

ANOTHER ALL-TIME HIGH



THE 21ST CLAIMING CROWN SETS NEW HANDLE RECORD AT GULFSTREAM PARK

Compiled from Gulfstream Park news releases | Photos by Coglianese Photos/Andie Biancone, Lauren King and Ryan Thompson

The Claiming Crown continues to break its own record. Total handle on the nine-race event featuring more than \$1 million in purses has grown every year since 2012, when Gulfstream Park first became host, and this year was no different. The 21st running of the Claiming Crown, held December 7 at the South Florida track, set a new all-time handle record of \$13.846 million, up from \$13.612 million the previous year.

The Claiming Crown, which began in 1999 at Canterbury Park, is set to remain at Gulfstream Park through at least 2021 as part of an extension announced last year by the event's partners, the National HBPA, Florida HBPA, Thoroughbred Owners and Breeders Association and Gulfstream.

The response from bettors and fans, as well as the horsemen who fill the fields, continues to prove that a day that honors horse racing's "blue-collar" runners presents a popular and anticipated feature on the racing calendar.

"This event has seen tremendous growth over the years thanks to the strong support of the owners and trainers of these great horses and all the fans who enjoy wagering on the competitive fields, plus of course the cooperation of Gulfstream Park, the Florida HBPA, TOBA and the National HBPA," said Eric Hamelback, CEO of the National HBPA.

"It's also important that we remember the contributions of the late Tom Metzen Sr. and Kent Stirling, both of whom had races named in their honor," Hamelback added. "Without their hard work and dedication in building up the Claiming Crown it wouldn't be the showcase that it is today."

The Claiming Crown races are run under starter allowance conditions with the races classified based on horses having started at least once for a specified claiming price since January 1, 2018, with the Claiming Crown Express and Claiming Crown Iron Horse having the condition of a horse starting at any time during its career for an \$8,000 tag.

Proving the talent level of horses eligible for the Claiming Crown, among the nominees for the event were two-time graded stakes winner Tax, who could have been haltered for \$30,000 early in his career, and former \$16,000 claimer Maximum Security, who crossed the finish line first in the Kentucky Derby (G1) before being disqualified for interference and on the same day of the Claiming Crown captured the Grade 1, \$750,000 Cigar Mile Handicap at Aqueduct in New York.

The weekend also included a seminar presented by TOBA and sponsored by the National HBPA titled "Claiming Your Way to Ownership."

Following are recaps of all of the Claiming Crown races.

LEITONE (CHI) AND JOCKEY JOSE LEZCANO CAPTURED THE \$200,000 CLAIMING CROWN JEWEL TO CAP ANOTHER SUCCESSFUL RUNNING OF THE 21-YEAR-OLD EVENT.





EXPRESS

BROTHER CHUB

The \$110,000 Express kicked off the nine-race card celebrating racing's bread-and-butter runners with a rather dramatic finish, as Brother Chub and Fast Pass both closed from behind to catch Take Charge Dude in the final sixteenth. Brother Chub, who initially raced well back in the nine-horse field, came five-wide into the stretch but rallied gamely to overtake Take Charge Dude. He then drifted out in the stretch but managed to hold off a steadily closing Fast Pass to hit the wire a nose in front. Brother Chub and Fast Pass both improved their positions over last year's Express, when Brother Chub was in the runner-up position and Fast Pass was third.

Racing for Kasey K Racing Stable LLC and Michael Day and trained by Michael Moore, Brother Chub completed the six-furlong Express, for horses that have started for a claiming price of \$8,000 or lower, in 1:10.09. Jorge Vargas Jr. was aboard for the win.

It was the second victory in a row for the 7-year-old gelding bred in New Jersey by Joe-Dan Farm. He captured a \$50,000 optional claimer at Laurel Park on November 3 going 6 ½ furlongs and won in allowance company three times at Parx Racing earlier in the year. Brother Chub's career record now stands at 16 wins in 52 starts and earnings of \$538,036.

Fast Pass, owned by Paradise Farms Corp. and Walder Racing and trained by Peter Walder, was also slow to get going but rallied late to just miss at the



wire. But his finish showed he did not suffer any ill effects from a journey to South Korea in September for the Group 1 Keeneland Korea Sprint, where he finished 14th over a muddy surface. Prior to that, he had won the Opening Lead Stakes in May, finished third in the Grade 3 Smile Sprint Stakes and won a starter optional claiming race in July, all at Gulfstream.

Take Charge Dude held on for third in the Express, 2 ½ lengths back. Owned by Bassett Stables and trained by Saffie Joseph Jr., the 4-year-old gelding came into the race off victories in a \$10,000 turf claimer and a starter optional claimer on the main track at Gulfstream Park West.

Bordini was a neck back in fourth, followed by Whyruawesome, favored Travy Boy who set the early pace, Nick the Cardshark, Northern and Tale of Fire.

GLASS SLIPPER

LIZA STAR



Trainer Peter Walder may have fallen short of victory in the Express with Fast Pass's near miss, but it didn't take long for one of his runners to find the winner's circle. It came in the second Claiming Crown race, to be exact, with a brilliant wire-to-wire run by Liza Star in the \$110,000 Glass Slipper for 3-year-old and up fillies and mares who have started for a claiming price of \$12,500 or lower.

Ridden by Ricardo Santana Jr., Liza Star dueled throughout with 8-5 favorite Cuddle Kitten before pulling away from her around the eighth pole. Liza Star went on to win by a length over Potra Liza, who was covered up in the early going and came running late but couldn't get there in time.

She finished 1 ¾ lengths ahead of Cuddle Kitten who held on for third.

Liza Star, who races for Ron Paolucci Racing LLC, completed the one mile in 1:36.92 after setting fractions of :24.30, :46.84, 1:10.91 and 1:23.35.

"A lot of people doubted that she could get a mile, but when Ricardo got the first quarter in :24, it was all over," Walder said.

He and Paolucci claimed Liza Star for \$6,250 at Gulfstream on May 18. She won that contest and went on to win her next four races for them before finishing third in the Millions Distaff Stakes at Gulfstream Park West on November 9 in her final start before the Glass Slipper. Bred in Florida by Pedro Maestre, the 5-year-old mare now holds a record of seven wins in 14 starts and earnings of \$181,845 for the year and nine wins in 25 starts with \$219,605 in earnings overall.

"I can't take any credit for claiming her," Walder said. "Ron picked her out. I asked him if he was drinking his bathwater, but obviously he knew what



he was doing." About Liza Star's win streak, Walder added: "We clicked. I can't say I did anything special. I just give her time between races and treat her like a rock star."

Potra Liza, owned by Joseph E. Besecker and trained by Jorge Navarro, was claimed by her connections for \$6,250 at Gulfstream in February, winning that race and four others before finishing third in the Parx Hall of Fame Filly and Mare Starter Handicap prior to the Glass Slipper. Potra Liza's stablemate Cuddle Kitten, who runs for Flying P Stable, won the Parx Hall of Fame Filly and Mare Starter Handicap by five lengths, as well as three consecutive allowances under Navarro's care.

Lucy's Town was another 1 ¾ lengths back in fourth in the nine-horse Glass Slipper field, followed by All Good Times, Expect Indy, Final Flurry, Picasso Moon and She's Right Again.

DISTAFF DASH THINKIN COWTOWN



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ich Averill had two runners in the \$110,000 Distaff Dash, but only bet on one of them—the one

who didn't win. He wasn't complaining, though. His filly Thinkin Cowtown, who does her best running from off the pace, seized command in the stretch after sitting pretty in midpack in the early stages to win the five-furlong turf stakes by a half-length as the favorite. Averill's other runner, the 14-1 R Next Roll, finished seventh.

"That's all right," Averill said of his losing wager. He had decided to bet on R Next Roll, who races near the pace, because Gulfstream's turf course had been favoring speed during the first few days of the meet and he thought the mare would benefit. Regardless, the winner's purse of \$60,500 more than made up for Averill's wager.

Thinkin Cowtown, with jockey Tyler Gaffalione aboard, wouldn't be denied, however, as she held off Unaquoi in the final strides for her first victory of the year. Averill and his partners, Matties Racing Stable LLC and ATM Racing, claimed the 6-year-old mare just two starts prior for \$25,000 at Gulfstream on July 13 with the express intent of racing her in the Distaff Dash, which is for fillies and mares who have started for \$25,000 or less. She is conditioned by Georgina Baxter.

"I had watched the horse and she beat me in one of her races," Averill said of why he chose her.

Bred in Florida by Bob Leininger, Thinkin Cowtown has won six of 20 career starts for earnings of \$216,880.



Unaquoi, a 5-year-old homebred for Mrs. Ray M. Pennington III and trained by Ollie Figgins III, was second in last year's Distaff Dash as well. And this year she added two optional claiming wins to her name, both at 5 ½ furlongs on the turf.

Third-place finisher Blue Magic, who was a length behind Unaquoi as a 29-1 longshot, gained momentum late after being bumped at the start. The 4-year-old filly races for Pinnacle Racing Stable LLC and trainer Luis Ramirez, who claimed her two starts prior for \$10,000 at Gulfstream on September 25. She won her last start prior to the Distaff Dash, an optional claimer on November 7 at Gulfstream Park West.

Stetson Gold finished 1 ¼ lengths back in fourth in the nine-horse field, followed by Same Kinda Crazy, Glory Roll, R Next Roll, Band of Angels and Dance Till Dawn.

RAPID TRANSIT

ROYAL SQUEEZE



Jockey Paco Lopez ended the day with four Claiming Crown victories, and he got the ball rolling with Royal Squeeze in the \$110,000 Rapid Transit for horses that have raced for a claiming price of \$16,000 or less.

Royal Squeeze, who was the second choice at nearly 3-1, and Lopez vied for the lead with Rol Again Question early on before finally edging away to win by 1 ¾ lengths over 27-1 shot Empire Power. Owned by Imaginary Stables and Glenn Ellis and trained by Elizabeth Dobles, Royal Squeeze finished the seven-furlong race in 1:23.63 while apparently never changing leads in the stretch.

"I was fortunate to have some great horses today," Lopez said. "Whether it's the Claiming Crown or a \$5,000 race, it's no different for me. I always try for a win."

The Rapid Transit was the fourth career stakes win for 7-year-old Royal Squeeze and his second this year after the Big Drama Stakes at Gulfstream in May. In addition to his stakes wins, Royal Squeeze has won three optional claiming races for his connections, who claimed him in February at Gulfstream in a \$25,000 optional claimer, where he finished third at five furlongs on the grass. Bred in Florida by Gary Aiken, Royal Squeeze has won 11 of 40 career starts and earned \$556,627.

Empire Power rallied late in the Rapid Transit to get up for second by a head over D T Goodie, who was just a nose in front of fourth-place finisher Benefactor. Empire Power races for Secure Investments and is trained by



Antonio Sano, who claimed him for \$12,500 at Gulfstream in May. The 4-year-old colt subsequently won twice at a mile in a \$20,000 claiming race and \$25,000 optional claimer.

Six-year-old D T Goodie came into the Rapid Transit off of two runner-up finishes at Parx Racing, one in allowance company at 6 ½ furlongs and the other in an optional claimer at a mile. The gelding is owned by Long Ball Stable LLC and trained by Joseph Taylor.

Following Benefactor in the eight-horse field was Rol Again Question, who finished a half-length back in fifth, then Who's Out, First Deal and favored Yodel E. A. Who.

CANTERBURY

SHEKKY SHEBAZ



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hekky Shebaz gave jockey Paco Lopez his second Claiming Crown win on the day as the odds-on

favorite in the \$110,000 Canterbury for horses that have started for \$25,000 or less. And the 4-year-old gelding won like it by staying close throughout and then driving to win by three-quarters of a length, covering the five furlongs on the turf in :54.25.

The Canterbury victory came on the heels of Shekky Shebaz's close third in the Grade 1 Breeders' Cup Turf Sprint at Santa Anita, where he missed the place by only a nose. As recently as July, he raced in and won a \$25,000 5 ½-furlong claiming race on the turf by nearly two lengths. In fact, that was the race where he caught the eye of his current owners, Michael Dubb, Madaket Stables LLC and Bethlehem Stables LLC, essentially the same ownership group that sent British Idiom out to win the Grade 1 Breeders' Cup Juvenile Fillies this year.

"I was second in that race with my horse," recalled Dubb about Shekky Shebaz's claiming win, "and I saw a lot [in Shekky Shebaz] ... That was his first time on the turf, and I said, 'Oh my God, if that's his first time on the turf, what happens when he gets the feel of it?'"

Dubb and partners purchased Shekky Shebaz privately that summer and sent him to trainer Jason Servis. The gelding quickly got the feel of the turf in winning his first start for his new connections, the Lucky Coin Stakes at Saratoga on August 30. He then finished second in the Belmont Turf Sprint



Invitational prior to the Breeders' Cup. Shekky Shebaz's record currently stands at six wins out of 18 career starts and \$366,875 in earnings.

"I just get a thrill seeing horses like Shekky, somebody who came from humble beginnings and watch him develop," Dubb said.

Runner-up in the Canterbury was last year's winner, Rocket Heat, who races for Flying P Stable and is trained by Michael Tannuzzo. Rocket Heat came into the race off a 1 ½-length allowance victory at Parx Racing in October. Faction Cat, owned by Asterace Group LLC and trained by Georgina Baxter, was a length back in third.

Tiger Blood finished fourth in the eight-horse field, followed by New York's Finest, Cryogenic, Diamond Majesty and Pemaquid Pete.

IRON HORSE

YES I SEE



RYAN THOMPSON

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eter Walder and Ron Paolucci combined for their second Claiming Crown win of the day

with Yes I See in the \$110,000 Iron Horse, after capturing the Glass Slipper with Liza Star earlier on the card. This is the second time, that Walder and Paolucci have won both of these races on the same card. In 2015 they won the Glass Slipper with Moonshine Promise and the Iron Horse with Runs With Bulls.

Asked what the victories meant to him, Paolucci responded: "Considering I've modeled myself after Ken Ramsey, this means everything. Winning two Claiming Crown races is so special. You know, I can't really afford to play at the highest level and spend millions of dollars on horses. But guys ... like Imaginary Stable [who won the Rapid Transit with Royal Squeeze], I'm happy to see those kinds of guys win, because they're in the claiming box every day. So it's nice when you put the work in and see it pay off in the end."

Paolucci and Walder actually had two runners in the Iron Horse, and Yes I See was the much longer shot at 66-1. With Rajiv Maragh up, Yes I See came from behind to best his stablemate, Sensational Ride, by a neck. The latter, ridden by Jose Bracho, had tried to go wire to wire. Yes I See finished the 1 1/16 miles in 1:42.80.

"They worked together the other day and [Yes I See] beat [Sensational Ride]," Walder said. "I put the blinkers on for the work and I told Rajiv to never mind the recent form. I liked them both for the race. Ron gave me enough time to work with them."

Yes I See came into the Iron Horse, which is for horses that have started for



\$8,000 or lower, off of four off-the-board finishes, with his most recent win coming in June at Churchill Downs in a starter optional claiming race. Paolucci and Walder claimed Yes I See out of his next race for \$25,000 at Saratoga, in which he finished fifth at 1 1/16 miles on the turf. Bred in West Virginia by Ellen H. Walters, the 8-year-old gelding has 14 wins in 48 career starts and earnings of \$307,316.

Sensational Ride has been the picture of consistency this year, winning eight of nine starts prior to the Iron Horse. The 6-year-old gelding has a lifetime record of 19 wins in 44 starts and earnings of \$227,156.

The third-place finisher was last year's Iron Horse winner Salsa's Return, who races for Joseph E. Besecker and is trained by Jorge Navarro. To Dare was three-quarters of a length back in fourth in the 12-horse field, followed by Bobby G, French Quarter, Donji, Dizzy Gillespie, Peppi the Hunter, Ruler of the Nile, Twocubanbrothersu and Spin Cycle.

TIARA

LUCKY LONG



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ucky Long has been a horse for a course this year with all six of her starts coming at Gulfstream

Park, including her most recent, a victory in the \$125,000 Tiara for fillies and mares who have started for \$25,000 or less. That course affinity no doubt played into her being made the favorite at nearly 4-1 in the 12-horse field. And she was ridden by jockey Paco Lopez, who collected his third Claiming Crown victory on the day in the Tiara.

The 5-year-old mare settled mid-pack in the 1 1/16-mile turf race and moved up well through traffic. Lopez shifted her out turning for home and then they dug in to forge ahead in deep stretch. Lucky Long and Lopez won by three-quarters of a length in 1:40.39.

Owned by Robert J. Slack and trained by Rohan Crichton, Lucky Long began the year finishing off the board in an optional claiming allowance in mid-January, then followed up about two weeks later with a win in starter optional claiming company. In February she earned her first stakes win in the Mary Todd Stakes at 1 1/16 miles on the turf. After running second in a March starter optional claiming race, she was given the summer off and returned to the races at Gulfstream on September 28. Lucky Long ran fourth in the 1 1/16-mile Monroe Stakes on the turf.

With her Tiara score, Lucky Long now has six victories—all on turf—in 21 career starts and \$288,817 in earnings.

Runner-up Una Luna lost some ground entering the stretch but rallied to get back into striking range near the wire, finishing a head in front of Bareeqa.



Una Luna races for Robert J. Amendola and is trained by Jose Gallegos. The 4-year-old filly came into the Tiara off a second in the Millions Filly and Mare Turf Preview Stakes at 7 1/2 furlongs on the turf at Gulfstream Park West. She also had two other stakes placings during the year, in the mile Treasure Coast Stakes and 1 1/16-mile In the Breeze Stakes, both on the grass at Gulfstream.

Bareeqa, a 6-year-old mare owned by Midwest Thoroughbreds Inc. and trained by Danny Gargan, won three times on the turf at Belmont Park this fall, including in allowance company at seven furlongs and at the \$25,000 and \$32,000 claiming levels.

Arabella Bella finished a length back in fourth in the 12-horse field, followed by Amazing Audrey, Diamond Play, Raki, Lady Alida, Codrington, Bienville Street, Vip Nation and Drinks On Me.

EMERALD

MUGGSAMATIC



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ugsamatic's victory in the \$125,000 Emerald provided several important distinctions for his

connections at this year's Claiming Crown. It was the second victory on the day for owners Michael Dubb and Bethlehem Stables LLC, the third for trainer Jason Servis and the fourth for jockey Paco Lopez.

Dubb and Bethlehem Stables are part of the ownership group of Canterbury winner Shekky Shebaz, whom Servis trains along with Leitone, who captured the Jewel just prior to the Emerald. And Lopez had already won aboard Royal Squeeze (Rapid Transit), Shekky Shebaz and Lucky Long (Tiara).

Mugsamatic played musical barns over the summer, being claimed out of three consecutive starts, the last time at Monmouth Park going to Dubb and Servis for \$25,000. The 5-year-old-gelding won that race, running 1 1/16 miles on the turf, the Emerald distance.

"They wanted to run the horse back in October for a higher claiming price," Dubb said. "I didn't want to take any chances. I wanted this horse for the Claiming Crown. In this game, you've got to plan in advance."

In the Emerald, which is for 3-year-olds and up that have started for \$25,000 or less, Mugsamatic tracked the leader through the early going before taking command and pulling away in the stretch to win by 1 1/4 lengths as the favorite in a time of 1:41.02. Bred in Florida by Gilbert G. Campbell, Mugsamatic has won nine of 24 career starts for earnings of \$291,590, including a victory in the 2017 14 Hands Winery Sophomore Turf Stakes at Tampa Bay Downs.



Emerald runner-up Apreciado, who races for Justice Racing Stable LLC and is trained by Mike Maker, was claimed by his connections in February, winning for a \$16,000 tag at Gulfstream. He added three more wins during the year including an allowance score going 1 1/8 miles on the turf at Keeneland in October.

Tusk, who finished three-quarters of a length back in third, races for Jordan V. Wycoff and is trained by Saffie Joseph Jr., who claimed the 6-year-old gelding for \$32,000 out of his last start, a mile turf race at Belmont Park. It was the third straight victory for Tusk, who had won two optional claiming races at Delaware Park in September.

Patriot Drive was 1 1/4 lengths back in fourth in the 11-horse Emerald field, followed by Hieroglyphics, And Won, King of Spades, Fifth Title, Spring Up, Driven by Thunder and Max K. O.



JEWEL

LEITONE (CHI)

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aturday, December 7, was a very good day for the Jason Servis barn. In New York at Aqueduct, Maximum Security

rolled to victory in the Grade 1 Cigar Mile. Then, shortly after, Leitone (Chi) dominated a field of eight to win the headliner on the Claiming Crown card, the \$200,000 Jewel. Servis had already won the Canterbury with Shekky Shebaz and closed out the card with Muggsamatic's victory in the Emerald.

Leitone, who races for Ara Aprahamian, stalked the pace in the early going before taking control of the race after three-quarters. Guided by Jose Lezcano, the 5-year-old Chilean-bred pulled away for a commanding 2 ½-length score as the 4-5 favorite. Leitone ran the 1 ½-mile distance in 1:49.54.

"This is the kind of horse that you keep asking and he'll keep running. He's got a long stride and doesn't stop; he's a very nice horse," Lezcano said. "The other horses in the race were sent early on, and I gave him at least a half mile before asking him to go and when I did, he went on to win easy. I had so much horse the whole way and still had some left in the tank."

Leitone was claimed for \$12,500 at Belmont Park on June 16, winning the 1 ½-mile race on the main track by 13 ¾ lengths. He finished third on the turf in his first start for Servis and then won a \$50,000 claiming race at Saratoga. After an off-the-board finish on the grass in an optional claiming allowance, Leitone prepped for the Jewel with a 7 ½-length win in a \$50,000 claiming race at Belmont on October 25. Imported from Chile in 2018, the son of Dunkirk has a career record of seven wins and seven placings in 20 starts and earnings of \$469,355.



Noble Thought, who finished second by a half-length for owner Three Diamonds Farm and trainer Mike Maker, trailed the entire field of nine for six furlongs before strongly rallying to get up for the place. The 6-year-old Harlan's Holiday gelding came into the Jewel off a victory in a 1 ½-mile optional claiming race at Churchill Downs on November 24.

Holiday Bonus, a 35-1 longshot owned by Woodland Farms and trained by Jorge Navarro, finished third after also closing well in the stretch but couldn't get by Noble Thought in the final strides. Third Day was three-quarters of a length back in fourth, followed by early pacesetter Create Again, Degrom, Ekhtibaar, Forest Fire and Aequor. **HJ**