



FILLY & MARE SPRINT

by Trey Stiles

ABOUT THE RACE

The Filly & Mare Sprint is a Grade One race for, as the name implies, fillies and mares aged 3-years-old and up. The race was added in 2007, as part of the expanded two-day format; it carries a purse of \$1,000,000, and it has been run at 7-furlongs each year except the first due to the configuration of Monmouth Park's main track. Because of the brief history of the race, it is difficult to find any trends—horses of various running styles have won. Last year, Dubai Majesty sat just off the early pace and won easily at tasty odds of 11/1.

OVERVIEW OF THE FIELD

This year's Filly & Mare Sprint division is considered by most to be particularly strong. Some horses with a little more versatility may opt for the Ladies' Classic or other Breeders' Cup races, but there remains a lot of talent among the pure sprinters. Keep an eye out for horses that were expected to run in other divisions but are trying to find a softer spot instead in the Filly & Mare Sprint. I have tried to include the most likely contenders here, but there could be some surprise entries if other prominent ladies defect from other divisions.

An injury to Hilda's Passion eliminated the dominant early favorite but left a more competitive field and created better wagering opportunities. There should be a good mix of running styles to produce an honest race, and I expect this to be one of the better wagering races on the two-day Breeders' Cup card.

KEY PREP RACES

The obvious place to start is with the Breeders' Cup Challenge "Win and You're In" races. The first of these events was the 7-furlong A Gleam Handicap (G2) at Hollywood Park. IRISH GYPSY won this race, which was her first graded-stakes win and her third stakes win in a row at the time. However, she was allowed to set an easy lead, and the victory was not all



THE TALENTED 3-YEAR-OLD FILLY TURBULENT DESCENT BRINGS A STELLAR RECORD INTO THIS YEAR'S FILLY & MARE SPRINT.

that strong visually. Since then, she has looked unimpressive, finishing out of the money in the Honorable Miss Handicap (G2) at Saratoga and third in the Rancho Bernardo Handicap (G3) at Del Mar, which featured only four runners.

ULTRA BLEND, who finished second by a nose in the A Gleam (G2), later went on to win the Clement L. Hirsch (G1) at 8.5-furlongs and seems more likely for the Ladies' Classic than this race. Neither of these top finishers from the A Gleam (G2) looks like they will impact the Filly & Mare Sprint, albeit for different reasons.

Next up was the 7-furlong Ballerina Stakes (G1) at Saratoga. Hilda's Passion won by 9-1/4 lengths and established herself as the division's frontrunner; however, she came out of the race with an injury to her right leg, which eliminated her from the Breeders' Cup.

The distant second-place finisher, TAR HEEL MOM, stumbled at the start but managed to get up for second despite spotting the field a huge head start. She would not have beaten Hilda's Passion even with a clean start, but she was the best of the rest.

Race favorite Sassy Image emerged from the race with a quarter crack and was training up to the Filly & Mare Sprint before a late injury sidelined her.

The 6-furlong Thoroughbred Club of America (TCA) Stakes (G2) at Keeneland was the last "Win and You're In" race. HOLIDAY FOR KITTEN took advantage of a speed-favoring track to win by a nose over the hard-charging MUSICAL ROMANCE in a tight "head bob" photo. Big favorite SWITCH closed to finish third.

Based on her prior efforts, I have to assume that HOLIDAY FOR KITTEN is a Keeneland horse-for-course (her lifetime best Beyer of 89 is at Keeneland), and that she also benefitted from a speed bias. MUSICAL ROMANCE and SWITCH were able to close against the bias and are the horses to watch coming out of this prep.

MOST LIKELY WINNERS

The 3-year-old filly TURBULENT DESCENT seems to be reaching peak form at just the right time. She has six wins in eight lifetime starts, including victories in the Hollywood Starlet (G1), Santa Anita Oaks (G1), Beaumont (G2), and most recently, the Test (G2). Her other two races were respectable second-place finishes in the Acorn (G1) and Las Virgenes (G1).

This will be her first attempt against older runners, which concerns me a bit. Also, she may not have liked the muddy surface in the Acorn (G1), so

PHOTO CREDIT: TURBULENT DESCENT PHOTO © DWAYNE LOO

be cautious if the track is wet. Even though she's been running against quality competition, she has gone off as the favorite in every race of her career, so don't expect a big payday here. Still, she's my top pick, and her fair odds should be 2/1.

The extremely classy SWITCH was second in this race last year, and she never shies away from tough competition. Before finishing third in this year's TCA Stakes (G2), she had run in eight Grade Ones in a row, finishing in the money each time. Her last four starts before the TCA (G2) have been at distances longer than a mile, but she is very versatile and has had success at various distances. Her TCA (G2) outing wasn't bad, and her third-place result should create some value on Breeders' Cup day. She's a top contender and a "must use" for win and multi-race tickets. Her fair odds should be 7/2.

OTHER CONTENDERS

Three-year-old POMEROYS PISTOL was last seen beating older horses in the Gallant Bloom (G2) at Belmont Park. She sat right off the pace and pounced for the lead down the stretch. None were able to muster a threatening move toward her. The chart reflects a strong outing on paper, but it was even more impressive to watch. Keep in mind that her only start at Churchill Downs, in the Eight Belles (G3), however, was one of her worst lifetime efforts—but she usually fires a good shot. She seems a notch below the top contenders, having already run second to TURBULENT DESCENT in the Test (G1), but she is capable of winning with her best effort. Her fair odds should be 6/1.

MUSICAL ROMANCE has had an impressive 2011, including a close second in the Princess Rooney Handicap (G1) and a narrow win in the Presque Isle Masters (G2). In her last race, she lost by a nose in the TCA (G2), but even in defeat, she had the most impressive performance of the race. She fought off a speed bias and nearly closed for the win, losing a very close photo. She is not nominated to the Breeders' Cup, and her connections will have to pay the supplemental fee for her to enter. If she makes the race, she's my top value pick, as she rarely



THE VERSATILE SWITCH FINISHED SECOND IN THIS RACE LAST YEAR.

merits the respect she deserves, going off at nice odds of 9/1 in the Presque Isle Masters (G2) and 11/1 in the TCA (G2). Her fair odds should be 4/1, but you'll probably get much more.

LIVE LONG SHOTS

TAR HEEL MOM has had some of the best races of her career in 2011, including a blowout win in the Honorable Miss (G2). She was in fine form going into the Ballerina (G1) at Saratoga, where she had a troubled trip. The comment line reads "stumbled start," but that is an understatement. Despite a poor beginning, she ran (a distant) second to the dominant Hilda's Passion. I have no idea how to explain the next-start flop in the Gallant Bloom (G2) when she only beat one horse despite going off as the favorite. However, this mare has a history of following a rare poor effort with a strong one, and I think she can bounce back with a timely showing in this race. Her fair odds should be 8/1.

After TANDA's victory in the Rancho Bernardo Handicap (G3) at Del Mar, trainer Mike Mitchell set his sights on this race. She finished third on the downhill course at Santa Anita in her last start, and she comes into this event a relatively fresh horse that could be set for a peak effort. Fair odds should be 12/1.

ARIANA D had five placings in six starts this year before breaking through for the win in the Avowal Stakes at Woodbine. Before that she was closing

from last to second behind MUSICAL ROMANCE in the Presque Isle Masters (G2). She likes to come from the back of the pack, and I expect she will benefit from an honest pace in this race. The big knock is that she has twenty-four lifetime starts without ever seeing real dirt. If her connections decide to try dirt at Churchill Downs, keep this filly in mind for your exotic tickets at a huge price. Fair odds should be 12/1.

SPECIAL WAGERING THOUGHTS

Play against the "Win and You're In" horses. With Hilda's Passion out with an injury, I will be surprised if the other two—IRISH GYPSY and HOLIDAY FOR KITTEN—impact the race beyond ensuring a fast pace. Both will want the lead but shouldn't last.

While a lot can change between our press deadline and post time. I anticipate a good mix of running styles, which should make for an honest race. If I can get 4/1 or more on one of my top selections, I'll take it. Otherwise, I'll mix in some of my "other contenders" and "live long shots" in the exotic wagers. With a competitive field shaping up in the Filly & Mare Sprint, the exotics should pay nicely.

One last piece of wagering advice: Don't be afraid to swing for the fences when betting this race. **HP**

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