

MARK BELLING'S BELMONT STAKES PICKS - 2021

OVERVIEW:

The Triple Crown started five weeks ago with trainer Bob Baffert somehow winning another one of these races with relative outsider Medina Spirit. Since then, Medina Spirit tested positive for a banned steroid, is certain to be disqualified and Baffert has been banned from tracks in Kentucky and New York.

The Preakness, as usual the weakest of the three races, was won three weeks ago in Baltimore by Rombauer, an off the pace runner who is back for the Belmont Stakes. But this is a much better field than the one Rombauer faced in the Preakness with several Kentucky Derby horses on the scene but not Medina Spirit, the horse whose drug test finally exposed Baffert as a cheat.

Essential Quality, unbeaten until a fourth place finish in the Derby (will be upgraded to third when Medina Spirit is officially disqualified), is the best and most consistent horse in the race. But he isn't really improving and may not be good enough to win the 1 1/2-mile Belmont. But the other contenders all have as more questions than answers. As usual, I'll assess the field in post position order.

THE FIELD:

#1 BOURBONIC Deep closer is one of three trained by Todd Pletcher but his speed figures are slower than what will be needed to win this race.

#2 ESSENTIAL QUALITY He ran fourth in the Derby despite a troubled trip and was unbeaten in five races before that. Trained by Brad Cox, whose remarkable success in the sport the last five years has been Baffert-like. EQ has tactical speed and should be close to the pace. I have no real knocks on this horse (after all, he is 5-for-6) but am not sure he hasn't leveled off. He is vulnerable to a horse that steps up and runs a big race. Aggressive jockey in Luis Saez.

#3 ROMBAUER He won the Preakness coming from off the pace to run down my pick, Midnight Bourbon. But the Belmont field is way tougher than the one in the Preakness and Rombauer will have to improve again. The three week turnaround could be an issue but now that horses are not running on the performance-enhancing drug Lasix in stakes races anymore, these quick turnarounds may be easier to pull off.

#4 HOT ROD CHARLIE Contender. He will either press the pace or lead. Finished an excellent third in the Derby and won the Louisiana Derby in March (the strongest of the "prep" races this year). Outstanding jockey Flavien Prat rode Rombauer to the Preakness win but gets off him to ride Hot Rod. This horse keeps improving but may be a tad suspect at the distance and the pace may be too hot for a frontrunner like him

#5 FRANCE GO DE INA Showed early speed before fading in the Preakness. Japanese based horses excel in long races like this, but this horse is coming off two subpar performances

#6 KNOWN AGENDA His trainer, Pletcher, has won the Belmont [three](#) times and has run second in the race [six](#) times. Pletcher is based at Belmont Park and knows how to prepare a horse to win this race. He finished a decent enough tenth in the Derby after a troubled trip and was still running well at the end. The long distance suits him. He will be coming from

off the pace but shouldn't be way back there. This horse won the Florida Derby and is being ridden by Irad Ortiz, who many consider the best jockey in America.

#7 ROCK YOUR WORLD This horse was wiped out right out of the gate in the Derby and never had a chance. He's only raced four times in his life, but he is bred to run long and has a long stride that is ideal for Belmont Park with its wide turns. Jockey Joel Rosario is the best money rider in America and rarely makes mistakes. I look for this horse to be pressing the leader and may take the lead turning for home. Does he have enough seasoning to finish the deal? I don't know.

#8 OVERTOOK Pletcher's third horse in the field. This one has only one career win and has been slow to develop but is bred to get the distance and trained by a guy who has pulled surprises in this race before.

PREDICTION: - Let me stress that I do not have a strong opinion in this race.

HORSE #	HORSE	PROGRAM ODDS
6	KNOWN AGENDA	6-1
7	ROCK YOUR WORLD	9-2
2	ESSENTIAL QUALITY	2-1
4	HOT ROD CHARLIE	7-2
3	ROMBAUER	3-1

ANALYSIS

Essential Quality has been the best horse so far. Rock Your World may turn out to be the best horse by the end of the year. But Known Agenda might be the best horse on this exact day. He will get a good pace to run at and Irad Ortiz always seems to have his horses in the right position. Rock Your World has an almost equal chance of winning, in my opinion. He has tactical speed and the most upside of anybody in the field. These two horses present better value than the other three that I consider to be contenders.

SOME WAGERS

(in order of preference; adjust dollar amount to your comfort level)

\$2 superfecta 6-7 with 2-6-7 with 2-3-4 with ALL (\$80)

\$12 to win place and show on #6

\$10 to win place and show on #7

\$2 exacta 6-7 with ALL (\$28)

\$1 exacta ALL with 6-7 (\$14)

\$1 trifecta 2-6-7 with 2-6-7 with ALL (\$48)

\$1 trifecta 2-6-7 with 2-4-6-7 with 2-3-4-6-7-8 (\$36)

OTHER RACES

The Belmont Park card on Saturday is filled with Grade 1 stakes races. **Best bet of the day:** #2 Valiance (4-1) in Race 7, the Ogden Phipps. In Race 8, the Just A Game, let's try #6 Pocket Square (5-1). In Race 10, the Manhattan, I'm playing a win place and show bet on #9 Gufo (5-1), an exciting horse that comes from way off the pace.