprint (G1), but a foot issue necessitated a new plan.

"We wanted to go to California and run in the Breeders' Cup, but we did right by the horse and gave him time," co-owner Richard Averill said. "We tried to make it and we pushed and it just didn't happen."

As the course record-holder at Gulfstream at the five-furlong turf distance with a time of :53.61 set in the Silks Run Stakes in March, Pay Any Price was sent to post in the \$110,000 Canterbury as the 1-2 favorite, and he overcame the five-month layoff to win by a half-length in :56.49 with Edgard Zayas in the irons.

"Health-wise he was 100 percent, but fitness-wise he was about



75 percent," Averill said. "There wasn't a doubt in my mind he'd be on the lead coming down [the stretch]. He held off. He's got heart. He's an awesome horse."

Pay Any Price, who was bred in Florida by Brent and Crystal Fernung, has now won 10 of 17 lifetime starts with earnings of more than \$300,000. The gelding was in for an \$8,000 tag last year at Tampa Bay Downs before working his way up the claiming ladder and developing into a multiple stakes winner in turf sprints.

Oak Bluffs, a 37-1 longshot for trainer Mary Eppler and her Mary Eppler Racing Stable Inc., made Pay Any Price work for the victory but could not quite get by but finished a strong second.

Sir Navigator, running for Kenneth and Sarah Ramsey and trainer Mike Maker, the respective leading owners and trainer in the history of the Claiming Crown with 15 wins apiece heading into this renewal, closed to finish third.

Super Spender, Diddley, Padilla, Our Independence, Billy the Bull, Shadow Rock, Black Tavish, Uncle Leo and Our Boss rounded out the order of finish.



RAPID TRANSIT

CAUTIOUS GIANT

In the \$110,000 Rapid Transit at seven furlongs for horses who have started for \$16,000 or less, Cautious Giant stood out with a race record that included eight starts against graded stakes foes, including facing Gun Runner in the Grade 1 Whitney Handicap at Saratoga. And while he proved to be ambitiously entered and no match for the probable Horse of the Year in that race, the 6-year-old Giant's Causeway gelding did show his class with a one-length victory in the Rapid Transit in 1:22.78 under Emisael Jaramillo as the 9-2 second choice in the betting.

"We had breezed this horse twice since claiming him and thought today was a good option to race him," said trainer Victor Barboza Jr., who claimed Cautious Giant for owner Mark Moshe for \$16,000 in September at Gulfstream. "It was my plan every day to run in the Claiming Crown. We will look to run him in the Grade 3 Hal's Hope [on February 24 at Gulfstream] next."

Bred by Grousemont Farm, Cautious Giant has won seven of 33 lifetime starts, and his bankroll now



stands at \$457,870. A return to graded stakes company would be no surprise for the gelding, as he placed in a pair of Grade 2 events—the Palos Verdes and Kona Gold Stakes—at Santa Anita Park in 2016.

Manhattan Mischief, who was claimed by trainer Matt Kordenbrock and owners Gwyneth Gower and Robert O'Hara Jr. for \$40,000 a month earlier at Churchill Downs, earned back more than half that price with a second-place run.

Crocodile Charlie, who captured a stakes at Gulfstream in June after breaking his maiden for a \$25,000 tag and running for \$12,500 in his debut, won a photo for third for trainer Rohan Crichton, who co-owns the colt with Span Investments Inc.

Aztec Sense crossed the wire fourth and was followed by Rhythm Park, Dark Arden, Chatiment, Sandro, Double Whammy, Shaft of Light, Coxswain, Whyruawesome, Thanks God and Crazy Frank C.



TIARA

MARTINI GLASS

If the Claiming Crown races were eligible to be graded, the \$125,000 Tiara for fillies and mares who have started for \$25,000 or less would merit serious consideration. The best evidence to argue that point is that Martini Glass, who came in with a pair of second-place finishes in Grade 1 races, was not even favored. Instead, that distinction went to Starship Jubilee, a two-time graded stakes winner in Canada. As the 2-1 second choice, Martini Glass and jockey Paco Lopez took the 1 1/16-mile turf event in 1:46.65 in a head bob over Peru (GB) with Starship Jubilee a length back in third.

"I thought we lost," said trainer Keith Nations. "Me and my wife, Cheryl, were just standing there. We didn't know whether to go to where they unsaddle or go to the winner's circle. We got caught in between and all of a sudden I looked up and saw the No. 4 up there and I was shocked. It looked like we ran second, but she got her nose down in time."

Owned by Vince Campanella and Nations Racing Stable LLC, Martini Glass came to Gulfstream off a second-place effort in the Grade 1, \$500,000 Juddmonte Spinster Stakes



at Keeneland, beaten two lengths by Romantic Vision. Over the summer, the 4-year-old Kitalpha filly was just a length back of champion Songbird while second in the Grade 1, \$750,000 Delaware Handicap and second by a neck in the \$100,000 Obeah Stales, also at Delaware. Those races were all on the dirt, and she won the Tiara despite turf not being her preferred surface.

"We always thought she would be better on turf; she's probably not," Nations said. "She's probably better on the dirt. We have some options. We don't even know what her best distance is. It's crazy. She ran within a length of Songbird going a mile and a quarter, and she ran a really powerful race going seven-eighths [at Tampa Bay Downs]."

Bred in Kentucky by Aschinger Bloodstock LLC, Martini Glass was claimed from her breeder in her maiden-breaking debut against \$16,000 claimers at Tampa Bay Downs and has since won seven more races with a total bankroll of \$475,445.

Runner-up Peru, racing for owners Kenneth and Sarah Ramsey and trainer Mike Maker, earned \$25,000 for her effort, the same amount she was claimed for in July at Belmont Park.

Starship Jubilee, a \$16,000 claimer earlier in the year who went on to win the Grade 2 Dance Smartly and Nassau stakes at Woodbine, could not hold the lead she had at the top of the stretch and finished third for trainer Kevin Attard, who co-owns her with Soli Mehta.

Arthemisa, Vendita, Valedictorian, Quebec, Temple Fur, Dynatail, Judy's Chance and Flattermefabulous completed the field.



EMERALD

SPECIAL OPS

Trainer Mike Maker came into the Claiming Crown with a record 15 wins, including six in the \$125,000 Emerald at 1 1/16 miles on the turf for horses who have started for \$25,000 or less. After missing by a nose one race earlier in the Tiara, Maker added to his win total as Special Ops and Julien Leparoux cleared the field late to score by 1 3/4 lengths in 1:50.41 at 7-1 odds.

"It's taken all day for it to come together, but better late than never," Maker said. "I was expecting that from him last time. He got a little sick after that race so it was a throwout race. He showed up again today."

The race Maker referenced was a fifth-place finish against allowance foes at Keeneland, but prior to that the 6-year-old Big Brown gelding won a starter allowance at Kentucky Downs and the \$75,000 West Virginia House of Delegates Speaker's Cup Stakes at Mountaineer Park. Maker claimed Special Ops for Skychai Racing LLC for \$50,000 in June at Churchill Downs, and in his five starts since then, the gelding has banked more than \$170,000. Bred in Kentucky by Candy Meadows LLC, Special Ops has eight



lifetime wins from 28 starts with earnings of \$375,202.

Maker completed the exacta with Bingo Kitten in the familiar colors of Kenneth and Sarah Ramsey. A 7-year-old son of the Ramseys' stallion Kitten's Joy, Bingo Kitten raced as low as the \$16,000 level earlier in the year before rising back up in class.

Durocher, a 61-1 longshot owned by Sterling Racing LLC, John Herzberg and Michelle Allan and trained by Harry Benson, got up for third.

Spring Up, D'craziness, Kaitain, Royal Blessing, Neoclassic, Sinatra, Laythatpistoldown, Cammack, Zambian, Eminent Force and Black Tide rounded out the finish.



JEWEL

FLOWERS FOR LISA

The \$200,000 Jewel at 1 1/8 miles featured an evenly matched field of horses who have started for \$35,000 or less, so it was no surprise that a trio of longshots completed a trifecta that paid more than \$7,000 for a \$1 bet. At the wire, it was Flying P Stable's Flowers for Lisa at 16-1 with Paco Lopez aboard winning his third Claiming Crown race of the day.

A 4-year-old gelding by Flower Alley who shipped to South Florida after running second against \$32,000 claimers at Belmont Park, Flowers for Lisa set a reasonable pace with fractions of :23.60, :47.06 and 1:11.28 and then held off his challengers to win by 1 1/2 lengths in 1:48.76.

Trainer Jorge Navarro, who earlier in the day won the Grade 1 Cigar Mile at Aqueduct with Sharp Azteca, claimed Flowers for Lisa for \$20,000 in July at Monmouth Park for Jason Provenzano's Flying P Stable.

"Jorge told me the day he claimed him that this was our Claiming Crown horse," Provenzano said. "This is a dream for me. The phone hasn't stopped. I got in this game a long time ago. My father was a jockey years ago; he rode down at Bowie,



Timonium, Pimlico, Marlboro, tracks that don't even exist anymore, some of them. I fell in love with horses at a young age, but I never thought I'd have the money to own them. I got in a good position in my life, and we started claiming horses."

Flowers for Lisa, who was bred in Kentucky by Kenneth and Sarah Ramsey, spent the early part of his career at Gulfstream and earned \$110,000 for his first race in Florida since May 2016. His record now stands at 33-7-8-5 with earnings of \$276,616.

Flashy Jewel, with the perfect name to win the race, chased Flowers for Lisa throughout and got his head down in front of Diamond Bachelor to earn second. Owned by Michael Hui and trained by Mike Maker, Flashy Jewel finished second in last year's Rapid Transit and came into this year's Jewel with more than \$100,000 in earnings for the year and a placing in the Grade 3 Skip Away Stakes at Gulfstream.

Third-place finisher Diamond Bachelor is also a Claiming Crown veteran having finished second in last year's Jewel. Trained by Patrick Biancone and owned by Diamond 100 Racing Club LLC, Robert Trussell and Patrick L. Biancone LLC, the 6-year-old War Front gelding won a pair of turf stakes last year and ran in the 2013 Breeders' Cup Juvenile (G1).

The remaining order of finish in the Jewel was Turco Bravo (Chi), Capital Letters, Dream Saturday, Jay's Way, Indian Guide, Fearless Dragon, Chunnel, Gigantic Breeze and Clubman. 