



BLUE SKIES AND A WARM AFTERNOON PROVIDED THE IDEAL SETTING FOR THE CLAIMING CROWN'S RETURN TO CHURCHILL DOWNS IN 2024.



# BACK TO THE BLUEGRASS

Eric Hamelback stood in Churchill Downs' paddock midway through the 26th Claiming Crown card and couldn't help but think about those who put their stamps on the day that celebrates the blue-collar horses and horsemen and women who often ply their trade far from the spotlight.

Tom Metzen and Kent Stirling, leaders with the HBPA at the national and state levels and tireless, fierce and loyal advocates for horsemen throughout their careers, were chief among those thoughts.

"It was a glowing tribute especially to Tom Metzen," said Hamelback, CEO of the National HBPA, which presents the Claiming Crown in conjunction with the Thoroughbred Owners and Breeders Association. "Going all the way back to 1998, the formulation and the thought to bring something like the Claiming Crown to the forefront—they had a lot of vision. Hosting the first one in 1999 and the intent at least in the beginning ... to try and move it around some, which they did. It started out slow, then getting it to Gulfstream Park, where Kent Stirling took it to a new level.

"For me, in the paddock, watching everything go on in slow motion, I thought about Tom and Kent, both who have passed away," Hamelback added. "It was an emotional time for me because it was such a great event this year."

An enthusiastic crowd turned out for the perfect fall afternoon of racing under the twin spires November 16, as Churchill hosted the Claiming Crown for the second time in three years. Churchill doesn't report attendance figures, but a safe estimate might peg the crowd as high as 10 times the number for 2022 when a cold, raw day featuring rain and snow welcomed the Claiming Crown to Louisville for the first time.

The overnight for this year's event featured 119 entries, including the maximum 16 in five races, from 83 trainers. Seven races drew overflow fields beyond the 12-horse limit. Two dozen horses wound up on the also-eligible lists, and an additional 16 horses were entered but didn't even make the also-eligible lists.

The Claiming Crown races ended up with an average field size of almost 11 runners, and horseplayers responded as enthusiastically as the participants with an average win payoff of almost \$25 for a \$2 bet.

The sun-splashed day went off without much of a hitch. When the last Claiming Crown race ended a little after 6 p.m., accompanied by the setting sun, it ensured all eight races were completed safely.

"The Claiming Crown is awesome," said Mike Marsico, shortly after celebrating Like a Saltshaker's victory in the Rapid Transit for his family's



GWEN DAVIS/DAVIS INNOVATION



FANS OF ALL AGES ENJOYED THE 26TH CLAIMING CROWN IN MID-NOVEMBER AT CHURCHILL DOWNS.



GWEN DAVIS/DAVIS INNOVATION

SURFACE TO AIR (11), WHO CROSSED THE FINISH FIRST, AND LAUGHING BOY (9) AND THEIR HANDLERS WAIT FOR THE STEWARDS' DECISION AFTER THE CLAIMING CROWN JEWEL.

Marsico Brothers Racing partnership. "For owners like us, honestly, it's the premier event that we get to compete in. We absolutely love it."

Horseplayers wagered \$10,262,495 on the 11-race card. That far outpaced the last two editions at Churchill in 2022 and Fair Grounds in 2023, events plagued by wet weather that forced the days' turf races to the main track.

"The handle didn't get close to the record of \$14 million that we had at Gulfstream back in 2020 when COVID was going on and only a few tracks were racing anyway, but to get over that \$10 million mark was very satisfying," Hamelback said. "To hear Churchill management happy and glowing about the day, that reaffirmed the fact that it was a successful day.

"Overall, [it was] an overwhelming, emotional day and a happy day," he continued. "The Claiming Crown benefited from being at Churchill. And I think Churchill benefited from the Claiming Crown being there. We weren't even past the fifth race and management said to me, 'We're coming back next year, right?' It's a deal. We're definitely coming back in 2025, and I hope to set it there for a little while."

—Tom Law

## Take a Number

### 10.75

Average field size for the eight Claiming Crown races, which featured 86 starters

### 12

Breeding programs represented by the runners—California, Indiana, Kentucky, Florida, Louisiana, New York, Oregon, Pennsylvania and Washington, along with England, Ireland and Ontario

### \$24.86

Average win payoff for the eight Claiming Crown races

### 42

Initial nominations received for the Claiming Crown Emerald

### 83

Trainers represented on the overnight for the Claiming Crown



## Say What?

“It was hard. It wasn’t easy. It took a little extra training, I guess, to get him fit for the mile and an eighth.”

—Winning trainer David Jacobson on bringing *Laughing Boy* back off an almost seven-month layoff for the *Jewel*

“We’ll see how he does. He might need a long rest, or he might be in the entries next week.”

—Jacobson on what could be next for *Jewel* winner *Laughing Boy*

“I’m from the same place the horse is from. Well, at least his name. He’s by *Treasure Beach*, and I’m from *Treasure Beach*, St. Elizabeth, in Jamaica.”

—Owner Anthony Rogers on what he liked about *Emerald* winner *Echo Lane* to claim the colt for \$25,000 in late 2023

“Nervous confidence.”

—Trainer Rohan Crichton when Rogers said they came into the *Emerald* with confidence

“Let’s do it. I’ve done one or two.”

—Wayne Catalano, after being asked for an interview after saddling *Ghostly Gal* to victory in the *Tiara*

“I thought you’d be in New Orleans eating red beans and rice already.”

—Churchill Downs Vice President of Racing Ben Huffman to Catalano after the *Tiara*

“He’s earned his way back here. ... He’s super classy, just look at him.”

—Owner Alessio Bianco before *Caramel Chip* finished a game third in defense of his *Ready’s Rocket Express* title

“If they’re in a stretch duel, *Saltshaker* will try to get his nose in front.”

—Trainer Brittany Vanden Berg to her husband and jockey Chris Emigh before the *Rapid Transit*

“This is the biggest race we’ve won to date so far. The *Claiming Crown* is huge because we’re claiming trainers and owners. I couldn’t be happier for all my owners. I couldn’t be happier for everyone that made it here today. This is such a great stage for everybody.”

—Vanden Berg

“Just got to make sure he has the money in the account.”

—Jeff Mullins, trainer of *Glass Slipper* winner *Jubilant Joanie*, when owner Will De Quevedo said he just “writes the checks” for potential claims

“I’m the claiming king of Gulfstream. I buy cheap, run them, get claimed, keep going. This horse ended up being better than most, so we never ended up putting him in for a tag after that.”

—Big Frank Stable’s Frank Rupolo after *Concrete Glory* won the *Ready’s Rocket Express*

“I try to be realistic with what I’ve got. I claimed her for \$5,000. She’s a lower-level horse, and we’ve been able to run her in some races and make a little money with her. I know she’s not *Seabiscuit*, but she is to us.”

—Owner-trainer Mark Hibdon on *Tennessee Moon*, who finished fourth in the *Glass Slipper* after coming in with a North American-leading 11 wins in 2024. She added a 12th win December 7 at *Delta Downs*.



THE HORSES ARE ALWAYS THE STARS AT CHURCHILL DOWNS.



LIAM AND MARY K OGLETREE TIED THE KNOT NOVEMBER 16 AT THE KENTUCKY DERBY MUSEUM BEFORE TAKING IN SOME OF THE CLAIMING CROWN CARD WITH THEIR WEDDING PARTY BETWEEN THE CEREMONY AND RECEPTION.



RENEE TORBIT/COADY PHOTOGRAPHY

JOCKEY SAMI CAMACHO EMBRACES MEMBERS OF DAVID JACOBSON'S TEAM AFTER LAUGHING BOY WINS THE CLAIMING CROWN JEWEL ON THE DISQUALIFICATION OF SURFACE TO AIR.

## JEWEL—LAUGHING BOY

**P**anagiotis Synnefias couldn't believe it. Neither could David Jacobson.

Such was life on both ends of a disqualification in the 26th renewal of the featured \$225,000 Claiming Crown Jewel at Churchill Downs.

Trainer Jacobson and fellow co-owner Lawrence Roman wound up the beneficiaries of the stewards' decision in the Jewel, which elevated their Laughing Boy from second to first and disqualified the Synnefias-trained Surface to Air to fourth in the 9-furlong Jewel. The stewards decided Surface to Air impeded fourth-place Welaka and jockey Adam Beschizza, who claimed foul, inside the eighth pole and made the call—the right or wrong call, depending on who was asked.

"Two stakes races out of three starts, very exciting," said Jacobson, referring to Laughing Boy being put up for the win in the Excelsior Stakes in late March at Aqueduct. "Only we didn't have to do any of the work this time."

Surface to Air, who crossed the finish a half-length in front under Fernando Jara, apparently did that "work" in the eyes of the officials. He and Laughing Boy appeared to squeeze the retreating Welaka out on each side, at least the way Synnefias saw it.

"[Laughing Boy] comes out, our horse goes in and corrects himself right away," Synnefias said while watching the replay after the decision was announced. "The horse in between was already (backing up). He wasn't going anywhere. ... My horse doesn't stop his momentum, not in the slightest bit. There's no reason behind it. Our horse was much the best."

Sami Camacho Jr. rode Laughing Boy, a 6-year-old son of Distorted Humor purchased by Roman and Jacobson for \$47,000 at the 2023 Fasig-Tipton Kentucky July horses of racing age sale, and agreed with the decision.

"It was an exciting race," Camacho said. "At the quarter pole, I felt like I still had a lot of horses to fight. He's the kind of horse that never gives up, and he continued to fight. By the grace of God, we got the win, again, the same way that we did last time when I rode him in New York. This is really great. ... My horse is the kind that likes the fight. I tried to pull him as close to the other horse as much as I can, but I never affected the other one intentionally."

Off since finishing a distant eighth in the Grade 3 Ben Ali Stakes in late April at Keeneland Race Course, Laughing Boy went to the post at 10-1 in the Jewel's field of nine behind last year's winner Money Supply and others. Camacho put Laughing Boy on the lead from the start and coaxed him through moderate fractions of :24.10, :49.58 and 1:14.25 ahead of Welaka. Surface to Air, the 4-1 fourth choice off a win in an allowance-optional at Keeneland, took up the chase on the far turn and came alongside the leading pair in the stretch. Surface to Air took the lead inside the eighth pole and held off Laughing Boy at the wire with Hurry Hurry a neck back in third.

Laughing Boy, originally a \$400,000 yearling purchased by Kenny McPeck at the 2019 Keeneland September sale, improved to 5-4-5 in 33 starts and picked up \$134,040 to boost his bankroll to \$507,778.

—Tom Law





TOMMY TOWN THOROUGHBREDS' HOMEBRED MARE GHOSTLY GAL (OUTSIDE) UPENDS ODDS-ON FAVORITE DANA'S BEAUTY AND OTHERS TO WIN THE TIARA FOR JOCKEY VINCENT CHEMINAUD AND TRAINER WAYNE CATALANO.

## TIARA—GHOSTLY GAL

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he \$166,334 Claiming Crown Tiara looked like a layup for Dana's Beauty.

Everything seemed dressed up for the 6-year-old Not This Time mare as turf racing returned to the Claiming Crown for the first time since 2021 following snow at Churchill Downs in 2022 and near monsoon rains at Fair Grounds in 2023. Dana's Beauty came into the Tiara off a victory in the \$75,000 Ricks Memorial Stakes in late September at Remington Park. She'd won two other stakes in 2024—the Latonia at Turfway Park in late March and the Ouija Board at Lone Star Park in her first start for trainer Mike Maker and John Stewart's Resolute Racing, which paid \$450,000 for her at Keeneland's April horses of racing age sale.

Stewart and his entourage of family and advisors came out, and Maker saddled the mare with hopes to build on his Claiming Crown record of 22 victories. Then along came Ghostly Gal.

Tommy Town Thoroughbreds' homebred Ghostzapper mare ran down Dana's Beauty in the stretch to win the 1½-mile turf event by a head, giving trainer Wayne Catalano his second Claiming Crown victory.

"We knew [Dana's Beauty] was pretty tough on paper, but they don't run them on paper," Catalano said on his way for the winner's toast. "You got to be in them to win them, somebody said that."

Ghostly Gal almost wasn't in the Tiara.

Catalano nominated and entered the Kentucky-bred after a call from the racing office about the mare's eligibility. She'd run for a \$25,000 tag two starts back—and won going 1 mile on the grass at Colonial in her second start for Catalano—and would be a major player in the Tiara against Dana's Beauty and another Maker runner, Boomin' Belle.

"They called me the other day and asked about my filly; I said she's training great and she's in good form," Catalano said. "It is what it is."

The 4-1 third choice behind odds-on Dana's Beauty and 3-1 Boomin' Belle, Ghostly Gal and Vincent Cheminaud raced toward the back of the field in seventh through the opening fractions. Dana's Beauty and Jose Ortiz were one spot ahead of Ghostly Gal into the first turn and down the backstretch before shifting three wide on the far turn for a run at leaders Big Dig, Boomin' Belle and Best Performer.

Dana's Beauty took command turning for home and looked on her way after opening a 1½-length lead in midstretch. Cheminaud kept Ghostly Gal in the clear on the outside and stayed busy through the lane to cut into Dana's Beauty's lead. Ghostly Gal edged past the favorite inside the sixteenth pole for her sixth win in 15 starts.

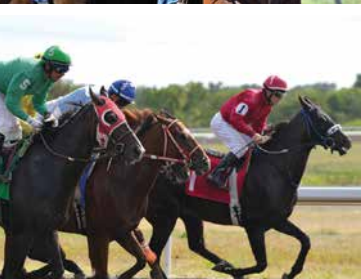
"She's a very nice mare and kept trying the entire stretch to get the job done," Cheminaud said.

Ghostly Gal started her career in California with Jonathan Wong, winning twice and placing five times in nine starts but finding her best form on turf and synthetic tracks. She made two starts for Jeff Engler in late 2023 and early 2024—including a 12-length victory for a \$30,000 tag at Turfway Park—before being transferred to Catalano in the spring.

After she had a disappointing run in a 6-furlong dirt race in early June at Churchill, Catalano put Ghostly Gal back on the grass, and she hasn't lost in three starts since.

"She got better and better as we kept training her," said Catalano, who won his first Claiming Crown race in 2004 in the Jewel with Intelligent Male. "She was gaining weight and looking really good. She had some little issues when we got her, but we worked those out and here we are today."

—Tom Law



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ECHO LANE CLOSES THE DAY WITH A VICTORY UNDER LUIS SAEZ IN THE EMERALD FOR OWNER ANTHONY ROGERS AND TRAINER ROHAN CRICHTON.

## EMERALD—ECHO LANE

R

ohan Crichton watched Echo Lane finish a solid fourth behind one of the leading 3-year-old turf horses in America in the Grade 3 Virginia Derby in early September and came up with a plan.

The son of Treasure Beach, claimed by Crichton and owner Anthony Rogers for \$25,000 last December, met the eligibility requirements for the Claiming Crown Emerald—and that became the late-season goal.

"Expectations were very high," Crichton said. "He ran very well in the Virginia Derby. We sat through a lot of other races for this race, so it feels really good."

Echo Lane gave Crichton and Rogers those good vibes when he closed the Claiming Crown card with a victory over older foes in the 1 $\frac{1}{16}$ -mile, \$181,230 Emerald on the grass. Luis Saez rode Echo Lane to a half-length win over odds-on favorite Sugoi for his second Claiming Crown score of the day.

"This is awesome because the trainer said he was going to sit the horse and rest the horse for this race," Rogers said. "From our end ... when it finally comes, it's awesome. The jockey rode the horse exactly the way the trainer said to ride the race. It was a pretty sight."

Crichton and Rogers claimed Echo Lane out of his seventh start, a distant third in a 7-furlong dirt race at Gulfstream Park. He hasn't run on dirt since.

The Emerald marked Echo Lane's 10th start since the claim—seven on turf and three on synthetic. He won five of those 10 to go with a fifth on soft turf in the James W. Murphy Stakes on Preakness weekend at Pimlico Race Course, a fourth in the Not Surprising Stakes at Gulfstream and the fourth in

the Virginia Derby September 7 at Colonial Downs. He finished 3 lengths behind Deterministic in the Virginia Derby after racing close to the pace early.

"Ever since we claimed him and started to move up the ladder he's been improving," Crichton said. "He ran very well behind Deterministic. The journey was a little too long for him there. Today was just perfect, a mile and a sixteenth. He's been maturing; he's put on a lot of weight. We were very confident. He trained really well. It feels good to have a plan and have it come through."

Saez, who also rode Concrete Glory to victory in the Ready's Rocket Express, put Echo Lane close to longshot frontrunner Devil's Harvest in the early stages of the Emerald. Echo Lane tracked that foe through splits of :22.76, :47.32 and 1:11.43 before mounting a serious rally on the far turn.

Echo Lane took over in the stretch, built a 2 $\frac{1}{2}$ -length advantage in midstretch and held off Grade 3 winner Sugoi at the finish after 1:41.09. Echo Lane picked up \$100,905 for winning the richest of the three turf races on the Claiming Crown card and boosted his bankroll to \$278,672.

Rogers called the Emerald his biggest victory. He's been involved in racing for about a year, with Crichton training and calling the shots.

"I met him, and then it happened," Rogers said. "I have all my horses with him, 15, 16 horses. We fight, we quarrel, but we win. ... I dreamt about this, and it came to reality. It's a wonderful day. ... We had confidence going into the race. That's the one thing we had."

—Tom Law



VOODOO ZIP SCORES THE BIGGEST UPSET ON THE CARD WITH A 33-1 VICTORY IN THE CANTERBURY TOM METZEN MEMORIAL FOR JOCKEY FRANCISCO ARRIETA AND OWNER-TRAINER JUAN CANO.

## CANTERBURY TOM METZEN MEMORIAL—VOODOO ZIP

**S**omewhere, Angel Montano was smiling. That felt like the consensus after Voodoo Zip scored the biggest upset on the Claiming Crown Day card, shaking up the \$168,266 Canterbury Tom Metzen Memorial as a 33-1 shot going the 5½ furlongs on the turf. Not that Juan Cano was surprised.

“Big price, yes, but the horse had been training pretty good and I know he’s a real grass horse,” said Cano, who took over the stable when his mentor Montano died in 2020. “I’m real happy. I work so hard. With this horse I’ve waited two months for this race. ... I wanted to wait for the grass. When I looked at the nominations, I was thinking I had a good chance to get in the race. Got lucky to get in and now to win. I’m so happy.”

Cano claimed the 7-year-old Kentucky-bred City Zip gelding for \$17,500 in March at Turfway Park. Voodoo Zip won that day, taking a 6½-furlong event for his first victory in two tries on synthetic.

Voodoo Zip proved even more productive on the grass during the early part of his career on the New York Racing Association circuit for West Point Thoroughbreds and trainer Christophe Clement. The \$120,000 purchase out of the 2019 Ocala Breeders’ Sales April 2-year-old sale went winless in two starts at 2 and three starts at 3 before winning four times in nine starts through May 2022. He earned stakes appearances in the summer and fall of 2022 off that good run, finishing fifth in the Grade 2 Highlander at Woodbine, fourth in the Lucky Coin at Saratoga Race Course, second in the Grade 2 Belmont Turf Sprint at Aqueduct and fifth in the Aqueduct Turf Sprint Championship.

Voodoo Zip eventually wound up in the claiming ranks and was haltered by Roddina Barrett for \$50,000 at Kentucky Downs in September 2023. He didn’t run on grass for his next eight starts from October 2023 to August 2024 and came into the Canterbury Tom Metzen Memorial off a sixth at Ellis Park and a third at Horseshoe Indianapolis.

Cano, who ran three others in the Claiming Crown races, came in confident Voodoo Zip might run the best of his group.

“Christophe Clement used to have him before in New York, and he’s a grass horse or a Polytrack horse,” Cano said. “I waited and waited for him to have this opportunity.”

Sent off as the fourth biggest price in the 11-horse field, Voodoo Zip raced toward the back of the pack early under Francisco Arrieta. Philo Beddoe and Atlas set the early tempo, clicking off :22.31 and :45.17 splits over the firm course, just ahead of Spycraft and 8-5 favorite Final Verdict.

Spycraft took over before the field turned for home and opened a 2½-length advantage in midstretch, while Voodoo Zip continued his steady run through the lane. Voodoo Zip came to Spycraft at the sixteenth pole, powered past and won by 1¼ lengths in 1:03.24.

Based at Churchill, Cano also owns the gelding and couldn’t help but think of his mentor.

“It’s the biggest win in my career,” he said. “Hopefully there will be more coming. ... Angel is smiling. He was like my daddy. He helped me a lot.”

—Tom Law





LIKE A SALTSHAKER (CENTER) AND JOCKEY CHRIS EMIGH BRACE FOR THE LATE CHALLENGE OF KEEN CAT EN ROUTE TO VICTORY IN THE RAPID TRANSIT FOR OWNERS MARSICO BROTHERS RACING AND TRAINER BRITTANY VANDEN BERG.

## RAPID TRANSIT—LIKE A SALTSHAKER

M

ike Marsico made his way through the tunnel, down the horse path toward the winner's circle, looked up at the big board on the backstretch and froze in his tracks.

"Oh wait, I think we got nipped," Marsico told Brittany Vanden Berg, whose expression went from beaming to concerned in the time it took to hear the words.

"No, oh no. No, oh no," Vanden Berg said as she and Marsico watched the final strides of the \$130,957 Claiming Crown Rapid Transit over and over and over.

"This one's going to be a heartbreaker, isn't it?" Marsico asked a handful of people also trying to see if his family's Like a Saltshaker had held off Keen Cat in the 7-furlong Transit.

Vanden Berg wasn't hearing any of that.

"Oh, OK. That's OK," she said. "He ran huge. He ran huge."

There would be no heartbreak, at least for Vanden Berg, Marsico and the Marsico Brothers Racing partnership that campaigns Like a Saltshaker. The 6-year-old Pennsylvania-bred Peace and Justice gelding edged Keen Cat by a head under Chris Emigh, giving the Illinois-based owners and trainer-wife/jockey-husband team reason to admire the effort and toast the victory.

"That got the heart racing," said Marsico, representing the ownership group that also includes Louis Marsico Jr., Louis Marsico III and Jonathan Marsico. "That's why you do it, right?"

Like a Saltshaker, claimed out of a win in May 2023 at Churchill Downs for \$10,000, won for the fifth time in 10 starts this season. He also won for the ninth time in 16 starts since being claimed.

"Whether he ran second or won, I was so happy he ran that hard," said Vanden Berg, who trains the gelding from her primary base at Churchill's Trackside Training Center in Louisville. "He has a special place in my heart. He's been with us for a little while now.

"Anytime you can win one race you're excited, but when you get to ride a horse every morning that is so kind like Like a Saltshaker, such a sweet animal and gives everything every time he goes out there for you, it just means the world," she continued. "People that train horses will know how far and few like that come by. It's very exciting."

Despite a 3-for-7 record at Churchill and a starter allowance win at Keeneland Race Course October 6, Like a Saltshaker went off at 13-1 in the Rapid Transit. Emigh kept Like a Saltshaker just off the pace up the backstretch while Forge in Fire and Pure Panic scrimmaged for the lead through splits of :22.98 and :45.96 just ahead of 2-1 favorite Global Sensation.

Emigh angled Like a Saltshaker wide in the stretch and came through a hole between Keen Cat to his outside and Critical Threat. Like a Saltshaker and Keen Cat separated from their 10 rivals inside the final 50 yards, with the former getting up to win in 1:23.52.

"We wanted to break on the lead and ended up breaking a little slow; it didn't really make that big of a difference," Emigh said. "This horse always tries so hard. It turned into quite the horse race down the lane, and I thought I was able to get in front of the wire but didn't know right away. He's always been so tough in these starter races and was able to show it against the best today."

—Tom Law

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SOUTHERN CALIFORNIA SHIPPER JUBILANT JOANIE, CLAIMED TWO STARTS BACK FOR \$20,000 AND THREE STARTS BACK FOR \$8,000, DELIVERS AS THE FAVORITE IN THE GLASS SLIPPER UNDER REYLU GUTIERREZ.

## GLASS SLIPPER—JUBILANT JOANIE

J

eff Mullins felt content to skip another Claiming Crown—he hadn't competed in the event since winning the Emerald with Stage Player in 2004 at Canterbury Park—until the situation changed leading up to the 2024 renewal at Churchill Downs.

"Whether or not we were going to have to travel alone on the plane or not," the California-based trainer said of the major factor to send Jubilant Joanie from his base at Santa Anita Park to Louisville for the \$108,000 Glass Slipper. "A solo flight is about \$12,000. A three-horse share is \$4,000. We were teetering on that. We knew she belonged in this spot, but you have to put a pencil to it and make sure it makes sense."

Mullins and co-owners Darren Carraway and Will and Denise De Quevedo "got lucky" when two other Californians needed a ride east for other races at the Churchill fall meeting. They split the bill and watched the 4-year-old daughter of Unified take on eight other fillies and mares in the 1-mile Slipper.

Jubilant Joanie and Reylu Gutierrez did the rest, stalking from the outside early and running down open-length leader Majestic Oops late to win by a neck as the 9-5 favorite.

"If we couldn't have shared the flight, it wasn't worth it to us to pay \$12,000 plus all the other expenses," Mullins said.

Jubilant Joanie, claimed by Mullins and his co-owners two starts back in September at Del Mar, picked up \$65,520 for the Glass Slipper victory. She improved to 6-for-13 in her career, which started in her native Kentucky before winding through Arkansas and Louisiana on the way to California.

Jubilant Joanie was claimed six times in her first 12 starts, including for \$20,000 by Mullins and for \$8,000 by owner/trainer Steve Sherman in early August.

"I thought the guy that claimed her for 8 and lost her for 20 was doing good, but I think we're doing all right," Mullins said.

The Glass Slipper gave Mullins his second Claiming Crown victory and marked a successful return to Churchill. He competed in the Kentucky Derby four consecutive years from 2002 to 2005 and nearly again in 2009 until morning-line favorite I Want Revenge was scratched the day of the race with an injury. Mullins hadn't run a horse at Churchill since the 2019 spring meeting.

The Glass Slipper also gave Mullins and his ownership group reason to celebrate after a bit of a reunion in recent months.

"It's great to be here, with Jeff, reunited again," Will De Quevedo said. "I took a 10-year break from owning horses, and now I'm back in it. It's a great way to get back in it. It's all Jeff. He gets all the credit. I just write the check, and he does all the work."

"With a horseman like this you don't need to put in a lot of work; you just get to enjoy how great he is, getting everything ready, getting these horses prepared," De Quevedo added. "If you ever look at what he does, there's never a horse that isn't prepared or in a bad spot. He's really good at placing a horse. Every time we have a horse in, they have a great chance to win. That's what I like about how Jeff prepares them."

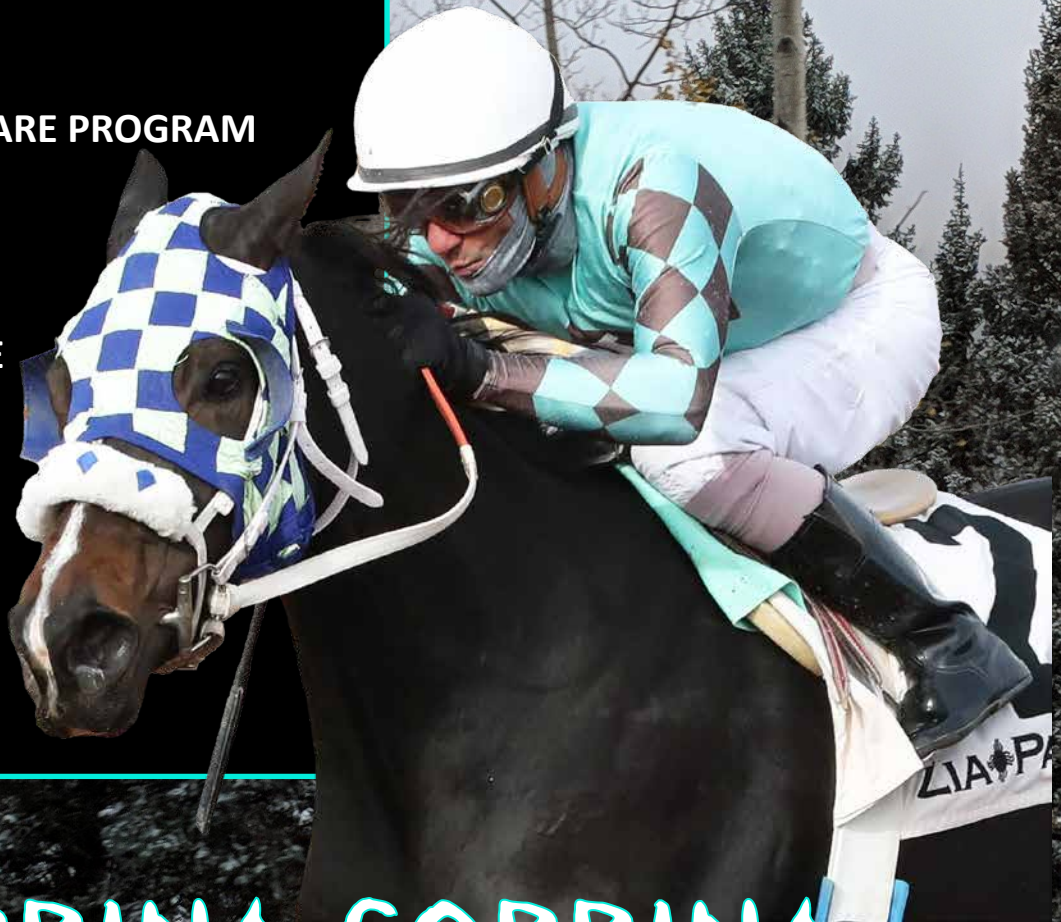
—Tom Law





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ESTELA GARCIA'S KING OF HOLLYWOOD LEADS OFF THE CLAIMING CROWN PORTION OF THE CARD WITH A VICTORY IN THE IRON HORSE UNDER JORGE GONZALEZ.

## KENT STIRLING MEMORIAL IRON HORSE—KING OF HOLLYWOOD

**J**orge Gonzalez made his riding debut at Churchill Downs in the \$109,960 Kent Stirling Memorial Iron Horse to kick off the Claiming Crown races. And he came with a plan.

“My plan with the owner and trainer, if I thought [we had] enough to send the horse to the lead, [then take the lead],” said Gonzalez, riding Estela Garcia’s King of Hollywood in the 1½-mile Iron Horse. “Then when he broke perfect, I took him to the lead.”

King of Hollywood went to the front and stayed there, sparring with one rival early and holding off eight-time winner Freedom Road late for a neck victory. It was King of Hollywood’s third straight win, adding the Iron Horse to close scores in September and October at Delaware Park for trainer Daniel Siculietano.

Garcia claimed King of Hollywood through former trainer Jose Hernandez for \$5,000 out of a win June 1 at Monmouth Park. The 5-year-old son of Palace Malice had been claimed in four straight starts—for \$12,500 in late January at Tampa Bay Downs, \$8,000 in early March at Tampa, \$5,000 in mid-May at Monmouth and that June victory at Monmouth going 1½ miles.

Gonzalez rode King of Hollywood for the first time in his first start for Garcia and Hernandez, putting the Kentucky-bred gelding on the lead in a 1-mile and 70-yard starter-optional at Monmouth to win by a nose. He rode him in seven subsequent starts—five for Hernandez at Monmouth and the last two at Delaware after the gelding was transferred to Siculietano—and won four times. He wasn’t about to miss the chance to ride him for a ninth consecutive start.

“I know the horse; I’ve won five races with him, today now six,” Gonzalez said. “I know the horse, and he’s running great. I’m so happy, this is my first time riding here at Churchill Downs. Thank you, God, for the opportunity, and for the owners and trainers, thank you.”

Gonzalez has ridden primarily in the Mid-Atlantic since returning to the saddle regularly in 2018. He won 80 races in 2009 and 2010, riding almost exclusively in New Mexico. The Iron Horse is one of 222 wins in his career through December 1.

“It’s my dream to ride here,” he said. “For all the jockeys, it’s a dream. I’m so happy. It’s amazing. To win for the first time in my first race here. Beautiful track. All the people are good.”

King of Hollywood carried his good form from the Mid-Atlantic and took control from the start at 14-1, clicking off splits of :24.17, :48.18 and 1:12.65 with Fightertown giving chase ahead of Meant to Be Lucky and Freedom Road. King of Hollywood shook off his early pursuer turning for home and clung to his half-length lead inside the final furlong with Freedom Road making his run.

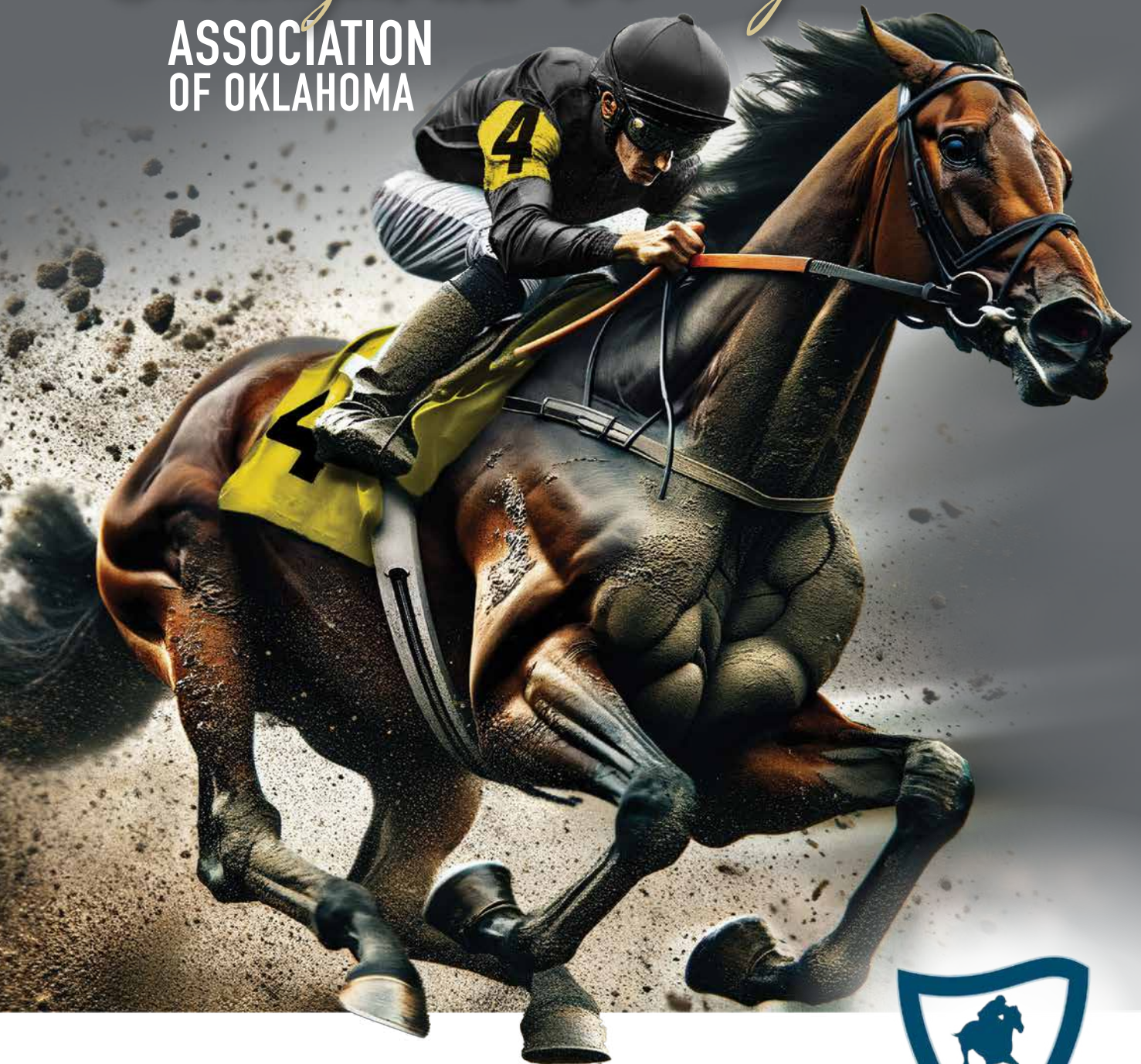
Freedom Road brought a seven-race win streak from his Maryland base and eight wins this year but came up a neck short as the 8-5 favorite. King of Hollywood finished in 1:44.29. Fightertown was 3¼ lengths back in third with 5-2 second choice On a Spree fourth in the field of 10. King of Hollywood, sixth in the Grade 1 Haskell Invitational Stakes in 2022 at Monmouth, won for the 12th time in 39 starts and boosted his earnings to \$305,253.

—Tom Law



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BIG FRANK STABLE'S CONCRETE GLORY REDEEMS HIS LOSS IN 2023 AS THE FAVORITE WITH A DOMINATING WIN IN THE READY'S ROCKET EXPRESS UNDER LUIS SAEZ.

## READY'S ROCKET EXPRESS— CONCRETE GLORY

**T**he man behind Big Frank Stable could not be missed after the \$103,943 Claiming Crown Ready's Rocket Express.

Frank Rupolo held court in the Woodford Reserve winner's circle at Churchill Downs after Concrete Glory bounced back from a disappointing run as the 9-5 favorite in last year's 6-furlong Express to win the 2024 renewal as the 6-5 chalk. The man nicknamed "Big Frank" and the "Claiming King of Gulfstream" probably deserved to gloat a bit after Concrete Glory romped by 7½ lengths in 1:09.30. Concrete Glory ended the day as one of two winning post-time favorites, along with Jubilant Joanie in the subsequent Glass Slipper.

"He ran 1:09, not bad for a \$6,250 claim, right?" said Rupolo, who added that he gifted Big Frank Stable to his daughter Nikki before the race. "I had it and gave it to her for her 18th birthday. That was a pretty good gift."

Concrete Glory, who won for the 14th time in 33 starts and fourth time in six outs in 2024, wound up in the Big Frank arsenal on the advice of South Florida-based conditioner Saffie Joseph Jr. Big Frank and Joseph claimed the then 3-year-old Bodemeister gelding for \$6,250 out of a winning effort going 6 furlongs in early December 2022 at Gulfstream Park.

Concrete Glory won seven of 11 starts after the claim and before the Express, including back-to-back races three times.

"Saffie, Saffie, it's all Saffie," Rupolo said. "He told me, 'I don't think we can go wrong with this horse.' Can't beat it. Greatest trainer I've ever had. So

happy, so elated. I came here from Florida, said 'Let's go.' And we're here having a great time. I love it."

Luis Saez rode the winner, picking up the mount after Tyler Gaffalione took off following a spill in a 2-year-old maiden race early on the Claiming Crown card. Saez put Concrete Glory, fifth behind Caramel Chip in last year's Express on a sloppy track at Fair Grounds, on the lead from post two and clicked off strong splits of :21.40 and :44.56.

Concrete Glory built a 2-length lead after that half-mile and turned for home well in command. The advantage grew from there, from 4 lengths in midstretch to 7½ in front of Charter Oak at the wire. Caramel Chip was a neck behind in third.

Rupolo watched from a spot next to the winner's circle and loved every second. "Once he had the lead and nobody was there, it was the matter of what I was going to win by," he said. "Really. This horse, on the front and nobody near him, nobody is going to touch him."

Rupolo hopes Joseph considers the Express again in 2025, when the Claiming Crown returns to Churchill for the third time in four years. The Pennsylvania-bred gelding could be there, since eligibility for the Express is open to 3-year-olds and up who have started for a claiming price of \$8,000 or less lifetime.

"What I like about this one is it's lifetime," Rupolo said of the conditions. "If you're above \$16,000, \$25,000, you have to have run for a tag in the previous two years. You'll see me again. He's eligible for his life." **HJ**

—Tom Law