



In Focus

De Francis Dash Day stakes

November 14, 2015

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De FRANCIS DASH DAY

This marks the 24th running of the Frank J. De Francis Memorial Dash, a six-furlong test for older horses that has become a fixture on the fall racing calendar. Once a Grade 1 event, the De Francis lost its grade after not having been run in 2008 and 2010, but it's now back and getting better each year. Four Eclipse champion sprinters have run in the De Francis, most recently Thor's Echo in 2006, whose win here secured his sprinter of the year trophy. The day's questions:

- ✓ **Will class rule?** De Francis favorite Palace is a Grade 1 winner, while Safely Kept favorite Hot City Girl has a Grade 3 win to her credit; both possess a class edge over their fields. Will they prevail?
- ✓ **Will the track continue to play fair?** Over the last three days at Laurel, horses have won by wiring the field -- and by closing from as much as 15 lengths back. And they've won hugging the rail or circling the field. Will that continue?

DE FRANCIS DASH

THE SCOOP

- ✓ **THE TOP CONTENDERS** -- The 9-5 Morning Line favorite, 6-year-old **#3 – Palace** is a multiple G1 winner with a total of four graded stakes victories on his impressive resume'. This NY-bred comes off a half-length victory in a state bred stakes, snapping a five-race winless streak that dates back to September 2014. He adds blinkers off of that victory, which typically requires the stewards' approval. The DeFrancis Dash will be his 3rd race after a layoff, a popular angle with most handicappers. His primary rival is **#2 – Stallwalkin' Dude (5-2)** who finished a half-length in front of Palace while being a hard-luck 3rd in a blanket finish of the G1 Vosburgh two races back. The "Dude" took the lead late in that affair when sent off at odds of 12-1. Owner/Trainer David Jacobson shot for the moon when he sent his 5-year-old runner to Keeneland to compete in the G1 Breeders' Cup Sprint. A 34-1 longshot did not have the cleanest of trips yet

DE FRANCIS FACTS

- ✓ Race 10, 4:10 EST
- ✓ \$350,000 purse
- ✓ 3yo and up, 6 furlongs
- ✓ Named for former track owner Frank J. De Francis

THE PICKS

1. **#9 – Trouble Kid (9-2):** *Don't see any of his rivals challenging him early; the Fall weather and cold temps (mid-40s) may harden the Laurel dirt oval enough to allow this "Kid" to go gate-to-wire*
2. **#3 – Palace (9-5):** *The class of this field will need help on the front end to soft the early speed; Blinkers on is a curious move which didn't show its hand in his Nov. 7 breeze*
3. **#6 – Spring in the Sky (8-1):** *Could pull a shocker in just his 2nd fast/dirt track try in his 32nd career outing; might be the candidate who provides some pressure on the early speed*
4. **#8 – Gentlemen's Bet (6-1):** *Willing to forgive most recent effort, his first on a sloppy track where he held his own against a group of much tougher than he'll face here.*

(Thanks to Gary Quill for his handicapping prowess.)

was only 4¾ lengths behind the winner (*Runhappy*)... expect **#9 – Trouble Kid (9-2)** to play catch me if you can, seeking his fifth consecutive victory. A nominee for the fictitious Claim of the Year award, this 3-year-old son of Harlan's Holiday was claimed for \$15,000 out of a maiden race on July 5th where he was the runner-up. Three races later he won the G3 Gallant Bob at Parx, beating BC Sprint participant Limousine Liberal by a neck.

- ✓ **LIVE AT A PRICE** - New York shipper **#6 – Spring to the Sky (8-1)** has earned his living on the turf, racing 25 of his 31 lifetime starts on the green. Four years ago he won his career debut by 9¾ lengths sprinting 5½ furlongs over a muddy, sealed Belmont track. His lone fast (dirt) track effort resulted in an off-the-board finish (4th) in his second start, a six-furlong optional claiming event. Though his work tab is filled with bullet drills on the turf, his 48 1/5 work on a fast dirt oval, 10th fastest of 82 the morning of Nov. 7th serves notice that he is no turf specialist. Also note his last dirt work prior to this one was a bullet on Apr. 22nd. Mike Luzzi who guided this one to victory here on the turf in 6½ furlong the Laurel Dash on Sept. 12th returns... it's his only mount on the card.
- ✓ **THE REST OF THE GANG** -- The locals are well-represented as **#1 – Cutty Shark (15-1)** has raced 16 of his 22 starts on the Laurel dirt oval compiling an impressive 5-2-2 record. His first race since March was a head-scratcher finishing dead last by 21 lengths as the 2-1 Post Time favorite. Trainer Donald Barr obviously is unfazed by that performance as the goal was certainly this race. Home field advantage is his based on never being off-the-board in 3 career stakes races at Laurel which includes a neck defeat in the G3 General George earlier this year... speaking of in-the-money finishes, the versatile MD-bred **#4 – Sonny Inspired (20-1)** has hit-the-board in 6 of 8 starts at Laurel. Sheds blinkers here seeking his first victory since winning a N3X here on Valentine's Day. Hard to gauge his class level on a fast track as his toughest test came in the G3 Tom Fool at Aqueduct on a muddy track and a pair of minor stakes he competed in were on turf... the last of the locals may have the best shot in here to pull the upset is **#7 – Jack's in the Deck (20-1)** who was all out in the MD Million Sprint to deny *Ben's Cat* of his record fourth MD Million race victory. Playing Devil's Advocate, that race just 4 weeks ago may have taken too much out of him to expect another top effort against a tougher field... Trainer Tim Ice ships in **#5 – Sir Rockport (30-1)** from neighboring Delaware. The gray 3-year-old son by *Rockport Harbor* takes his first crack at stakes company after a third place effort here in a N2X on Oct. 25th. Making just his 10th lifetime start, he got a nice four-furlong blow-out (47 3/5 fastest of 50) over his home track (Del) last Saturday... **#8 – Gentlemen's Bet (6-1)** is no slouch, having competed in eight graded-stakes from 15 career starts including three third place finishes, the most impressive in the 2013 Breeders' Cup Sprint, weakening in deep stretch but holding onto the SHOW behind *Secret Circle* and *Laugh Track*. He comes off a 5th place finish in the G3 Phoenix at Keeneland, 5 lengths behind 2015 BC Sprint winner *Runhappy* and just 3 back from the 2014 BC Sprint winner *Work All Week*.

SAFELY KEPT STAKES

THE SCOOP

- ✓ **THE TOP CONTENDERS** -- Since trainer Linda Rice equipped **#5 – Hot City Girl** with blinkers, the 5-2 Morning Line favorite is 2 for 2, in convincing fashion no less which includes that victory in the G3 Charles Town Oaks. Having raced at Laurel twice, earlier this year, she was runner-up in the \$100k Wide Country stakes to... **#4 – Gypsy Judy (15-1)** who has since tried to make a living on the turf, but the results have not been what the connections must have anticipated (6:1-0-1). Draw a line through her four graded stakes races and she's a formidable foe in here on dirt... NY-bred **#7 – Tricky Zippy (4-1)** with 10 career races on her resume' have all been against state bred except one, the G2 Prioress at Saratoga where she weakened late, finishing 6 lengths behind Cavorting who in her next outing, the Breeders' Cup F&M Sprint finished 4th as the betting favorite... **#1 – Paulassilverlining (6-1)** idle since having a troubled trip in a minor stakes on April 26th, this daughter of Ghostzapper makes only her eighth career start and first outside of New York state. She resumed training in mid-September for trainer Michelle Nevin whose shippers have a win and second from two starters at the current Laurel meet... **#3 – Eloquent Tribute (6-1)** still eligible for N2L missed by just a head to next out winner Julie D. The stretch out to seven-furlongs should benefit this Tapit offspring who has been given a steady diet of evenly spaced, five-furlong workouts leading up to this race.
- ✓ **LIVE AT A PRICE** -- Local runner **#9 – Lake Sebago (15-1)** could find her two-year-old form when she won minor stakes races back-to-back on this dirt surface. She's the only runner in this field to have won twice at seven panels (in 3 starts). Her first start since March, a 5½ furlong turf for N3X looks to have been a nice prep for this event. The hot riding Victor Carrasco will get a leg up from trainer John Robb... a combo that has won at a 36% clip over the past year.
- ✓ **THE REST OF THE GANG** -- Trainer "Ham" Smith has indicated **#2 – Miss Bullistic (30-1)** trains well in the A.M. but it just hasn't translated in the afternoon during her sophomore campaign thus far while... Parx shipper **#6 – Truth in the Lies (30-1)** has had her hoofs full competing against N2X let alone stakes caliber runners, twice finishing behind another Parx shipper... **#8 – Darling Sky (10-1)** the

SAFELY KEPT FACTS

- ✓ Race 9, 3:40 EST
- ✓ \$100,000 purse
- ✓ 3yo fillies, 7 furlongs
- ✓ Named for Maryland-bred Breeders' Cup Sprint winner Safely Kept, the filly who beat the boys in the '90 running.

THE PICKS

1. **#7 – Tricky Zippy (4-1):**
Even though she's been running against NY-breds, she held her own against Cavorting and then was runner-up to La Verdad, both Breeders' Cup participants.
2. **#3 – Eloquent Tribute (6-1):** *NY shipper for Rudy Rodriguez needs to step up as she has only beaten maidens, but is moving in the right direction to be in the mix late.*
3. **#4 – Gypsy Judy (15-1):**
Looking to regain the her form from earlier this year; glad to see her back on natural dirt at Laurel (5:2-1-1)
4. **#5 – Hot City Girl (5-2):**
She's been lights out on the front end since adding blinkers; might take a step backwards after recording a career best 101 Brisnet#

most seasoned three-year-old in this group with 16 starts, finishing in-the-money in eleven of them. Sprinting on turf might be her best option in the future as she was second and third behind three next out (stakes) winners Lady Shipman, Miss Ella and Everything Lovely... **#10 – Titanium Jo (20-1)** has been racing two-turns lately and cuts back to tackle this distance for the first time in her 16th start. Showed “late energy” going 6½ furlongs in a minor stakes at Parx finishing behind #6 and #8 in here... **#11 – Ancient Goddess (15-1)** adds blinkers but has her pedigree suggests, has done her best work on the grass and synthetic surfaces... **#12 – Stroke Play (8-1)** had a nice three-race win streak ruined when thrown to the wolves in the G1 Cotillion at Parx where she ran 6th, 5¼ lengths behind I’m a Chatterbox.



Figure 1 Immortal Eyes, winner of the 2013 De Francis Dash. Photo by Laurie Asseo.

RICHARD W. SMALL STAKES

THE SCOOP

- ✓ **THE TOP CONTENDERS -- #8 – Page McKenney (9-5)** gets the Morning Line favorite honors by virtue of his consistent form, having been in-the-money the last 19 of his races, the past 14 in either minor or graded-stakes. Trainer Mary Eppler has worked nothing short of a miracle for owner Adam Staple, a Vegas poker dealer who spent \$16,000 to claim this non-descript PA-bred gelding with one win from 14 career starts out of sixth-place finish at Penn National on July 20, 2013. With a win here, “Page” will surpass \$900k in career earnings... Hall of Fame trainer Nick Zito sends out **#4 – Catholic Cowboy (3-1)** who last visited the winner’s circle at Gulfstream Park last December beating Page McKenney by a half-length in the Claiming Crown Jewel as a 17-1 longshot. This well-travelled son of *Heatseeker* will be making his Laurel debut, owns two wins from five starts at this nine-furlong distance and has been training well in New York firing a pair of bullets in preparation for this test... Graham Motion’s Fair Hill based trainee **#5 – Strong Stipulation (9-2)** has been facing N2X at NYRA tracks while trying to determine which surface he prefers, grass or dirt. It appears to be the latter based on his 1-1-2 from 5 starts on dirt. The 91 Brisnet# earned in his most recent outing is a career best after improving prior best numbers in his previous two. Stretching out from one mile to nine-furlongs should be to this son of Lemon Drop Kid’s liking.
- ✓ **LIVE AT A PRICE – #9 – Legendary (10-1)** blossomed as a five-year-old upon arriving in North America after competing in nothing more than handicap races during the first two years of his career in the United Kingdom. This event breaks his string of eight consecutive starts in graded stakes... all on grass, which leads to the reason why his Morning Line odds seem somewhat generous. Making his natural dirt debut at age 6, for a horse whose bloodlines scream of nothing but grass will certainly keep most bettors away, but he trains on dirt (not synthetic) at Fair Hill. Recent works do not suggest he would toss a sub-par effort on dirt and having an outside post, jockey Nik Juarez can keep him wide, free from any kickback.
- ✓ **THE REST OF THE GANG** Finger Lakes shipper **#1 – Cracker Jack Jones (12-1)** brings along regular jockey Oscar Gomez for the ride. This son

RICHARD W. SMALL FACTS

- ✓ Race 5, 1:52 EST
- ✓ \$100,000 purse
- ✓ 3yo and up, 1 1/8 miles
- ✓ Named for the late Dickie Small, the legendary Maryland trainer of Broad Brush, among others.

THE PICKS

1. **#4 – Catholic Cowboy (3-1):** *Carries 6 lbs. less than Page McKenney today; they were at equal weight when he beat “Page” last December; first LRL shipper this year for trainer Nick Zito.*
2. **#8 – Page McKenney (9-5):** *A model of consistency the past two years; part of the Exacta in his last ten non-graded stakes races.*
3. **#9 – Legendary (10-1):** *The \$64,000 question: If it does or even just a notch below, he wins this one drawing away! Hard to imagine getting double-digit odds.*
4. **#2 – Ever Rider (12-1):** *Figure jockey McCarthy to send this one and if the likely early challenger (#1) doesn’t engage, a gate-to-wire score is not out of the question*

of Smarty Jones has been a win machine (8 for 19 lifetime) at multiple distances, from six to ten furlongs and in between. NY-bred ventures outside of the Empire State to race for only the second time in his career. The first time was at Presque Isle Downs in an allowance where he lost by 20 lengths... ARG-bred **#2 – Ever Rider (12-1)** is used to running in ten to thirteen-furlong races with a victory at this distance in his lone try. This seven-year-old has been runner-up in two G2 affairs but appears to be way off form based on his 2015 debut in June, a 9th place finish in the G2 Brooklyn as a rank outsider. Transferred to local conditioner Tim Keefe, recent 5-week work tab gives one a glimmer of hope...**#3 – Talk Show Man (15-1)** seeks to make amends for his recent dull effort as post time favorite in the MD Million Classic. Last year in this inaugural event he was bumped and fell when 22-1. Seems up against it, since he's 0-for-5 at this distance.. **#6 – Service for Ten (12-1)** earned his career best 106 Brisnet# in his only race going nine-furlongs when DQ'd from second and placed third over a muddy, sealed Laurel Park surface. A surface he prefers based on his 3-0-2 lifetime "off track" record, though his 5-3-4 from 16 starts on a "Fast" track is nothing to sneeze at... **#7 – Dynamic Strike (12-1)** was a promising three-year-old who won the Miracle Wood stakes here, but then went on an 18-race drought until winning an optional claimer in May. Recent form suggests he should find a home up north closer to the synthetic surface tracks (Presque Isle Downs and Woodbine).



Figure 2 Zee Bros, upset winner of the 2014 De Francis. Photo by Jim McCue, Maryland Jockey Club.

OTHER LAUREL STAKES

Smart Halo Stakes

1. #4 – Twirl Girl (5-2): *Like her off the pace running style in here as the majority of her foes want to be on or near the lead early*
2. #7 – Lost Raven (3-1): *Her name tells the story of the Baltimore NFL club this season; connections rarely travel south unless they strongly believe a “W” can be recorded*
3. #3 – Crystal Rosario (3-1): *Only 2- time winner in this field; if she can get to the lead she just might steal it based on speed figures*
4. #6– J R Star (5-1): *Zayat Stables home bred still a maiden after three starts in New York against tougher foes than most in here*

Smart Halo Facts

- ✓ Race 3, 12:58 EST
- ✓ \$100,000 purse
- ✓ 2yo fillies, 6 furlongs

City of Laurel Stakes

1. #1 – Savoy Stomp (3-1): *Derby Trail wannabe this winter; beat elders in N1X in first eight months; training well at Saratoga*
2. #9 – Fortuitous Path (5-1): *Addition of blinkers helped immensely in most recent start; can move forward off that runner-up effort*
3. #2 – El Kabeir (2-1): *Less than 7 months ago this colt was at Churchill Downs preparing for the KY Derby before an injury shifted that Zayat dream to American Pharoah*
4. #3 – Duff (20-1): *Cut back in distance and switch back to natural dirt could result in a huge upset as that 102 Brisnet# two races back was no fluke*

City of Laurel Facts

- ✓ Race , 2:18 EST
- ✓ \$100,000 purse
- ✓ 3yo, 7 furlongs

James F. Lewis, III Stakes

1. #7 – Voluntario (5-1): *Scary to see “gear down” in comments when winning by 6¼, even moreso when final 1/8 run in 11 4/5*
2. #8 – Never Gone South (4-1): *A perfect 2 for 2; away for over three months but fired a couple bullets in the A.M. to complete prep work for this race*
3. #1 – King Kranz (6-5): *Awfully short price on a maiden with three races on his resume’; tries to make amends for runner-up finish in G2 at Belmont as PT favorite*
4. #5 – Awesome Speed (10-1): *Must respect trainer Alan Goldberg who is having a monster Laurel meet with limited starters (17: 6-3-5); \$335k purchase in March might turn out to be special*

James F. Lewis Facts

- ✓ Race 8, 3:13 EST
- ✓ \$100,000 purse
- ✓ 2yo, 6 furlongs