

DEL MAR FEATURED RACE OF THE DAY

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Date: 8/6/23

Race 10: \$150K La Jolla Handicap (G3) for 3yos going 8.5-furlongs on turf (rails at 18-feet)

Post: approx. post 6:39 p.m. PDT

OVERVIEW

It's the second leg of Del Mar's awesome turf series for 3-year-olds, which began in the Oceanside on opening day and will end later in the meet with the Del Mar Derby (G2). The middle leg is, of course, the \$150K La Jolla Handicap (G3) contested for 3-year-olds going 8.5-furlongs on the turf with the rails set at 18-feet.

#1 SMART MO (8/1) looked terrific breaking his maiden at first asking for a trainer who rarely wins with his debut runners—and this horse did it going a mile, beating a Baffert horse who eventually came back to romp here on Friday. Toss this one's next start when he lost all chance at the break. Clearly, he's better than that last race at Los Al, but therein lies the rub: this guy has raced exclusively on dirt, so we'll see if he can handle a move to the lawn. I'm a little skeptical, so if he wins, I lose. GRADE: X.

#2 AGENCY (4/1) was my wise-guy pick in the Oceanside at 14/1, but he was a little too keen stretching out in his first try around two turns. I'm willing to forgive that effort, but it remains to be seen if this guy is just a closing sprinter or not. I do like the jock switch, however, if you're a believer, and this race didn't exactly come up very tough. GRADE: B.

#3 MALTESE FALCON (IRE) (5/2) is still a maiden, but he's run well against stakes foes before, and I find it interesting that top jock Hernandez bothers to ride (with Berrios bailing for Justin's Legacy). This horse definitely has a good late kick, but it takes him a while to get going, and he has a tendency to find trouble. He's come up short going farther distances, so maybe he's best used underneath at this middle distance. Then again, there are no world-beaters in here, and he's shown enough ability so far that it's unlucky he's still a maiden. GRADE: B.

#4 JUSTIN'S LEGACY (12/1) just broke his maiden at Gulfstream Park back in May, going wire to wire in a turf race at this distance. It was a sharp performance, but the waters get much deeper today. That said, Sanchez shipped out horses last year with good intent—and when he legs up Berrios, look out. Still, this seems like an ambitious spot for a recent maiden break. There's nothing to suggest this horse is good enough to win this, so if he does, just play every Sanchez/Berrios horse the rest of the meet. GRADE: C.

#5 PANIC ALARM (IRE) (2/1) was scratched out of the one-mile Oceanside on Opening Day to run here, which is interesting because this guy's two wins overseas came going 7-furlongs. That said, Sadler knows a lot more than I do, so if he chose this spot, then who am I to argue? Sadler isn't exactly known for European imports, but he's gotten a lot more of them over the last year, and while they've run well, none of them have won. GRADE: B.

#6 KID AZTECA (20/1) had no chance with a wide trip in the Oceanside, but he was also 17/1, so no one really expected him to win. It's interesting that Peter Miller comes right back and runs him here, since his two wins have come in turf sprints. Miller has heated up, so it wouldn't shock me if this one bounced back, but I can't really make a case for the W. GRADE: X.

#7 HENRY Q (6/1) has solid dirt form, but last time I checked, this race was on turf! He has tactical speed, so he should be able to angle over and get good forward position, but on or near the lead really hasn't been the winning trip so far this meet on this turf course. I'm not really feeling him, though *OptixNOTES* does suggest he could move forward on the lawn. GRADE: C.

#8 ZALAMO (FR) (8/1), the second Powell entrant, gets top honors. Toss his troubled run in the Oceanside in his first start in this country, and focus on the fact that he was running in Group Threes overseas, so someone must have thought he had ability. The blinkers go on, and Mike Smith bothers to ride back after that debacle in the Oceanside, where he finished ninth. He looks horrible on paper, but note that he came home in :23.35 in the Oceanside, and that's pretty darn good, hinting at ability. I'm expecting a big step forward today. GRADE: A.

CONCLUSION

This isn't exactly the greatest renewal of the La Jolla (G3), so it wouldn't surprise me if anyone of these won, but I'll plant my flag with **#8 ZALAMO (FR) (8/1)**. Powell has been on fire, and the fact that he runs this one back in a graded-stakes race—and that Smith stays on—after a ninth-place finish in the Oceanside, is telling to me. Maybe that was just a leg-stretcher off the boat for this?

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