



TIME FOR TROUBLE (OUTSIDE) DEFENDS HIS TITLE IN THE KENT STIRLING MEMORIAL IRON HORSE AT THE 25TH CLAIMING CROWN, WHICH RETURNED TO FAIR GROUNDS IN EARLY DECEMBER FOR THE FIRST TIME IN MORE THAN A DECADE.



## GOOD SAVE

MAINTENANCE CREW APPLAUDED FOR EFFORTS AT CLAIMING CROWN

A

passerby on St. Charles Avenue in New Orleans' Garden District lamented the unfortunate timing of the heavy rains forecast for the following day, December 2—the date the Claiming Crown was returning to Fair Grounds for the first time since 2011.

"It's really too bad; it hasn't rained here in weeks," she said. "We need the rain but maybe not this much."

The forecast proved correct as more than four inches of rain fell in the New Orleans area from the evening of December 1 until the morning of December 2 when spoonfuls of jambalaya, fried shrimp and fried catfish were doled out in the horsemen's hospitality tent at Fair Grounds. The free food came courtesy of the Louisiana HBPA and Alabama HBPA, which sponsored the 250 pounds of catfish and jambalaya, and Louisiana Lt. Gov. Billy Nungesser, who also serves as commissioner of the Louisiana Department of Culture, Recreation and Tourism and worked with the Louisiana Seafood Promotion and Marketing Board to donate 250 pounds of shrimp.

National HBPA CEO Eric Hamelback promised good eating before the 25th Claiming Crown, presented by the National HBPA and Thoroughbred Owners and Breeders Association. The only item of business remaining was whether the races would be run. A decision to cancel the opening two races—non-Claiming Crown

events—came a few hours before the first scheduled post of 12:45 p.m. CT after Claiming Crown officials came together with Fair Grounds racing officials Jason Boulet and Scott Jones and track superintendent Pedro Zavala. The first Claiming Crown race—the Ready's Rocket Express—was pushed back 45 minutes to 2:30 p.m. with a final decision on the card slated for 1:30 p.m.

"I didn't get a lot of sleep Friday night with the storms coming in and wondering what was going to happen," Hamelback said. "By 11 a.m. I was at the track, and we sat down with the stewards. The goal was to decide if we were going to run, period, and then set a secondary date if we couldn't run. Pedro was on the telephone with the stewards, and the conversation was leaning toward we weren't going to be able to run that day. Then Pedro stepped in, spoke up and said, 'Guys, if you can delay the post time, I think I can have it ready.'

"We worked it out, canceled those [first] two races, decided to reconvene at 1:30, get Pedro's opinion and go from there," Hamelback continued. "We broke the huddle, went out, and it was a little before noon at that point. I met with the Louisiana HBPA, and as we were sitting there—it was 12:30—it begins pouring rain again, and I just didn't really think we'd have a shot. But I'm watching the tractors go around, watching Pedro's crew work, and it was pretty amazing."

Several members of the jockey colony on outrider ponies took a tour of the

## Take a Number

2

Times the Claiming Crown has been run at Fair Grounds—2023 and 2011. The event is also slated for the New Orleans track in 2024.

7

Entries apiece for trainers Mike Maker and Robertino Diodoro

19

Scratches in the eight Claiming Crown races after heavy rains in the days leading up to and including December 2

90

Entries for the eight Claiming Crown races

25

States where the 90 Claiming Crown entrants competed in 2023. Two also raced in Canada.

11

Breeding programs represented by the runners—Louisiana, Kentucky, Florida, Illinois, Washington, New Jersey, Arkansas, New York, Ohio, Minnesota and Pennsylvania

2,999

Wins for jockey James Graham after the Claiming Crown card. Graham rode Anatolian in the Tiara and Time for Trouble in the Kent Stirling Memorial Iron Horse and hit his 3,000-win milestone the next day aboard Vortex in the second race at Fair Grounds.

saturated main track a little before 1 p.m. and gave the thumbs-up, and the races were cleared to run by 1:27 p.m. The Ready's Rocket Express went off at 2:32 p.m. Florida-based Caramel Chip splashed home by 3 ½ lengths, and the remainder of the card went off without incident or injury.

"They were very much on board with trying to race; they just wanted to make it safe," Hamelback said of the jockeys. "They were very accommodating, wanted to do anything they could to ride, and I certainly didn't want to have anything negative happen.

"Fortunately, we were able to pull off a very successful, competitive day of racing," he continued. "It was unfortunate that we weren't able to run on the grass, but when you look at the horses that scratched, there wasn't a significant amount. The Jewel didn't have any. ... And most importantly, all the horses and jocks came home safe, and a lot of credit goes to Pedro and his crew."

Jockey James Graham came away with two wins—the lone rider on the card with multiple wins—and also praised the maintenance crew.

"These guys do an amazing job," Graham said. "This track has always been good with water. About 12:30 today, we didn't think we'd get to run. They did an amazing job. That's why we like coming here for the winter, because we know



GWEN DAVIS/DAVIS INNOVATION

3,275

Victories for trainer Mike Maker after he sent out his record 22nd Claiming Crown winner in the Tiara with Anatolian

\$2,857,091

Total wagered (all-sources) for the Claiming Crown



RAPID TRANSIT WINNER RICHIESONAROLL (EXTREME OUTSIDE) FLEW THE FLAG FOR THE ILLINOIS BREEDING PROGRAM AT THE CLAIMING CROWN.

these guys can take care of what they need to take care of. Time is brilliant when you have her on your side. When you don't have her on your side, you maybe have to cancel two, but to save the rest of the card I think is the right thing to do. What a brilliant opportunity to have the Claiming Crown here again, after 12 years."

Trainer Joe Sharp, a former assistant to all-time leading Claiming Crown conditioner Mike Maker, saddled two winners in Runway Magic for Dwight Baron's Baron Racing Stables in the Emerald and Money Supply for Jordan Wycoff in the Jewel. Wycoff also picked up a victory in the Tiara with Anatolian, Maker's 22nd Claiming Crown winner.

"They did a great job having the track ready after all the rain we got," Sharp said. "When I came out this morning, I thought there was no way we would be able to make these races. Hats off to track management because every hour we checked on it, it got better and better. Really cool they didn't have to have any interruption. Lot of respect for what they did today."

The Claiming Crown, run at Churchill Downs under similar sloppy conditions albeit in much colder temperatures last year, will return to New Orleans in 2024.

—Tom Law

## Shop Talk

“Fast horses can run. Anybody can train a good horse. It’s the bad ones that no one can train.”

—Trainer Doug Cowans, who saddled *Mischievous Rogue* to win the Canterbury Tom Metzen Memorial



“Gritty.”

—Jockey Jareth Loveberry (above), after he won the Jewel aboard late-running *Money Supply*, on what mud tasted like

“Not very nice, but I do like playing in it.”

—Jockey James Graham, on the same topic after winning his second Claiming Crown event of 2023 aboard *Time for Trouble* in the Kent Stirling Memorial Iron Horse

“He’s a good kid, a good rider, and I know a lot of guys in New York like him. That’s enough for me.”

—Trainer Joe Sharp on Jaime Torres, who rode Emerald winner *Runway Magic*

“We wish the handle had been better, but for coming back to Fair Grounds for the first time in so many years and not having the ability to run on the turf, I believe we had a successful day.”

—National HBPA CEO Eric Hamelback



“For the cheaper horses where the owners don’t have a big budget, this is great.”

—Graham (above), on the opportunities provided by the Claiming Crown

“There are no words to be here and get the trophy.”

—Owner Alessio Bianco, after winning the Ready’s Rocket Express with *Caramel Chip*

“My husband and I had him at our farm in Florida and in a 2-year-olds in training sale. We had every intention of selling him and got \$240,000 for him. Carole, God love her, said, ‘Let’s run him.’ I just told her, ‘It’s your horse, have at it.’ He’s worked out great and has gotten better with age.”

—Penny Lopez, racing manager for Southern Comfort Stable owner Carole Fernandez, on Canterbury Tom Metzen Memorial winner *Mischievous Rogue*

“Jordan Wycoff picked him out. We talked about it, and I think we won a shake for him that day. He looked like a versatile horse, looked like [his best races were on a] fast track on the dirt ... and with blinkers ... and he’s done everything we’ve asked of him and then some.”

—Sharp on Jewel winner *Money Supply*





HODGES PHOTOGRAPHY

MONEY SUPPLY, A \$35,000 CLAIM AT SARATOGA IN AUGUST BY JORDAN WYCOFF AND TRAINER JOE SHARP, CAPS THE DAY WITH A VICTORY IN THE \$200,000 CLAIMING CROWN JEWEL UNDER JARETH LOVEBERRY.

## JEWEL—MONEY SUPPLY

**A**side from the heavy rains that led to races coming off the turf and a number of race-day scratches, the Claiming Crown's return to Fair Grounds in New Orleans went off without a hitch—and without incident in the first seven events on the card.

Jareth Loveberry and Joe Sharp felt like their good luck had run out when Jordan Wycoff's 5-2 favorite Money Supply broke through his stall just before Fair Grounds starter Jeremy Bourgeois sent the field away in the featured \$200,000 Claiming Crown Jewel.

"They don't run well, usually," Loveberry said. "But it didn't rile him up, so I was thinking, 'OK, he didn't get too keyed up and antsy off it. That's one positive.' You never want to do it, obviously. That's not a good sign, but he handled everything."

Sharp, fresh off a victory in the off-the-turf Claiming Crown Emerald with Runway Magic, felt the same deflation before being talked off the ledge.

"When that happened, I looked over at one of my owners and said, 'They never run good after that,'" Sharp said. "But he said, 'Sometimes they do.' The gate guy did a good job keeping him from going any further."

Once that bit of pre-race unsettledness cleared up, Money Supply still needed to negotiate the Jewel's 9 furlongs and a field that featured King's Ovation, Saqeel, Frosted Grace, All West and others.

Loveberry and Money Supply found themselves seventh of nine around the first turn and up the backstretch, almost 6 lengths behind free-wheeling frontrunner and 3-1 second choice King's Ovation through the opening half-mile in :49.45. Money Supply managed to get a smidge closer after 6 furlongs in 1:14.35 but still needed to make up almost 5 lengths turning for home.

"He had kind of a tough trip, but Jareth didn't panic," Sharp said. "Down the stretch the horse overcame everything. He's really gotten good, and he's gotten

confident. You know how it is, when a horse gets confident, and as the bar gets raised, they keep stepping up. That's what he's continuing to do, and we hope to see the same progression moving forward."

Money Supply picked off rivals in the lane while four paths off the rail, split Frosted Grace and King's Ovation at the eighth pole and drew off late to win by 1 ¾ lengths. Luigi's Spirit, second in back-to-back races in the Mid-Atlantic, rallied from eighth for the place spot, a neck in front of Frosted Grace.

"What a nice horse," Loveberry said. "Joe's done a really good job with him. He turned for home, he got that hole, and he was running home. ... It seems more of a closers' track today. I didn't get too uncomfortable because he was handling it the whole time. He never took a step off the bridle. He was ready to go."

Bred by Jeff Little, Teresa Little, Marilyn Little and William Lynn and out of the Candy Ride mare Evita's Sister, Money Supply started his career with Klaravich Stable and trainer Chad Brown after being sold for \$400,000 at the 2020 Keeneland September yearling sale. He won once in his first nine starts—a debut victory at Tampa Bay Downs in February 2022 to start his 3-year-old campaign—before being claimed by Wycoff and Sharp for \$35,000 out of an August 20 victory at Saratoga Race Course. After finishing second six days later in a 9-furlong starter allowance, Money Supply went with Sharp's string to Churchill Downs and rattled off back-to-back victories in a starter allowance and \$125,482 allowance before the Jewel.

"These are war horses, and it's cool to see a horse change barns, change venues, change environment and then all of a sudden find themselves," Sharp said. "It's not that we reinvent the wheel; sometimes they just get good at the right time. It's a lot of fun to watch that."

—Tom Law



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JORDAN WYCOFF'S ANATOLIAN HANDLES THE SLOP—AGAIN—AND GIVES ALL-TIME LEADING CLAIMING CROWN TRAINER MIKE MAKER HIS 22ND VICTORY WITH A 2 ½-LENGTH TALLY UNDER JAMES GRAHAM IN THE TIARA.

## TIARA—ANATOLIAN

S

avvy horseplayers and rival horsemen are almost required to scan the overnight for the Claiming Crown the moment it comes out to see in which races Mike Maker might factor.

The all-time leading Claiming Crown trainer held a strong hand in three events as the series made its return to Fair Grounds in 2023. He sent out six horses in those races and came away with a victory in the \$150,000 Claiming Crown Tiara with Anatolian. Jordan Wycoff's 4-year-old daughter of Not This Time, exiting a win in an off-the-turf 10-furlong optional-claiming race November 12 at Churchill Downs, gave Maker his 22nd Claiming Crown win.

The 1 ½-mile Tiara also came off the grass following the soaking rains. James Graham rode Anatolian, the first of his two Claiming Crown victories on the day.

"Mike is a man of few words; anybody that's interviewed him knows that," Graham said when asked if there were any pre-race instructions. "If he's putting you on one, he's expecting you to get the job done. I appreciate it. We wouldn't be able to do this without the likes of Mike. Big claiming barn, good trainer, turns them out every year and brings a handful of horses for the Claiming Crown. This is like his Breeders' Cup, and I know he's won one of those, too."

Maker, who also won the \$100,000 Sandpiper Stakes at Tampa Bay Downs with Let Them Watch on Claiming Crown Day, claimed Anatolian on

behalf of Wycoff for \$35,000 in her debut at Gulfstream Park in late February 2022. She broke her maiden two starts later for a \$16,000 tag, meeting the Tiara's conditions for fillies and mares who have started for \$25,000 or less in 2022–23.

Anatolian came in with four wins, three on the main track and one on a sloppy track in a \$115,345 allowance at Saratoga Race Course. Bettors responded, sending Anatolian off as the 3-2 favorite in the field of eight, reduced by just one with the scratch of morning-line favorite Perhaps Tonight.

Graham allowed Anatolian to settle in seventh early—"probably a length or two further back than I wanted but they went quick," he said—through the opening quarter-mile in :23.82. Anatolian remained in sixth through 6 furlongs before finishing off her wide run toward the leaders in the lane. She took over outside the eighth pole and widened to a 2 ½-length win over Enchanted Nile with Dana's Beauty third.

"I don't think it would matter what surface we were on today; she was going to win," Graham said. "She's very nice, very honest. Can't complain."

Bred in Kentucky by Springland Farm and out of the Curlin mare Lucky Winner, Anatolian improved to 5-for-13 and boosted her earnings to \$313,840.

—Tom Law



BARON RACING STABLES' RUNWAY MAGIC, CLAIMED FOR \$20,000 LESS THAN TWO MONTHS BEFORE, SCOOTs AWAY TO A 1 ½-LENGTH WIN UNDER JAIME TORRES IN THE OFF-THE-TURF CLAIMING CROWN EMERALD.

## EMERALD—RUNWAY MAGIC

**J**oe Sharp prepared his entries for the Claiming Crown a week out from the 25th renewal at Fair Grounds and put Runway Magic in the group with one thing in mind.

"Turf is a bit of an unknown," Sharp said of the 5-year-old Runhappy gelding, who made just one start on the grass in a 1-mile allowance race at Ellis Park in August 2021. "We entered hoping it would come off. He's run once on the grass. But like I said, it all worked out. We're glad to see these fields hold up well when they come off the turf."

Sound familiar?

Sharp did the same thing a year ago with Palace Coup, who drew into the Claiming Crown Emerald as the lone main-track-only runner and came away with a victory in the slop at Churchill Downs. He did it again with Runway Magic, who drew into the body of the race but won the off-the-turf \$150,000 Emerald by 1 ½ lengths under Jaime Torres for owner Dwight Baron's Baron Racing Stables.

"Everything came together coming off the turf," Sharp said. "When he's doing well, he runs big. Jaime did a good job; he waited long enough because he kind of can have a tendency to hang. Great ride. Grateful for the opportunity from the owner. We always love the Claiming Crown; it's fun to display these claiming horses, these warriors."

The 5-1 fourth choice in the field of seven, Runway Magic pressed early leader Tatanka through the opening half-mile in :48.65 with 8-5 favorite Race Craft a few lengths back up the backstretch. Torres put more pressure on Tatanka and James Graham heading into the far turn and sent Runway Magic to

the front just before the field turned for home.

Runway Magic finished well out in the racetrack down the lane while Duke of Carthania claimed the place spot, 2 lengths ahead of Tatanka. Runway Magic, a Kentucky-bred out of the A.P. Indy mare Divine Escapade, won in 1:44.71 over the sloppy and sealed track.

Runway Magic gave Sharp his second Claiming Crown win, and the trainer made it three in the next race when Money Supply captured the \$200,000 Jewel.

Starting his career for his breeders, Hill 'n' Dale Farm and Bruce Lunsford, and trainer Rusty Arnold, Runway Magic was claimed for \$20,000 in early October 2022. Sharp claimed him for \$30,000 one start later, a win at Keeneland Race Course, before losing him in January at Oaklawn Park for \$50,000. Runway Magic didn't show up at the races until October 28, when he ran for a \$20,000 tag for trainer Tom Amoss at Delta Downs.

"Obviously he's a horse we had a liking for," Sharp said. "Dwight Baron brought him up. I didn't see that he was in at Delta, and he said, 'What about your old horse?' We picked him back up over there. ... Sometimes when they get back home in their environment they move forward. We're very proud of him."

The Emerald was one of three six-figure victories for the Sharp barn on the day, along with Money Supply and Brad Grady's homebred Honey Dijon in the \$300,000 FTBOA Florida Sire My Dear Girl Stakes at Gulfstream Park. Runway Magic picked up \$90,000 for the Emerald to boost his earnings to \$310,342 from a record of 4-3-3 in 18 starts.

—Tom Law



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SOUTHERN COMFORT STABLE'S MISCHIEVOUS ROGUE DELIVERS A RARE HOMEBRED VICTORY ON CLAIMING CROWN DAY UNDER LUAN MACHADO IN THE CANTERBURY TOM METZEN MEMORIAL.

## CANTERBURY TOM METZEN MEMORIAL—MISCHIEVOUS ROGUE

A

homebred winner on Claiming Crown Day, you say? Surely that's a misprint. Think again.

Mischievous Rogue, bred by Carole Fernandez and raced in her white-and-red Southern Comfort Stable colors, delivered the rare win by a homebred during the showcase for the everyday horses with a powerful score in the \$150,000 Claiming Crown Canterbury Tom Metzen Memorial. And the 5-year-old Into Mischief gelding won the off-the-turf 5 ½-furlong event by 3 ½ lengths under Luan Machado after almost staying in the barn.

"Early in the week when I was looking at the forecast I said, 'I don't know what we're going to do, but I'm probably out,'" said Doug Cowans, who trains Mischievous Rogue from his base at Turfway Park. "I left it open a crack but said I was probably out."

A conversation with Penny Lopez, who helps manage Fernandez's horses, changed things.

"New Orleans lives in a hole," Lopez said. "They're used to this mud and slop. I figured they'll have it straightened out by race time. You just know."

Mischievous Rogue hadn't run on an off track in 17 prior starts, but Cowans relented.

"Ten other people kept calling me and saying he had a big Tomlinson number for the mud," Cowans said. "I didn't think they would run at all. When I saw the water in the barn area this morning, it was up over the tires of the cars."

The card went on, and Mischievous Rogue ran big, collecting his sixth win after taking the overland path to victory. The Kentucky-bred out of the Candy Ride mare Mahna came into the Metzen Memorial off four starts on synthetic followed by four starts on the turf, all sprints from 5 ½ to 6 ½ furlongs.

Cowans watched Mischievous Rogue race seventh of nine in the early stages and figured he'd need his "built-in excuse," but then the gelding and Machado got on track around the far turn while well out in the track. Mischievous Rogue came widest of all into the lane and poured it on late to win in 1:04.20 as the 8-5 favorite. Counterstrike finished second with Tilted Towers third.

"You're on the inside, you've got to work out a trip, get off the rail; these horses are all closing," Cowans told Machado in the paddock. "Don't try to get in a big rush; there's a lot of speed in the race. Just try to get him outside and see what he can do in the slop."

Mischievous Rogue, a \$240,000 RNA at the 2020 Ocala Breeders' Sales April 2-year-olds in training sale and risked for a \$20,000 tag in November 2022 at Churchill Downs, boosted his career earnings to \$411,297 with his fourth win in eight starts in 2023—all for his breeder and owner.

"We got lucky running him for a tag once or twice," Cowans said. "There was a long layoff, we gelded him, and then when he came back, we ran him for \$20,000 the first time. That's where we felt like he was. We weren't trying to do anything out of line. When he got back on the [Polytrack] and turf, he took off. I tell you, the horse has gotten good. I told [Lopez], 'The horse can't be doing any better.' When I got here, he shipped good, trained well."

"Early on I felt like the horse had talent, but I never could get it out of him," Cowans continued. "Even Brian Hernandez rode him early on for me at Turfway once. He told me, 'Whatever you do, run the horse back at Churchill.' I took him over to Churchill, and he threw craps again. I looked at him after the race and was like, 'The horse has talent, but he hasn't shown it yet.'"

—Tom Law



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APPRENTICE EMMANUEL GILES GUIDES RICHIESONAROLL FOR OWNER/TRAINER JOSE RODRIGUEZ IN THE CLAIMING CROWN RAPID TRANSIT.

## RAPID TRANSIT—RICHIESONAROLL

**T**he founders and presenters of the Claiming Crown promote the event as the “claiming horse owner’s Breeders’ Cup” and “one for the sometimes-forgotten ‘average owner,’” and it rang true a little after 5 p.m. CT at Fair Grounds December 2.

Take the \$100,000 Claiming Crown Rapid Transit. It was won by a 3-year-old Illinois-bred gelding from FanDuel Sportsbook and Horse Racing (the former Fairmount Park) who was saddled by a trainer barely a year into his career and ridden by a five-pound apprentice in just his 500th race. Richiesonaroll delivered the biggest upset of the day, winning by a neck for owner/trainer Jose Rodriguez and jockey Emmanuel Giles.

Richiesonaroll, a son of Gone Astray claimed by Rodriguez for \$12,500 in June at Hawthorne Race Course, closed from fifth in midstretch to edge Kentucky-based Startdfromdabottom by a neck with fellow FanDuel-based runner and pacesetter Faithful Ruler third in the field of 10.

“I wasn’t sure, but I’m glad to be here,” Rodriguez said of the tight finish. “These days don’t come very often, and I’m glad I’m here.”

Giles, who rode Richiesonaroll in his last two starts, including a blowout victory in a state-bred allowance-optional at FanDuel when he wasn’t risked for a tag, knew he had come up with the biggest victory of his young career.

“For sure, I rode all the way to the end thinking I won,” Giles, the younger brother to former Illinois-based jockey Francisco Giles, said through Rodriguez as the impromptu interpreter. “It’s always better to be sure, so I kept riding to the wire.”

Rodriguez, 40, took out his license in the fall of 2022 and brought Richiesonaroll to Fair Grounds with a training resume of 22 wins in 155 starts. He saddled 9-2 third choice Samarita to a fourth in the Glass Slipper early on the

card, which was maybe even more of a surprise than Richiesonaroll upsetting the Rapid Transit at almost 16-1.

“Samarita, I had more confidence in her,” Rodriguez said. “It didn’t work out. Maybe the surface, I don’t know. You can’t win them all.”

Richiesonaroll, who started his career sprinting on the grass at Colonial Downs in 2022 with trainer Larry Rivelli and owners Patricia’s Hope and Richard Ravin, now sports two wins and two seconds since being claimed by Rodriguez June 22. Richiesonaroll was claimed previously by trainer Gerald Bennett off Rivelli at Colonial in the gelding’s second start and then five starts later by Michael Campbell at Tampa Bay Downs.

Rodriguez dropped the slip two starts after that, when Richiesonaroll finished a well-beaten fourth after showing speed early going 1 mile and 70 yards on the dirt at Hawthorne. He didn’t immediately think of the Claiming Crown after that but wanted to shorten the gelding up for the rest of his summer campaign.

Richiesonaroll showed plenty of speed in his three starts for Rodriguez but came from 5 lengths back after a sharp opening half-mile in :45.36 in the 6-furlong Rapid Transit.

“It wasn’t the plan at all; there was a lot of speed, and it worked out the whole way,” Rodriguez said of the change in tactics. “[The Claiming Crown] wasn’t really a thought. I got a phone call from the guys in the office; they mentioned it and it took me a while to... decide to do it. I’m glad I did.”

Richiesonaroll, bred by Ravin and out of the Bring the Heat mare Sydneyrella, picked up \$60,000 and boosted his bankroll to \$143,170 from a record of 4-5-0 in 13 starts.

—Tom Law





HODGES PHOTOGRAPHY

XYLOPHONE HELPED A PLAN HATCHED LAST SPRING BY HER FORMER TRAINER COME TO REALITY IN WINNING THE CLAIMING CROWN GLASS SLIPPER UNDER MITCHELL MURRILL.

## GLASS SLIPPER—XYLOPHONE

**B**

url McBride picked up his phone last spring and called Joseph Longtin with some news. Like any owner receiving a call from a trainer, Longtin listened to the update with hesitation.

“I sent your horse to Kentucky,” McBride said, referring to the 5-year-old Tonalist mare Xylophone, who had recently finished fifth in a \$25,000 claiming race on the grass at Lone Star Park.

“You did what?” a surprised Longtin asked.

McBride had sent Xylophone to fellow trainer Chris Hartman, not out of frustration in the midst of a five-race losing streak since claiming the mare for \$12,500 but with a plan.

“Chris is a longtime Oaklawn trainer, a Hot Springs guy; and he and Burl McBride, they’re good friends, so logistically it worked out,” said Longtin, himself a resident of Hot Springs and a regular at Oaklawn Park. “Burl actually made the decision to send her to Chris, which was huge. . . . He had a plan. This was it, and here we are.”

The plan involved sending Xylophone to New Orleans for the \$100,000 Claiming Crown Glass Slipper, where she might factor with a return to her form of last February and March. Xylophone did just that, exiting a useful prep in a starter allowance in late October at Keeneland Race Course and turning the tables on My Good Fortune to win the 1-mile Glass Slipper.

Mitchell Murrill rode Xylophone, the 3-1 favorite in the field of nine, and she won by a widening 3 ¾ lengths in 1:39.02 over the sloppy track.

“With all this rain, Chris and I discussed it this morning that sitting on that far turn and keeping her four or five [paths] off the rail was the trip we wanted,” Murrill said. “Get a good clean path on the high ground, and then I could pick my

spot down the lane. It seemed to work out perfectly. Each stride down the lane she kept reaching and reaching and reaching, so I knew it was over turning for home.”

Xylophone, second to My Good Fortune in that Keeneland starter, won for the second time in nine starts in 2023. Longtin and McBride claimed her out of a starter-optional February 11 at Oaklawn, where she finished in a dead heat for second to start a run of three straight runner-up finishes. Xylophone ended the winless run with a victory in an off-the-turf starter-optional August 15 at Horseshoe Indianapolis in her first start for Hartman.

Xylophone not only defeated My Good Fortune, also trained by Hartman, in the Glass Slipper but also the race’s defending champ and 2023 Claiming Crown Horse of the Year Invaluable, who struggled in the off going on the way to finishing sixth. Xylophone improved to 6-for-31 with earnings of \$189,224.

Longtin, attending the races with his nephew decked out in a Xylophone baseball hat, celebrated his first Claiming Crown victory with a trip to the fourth floor of the clubhouse to see if the band jamming in the entryway could pump out some tunes on a xylophone.

“That was a really stellar field; I’m so proud of her,” he said. “Marlon [Ortiz], Chris’ assistant, told me yesterday that she was training unbelievably. He had her at Keeneland, and she was training good there, but something is clicking in this mare. She’s getting better and better. . . . You hear the term from horsemen that they light up for certain reasons; well, her light bulb goes on when it gets muddy.”

—Tom Law



HODGES PHOTOGRAPHY

TIME FOR TROUBLE (OUTSIDE) EDGES PROVERB IN DEEP STRETCH FOR HIS SECOND STRAIGHT VICTORY IN THE CLAIMING CROWN KENT STIRLING MEMORIAL IRON HORSE, ALSO THE THIRD CONSECUTIVE VICTORY IN THE EVENT FOR TRAINER JEFF HILES.

# KENT STIRLING MEMORIAL IRON HORSE — TIME FOR TROUBLE

**J**eff Hiles aimed high with Time for Trouble in 2023. The Kentucky-based horseman ran the 6-year-old English Channel gelding in graded turf stakes at Gulfstream Park and Churchill Downs, high-purse races at Keeneland and Kentucky Downs and a marathon dirt stakes at Saratoga before embarking on a trip to California for the most prestigious stamina test of the season on the Breeders' Cup undercard. They didn't make the Grade 2 Thoroughbred Aftercare Alliance Marathon Stakes at Santa Anita Park—blame a superficial injury and inflammation that required treatment—but did defend their title in the \$100,000 Claiming Crown Kent Stirling Memorial Iron Horse at Fair Grounds.

"Got lucky," Hiles said after Time for Trouble gave him a third straight Iron Horse victory. "It's good to win a Claiming Crown race. They're difficult to win. You've got to have the right horse, right place, right track. If you look at the PPs of these horses, some of them have [won] 13, 15, 20 races. These are fine horses to do that. It's extremely difficult to beat them. To win it three years in a row, I never thought I would."

Hiles also won the 1 1/16-mile Iron Horse at three tracks, with Blue Steel winning at Gulfstream in 2021 and Time for Trouble last year at Churchill.

Owned by Hiles and Paul Parker's Thorndale Stable, the 6-5 favorite closed from next to last over the sloppy track under James Graham to win by a head over Proverb in 1:46.17. Time for Trouble, claimed by Hiles in a 13-way shake

for \$8,000 in June 2021, improved to 10-for-28 with earnings of \$450,757 in five seasons.

"We've been fortunate with him," Hiles said. "He's been a blessing to my barn. This is why we do what we do. At the three-sixteenths pole, we didn't think we had a shot. The emotions you experience that last three-sixteenths of a race are exactly why we are in this. The thrill, the agony. You're going to win, you're not going to win, you're going to win, the adrenaline kicks in, the emotions. You can't buy it."

Hiles watched the race from a row of grandstand bleachers just before the finish, alongside fellow Kentucky trainer George Leonard III. They saw Time for Trouble, second in Saratoga's Birdstone Stakes behind marathon specialist Next two starts earlier, drop back 8 lengths on the backstretch.

Graham and Time for Trouble were still 7 3/4 lengths behind after Coach Adams clicked off 6 furlongs in 1:12.74. Time for Trouble made steady progress at the leaders in the stretch and got up in time inside the sixteenth pole, despite a belated battle with Proverb approaching the finish.

"He ran great," said Graham, winning his second Claiming Crown race after taking the preceding Tiara on Anatolian. "A little further back than I wanted to be, but he's such a big, long, lanky horse he didn't get around that [first] turn really good. But he got in a great rhythm down the backside, picked off horses."

—Tom Law



CARAMEL CHIP AND FLORENT GEROUX SPLASH TO VICTORY IN THE \$75,000 CLAIMING CROWN READY'S ROCKET EXPRESS TO KICK OFF THE 25TH CLAIMING CROWN CARD AT FAIR GROUNDS.

## READY'S ROCKET EXPRESS— CARAMEL CHIP

Owner Alessio Bianco and trainer Jose D'Angelo thought so much of Caramel Chip they considered moving the 5-year-old son of Midshipman up in class just in time for the Claiming Crown.

"That was my goal for the year," Bianco said of running in the Claiming Crown's return to Fair Grounds December 2. "He ran so many races, so many good races, beautiful numbers. The Claiming Crown for me was like [the goal]. I was in between the \$8,000 or \$16,000, but when you come here, you are like, 'I don't want too much stress.'"

Eligible for the Claiming Crown Ready's Rocket Express—for 3-year-olds and up who have started for \$8,000 or less in their careers—and the Claiming Crown Rapid Transit—for 3-year-olds and up who have started for \$16,000 or less in 2022–23—Caramel Chip wound up in the former and put his team in the winner's circle.

"He's a horse that can compete with anyone, but to come here and get the trophy, that's the most important thing," said Bianco, a native of Italy who lives in Florida and races as Bianco Stable. "Thank God. I'm very grateful."

Bianco and D'Angelo, who bases his training operation at Palm Meadows in South Florida, ran Caramel Chip above where he was eligible in 2023. He finished fourth in an open-company allowance at Saratoga Race Course—about 5 lengths behind eventual graded stakes winner Everso Mischievous—in early August and won and placed in allowance-optional events in South Florida not long after Bianco claimed him for \$8,000 in early January at Gulfstream Park.

Caramel Chip had won six of 13 starts with three seconds coming into the \$75,000 Ready's Rocket Express, warranting a spot as the 2-1 second choice in the field of eight. He'd also won on a sloppy track, which he would face in New Orleans after the track experienced heavy rains for a solid 48-hour stretch before the race.

"I don't have words for this horse," Bianco said after Caramel Chip won by 3 ½ lengths over Beverly Park, North America's leading horse by wins in 2022 with a record of 15-for-30. "Since I came here, I knew it. I knew he had a big heart. Just to be around him, you can tell he's an amazing horse. We put him in each race, and he runs like crazy, just amazing to have him. A real pleasure to have him and to be around him is a pleasure.

"He's super intelligent," Bianco continued. "You just go in there, give him a kiss and so much love. When you give love to horses and they understand you, I'm telling you, they change a lot."

Florent Geroux rode Caramel Chip, bred in Kentucky by Bugle Hill Farm out of the Speightstown mare Nandira. Caramel Chip covered the 6 furlongs in 1:10.25 and improved to 10-for-34 with earnings of \$286,490.

The Ready's Rocket Express, which featured a field with a combined 97 wins, kicked off the card after track management opted to cancel a state-bred claiming race and maiden special weight on the grass that were originally carded to start the program. **HJ**

—Tom Law