



# CUATRO FOR PACO



JOCKEY PACO LOPEZ WINS FIVE RACES, INCLUDING FOUR CLAIMING CROWN EVENTS, AS GULFSTREAM PARK AGAIN SHOWCASES HORSE RACING'S BLUE-COLLAR RUNNERS

*Compiled from Gulfstream Park news releases  
Photos by Coglianesse Photos/Lauren King and Ryan Thompson*

**J**ockey Paco Lopez came into the 23rd running of the Claiming Crown on December 4 at Gulfstream Park as the all-time leading rider in the event celebrating racing's blue-collar runners. By the end of the afternoon at the South Florida track, Lopez had added four more Claiming Crown wins, as well as a victory in an undercard race, to bring his lifetime total to 14. Trainer Mike Maker, the all-time leader in his category, added another win to bring his total to 19, and relative newcomer Saffie Joseph Jr. broke out with three victories.

A run of seven consecutive years of record-breaking handle figures came to an end with the 2021 edition, but the wagering total of \$11,448,519 still ranks near the top of the list for the all-time marks at the event that has consistently proven to be popular with both handicappers and horsemen.

"We would like to thank the Florida horsemen for their continued support and commitment, and also a sincere thanks go to Gulfstream Park for again doing a tremendous job of hosting the Claiming Crown," said Eric Hamelback, CEO of the National HBPA, which in partnership with the Thoroughbred Owners and Breeders Association presented the Claiming Crown with Gulfstream and the horsemen of Florida. "And, of course, we are grateful for all the owners and trainers who participated and the racing fans who again showed their support by wagering on these competitive races. This is always a great showcase for the claiming level horses who are so important to our industry."

The Claiming Crown races are run under starter allowance conditions based on the claiming price started for in 2020 and 2021, except for the Express and Iron Horse, which allow for horses to have started for the specified claiming price at any point in the horse's career.



PACO LOPEZ HAS RECORDED A TOTAL OF 14 CLAIMING CROWN WINS TO TOP ALL JOCKEYS.





## BLUE STEEL—IRON HORSE

**J**ames Woodruff's Blue Steel showed his mettle while holding on to win the \$75,000 Claiming Crown Iron Horse Kent Stirling Memorial, a 1 <sup>1</sup>/<sub>16</sub>-mile race for horses who had started for \$8,000 or less in their lifetime. The race honors the former Florida HBPA executive director who helped grow the Claiming Crown at Gulfstream, among many other contributions he made to the industry.

Trained by Jeff Hiles, Blue Steel had won his last four starts on dirt by a combined 22 <sup>1</sup>/<sub>4</sub> lengths at Indiana Grand, Belterra Park and Keeneland Race Course. This win was not quite as easy, as the 7-2 second choice in the betting held on to prevail by a half-length in 1:44.61 under Paco Lopez.

The well-traveled 5-year-old gelding by Will Take Charge has recorded nine victories in his 35-race career while bringing home \$188,125. Blue Steel showed promise right from the start as a 2-year-old when he broke his maiden in a special weight race at Churchill Downs in 2018 and then ran in the Grade 2 Kentucky Jockey Club Stakes.

Dave Hearn's Zanesville, who came in off a victory at Churchill for trainer George Leonard III, finished second. Gulfstream-based Brasstown, running for Sano Racing Stables LLC and trainer Antonio Sano, took third.







## FACE OF VICTORY—EXPRESS

**U**nder a heads-up ride by Edgard Zayas, Mercy Man Racing's Face of Victory captured the \$75,000 Claiming Crown Express, a six-furlong sprint for horses who had started for \$8,000 or less at any point in their career.

A split-second decision at the three-eighths pole was the key to the Saffie Joseph Jr.-trained gelding's upset victory over favored Kalu, who broke sharply to take the early lead. Face of Victory, who broke from the rail and was ridden aggressively by Zayas, slipped inside the favorite on the backstretch. Gulfstream's leading rider at the fall meet quickly thought better of an inside challenge, easing up on his mount long enough to be able to guide him off the rail to make an outside challenge in the stretch. Face of Victory kicked on through the stretch to prevail by 1 ¼ lengths in 1:10.52 at odds of 9-2.

"Saffie gave me a lot of confidence in the paddock," Zayas said. "He said, 'Take it to [Kalu]. His only weakness is at the end where he tends to stop a little bit.' He said, 'Take it to him early if you can. Make him earn his money.'"

Face of Victory, a 7-year-old son of Run Away and Hide who was claimed for \$10,000 in August, pushed his earnings to \$224,974 with his seventh win from 33 starts.

RyZan Sun Racing LLC's Kalu, third in the Grade 3 Frank J. De Francis Memorial Dash Stakes for trainer J. Kent Sweezey in his last start, finished second as the 4-5 favorite. Aequor was third for owner Morning Moon Farm and trainer Frank Russo.







## SWEET WILLEMINA — GLASS SLIPPER

**R**ichard Ciavardone and Home Team Stables' Sweet Willemina emerged from a pack of horses in mid-stretch and rallied past Our Fantasy to capture the \$80,000 Claiming Crown Glass Slipper, a one-mile test on the main track for fillies and mares who had raced for a price of \$12,500 or less.

The Scott Lake-trained 4-year-old daughter of Reason d'Etat was coming off her first loss in seven starts since being claimed by her connections for \$32,000 in June, but she rebounded with a last-jump decision and stopped the timer at 1:36.68 at 8-1 odds.

Sweet Willemina, a Parx Racing-based filly who broke her maiden for a \$10,000 claiming price in September 2020, had her regular rider Silvestre Gonzalez in the irons.

"She's a beast," Lake said. "Her last race when she got beat, Silvestre and I talked about it and thought he rode her over-confidently and didn't go after the lone speed. We were a little worried coming in because she wasn't quite as sharp coming off that race, but she's been training great down here. Silvestre did a great job."

The Kentucky-bred Sweet Willemina now has earnings of \$241,804 with eight wins from 23 trips to the post.

Our Fantasy, also off at 8-1, just missed out on the victory for owner Ten Twenty Racing and conditioner Saffie Joseph Jr. Stud Locos Y Viciosos Corp.'s Let's Be Honest, trained by Enrique Torres, got up for third.







## — MILES AHEAD — RAPID TRANSIT

**D**avid Melin, Leon Ellman and Laurie Plesa's Miles Ahead, a graded stakes winner in a race for horses that had raced for a claiming price of \$16,000 or less, flaunted his class by winning the \$85,000 Claiming Crown Rapid Transit as the 6-5 favorite.

The Eddie Plesa Jr.-trained 4-year-old Competitive Edge gelding, who captured the Smile Sprint Invitational Stakes (G3) on the July 3 Summit of Speed program at Gulfstream, closely stalked the pace set by Legal Deal before moving to the lead at the top of the stretch under Paco Lopez and prevailing by a comfortable 1 ¼ lengths in 1:21.99 for seven furlongs.

Miles Ahead broke his maiden for a \$12,500 claiming price by 12 ¼ lengths in January 2020 after being eased in his debut over turf. The Kentucky-bred has steadily improved with age while establishing himself as one of the top sprinters on dirt in South Florida.

A \$175,000 yearling who also earned Grade 1 experience with an off-the-board finish in the Alfred G. Vanderbilt Handicap at Saratoga, Miles Ahead is a nine-time winner from 19 starts, and his bankroll stands at \$323,525.

Michele and Lawrence Sargent's Legal Deal, a Carlos David trainee, could not match strides with Miles Ahead but finished a clear second. Pudding, trained and co-owned by Elizabeth Dobles with Imaginary Stables, closed for third.







## PAYNTDEMBLUESAWAY—DISTAFF DASH

**A**ll My Hart Racing Inc.'s Payntdembluesaway, with Paco Lopez in the saddle, dueled with 46-1 longshot Cat's Astray for a half-mile before putting that rival away and sprinting clear to a popular four-length victory as the 9-5 favorite in the \$90,000 Claiming Crown Distaff Dash.

Living up to its name, the Distaff Dash was over in :55.31 for a distance of about five furlongs on the turf for fillies and mares who had started for \$25,000 or less.

"She runs the way she runs," said winning trainer Jane Cibelli. "There are no tactics or anything. She just breaks and runs. She's really, really fast, and she just loves to run. Paco and I talked in the paddock, and he said, 'What do you think? There's some speed in there.' I said, 'Paco, you've ridden her how many times? You know her better than anybody. Just when the gates open, see what she does.'"

Lopez has been aboard Payntdembluesaway for six of her eight career victories, including five straight from November 2019 to January 28, 2021, during part of the 5-year-old mare's six-race win streak. Three of those wins were at Gulfstream.



Payntdembluesaway, a Kentucky-bred daughter of Paynter, is now a winner of eight of 13 lifetime starts with earnings of \$192,170.

Drop a Hint, a 19-1 shot owned by Sam Wilensky and trained by Herman Wilensky, took second with Team Valor International LLC's Beantown Baby, an Arnaud Delacour trainee, finishing third.





## BAD BEAT BRIAN — CANTERBURY

**A**fter being stuck behind a wall of horses entering the far turn, Paradise Farms Corp. and David Staudacher's Bad Beat Brian swung into the clear approaching the stretch and came with a steady drive through the lane to edge Xy Speed by a length in the \$90,000 Claiming Crown Canterbury Tom Metzen Memorial.

Bad Beat Brian, at 4-1 odds, ran the about five furlongs on the turf in :54.78 to extend trainer Mike Maker's record for Claiming Crown victories to 19 with his first in the Canterbury. Maker has won at least one race in all but three Claiming Crowns since 2007. The Canterbury, named to honor the late Tom Metzen and his efforts to launch the Claiming Crown at the Minnesota racetrack, was for horses that had raced for a tag of \$25,000 or less.

"The horse broke really sharp, and the pace was lively," Maker said. "I was just hoping we'd have a chance somewhere to get out, and he did and ran them down. As soon as he got him out without getting stopped, I felt pretty confident."

A 4-year-old Kentucky-bred gelding by Jack Milton, Bad Beat Brian has spent almost his entire career on the turf, and his lifetime record stands at six wins from 21 starts with earnings of \$247,234.

Winning Stables Inc.'s Xy Speed, winner of the \$100,000 Laurel Dash Stakes in his last start for trainer Gerald Bennett, held second after dueling for the lead. The Connector, a 24-1 longshot owned by Mark Hoffman and trained by Darien Rodriguez, crossed the wire in third.







## SUGAR FIX—TIARA

**B**eaten after looking like a winner at the top of the stretch in last year's running of the Claiming Crown Tiara, Big Frank Stable and Mad Dog Racing Stable's Sugar Fix came from off the pace and surged late to earn a  $1\frac{1}{4}$ -length victory in this year's edition of the \$95,000 event for fillies and mares who had started for \$25,000 or less.

Sugar Fix, who covered the about  $1\frac{1}{16}$  miles on the turf course in 1:40.19 at odds of 3-1, was piloted by Edgard Zayas for trainer Saffie Joseph Jr., the same connections who won the Claiming Crown Express with Face of Victory about 35 minutes earlier.

"The race before, I told Edgard to be aggressive," said the trainer. "This race I said, 'patience,' and he executed. Like most of the Claiming Crown races, you know your horse is doing well, but like I was telling the owner, you can run third or fourth having run your race. Thankfully, she ran her best today."

Sugar Fix, a 4-year-old Florida-bred filly by Treasure Beach (GB), has won 10 of 23 starts and banked \$315,019.



Imaginary Stables' Passion Plus, a 21-1 longshot for conditioner Elizabeth Dobles, closed to finish second with Whimsical Muse in third for trainer Mike Maker and owners Paradise Farms Corp. and David Staudacher.





## MID DAY IMAGE — EMERALD

**J**ockey Paco Lopez put the finishing touches on his five-win afternoon by guiding Patricia Generazio's homebred Mid Day Image to a front-running 1 ¼-length triumph in the \$95,000 Claiming Crown Emerald, an about 1 ½-mile turf contest for horses that had started for \$25,000 or less.

Mid Day Image entered the Emerald off back-to-back wins at Monmouth Park, the most recent coming September 12, and both in gate-to-wire fashion. The 5-year-old Midshipman horse went straight to the lead from his rail post and was never headed before stopping the timer at 1:39.82 as the 3-1 second choice in the wagering.

"[Mid Day Image] has a lot of speed," Lopez said. "I give credit to my horse. He's very, very good. He put me right there, and [trainer Luis] Carvajal [Jr.] told me, 'Paco, that horse is ready today.'"

New York-bred Mid Day Image, who had three prior wins on the Gulfstream turf course, improved his lifetime record to 21-9-1-3 with earnings of \$232,050.

MEB Stables LLC's Clear Vision, a Matthew O'Connor trainee who shipped south after two daylight wins at Saratoga Race Course and Belmont Park,



chased Mid Day Image the entire way and finished a clear second. Attentive, also a New York shipper, took third for owner Paradise Farms Corp. and trainer Mike Maker.





## TWELVE VOLT MAN—JEWEL

**M**agic Cap Stables' Twelve Volt Man made a late charge along the rail to register an upset victory in the \$125,000 Claiming Crown Jewel, the richest race on the card and contested at 1 1/8 miles for horses who had started for \$35,000 or less.

Twelve Volt Man, a lightly raced 3-year-old dismissed at odds of 10-1, gave trainer Saffie Joseph Jr. his third Claiming Crown victory of the day.

"It's an amazing day," Joseph said. "You come into these races and you can have thirds and fourths and go home with no wins. After we got the first one, I was thankful. Then the second one happened. Then we got a hard beat and got the third one. All the horses showed up."

Joseph also sent out Girolamo's Attack, who was more highly regarded than Twelve Volt Man as the 6-5 favorite, but that runner wasn't a factor.

Twelve Volt Man, who won his first two career starts before finishing far back in two subsequent stakes, was made eligible for the Jewel while winning an October 14 optional claiming allowance for a \$35,000 tag at Gulfstream. The Jewel marked just the seventh start for Twelve Volt Man—all in 2021—and nearly doubled the Violence gelding's bankroll to \$144,728.

"I had a really good trip," said winning jockey Edwin Gonzalez about the race timed in 1:49.92. "I was saving ground around the first two turns. This is a



really big horse. After the first time I rode the horse when he broke his maiden, I said to Saffie that this horse wants to go long."

Hanalei's Houdini, one of many successful runners on the day for owners Paradise Farms Corp. and David Staudacher and trainer Mike Maker, was well clear in second. Third place went to GU Racing Stable LLC's Mo Hawk, trained by Juan Avila.