



Picks & Plays for Wednesday, August 23

by David Aragona

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PICKS

Race 1: 2 - 9 - 8 - 1

Race 2: 4 - 6 - 3 - 5

Race 3: 1 - 2 - 3 - 1A - 8

Race 4: 8 - 1 - 5 - 6

Race 5: 5 - 1 - 6 - 7

Race 6: 7 - 5 - 3 - 8

Race 7: 5 - 3 - 8 - 7

Race 8: 7 - 3 - 8 - 10

Race 9: 9 - 7 - 5 - 6

Race 10: 10 - 8 - 12 - 6

FAIR VALUE PLAYS

(Fair Value: These are the odds at which I could reasonably bet each of the horses listed. Wagering decisions should be based on the actual odds. The best value option will not necessarily be the top pick.)

RACE 3

The most intriguing runner in this optional claiming turf sprint is likely favorite **High Front (#3)**, who makes his first start since selling for \$350k at auction following his last start. That's a lot of money to pay for a 4-year-old gelding, but this runner does have some accomplishments to back it up. He showed talent right from the start in his debut as a 3-year-old but had trouble getting back to the winner's circle for the rest of the season despite running well on a few occasions. He appears to have returned as an improved specimen as a 4-year-old, improving through a couple of races in Kentucky before overcoming a poor start to sweep past the field in the Dark Star at Canterbury. A repeat of that performance will make him tough to beat here, but he does need to hold his form for new connections. A few of these exit the 7th race on July 26, including **Thin White Duke (#8)**. This gelding figures to attract some support based on his solid third-place finish in the Troy, but I'm a little concerned about the potential pace setup in this spot for a horse who makes his third start in 30 days. **Coppola (#2)** might be a more interesting horse to try out of that July 26 affair. He set the pace before getting swallowed up late, but I think he might fare better in this spot. With the temporary rails coming down on the

turf courses, he figures to get that coveted spot close to the hedge. He did run a race back in May that would make him tough to beat. My top pick is **Mid Day Image (#1)**. I think both halves of the David Jacobson entry are mildly interesting, but do prefer this 7-year-old horse who cuts back in distance following a poor result in the Lure. He just ran off in the early stages of that race, going unreasonably fast before Jose Ortiz just eased him through the final quarter mile. He had previously run well sprinting, and figures to sit the right trip from this inside draw for a barn that has been on a strong run lately. Entry mate **Cazadero (#1A)** is also worth considering, but his running style could be a liability here. That said, he did run deceptively well last time, closing into a slow pace.

Fair Value:

#1 MID DAY IMAGE, at 4-1 or greater

#2 COPPOLA, at 9-1 or greater

RACE 4

Slapintheface (#5) looks like the horse to beat off his runner-up finish at this level back in June. However, it's been nearly 3 months since that race, which was his first start off a lengthy layoff. I'm a little concerned about those gaps, though it is necessary to point out that he's been entered and rained off the turf in the interim. I thought he ran slightly better than today's rival **Tony O (#6)** in that June 1 event, coming with a stronger finish through the lane. Tony O subsequently ran again later in June and was mildly unlucky not to win when his rider overcommitted to the rail. He's been improving, but has also had his chances to win at this level and probably won't be as big of a price now that his form is exposed. I think there are a couple of interesting alternatives. I liked **Mission Hill (#1)** last time before that race was rained off the turf, since he had run like a horse that would appreciate added ground in his educational career debut. However, he showed significant improvement when staying in on the dirt, and he now figures to take some money off that effort, whereas he might have been a bigger price if only the turf race had been showing. I do expect a move forward, but would want slightly better than his morning line odds. My top pick is **Laurel Valley (#8)**. This gelding has only sprinted on turf, but I think he's run well in both of those efforts, finishing like a horse that should handle added ground. He was chasing outside on June 11 on a day when the rail was good, and it turns out that getting nosed out by Willintoriskitall is no disgrace at all. That horse has returned to place in a stakes, improving his speed figures in both subsequent starts. Then last time he cut back to 6 furlongs, but that just felt too short for him. This son of Laoban is bred to go longer for Mike Maker, who is 16 for 74 (22%, \$2.55 ROI) with maidens going from sprints to routes on turf over the past 5 years.

Fair Value:

#8 LAUREL VALLEY, at 7-2 or greater

RACE 6

I don't have a major problem with the form of likely favorite **Mischief Joke (#3)**. I'm just getting a little tired of a horse who has had his chances to win and keeps settling for minor awards despite running well. He's a standout based on speed figures against this field, but he's facing some interesting runners who could close that gap quickly. **B D Saints (#8)** is the most obvious alternative as he switches to dirt for the first time. This colt has had eventful trips in both career starts on turf. On debut, he broke 2 or 3 lengths slowly, was asked to rush up between rivals onto backstretch, getting keen before staying on at one pace. Then last time the short comment "horrific journey" isn't much of an exaggeration. He got rank soon after the start and Flavien Prat was forced to check him 4 or 5 times just in the opening furlongs. He then had more trouble in the stretch, getting in tight and clipping heels before switching outside. Much of

that was his own doing, as he got rank and difficult to steer. The positive is that he is bred for dirt, as a full-brother to dirt stakes winner Les Bon Temps. However, his antics make him hard to trust, and somewhat surprisingly Linda Rice is only 4 for 34 (12%, \$1.10 ROI) going from turf to dirt in maiden special weight races over 5 years. With these two likely to attract so much support, I think we could see fair value on some others. **Dixie Pharaoh (#5)** strikes me as a candidate to improve in his second start. Ray Handal is 10-for-44 (23%, \$2.18 ROI) with maiden second time starters in dirt sprints over 5 years. This half-brother to route winner Yono finished up on debut like a horse who would appreciate more ground, and he gets 7 furlongs here. My top pick is **Blue Eighty Five (#7)**, who looks like a progressive sort for Bill Mott. This colt was just out for some education on debut when he traveled well early before dropping back under a conservative ride. He showed improvement last time, coming from far off the pace to launch a decent run through the stretch, making up more ground than it appears on paper. That felt like a reasonably strong maiden heat, and he doesn't have to improve that much on his 75 TimeformUS Speed Figure to get in the mix this time. I don't think we've yet seen the best of him, and am expecting another move forward as Mott runs him back on short rest.

Fair Value:

#7 BLUE EIGHTY FIVE, at 5-1 or greater

#5 DIXIE PHARAOH, at 7-1 or greater

RACE 7

Morning-line favorite **Pioneering Spirit (#4)** is seeking his fifth consecutive victory in the John's Call, while progressively stretching out in distance. The way he has finished his races, registering each win by growing margins, would suggest that 1 5/8 miles might be within his scope. However, he is getting a significant class test as he tries stakes company for the first time. He has benefited from a fast pace in recent starts, and it's unclear how quickly the leaders will go as they all tackle this demanding distance. Furthermore, his recent TimeformUS Race Ratings, measuring the strength of his competition, range from 87 up to 115. The preliminary Race Rating for this John's Call is 120, so it's a steep class hike. I believe the value lies elsewhere this time. **Sy Dog (#8)** has some questions to answer as he stretches out to a marathon distance for the first time. He showed talent as a younger horse, but has been slow to get back on track since returning as a 4-year-old this season. He's bred to go this far as a son of the longwinded Slumber, but has to prove he can do it on the racetrack. **Burning Bright (#3)** is perhaps a little more intriguing as he also stretches out to this distance for the first time. He's settled for second in both turf starts so far this year, but has faced talented rivals. The form of that May 5 event at Churchill has proven to be strong, and I'm intrigued by him tackling added ground as a son of a Breeders' Cup Filly and Mare Turf winner. The main drawback is that he may have to contest the front end with **Tide of the Sea (#7)**, another runner who is capable on his best day despite having not won a race in quite some time. My top pick is **British Royalty (#5)**. Distance is no concern for this son of English Channel, who has twice placed in the two-mile Belmont Gold Cup. He's another who hasn't won recently, but he's held his own against some solid competition over marathon distances. He lost by only two lengths to classy individuals Channel Maker and Soldier Rising last summer before going off form later in the year. Yet he appeared to get back on track last time off the layoff, earning a career-best 119 TimeformUS Speed Figure for his third-place finish to classy international competitor Siskany. He's surely fit off that two-mile run and figures to be a fair price going out for Woodbine-based connections.

Fair Value:

#5 BRITISH ROYALTY, at 3-1 or greater

RACE 9

This New York-bred allowance affair handicaps as one of the most wide open races of the day. I suppose the public might gravitate towards **Radio Red (#6)**, who has returned as an improved horse this season, winning twice and finishing second in a stakes from his 3 starts in dirt sprints this year. He goes out for strong connections, but figures to take money and it's not like his top 104 TimeformUS Speed Figure makes him any kind of standout. There are a couple of older, more experienced runners drawn alongside him who merit consideration. **Amundson (#5)** looks pretty dangerous off the claim for Linda Rice. It's taken a little while for her to get this gelding back to the races after claiming him nearly 11 weeks ago. The drop in class is also of mild concern, though Rice is known to place horses aggressively at this meet. My biggest concern for him is the 7 furlong distance, since that's proven a bit far for him in the past. **Brew Pub (#7)** is more appealing to me. He comes off a poor effort here 18 days ago when pitted against a promising open N1X field. The pace never developed that day and he had little chance after his rider took him back to last early. He's obviously better than that, and now gets some appropriate class relief. He ran well in both prior attempts at this level for Rudy Rodriguez and the distance suits should suit him fine. I could easily use him at the right odds. Yet this race looks highly competitive and I want to keep my mind open to one of the bigger prices. **What's Up Bro (#9)** figures to get somewhat overlooked off his last couple of efforts, one a failed turf experiment and the other a fourth-place finish behind Radio Red. Yet I think this gelding is capable of better getting back into a dirt sprint. That Mike Lee is not as bad as it looks, since he got very rank in the early stages while Irad attempted to rate him. And even his turf race last time is worth an upgrade, since he got checked early and then raced wide and uncovered. He was running speed figures over the winter that would give him a chance to be competitive against this field with routine maturity. He has more tactical speed than it appears on paper, and he ran the best dirt race of his career in his only prior dirt start on Lasix, which he gets to use again here.

Fair Value:

#9 WHAT'S UP BRO, at 10-1 or greater

#7 BREW PUB, at 6-1 or greater