

## Ashley's Take

It took Track Phantom three attempts to break his maiden. In his debut race, he finished 3<sup>rd</sup> behind eventual Santa Anita Derby (G1) hero Stronghold and Wood Memorial (G2) winner Resilience. In his second start, Track Phantom was second to Real Men Violin, who placed in the Kentucky Jockey Club (G2) in his next outing. So while it did take Track Phantom a few starts to figure things out as a 2-year old, he did so against legitimate runners who he then turned around and beat as a 3-year old.

The son of Quality Road would turn the tables on two of those three rivals in subsequent races, however. While Stronghold shipped to the West Coast, Resilience finished 4<sup>th</sup> and Real Men Violin finished 8<sup>th</sup> in the Risen Star (G2). Real Men Violin was also 11<sup>th</sup> to Track Phantom's 4<sup>th</sup> in the Louisiana Derby.

Track Phantom is a pace-setting/pace-pressing type. Early in his career, if he established an unpressured lead, he would win. If he was pressured early, like in his first two races where he was forced to set splits of :22.86 and :46.30 in his mile long debut and then similar splits of :22.97 and :46.33 in his second race, also contested at a mile.

In his maiden breaking race, Wistucky was just a beat faster than Track Phantom at the first call, but by the second call Track Phantom had the lead. The opening splits for that race, a 1 1/16-mile affair, were :23.81 and :48.18, resulting in a 4 3/4-length victory for the colt. In the 1 1/16-mile, \$100,000 Gun Runner Stakes, Track Phantom ran nearly in tandem with pace-setting Next Level through early splits of :23.61 and :46.93. Next Level yielded prior to the 3/4-call, resulting in Track Phantom being able to slow the race down with splits of :25.11 and :25.54 and a final time of 1:44.42. He won by 1 1/4-lengths.

The Lecomte (G3) saw the Steve Asmussen trainee revert back to his usual front-running style. With Joel Rosario in the irons, the duo walked the dog on the lead, easing through splits of :24.01, :48.36, and 1:13.15. Track Phantom won by 2 3/4-lengths in a final time of 1:44.73.

The 1 1/8-mile Risen Star (G2) is where things started to derail for Track Phantom. In his first attempt beyond 1 1/16-mile, Track Phantom once again put the field to sleep with splits of :24.32, :49.67, and 1:14.74. With the middle two splits being run in :25.35 and :25.07, Track Phantom should have had plenty left in the tank in the stretch run. Instead, Sierra Leone came flying from the back of the field to snatch victory away by 1/2-length in a final time of 1:52.13.

It was nearly a copy and paste effort in the 1 3/16-mile, Grade 2 Louisiana Derby. Once again, Track Phantom got away with an easy lead, running fractions of :23.49, :48.33, and 1:12.54. Despite the reasonable pace, Track Phantom was once again run down in the stretch, with Catching Freedom and Honor Marie charging from the back of the field to grab first and second while Tuscan Gold ran an even third.

Track Phantom's sire Quality Road was grade one placed at the classic distance of 1 1/4-mile, the same as the Kentucky Derby, in both the Travers Stakes and the Jockey Club Gold Cup. As a sire, he has shown the ability to produce classic distance winning progeny with winners up to 1 1/2-mile. Track Phantom's dam, Miss Sunset, on the other hand, was a grade one placed sprinter via a runner-up effort in the Grade 1 Madison in 2018. Her only other foal to race to date is O'Conner Sunset, who was best up to 7-furlongs. Miss Sunset's dam Tuscan Sunset was also a sprinter and threw sprinters as a broodmare.

Based on what we've seen on the track and what Track Phantom's pedigree indicates, the 1 1/4-mile distance of the Kentucky Derby is out of the colt's wheelhouse. As the distances have gotten longer, the colt has digressed. He lost by 1/2-length to top prospect Sierra Leone in the 1 1/8-mile Risen Star and by 2 1/2-lengths in the 1 3/16-mile Louisiana Derby. With the likes of Dornoch and Fierceness also in the gate, there is little chance that Track Phantom gets an uncontested lead. He could hang on for a piece of the pie, but as a win play, he's a **pass**.

## Laura's Take

Track Phantom has been a polarizing horse all season, and coming into the Kentucky Derby, that hasn't changed in the slightest. While he is not my top choice, I do believe there is potential that is being missed here.

His detractors, as Ashley has done, will point to is Risen Star Stakes and Louisiana Derby as reasons the colt won't perform well in the Kentucky Derby.

The Risen Star was contested over a sloppy track, which is one that the race winner, Sierra Leone, is known to thrive over. Track Phantom never looked entirely comfortable over the surface, but still was able to make Sierra Leone work for it, despite having the length of the longest stretch in the country to run Track Phantom down.

The numbers originally came back on the lighter side for the Risen Star, but since several in that race came back to perform well, Beyer saw fit to increase the numbers earned in the Risen Star Stake by five points.

The Louisiana Derby pace is not one I'd call "easy", especially for 3-year-olds going 1 3/16ths, in late March, for the first time in their careers. 23.49 is solid opening first quarter at that distance. He got a bit of a breather, getting that second quarter in 24.84, but quickened again in the third, going 24.21 seconds.

Given that between the half mile to stretch calls, Track Phantom never had more than a half length of breathing room, I'd also say his lead was pressured. Not easy in the least.

I had hoped that the connections would allow Track Phantom the ability to sit off the pace, given his wide post. But they chose to send him, using him a decent bit to secure and keep the early lead in a race that could have been set up in a way that allowed him to track from the outside, as he's done in the past.

If Track Phantom is forced to go to the lead in the 150th Kentucky Derby, I will agree that he won't be able to hang on for the win.

If his connections learned from the Louisiana Derby, and he is allowed to track or press from the outside, I think we will see a much improved performance from the son of Quality Road.

He's never given the impression, in his races or works, that he's a speed crazy that needs the lead. In fact, he seems very laid back and has been ratable on the lead in many of his starts.

Pedigree wise, it is easy to see why several will take a pass on him. The pedigree does shout miler to middle distance. The problem is, we've seen many a horse outrun their pedigree. There is even a Kentucky Oaks contender, Thorpedo Anna, doing that right now.

In addition to that, let's look at some of the horses that have crossed the wire first in the Kentucky Derby recently. Justify, Maximum Security, Authentic, Nyquist, Always Dreaming and California Chrome all had questionable 10 furlong pedigrees.

What all of them had, however, was a forward running style and a high cruising speed. None of them were overly speed crazy, despite having plenty of speed, which enabled them to stay out of traffic, and outlast closing bids. While I think the horse who best fits this bill in 2024 is Fierceness, Track Phantom has a similar running style, and that could be why he finishes better than some late running favorites.

Yes, there is definitely a lot of speed here. Fierceness has plenty and Dornoch needs the lead to run his very best. However, we have seen that the post draw is crucial for speed horses as they break itself.

Track Phantom has shown a very consistent ability to break swiftly, which will help him in the Kentucky Derby. Should either be hampered at the start, things look a lot better for Track Phantom, which is why I'm willing to take a risk and deem the enigmatic colt a **play**.