



Firm Footing

PERFECT WEATHER, BIG FIELDS AND CLOSE FINISHES CONTRIBUTE TO A SUCCESSFUL EVENT

By Tom Law

A little less than two weeks before Thanksgiving, the organizers of the 27th Claiming Crown put together an ingredient list for success. Pre-race promotion, large and competitive fields, a lively on-track crowd and ideal weather paved the way to what those same organizers called one of the best days to celebrate the blue-collar stars of the sport.

"From a statistical standpoint, it was certainly one of the best events that we've had to date," said Eric Hamelback, CEO of the National HBPA, which presents the Claiming Crown in conjunction with the Thoroughbred Owners and Breeders Association. "We put a lot of work into doing that. We really ramped up a lot of the push before the event.

"This year we had the opportunity to really push this day," Hamelback added. "We have for several years done the event jointly with our executive committee meetings. Having National HBPA board members from across the country be there and experience the event in person also means a lot to me. From everything that we saw, [there were] 30 different racetracks represented, 121 horses, 110 trainers, 54 different jockeys. It was a great day."

A crowd of nearly 7,000 came out to Churchill Downs for the 11-race card, which featured the eight Claiming Crown events worth nearly \$1.2 million in purses along with the Grade 3 Chilukki Stakes for fillies and mares. Horseplayers like big fields and responded accordingly on Claiming Crown Day, which featured an average field size of 10.5 (11.75 for the eight Claiming Crown races).

Churchill reported total handle of \$12.8 million, almost 25% more than last year's \$10.3 million and the largest since \$14.6 million in 2020 when there were nine Claiming Crown races at Gulfstream Park. The \$12.8 million handle figure also came in fourth best in history, behind only 2020, 2019 at Gulfstream (\$13.8 million) and 2018 at Gulfstream (\$13.6 million).

"Those big fields, they're a horseplayer's dream," Hamelback said. "That was pretty amazing. I had one person standing next to me when the field for the Jewel went by the first time and they were like, 'My God, that felt like the Derby.'"

Hamelback credited the races' participants, who came from all corners of the country, along with Churchill's management team and racing office, led by Vice President of Racing and Racing Secretary Ben Huffman, and the Kentucky HBPA for the successful day.

THE FIELD FOR THE CLAIMING CROWN JEWEL PASSES IN FRONT OF THE STANDS THE FIRST TIME. THE JEWEL FEATURED A FIELD OF 14, A RARE SIGHT EXCEPT ON KENTUCKY DERBY, KENTUCKY OAKS AND STEPHEN FOSTER DAYS AND REQUIRING SPECIAL PERMISSION FROM CHURCHILL DOWNS.



ALL THE STARS WERE OUT ON CLAIMING CROWN DAY, INCLUDING LEGENDS HARLEY AND MONNIE GOETZ.



THE FIELD FOR THE CLAIMING CROWN EMERALD, INCLUDING BACK-TO-BACK WINNER ECHO LANE (FAR LEFT), RETURNS UNDER A VIBRANT AUTUMN SUNSET AT CHURCHILL DOWNS.



RACE PARTICIPANTS AND NATIONAL HBPA BOARD MEMBERS AND EXECUTIVE COMMITTEE MEMBERS TOOK IN THE RACES FROM THE NEW SI CLUB AT CHURCHILL DOWNS.

"A ton of credit has to go to the Kentucky HBPA, their board members, President Dale Romans, who embraced this event, not just accepted it, but embraced this event," Hamelback said. "They've gone up on purses and have already committed to 2026, really wanting to continue to showcase this event. I have to thank them.

"Churchill Downs' management go above and beyond," he continued. "They go out of their way to support the owners and the trainers that had horses in that day. The event itself, having everyone be in the SI [Club], that was a great success. Winners went to the Directors Room. Everything that management did to showcase these owners as being a special part of racing, they completely succeeded. I really appreciated all of their efforts."

The eight Claiming Crown winners were presented gifts from the SUCCEED Digestive Conditioning Program through its sponsorship. The winners received SUCCEED Challenge, a 75-day nutritional program containing 90 servings, enough for a 15-day double serving to start plus an additional 60 servings, valued at \$315. The winners of the Claiming Crown Jewel and Claiming Crown Emerald also received branded horse blankets.

Take a Number

\$1,183,149: Total purses for the eight Claiming Crown races, including money from the Kentucky Thoroughbred Development Fund

\$851,006: Earnings for Bad Beat Brian going into the Canterbury Tom Metzen Memorial, the most of any runner on the card. He finished fourth to boost his bankroll to \$858,981

146: Horses on the overnight for Claiming Crown Day

110: Trainers represented on the overnight for the Claiming Crown

23: Claiming Crown victories for all-time leader Mike Maker, who sent out Canterbury Tom Metzen Memorial winner Shape Note

15: Racing jurisdictions represented by runners on the card—Arkansas, California, Colorado, Connecticut, Florida, Illinois, Indiana, Iowa, Kentucky, Louisiana, Maryland, New York, Ohio, Pennsylvania and West Virginia

9 3/4: Combined margin of victory for the eight Claiming Crown races, which included two wins by a neck, one by a head and one by a nose

9: Breeding programs represented by the runners—California, Florida, Indiana, Kentucky, Louisiana, Maryland, Minnesota and Pennsylvania, along with Ontario, Canada

7: Entries on Claiming Crown Day for trainer Joe Sharp

6 1/4: Nation's margin of victory in the Rapid Transit, the largest on the card

6: Races that drew overflow fields on the Claiming Crown card—Rapid Transit (18), Tiara (16 entrants), Kent Stirling Memorial Iron Horse (16), Canterbury Tom Metzen Memorial (16), Jewel (16) and Emerald (15)

5: Combined winners on the card for brothers Jose Ortiz and Irad Ortiz Jr.

3: Defending champions on the card—Concrete Glory (Ready's Rocket Express), Jubilant Joanie (Glass Slipper) and Echo Lane (Emerald)

Say What?

"We're going to rename this the Ortiz Claiming Crown."

— Coady Media's Kurtis Coady after Irad Ortiz Jr. won his third Claiming Crown race aboard Nation in the Rapid Transit to give him and brother Jose five of the eight winners

"It's a good thing that I have him because he helps feed the rest of them."

— Owner Anthony Rogers on Echo Lane, who boosted his earnings to \$531,655 with a second straight win in the Emerald



GWEN DAVIS/DAVIS INNOVATION

"Lot of good problems to have."

— Trainer Mike Maker discussing potential future options for Canterbury Tom Metzen Memorial winner Shape Note

"I wish we could keep Churchill open all year long."

— Trainer Rohan Crichton after Echo Lane improved to 3-for-4 on the grass at Churchill in the Emerald

"You're right. Master handicapper."

— Trainer Rohan Crichton after The Horsemen's Journal editor Tom Law pointed out that Echo Lane prepped for both Claiming Crown wins at Colonial Downs

"My new best friend."

— Nation's owner Kevin Koentopp after the National HBPA's Jennie Rees mistook him and son Jake for brothers

"Play the music."

— Trainer Joe Sharp, wrapping up a post-race interview after Curlin's Malibu won the Kent Stirling Memorial Iron Horse



GWEN DAVIS/DAVIS INNOVATION

"The mile and an eighth is too short for him. I wish I could run him two miles and an eighth. He can go all day and then some."

— Trainer Ben Dunn on Jewel winner Double Your Money

"As a gambler, it's one of the better cards to bet anywhere. Look at the fields; they're full fields, and it's one of the best betting cards of the year."

— Wallace Moore Jr., owner of Tiara winner Ashima

"I never had a horse good enough to think about this. When I was able to get Curlin's Malibu back in the barn, I wanted his input. When he went to Saratoga, he was like, 'Oh yeah, we can do this.'"

— Owner Jeanine Cumiskey on the impact of trainer Joe Sharp on Iron Horse winner Curlin's Malibu

"I look forward to this the day after."

— Owner Frank Rupolo of Big Frank Stable after Concrete Glory won his second straight Ready's Rocket Express



GWEN DAVIS/DAVIS INNOVATION



COURTESY OF MIKE SALETTA

#FromClaimToFame for the Horseplayers Too

MIKE SALETTA OF ALDEN, N.Y., WINS TWINSPIRES CLAIMING CROWN NHC TOURNEY

By Jennie Rees

Mike Saletta knew virtually nothing about the Claiming Crown or its social media hashtag #FromClaimToFame this past fall but quickly became a fan—even more so after winning TwinSpires' Claiming Crown National Horseplayers Championship (NHC) qualifying tournament November 15 at Churchill Downs.

"The Claiming Crown was not on my radar until TwinSpires started promoting their contest around it and started putting on feeders to get into the event," the 56-year-old resident of Alden, New York, said by phone in late November. "If I'm being honest and transparent, it was the first I'd heard of the Claiming Crown. Then it piqued my interest because everybody else was talking about it. I'm like, 'Holy cow, now we've got a contest around it,' which is pretty cool. I began paying more attention."

Saletta already was familiar with TwinSpires.com's live-money handicapping contests and the NHC qualifying competitions. When TwinSpires offered its first online tournament for the Claiming Crown, which celebrates American racing's everyday warhorses, he jumped into the feeder tourneys.

Though he didn't win a feeder tournament, Saletta secured two seats with their \$500 buy-in and subsequently won Churchill's Claiming Crown NHC qualifier. When Echo Lane repeated victory in the \$182,886 Claiming Crown Emerald that concluded the card, Saletta earned his first seat in the 2026 NHC Championship in March and \$8,000 in prize money.

Players started with a \$250 bankroll, keeping everything they won. Saletta finished with a tournament-best \$2,501.75 to edge the \$2,406.50 earned by James Orban of Homer Glen, Illinois, who also earned an NHC prize package and will participate in handicapping's championship tournament for a fourth time.

"It promotes the horse and racing industry and stuff like that too," Saletta said of the Claiming Crown. "I love it. I thoroughly enjoyed it. It brings the human aspects and the focus on the horses and the people, the ownership, the connections, all of it. When we can focus on that in the industry, I think it does a world of difference than just being a sport."

Of course, the sport of handicapping remains an integral component of horse racing. Thus, the Claiming Crown NHC qualifier was a horseplayer's dream. The eight Claiming Crown races on the 11-race November 15 card totaled 94 runners for an average Claiming Crown field of 11.75 horses.

"As horseplayers, we appreciate that because you get better opportunities to find value without having to do combination bets, whether verticals or horizontals," said Saletta, who is in supply chain software management and also

covers Santa Anita Park and Del Mar for EquinEdge, which uses AI to analyze past performances. "You can place a nice single win wager where you find value as opposed to trying to get to that with two favorites."

Saletta said when he plays a live-money tournament, he starts by analyzing the last race and works backward through the card, striving to land on a number he thinks it will take to win the entire competition.

"I like to get to a number early and let everybody catch me as opposed to being the chaser," he said. "When I started working my way backward, I thought it was fairly difficult toward the end. Then there were a couple of races early. I cashed in on an exacta (\$19.20 for the \$2 exacta of Shred the Gnar and One Magic Philly in the Grade 3 Chilukki Stakes) in the third race—my first opportunity to put something hefty in. After I looked at it deeper, I found a couple of later spots where I thought I could maneuver. I thought, 'You know what? I do have some strong opinions on those last two races, as long as I have a decent enough bankroll to hammer away at a chance.'"

Saletta said Echo Lane was his key horse in the finale. He initially bet \$700 to win but calculated he might still come up short in what he thought would be the necessary bankroll to prevail. He bet another \$25 to win. Echo Lane paid \$6.90 to win as the tepid favorite over Risk Manager, who broke slowly and finished sixth in the 12-horse Emerald.

Saletta said he's "been playing the ponies since I was a kid," growing up not far from Buffalo Raceway and Batavia Downs harness tracks. He got into handicapping Thoroughbred racing after he attended the Kentucky Derby (in the infield) for the first of what is now 25 straight years. He considered himself a "weekend warrior" handicapper until delving into tournament competition about two years ago, gravitating this year toward live-money contests such as those offered by TwinSpires.

Also earning prize money at the Claiming Crown NHC event were 2021 NHC Final Table participant Jeff VanDrie (\$2,000), 2021 Breeders' Cup Betting Challenge winner Matt Miller (\$1,200), Albert Witt (\$960) and 2023 NHC champion Paul Calia (\$640).

According to the National Thoroughbred Racing Association, which owns and operates the NHC, the 108 participants were the third-highest number of players in a TwinSpires NHC qualifying tournament behind the Kentucky Derby Betting Challenge's 173 and the KDBC qualifier held on the Kentucky Oaks card (140).

Seven players converted their \$250 bankroll into at least \$1,000.

ABOVE, MIKE SALETTA AT CHURCHILL DOWNS THE WEEK BEFORE THE 2023 KENTUCKY DERBY. SALETTA, WHO WON THE CHURCHILL DOWNS CLAIMING CROWN NHC QUALIFYING TOURNAMENT ON TWINSPIRES.COM, GOT INTERESTED IN BETTING THOROUGHBREDS AFTER ATTENDING HIS FIRST DERBY IN THE INFELD 25 YEARS AGO.



MELVIS GONZALEZ AND DOUBLE YOUR MONEY EMERGE FROM THE PACK IN THE STRETCH TO WIN THE \$224,943 CLAIMING CROWN JEWEL.

Jewel – Double Your Money

Ben Dunn didn't like what he saw more than halfway through the 9 furlongs of the \$224,943 Claiming Crown Jewel November 15 at Churchill Downs.

Expecting the distance-loving Double Your Money to be on or just off the lead per his usual style, Dunn instead saw his charge buried on the rail through the first 6 furlongs of the jammed-up Jewel. Double Your Money and jockey Melvis Gonzalez were eighth to that point, just $2\frac{3}{4}$ lengths off the lead as 12 of the 14 runners in the feature bunched up within less than $3\frac{1}{2}$ lengths.

"I was very frustrated," Dunn said. "Because of this horse's running style, the one thing I thought is that I was going to get a good trip. I couldn't have been [more] wrong, but he overcame it."

Double Your Money shot through several holes from the end of the far turn and through the stretch to win by $1\frac{1}{4}$ lengths as the 9-1 fifth choice over the 6-1 Cadet Corps. Welaka, who closed from behind Double Your Money, finished third at 15-1 with 134-1 longshot Dr. Storm fourth. Navajo Warrior, the even-money favorite looking for his sixth straight win, finished eighth after a troubled trip.

A private purchase not long after being claimed for \$30,000 in October 2024 at Keeneland Race Course, Double Your Money gave Dunn his fifth win as a trainer from his sixth start. The 25-year-old son of trainers John and Felissa Dunn, Dunn took out his license in mid-September. He won with his first starter, Golden Ice, in a starter-optional September 16 at his Parx Racing base and four days later saddled Double Your Money to a second in the Grade 3 Greenwood Cup Stakes on Pennsylvania Derby Day at Parx.

"This is the first horse I've run on the Kentucky circuit," Dunn said. "It was a pleasure to come down here—great day, great atmosphere and a great horse race. ... It means the world to me. To be able to run a horse like this for \$200,000, plus the Kentucky bonus, it's a great day that you guys have here, letting the small guys come in and have a big day."

Double Your Money improved to 6-for-25 with his big day in the Jewel, picking up \$127,840 to boost his bankroll to \$473,536. The Demarchelier gelding started his career in the Midwest, won his second start in a 1-mile turf maiden at Kentucky Downs and made four stakes starts in his next five starts. He was claimed for \$16,000 on August 12, 2024, in his 10th start when fourth at Ellis Park at a mile on the turf and then claimed again two starts later when fifth going about 7 furlongs on the dirt at Keeneland.

Double Your Money ran for Dunn's mother for his next 10 starts at Parx, Aqueduct and Saratoga, winning three times with six seconds and a third with Ben Dunn and Chris Mancusi the owners. Double Your Money won the Jewel for Mancusi and Dunn as co-owners.

The winner's circle celebration after the Jewel included Dunn's father, who picked out the gelding in 2024.

"I trained for like 30 years, and now he's taken over the family business," said the elder Dunn, who retired from training in late 2023. "This is great for him—what a stepping stone. He's off to a great start."

Mancusi, who lives on Staten Island in New York, also relished his first trip to the Claiming Crown and Churchill Downs and couldn't help but remember coming close two years ago.

"The coolest part about this race is it's been a target of mine for a couple years because I lost a shake on Money Supply," Mancusi said of the 2023 Jewel winner. "It was a three-way shake that we lost, and I said, 'Man, that was our opportunity to try and win this race.' Then once [Double Your Money] started blossoming, I thought, 'Holy cow, how ironic would it be to get this race after losing Money Supply?'"

—Tom Law



IRAD ORTIZ JR. KEEPS ASHIMA IN THE CLEAR ON THE WAY TO VICTORY IN THE \$157,286 CLAIMING CROWN TIARA.

Tiara – Ashima

Wallace Moore Jr. told himself and his family and friends, but mostly himself, to keep it together if Ashima looked like a winner in the \$157,286 Claiming Crown Tiara at Churchill Downs.

"If we look like we're going to win," Moore said, "act like you've been here."

A good idea, in theory. When Ashima split rivals approaching the stretch and surged through the lane to win the 1 $\frac{1}{16}$ -mile turf event for fillies and mares, Moore whooped it up in equal parts celebration and disbelief, hugging and high-fiving all the way from the owners' viewing area to the winner's circle.

"He feels like a priest that just saw the Vatican for the first time," said Sal Santoro, who trains the 4-year-old daughter of The Big Beast for Moore.

Moore, who manages a car dealership near his home in Forked River, New Jersey, deserved the celebration. Ashima, an \$8,000 claim out of a win almost a year before at Gulfstream Park, won for the sixth time in nine starts since the claim for Santoro and Moore. She also picked up \$86,490, giving her career earnings of \$345,660.

Moore, who finished 25th at the 2025 National Horseplayers Championship, ventured into horse ownership six years ago. He started small, and Ashima helped him win big. She's earned \$266,440 since the claim, with victories in the Tiara and the \$75,000 Sunshine Filly and Mare Stakes in January at Gulfstream Park leading the way.

"She's been something else," Moore said.

The Tiara marked Moore's first start at Churchill. Santoro, who trains three horses owned by Moore at Gulfstream Park, made his return to Louisville for the 2025 Claiming Crown.

A winner of 59 career races through late November, Santoro made his Churchill debut in the 2013 Kentucky Oaks with Rose to Gold. The daughter of Friends Lake won six stakes, including the Grade 3 Fantasy and Grade 3 Honeybee at Oaklawn Park, before her eighth in the Oaks. She later won the 2014 Houston Ladies Classic Stakes at Sam Houston Race Park before being sold for \$450,000 at the 2015 Fasig-Tipton Kentucky winter mixed sale.

Santoro's stable enjoyed a strong three-year run from 2012 to 2014—racking up \$705,545, \$566,709 and \$488,187 in purses—but he prefers to keep his operation small. He's made 20 starts in 2025 with six wins and earned \$266,630 in purses through November 24.

"I had a big stable once, but I don't want to do it again," Santoro said. "Maybe eight, maybe 10 [horses]. I've got to look at them, touch them every morning. I want to train horses, not manage people. Being here is great. It's the holy land. I love it here. The people in Kentucky are great."

The 2-1 favorite in the field of 12 coming out of a third in an optional claimer October 18 at Gulfstream, Ashima popped the doors of her starting stall but stayed in the gate under a good hold from Irad Ortiz Jr. She settled in midpack after the start, racing seventh early while longshot Getaway Palace set the pace ahead of Goats On a Tree.

Goats On a Tree took control around the far turn while Ortiz angled Ashima between rivals to reach contention. Goats On a Tree opened up by 2 lengths in midstretch but couldn't hold off Ashima and Settling Storm. Ashima won by three-quarters of a length over Settling Storm with Goats On a Tree third and Nerazurri fourth. Ashima won in 1:43.08 over the firm turf to improve to 10-for-20.

—Tom Law



ECHO LANE DEFENDS HIS TITLE IN THE \$182,886 CLAIMING CROWN EMERALD FOR JOCKEY LUIS SAEZ, TRAINER ROHAN CRICHTON AND OWNER ANTHONY ROGERS.

Emerald – Echo Lane

Anthony Rogers knew what to wear for his second trip to Churchill Downs for the Claiming Crown, even with the weather slightly warmer than his first go.

"I had to come with the jacket again," Rogers said, standing proud in his gray bubble jacket after Echo Lane scored a second straight victory in the \$182,886 Claiming Crown Emerald to close the card. "I want to say thanks for the opportunity to compete for the second year in a row. My wife and I look forward to it. I have this bubble jacket, and if we come back next year, I'll be back in the same jacket."

Echo Lane sparked the jacket-clad celebration by Rogers and trainer Rohan Crichton with his 1-length win as the 2-1 favorite in the Claiming Crown's featured turf event. Under Luis Saez—who also rode the Treasure Beach gelding for the first time in last year's Emerald—Echo Lane improved to 3-for-8 on the season and pushed his 2025 earnings to \$252,983. A \$25,000 claim by Rogers and Crichton out of a December 2023 dirt race at Gulfstream Park, Echo Lane also boosted his total earnings to \$531,655 with his latest Emerald victory. He's earned \$507,375 since the claim, with 17 starts on turf and one on synthetic, not to mention the admiration of his connections.

"He's a half-million-dollar earner now," said Rogers, who claimed the Florida-bred partly because he's from the Jamaica city that shares the name of the gelding's sire. "From a \$25,000 claimer to half-a-million, that's the way to go. ... He's never run a bad race. He's always there. It's possible that he might lose, but he'll be second or third; if you look back at his starts, he doesn't flop."

Echo Lane, 2-1-3 in his seven starts in 2025, didn't flop in the Emerald.

Crichton didn't run Echo Lane from August 21, when he finished third in \$87,500 Emerald Qualifier starter on the Claiming Crown Preview Day card at Colonial Downs, until November 15. That followed a similar plan that worked in the 2024 Emerald, when Echo Lane returned after a close fourth in the Grade 3 Virginia Derby in early September to win in Louisville in mid-November.

"We have a little bit of a secret," Crichton said. "We know that he likes a little bit of a rest in between his races. When we ran him in the Preview Day at Colonial, the whole idea was to sit and wait for today. A great job by the guys at the barn. We don't talk enough about the guys at the barn. ... This horse is really special, does his work, does not do anything wrong and really stays sound."

Crichton prepped Echo Lane with his Kentucky string at Churchill's Trackside Louisville training center. He breezed six times between the Colonial race and the Emerald and came in with strong enough form to land the second choice on the morning line at 3-1 behind 2-1 favorite Risk Manager for the Claiming Crown's all-time leading trainer Mike Maker.

Echo Lane wound up a slight favorite over Risk Manager at post time and then tracked the early pace of Gewurtztraminer and Grounded through splits of :23.93, :48.52 and 1:12.68. Saez moved four paths off the rail approaching the stretch, and Echo Lane delivered, overtaking Gewurtztraminer inside the final sixteenth to win in 1:42.49 over the firm ground.

"Last year I was really confident because of the Virginia Derby race," Crichton said. "This year we were quietly confident, but we were a little disappointed in the race before. I was on edge. This was special."

—Tom Law



JOSE ORTIZ AND SHAPE NOTE STRETCH TO THE FINISH ON THE WAY TO VICTORY IN THE \$165,228 CLAIMING CROWN CANTERBURY TOM METZEN MEMORIAL.

Canterbury Tom Metzen Memorial Shape Note

The connections of Shape Note always wanted to get him back on the grass. The only problem was the Mendelssohn gelding kept being claimed out of dirt substitute races.

No such worries existed in the \$165,228 Claiming Crown Canterbury Tom Metzen Memorial at Churchill Downs—Shape Note's first turf start in more than 13 months. Shape Note relished the return to the grass, just as trainer Mike Maker and owners Peter Proscia and David Staudacher hoped, and won the 5½-furlong event by a neck over Final Verdict.

"We've had good luck since we claimed him," said Maker, who won his 23rd Claiming Crown race to extend his lead in the event's all-time standings. "We were disappointed when we lost him first time back. We originally claimed him to get him on the turf, and he rewarded us today."

Jose Ortiz rode Shape Note, picking up his second Claiming Crown win on the card along with Next Girl in the Glass Slipper one race prior.

"Credit to Jose making all the right moves now," Maker said. "He was the difference between winning and losing."

Proscia's Paradise Farms Corp., Staudacher and Maker claimed Shape Note for \$40,000 when he finished third in a 6½-furlong race April 12 at Keeneland Race Course for owner and trainer Anna Meah. He won his first start off the claim about a month later at Churchill Downs but was claimed for \$32,000 by Workman Ranch and trainer Lon Wiggins.

Two starts later when he showed up for \$25,000 July 6 at Ellis Park, the trio discussed another claim and didn't hesitate.

"We all said, 'Claim him back,'" Staudacher said.

Maker dropped a slip, and the Kentucky-bred gelding rejoined the barn after finishing fourth going 6½ furlongs on the dirt. He made three more starts—all on the dirt—with two wins and a second before the Canterbury Tom Metzen.

"I was very surprised," Proscia said of Shape Note's win as the 8-1 fifth choice in the field of 12. "I thought he was a better dirt horse, but Mike decided to put him on the grass here for the Claiming Crown, and lo and behold, he got a great ride. It's good for us; we got another win."

Paradise Farms Corp. and Staudacher ranked 70th in North America with nearly \$1.4 million in purses through November 24, and Paradise Farms solely checked in 90th through that same date with more than \$1.2 million in purses and 25 wins from 99 starts. Maker, who returned to the Claiming Crown win column after a rare shutout in 2024, headed into the final month of 2025 eighth by earnings with a near career-best of more than \$15.7 million in purses.

"We love the Claiming Crown," Staudacher said. "A lot of our horses are claimers. We've had such great success with Mike claiming horses, moving them up, moving them up to stakes races. That's what racing is all about."

"We lead up to it," Proscia said. "We think about it about three, four months out and see if we can get a few. We're happy with the performances today; we had one third [Goats On a Tree in the Tiara] and a win so quite pleased with that."

—Tom Law



NATION DOMINATES THE \$136,925 RAPID TRANSIT, WINNING BY 6¼ LENGTHS FOR THE LARGEST WINNING MARGIN OF VICTORY OF THE EIGHT CLAIMING CROWN EVENTS.

Rapid Transit – Nation

The Las Vegas-based father-son ownership duo Kevin and Jake Koentopp and trainer Bob Hess Jr. tried to claim the 5-year-old Nation for \$10,000 when he won in July at Del Mar. Out-shook but undeterred, the group came back a month later, spent \$10,000 more and came away with the Constitution gelding.

"It was a team effort," Kevin Koentopp said after Nation provided the group with a second straight victory in Kentucky in the \$136,925 Claiming Crown Rapid Transit at Churchill Downs. Nation dominated the 7-furlong Rapid Transit, winning by 6¼ lengths about a month after a narrow victory in a starter allowance at Keeneland Race Course.

Irad Ortiz Jr. rode Nation for his third Claiming Crown winner on the card, adding to scores on Ashima in the Tiara and Concrete Glory in the Ready's Rocket Express. Nation, the third most expensive auction purchase on the Claiming Crown card as a \$385,000 Fasig-Tipton Saratoga yearling, won as the 6-1 fourth choice in the field of 13.

Nation also improved to 2-for-2 at 7 furlongs and 4-for-12 overall, adding \$80,300 to boost his earnings to \$198,293.

"The key with this horse is, I don't know if it's really dirt or turf, but really a one turn," said Jake Koentopp. "When he ran for [\$10,000], he ran lights out. He came back for [\$20,000], ran great, just finished second, and then when he ran third, it was not enough ground for him at 5½. The 7 furlongs just hits him right between the eyes."

Nation's October 17 win at Keeneland also came at 7 furlongs and in his sixth start on the dirt. The Claiming Crown wasn't really on the team's radar

before that race, his first back in Kentucky after nine straight runs in Southern California. Hess liked what he saw in that win enough to pick up the phone.

"I've got an idea; what about the Claiming Crown?" Hess said that day.

"I just told him, 'Sounds like a good idea to me,'" Kevin Koentopp said.

"And here we are."

The only horse owned by Koentopp Racing, Nation found a stalking position behind longshots Soze, Freedom Stance and Miacomet through a strong opening quarter-mile in :22.57. Ortiz sent Nation after the leaders heading to the far turn and inched up to second and just a head back of Soze on the midpoint of the bend to the half in :45.15.

Nation took control off the turn and zipped past 6 furlongs in 1:09.33 with a 3½-length lead that continued to grow in deep stretch. He won in 1:22.01. My Noble Knight rallied for second, a half-length in front of Unlimitedpotential, the most expensive auction purchase on the Claiming Crown card as a \$750,000 2-year-old, in third. Seven-time winner and 2-1 favorite Gilmore finished seventh.

Kevin Koentopp said he was numb watching the final strides of the win, his stable's first foray at the Claiming Crown with its only horse.

"But a good one to have," Jake Koentopp said. "We knew the way the races were running today that you had to be somewhat close to the pace. Irad had him in the perfect spot, moved at the right time and drew off with authority. It was really a great run."

—Tom Law



NEXT GIRL (OUTSIDE) EDGES SADIE THE GOAT AFTER A THROWDOWN IN THE \$103,967 CLAIMING CROWN GLASS SLIPPER.

Glass Slipper – Next Girl

Trainer Robbie Bailes and owner Wade Meadows always believed in Next Girl. A \$20,000 purchase out of a digital sale shortly before she became a yearling, the Maryland-bred daughter of Divining Rod just took a little longer to back up that belief.

Next Girl, who started her career with three off-the-board efforts in the maiden-claiming ranks, continued her ascent for Bailes and Meadows with a victory in the \$103,967 Claiming Crown Glass Slipper at Churchill Downs. Under Jose Ortiz, Next Girl edged Sadie the Goat by a nose in the 1-mile Glass Slipper for her seventh victory in 23 starts.

"They put on a good show down the lane, and I'm glad I came out on top," Ortiz said. "The other horse was coming back at me."

Next Girl, who won in 1:36.10 for her second victory in eight starts in 2025, shipped in from Bailes' Laurel Park base off a sixth in the Maryland Million Distaff October 11. She earned her way into the Claiming Crown with a victory in Colonial Downs' Glass Slipper qualifier three starts back.

Ortiz rode the filly for the first time in the Glass Slipper, which came just before his win aboard Shape Note in the \$165,228 Claiming Crown Canterbury Tom Metzen Memorial. He didn't know much about Next Girl aside from one bit of pre-race info from Bailes.

"I talked to the trainer, and he said, 'Just keep her outside,'" Ortiz said. "I went out there and rode her my way and made the move when I thought it was the right time to do it, and she won."

Next Girl, bought by Meadows and Bailes out of the 2021 Fasig-Tipton Digital December mixed sale, broke her maiden for a \$12,500 tag in a maiden claimer January 12, 2024, at Laurel. She also ran multiple times for a \$20,000 tag, but the \$12,500 made her eligible for the Glass Slipper.

Next Girl won for \$16,000 in May 2024, the last time Bailes and Meadows risked her for a tag.

"As a 3-year-old filly, she was kind of stuck," Bailes said. "We weren't even sure how long we were going to have her. She was running for \$12,000, \$16,000 back then. All of a sudden, she hit a switch and went forward for us. She went from the maiden 12 to ... winning the Maryland Million starter handicap last year. ... She's grown up over the last year or so."

Bailes saddled Scrappy T to a memorable runner-up finish in the 2005 Preakness Stakes at Pimlico Race Course. Afleet Alex won the Preakness after colliding with Scrappy T at the top of the stretch. Bailes made his Claiming Crown debut with Next Girl, who picked up \$58,280 for winning the Glass Slipper and boosted her bankroll to \$255,330.

"She was a light-boned filly and [I] thought she would grow into a little stronger filly," Bailes said before the race about what he liked about Next Girl before making that \$20,000 digital sale purchase. "It has taken her a while to mature, but she has gotten a little stronger and a little bit bigger. She's just a really honest-type horse."

—Tom Law and Jennie Rees



CURLIN'S MALIBU TAKES THE OUTSIDE ROUTE TO VICTORY IN THE \$109,914 CLAIMING CROWN KENT STIRLING MEMORIAL IRON HORSE.

Kent Stirling Memorial Iron Horse

Curlin's Malibu

Jeanine Cumiskey wanted Curlin's Malibu back. She bought the gelding by Curlin out of the multiple Grade 2-placed Malibu Moon mare Tonasah as a 2-year-old and ran him five times at 3 without success in maiden special weight events at Charles Town, Fair Grounds, Keeneland Race Course and Churchill Downs. Cumiskey found a softer spot and lost the gelding for \$10,000 when he finished fourth in a two-turn turf race in late July 2022.

"I've been chasing him for two and a half years; the owner finally decided to sell him to me," said Cumiskey, who enlisted trainer Joe Sharp for help. "So, I called Joe, and Joe went to look at him, vetted him and he was perfect."

Easy enough, right?

"When Jeanine called me to go look at this horse, I was actually on a camping trip in Harpers Ferry, West Virginia, right by Charles Town, where I'm from," Sharp said, remembering the pre-Saratoga meet vacation with his wife, Rosie, and their two young children. "We left the campsite—I was in a set of pink swim shorts, flip flops—and we went to see the horse."

The story of Curlin's Malibu, who at the time was a stakes-placed four-time winner and earner of \$188,412, only gets better from that point.

The parties made a deal, and Curlin's Malibu returned to Cumiskey, who was in the midst of an outstanding season as an owner thanks largely to the success of Gilmore and Refuah.

"Where do you want to send him?" Cumiskey asked Sharp about Curlin's Malibu, who finished a distant fifth in the Deputed Testamony Stakes in late June at Laurel Park in his last start before the sale.

"Saratoga."

"Wait, we're going to look at a horse in West Virginia that you're going to

send to Saratoga?"

Curlin's Malibu made it to Saratoga by mid-July, worked a few times on the main track and finished second for a \$32,000 tag in early August. The ultimate goal was down the road.

"[After] Saratoga ... we brought him for the Claiming Crown [Preview]," Cumiskey said of the inaugural event August 21 at Colonial Downs. "That was my initial thing because he's run for that price lifetime. We went to Colonial, he won there, and this was the next adventure."

Eligible for the Claiming Crown Kent Stirling Memorial Iron Horse because he'd run for \$8,000 or less—he ran for \$6,250 in February 2023—Curlin's Malibu won the Iron Horse Preview. About three months later and after finishing third behind eventual Claiming Crown Jewel winner Double Your Money in a prep at Aqueduct, Curlin's Malibu returned to Churchill to win the \$109,914 Iron Horse.

Luis Saez rode the 3-1 second choice to a neck victory over the 8-5 favorite Freedom Road with 2022 and 2023 Iron Horse winner Time for Trouble third in the field of 12. Curlin's Malibu, who ran the 1 $\frac{1}{16}$ miles in 1:45.01, improved to 6-for-41, and the \$63,660 winner's share boosted his bankroll to \$304,872.

"It all worked out and has been a ton of fun; Jeanine's had a wonderful year," Sharp said. "We sent her a video of this horse breezing in the fog the other morning, and she said, 'It looks like it's out of a movie.' I just told her that these three horses have been like a movie for us this year. They've been so good to us."

—Tom Law



CONCRETE GLORY AND IRAD ORTIZ JR. (INSIDE) GET THE BETTER OF WOUND UP AND JOSE ORTIZ IN THE OPENING \$102,000 CLAIMING CROWN READY'S ROCKET EXPRESS.

Ready's Rocket Express Concrete Glory

The middle part of Concrete Glory's 6-year-old campaign proved quite cringeworthy.

The Bodemeister gelding turned his head just before the break of the Grade 3 Maryland Sprint Stakes at Pimlico Race Course and was pulled up by Irad Ortiz Jr. after walking out of the starting gate. He returned three weeks later, led early, but finished last and 23 lengths behind Book'em Danno in the Grade 3 True North Stakes at Saratoga Race Course.

Nothing like familiar territory to put things back on track. After an optional-claiming win in mid-July and a four-month layoff, Concrete Glory reverted to his late 2024 form with a second straight victory in the \$102,000 Claiming Crown Ready's Rocket Express at Churchill Downs.

Just the way Frank Rupolo, the voice and namesake of his daughter Nikki Rupolo's Big Frank Stable, knew it would turn out. After last year's Express, he predicted, "You'll see me again. He's eligible for life."

"I said I'll be back, and I came back," Rupolo said. "A lot closer this year than last year, oh my God. Only difference is my daughter, again, who is the owner, couldn't make it. But she's getting married. ... We're going to transfer the horse to my beautiful wife [Yasmin], who is now going to be the owner of Big Frank Stable."

Regardless of ownership, Concrete Glory continues to churn out big wins aside from those two disasters this year and a distant fifth as the 9-5 favorite in the sloppy renewal of the Ready's Rocket Express in 2023 at Fair Grounds. The 4-5 favorite in the field of eight for this year's race, Concrete Glory and Irad Ortiz Jr. edged 8-5 second choice Wound Up and Jose Ortiz by a head. Concrete Glory improved to 17-for-39, and the \$60,140 first-place check boosted his bankroll to \$519,874.

"That was fun," Irad Ortiz said after a prolonged stretch duel with his brother. "The horse is pretty honest. The last time at Saratoga he won the same way. He broke so good, I let him be him and he fights. He fights back."

Rupolo and trainer Saffie Joseph Jr. claimed the then 3-year-old Concrete Glory for \$6,250 out of a win going 6 furlongs in December 2022 at Gulfstream Park. He's racked up 11 wins in 18 starts since, and his score in this year's Express gave Joseph his sixth Claiming Crown victory, third on the all-time list behind Mike Maker (23) and Scott Lake (nine).

Concrete Glory went to the front from the start and clicked off a strong opening quarter in :22.42 ahead of Wound Up, Empire's Best and Illini. Wound Up, off back-to-back graded stakes sprint starts in California, ran alongside Concrete Glory around the far turn, and the two were separated by just a head past the half in :44.67.

Concrete Glory and Wound Up came into the lane together, with the former repelling another challenge straightening for home a few paths off the rail. Concrete Glory hung tough on the inside and never lost the lead, winning in 1:09.89.

"That scared the hell out of me," Rupolo said. "I'm a betting guy, and they bet [Wound Up] down from 3-1 to 8-5, and the exacta went [Wound Up] favorite to my horse. I said, 'We're in trouble.' It looked like it was going to be Ortiz-Ortiz, one way or another. He never really passed him. Concrete, is this horse unbelievable? They come after him, and he doesn't stop."

The win set off a raucous celebration by Rupolo and his crew—and, of course, another prediction.

"And 100 percent we'll be back again," Rupolo said. "I look forward to this the day after." **HJ**

—Tom Law