SANTA ANITA ANALYSIS

BY BRAD FREE

BEST BET: RACE 8, MAJESTIC HEAT

FIRST RACE

Runner-up twice recently at a mile and one-eighth, **COMBAT ZONE** shortens to a mile as a logical choice to win this maiden special-weight on turf. 'ZONE led at the eighth pole both recent starts; he may benefit by this slightly shorter distance. **INDOCTRINATION** had a tough trip from the outside post last time, and split the field. His runner-up finish two starts back on this this course was the best of his career. Pacesetting chores are up for grabs, INDOCTRINATION will be forwardly placed setting or pressing likely slow splits. **GOSILENTLY** makes his California debut after finishing in the money seven straight on the East Coast. He has speed, and is a candidate to make the lead.

SECOND RACE

TOPAZ TIME and **SOUL SOUND** are the principals in this modest $40k-50k maiden-claiming sprint for California-bred fillies and mares. TOPAZ TIME pressed the pace and weakened in her comeback two months ago. That was her first in more than one year. She can improve second start back. Tough to trust a 5yo maiden, however. SOUL SOUND has changed trainers since raced; new trainer Jeff Mullins puts blinkers on and returns her to the main track. She finished third in three straight last spring and summer. No surprise if she goes favored. **DEL MAR DIVA** drops into a maiden-claiming race for the first time. The truth is, this race is a mess.

THIRD RACE

Doug O'Neill entered one in this special-weight sprint for 3yos; Bob Baffert entered three. O'Neill runner **JIMMY CHILA** flashed talent his only start two months ago at Del Mar, pressing/setting a fast pace on turf and only getting collared late to finish third. It was a promising debut. Second time out, come and catch him. However, the Baffert trio looks formidable, led by second-time starter **NERO**. He was a "universal good thing" into his debut last summer at Del Mar, opened up in midstretch, then appeared to pull himself up. He lost by a nose to a next-out stakes winner. Off since, blinkers on for his comeback, NERO will keep the top choice honest. **BOTERO** posted a series of sharp gate works for his debut for Baffert, while stablemate CURLY'S ROCKET also has trained well since a fourth-place prep debut.

FOURTH RACE

The pick six begins with a competitive N2X/optional $62.5k claiming turf route. While several are qualified, **UNA-POLOGETIC** gets the call first start in three months. He missed by only two lengths last time in his first try at this level; the winner returned to win a G3 at Golden Gate, and finish third in a G2 at Santa Anita. Perhaps this is an easier spot for UNAPOLOGETIC. **A RED TIE DAY** runs best from slightly off the pace, which gives him an alibi for finishing fifth last time after pressing the pace as the favorite in a similar N2X/optional claiming route. However, the dilemma is there is really no true speed in this field; A RED TIE DAY might fall into the lead by default. The splits should be slow. Lightly raced **CAFE FLAVOR** was no match for the top choice when they met in August, but CAFE FLAVOR has improved since then and moves up the ladder following an impressive N1X marathon victory at Del Mar.

FIFTH RACE

The pace scenario benefits front-runner **EL SUPER** in a field otherwise short on speed. EL SUPER was chewed up dueling on a strong pace last out at Los Al; he meets less heat this time and is reunited with Martin Pedroza, who rode him to successive front-running victories last summer and fall. Gate to wire? **CITY STEEL** has been facing better than these, and picking up an occasional piece. He drops from $25k claiming starter to $12.5k claiming, and will be rolling from off the pace. The knock is he seems to race wide and lose ground every start. **LINDANTE** defeated the top choice last month when second, and came back 10 days later to win. The in-form gelding could get a good trip positioned second behind the top choice. If that one falters, LINDANTE can be first to attack. **FREDDIES DREAM**, a closer, has faced better. **MR. SHOOK** might be ranked too low. He drops from N2X; this is the first time he has raced for a claim tag.

SIXTH RACE

Although several "back-class" droppers are contenders in this $50k claiming turf sprint, the call is a consistent gelding racing regularly at about this level **ZURI CHOP** returns from a two-month freshening to the course which he scored a sharp claiming win in October. His last four starts on the hill produced one win, two seconds and a third. Trainer Vladimir Cerin is holding a hot hand. **SECRETO PRIMERO** rallied wide and finished a creditable second two weeks ago in a N1X on the hill. The pace should be legit in this big field; 'PRIMERO will roll late. **HOME RUN KITTEN** is one of the "back-class" droppers. A G3 winner on this course in 2014, he was gelded last fall and is dropping to a new low. He will fly late. **MOONLIGHT DRIVE**, multiple graded placed, scored his most recent win on the hill in fall 2016. This is his first start for a tag. **CLEVER ROYAL** returns to California for his new trainer David Jacobson, who is 5 for 13 in Southern California when he employs Kent Desormeaux. When he employs others riders, Jacobson is 4 for 65 in Southern California. Desormeaux rides CLEVER ROYAL, whose top effort puts him in the hunt.

SEVENTH RACE

This $6,250 claiming sprint is the first bottom-claiming-level race of the meet; last-out winner **LAMBO LUXX** is the horse to beat. He returned to form last out wining a $9k-10k claiming sprint at Los Al; he should get a perfect trip pressing the likely pacesetter that breaks from the rail. **PRIVATE PROSPECT** has the top recent sprint figures, and takes a big drop from $10k claiming while wheeling back in six days. If the speed tops, 'PROSPECT could be along in time. **PAT THE BEAR** is the aforementioned likely pacesetter drawn on the rail. Inside speed has been less effective this winter as it has been seasons past (the main track is relatively bias-free), but 'BEAR conceivably could shake loose out front and be gone. He is the quickest in the field. **BARGAINING** adds speed. He missed by a neck last out in a restricted $8k claiming sprint at Los Al.

EIGHTH RACE

Based on two impressive victories since switching to dirt, **MAJESTIC HEAT** looks tough to beat in this dirt stakes for fillies and mares. 'HEAT cruised vs. Cal-bred foes in early November, followed by an equally impressive victory last out in a dirt route similar to this. The in-form 6yo is proven at the level, "fast" on figs, and adaptable to any pace scenario. She looks tough to beat, unless claiming mare **MENDED** gets brave on the lead. After being claimed a year ago for $12.5k, MENDED reeled off 10 straight. This is her first start in a graded stake; she should be positioned in front of the top choice early. **UNION STRIKE** has worked well for her return, though she concedes a current-condition edge to the top pair. 'STRIKE was a G1 winner (Del Mar Debutante) early in her career, this is the 4yo filly's first start since June. Initially ticketed for a G3 turf race on Monday, she switched targets and will remain on dirt for now. **SANDY'S SURPRISE** romped in a $300k stakes race at Zia Park her last start in November; **SHENANDOAH QUEEN** has an upset chance based on her late-summer stakes win at Del Mar.

NINTH RACE

GENERAL IKE drops to $25k claiming and returns to the downhill course on which he ran one of the best races of his career. That was a runner-up finish in October after pressing a fast pace in a $40k claiming turf sprint. Freshened since early November, the Mark Glatt trainee will be ridden for the first time by Kent Desormeaux. He can win with a pressing/stalking trip. **COASTLINE** could go favored while dropping in class from N2X and Grade 3. A stakes winner on this course two years ago (his most recent win), he was claimed in summer for $62.5k. This is the lowest level of his career. A good fit this level, and a logical contender from off the pace. **THEYCALLHIMTHEKID** is an upset candidate, first start in California with speed figures earned last year on the East Coast that compare favorably to this field. **JOHNNY REB** goes first off the claim for Jerry Hollendorfer; his Northern California grass form puts him in the hunt. **AIRLITE** goes route to sprint and will roll late.