Race 1

1 Mile/Pace • NW 1 EXT PM LT
(3) JD CAMDEN GB ships from the east coast off three priming miles. Class and speedwise, he should reign over these if properly put in play. (9) PRETTY N SASSY can grind and take loads of air, but her main obstacle will be getting into the race from the second tier. (2) DESIGNATED FREAK showed promise last season and enters off a solid qualifier. (7) FIGHTFORYOURRIGHT also showed some life in his qualifier and could snag a share.

Race 2

1 Mile/Pace • F&M Open
(6) AINTHESAMENOTWITHOUTU flourished over this surface last season. She's stayed sharp through winter and returns to her stomping grounds with just an outside post to overcome. (5) MAGGIE RHEE goes off Lasix but qualified well off a sick scratch. If she leaves, she's in play. (4) SOUTHWIND BELLA fits this group but she hasn't raced since November. May need a start. (2) BETTER DOUBLE FLIP can keep pace and grab a piece.

Race 3

1 Mile/Pace • USHDC NW$3,000L4 Opt. Claim $8,000
(6) SNEAK ON BYE could have more ability than most in this field, but he does enter off an over month-long layoff. This barn does well in this spot though. (4) PALOMAR may have gotten back on track with his most recent mile. His backclass could carry him. (1) BUSINESS CHECK could work a good trip for a slice from this post. (3) AYR PIONEER GB did his best work rolling on the front last season, but he doesn't appear in that form just yet.

Race 4

1 Mile/Pace • F&M NW 1 EXT PM LT
(8) WOMEN BE SHOPPIN appears to have promise off two solid qualifiers, but debuting from the outermost post is a stiff task. She could be live at first asking. (4) TAKE YOUR PICK has the speed to lead here, but her qualifier raises concern of her current fitness. At her best, she wins here. (9) SPARKLING DIVA finally managed to push to a victory in her most recent start, so she could be turning around. She can keep pacing under the line in a race where many falter. (2) PAYCHECK PRINCESS should be fast enough for a check.

Race 5

1 Mile/Pace • NW$9,200L4 CD
(3) ILLUSION SEELESTER has crazy speed and comes to a track where, if let loose, she can roll. The lone concern is her stale date, having last raced on Feb. 19. (2) LOW RIDER has the class to crush here as an obvious contender, but might not be a necessary slam dunk. (4) THIS KIT ROCKS has gone good miles over this surface, but his current off-the-pace tactics risk giving him a steep mountain to climb at a short price. (5) CAVIART CAMDEN could offer solid odds for an off-the-speed type who was put in tough spots in his last two miles.

Race 6

1 Mile/Pace • NW 1 EXT PM CD
(4) CHASE THE BOUQUET has the speed to excel here, but showed little in her qualifier. Possibly vulnerable favorite who also could crush. (3) MAGICKINGDOM closed ground in lone qualifier and could be ready. (7) APRIL'S BIG GUY can close into action. (1) DULLY RUCK could just suck along for a share.

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Race 7

1 Mile/Pace • Open
(2) HE’ZZZ A WISE SKY draws the right spot to leave and roll. If left alone, he's tough to down. (6) NO LOU ZING tends to come from off the speed in spots like this, and from this spot that could be to his disadvantage. He has enough ability though to breakthrough. (4) SHAMWOW has speed and fits the class but doesn't show the type of ability to be a lock. (1) MAC'S MARVEL fits the class but could need a start to get back to form.

Race 8

1 Mile/Trot • NW 1 EXT PM LT
(3) BLINDING LIGHTS AS showed some life as a 2-year-old and could be coming in here off a sneaky qualifier. This barn does well off these kinds of layoffs. (6) MILITANT could just be faster than others here, and that might be enough. (1) BLACK BUTTON won in her qualifier but sometimes these kinds need a start before they're really tuned. (7) BEE OUR HONEY may have speed to get involved from the outside.

Race 9

1 Mile/Pace • NW1 EXT PM CD
(1) FROZEN SHARK wins this race if he can replicate his performance from two starts ago. It’s not a lock, though. (7) IT'S A JK won over this track last season but otherwise shows even efforts on the bigger track. He also has been absent for over a year, so he either developed or will need a start. (4) BELLA MAGIC can get into a winning position but might struggle passing horses. Must-use underneath. (6) LADY’S CHOICE K can also get into a striking spot, but also shows a lack of gumption where it counts at the end.

Race 10

1 Mile/Pace • NW$2,500L4
(3) WHITE BELLY took a bad step but otherwise romped in his most recent qualifier. He should be ready to rock. (2) JOSIE ROCKSMYWORLD also comes in off a good qualifier and should be able to place himself into a striking spot. (5) MAJOR LEAGUER fits higher levels than this but could need a start. If ready off the bench though, could be live at a price. (1) TOPVILLE ROCKNLUCK gets an improved post draw and a class drop, but aside from that he's a pure gamble. No guarantee he crushes on merit alone.

Race 11

1 Mile/Pace • NW$4,000L4 Opt. Claim $10,000
(3) LOUIE THE LOOPER has the ability to down this field, but he's clearly had issues getting in his way. Making his first start for Big Jim Brinson could help breathe life into him. (5) VESPA N almost won against similar last out and that's about it. He's a basic morning-line favorite. (1) CLEARCHOICE DE VIE is another who could roll down the pipeline at his best, but whether he's there in his first start since December is the question. (7) GALACTIC STORM will just have to find his way into the race. The outside post gives him options to sit or launch.

Race 12

1 Mile/Pace • NW$6,500L4 CD
(7) CRIUS N ROCK is fast enough to beat a bunch like this at first asking. He just has to stay together through the turns. (2) CALIBER may be ready to ride a pocket trip and pounce like he did on Dec. 30 to win, but his most recent mile raises some question marks about whether he's ready to go. (4) SPEED SNIP ships in off solid miles that could win him this race. (6) SPEAKING VOLUMES can climb from far out of the mix, which is great for grabbing checks but tough for winning races.
Greetings to everyone for the opening day of what is going to be an power-packed Oak Grove 2024 season of harness racing. I'm track announcer Peter Kleinhans, and I'll be calling the races, trying to provide both an exciting and informative take on every race as it happens.

I will also be giving a deep dive analysis of one or two of the races on the card each day. For a serious look into all the races, take a look at Ray Cotolo's excellent in-depth evaluation of all the races for our in-house and simulcast signals. He's sharp.

Among other a million other things, what makes harness racing unique is that if you like predicting things, and put time into it- you can really learn understand what's going on with the races. That's why it's a true game of skill, with some miraculous good luck and torturous bad thrown. One thing is for sure- the more you learn, the more you win!

My goal here is to provide a free-form look into handicapping. I'm here to entertain and educate new racing fans, so please feel free to let me know what you'd like to see more of. I hope that the long-form analysis of the races will get you excited about reading the program from the standpoint of making smart bets. There's nothing better than making a smart bet for the right reasons and cashing a ticket.

For opening day, I'm going to look at the first race in depth. There's nothing better than getting off to a great start in the opener- and if you're a Pick-5 bettor, the first race opens all those possibilities. Remember, those early Pick-5 bets must be placed before the first race.

Race 1

What makes the start of a meet so interesting is that you're comparing horses coming from all different tracks and different classes. You can't just look at the last race, times, etc, because times are really dependent on which track the race was competed at, the circumstances of the race, etc. Instead, in a race like this, you're trying to size up who the class of the field is, if they're ready, etc. Let's take a look at what we've got here. These are young horses, mostly without any wins to their credit yet, and many making the first or second starts of their three-year-old campaigns.

1. PERFECT HILL has yet to really impress, but he did have a valid excuse in his first race off a long layoff- he had the impossible 9 post at The Meadows (Pennsylvania) and got away last... you don't usually get much coming from last at The Meadows, but he managed to pass a few horses. His qualifier wasn't bad either- he was second- but note that his final 1/4 (to me, an especially important factor in qualifying races) was only 29.4- decent but not overwhelming. This horse seems to have some good performances in his not-too-distant future, but i don't think he can get there today.

2. DESIGNATED FREAK is really interesting here. A son of the (truly freakishly-fast) Freaky Feet Pete, he won 4 of 8 races as a two year old, including a 1:54.1 win here at Oak Grove. He still fits this race because three of his wins were in non-betting races, so he definitely has an edge on this field as far as successful experience. He hasn't raced since August, but he came flying home to win his qualifying race. I think he's very competitive here.

3. JD CAMDEN GB looks like the main threat to #2. First of all, he's a four-year-old competing against mostly three-year-olds, which is still pretty significant at this time of year. But he has other things going for him as well. Last September he won a Grade One stakes race in England. To be fair, a stakes race England is not necessarily indicative of much, because they don't have the quality or quantity of horses there that we have in the US. Nevertheless, since arriving on these shores, he hasn't done much wrong. He qualified well, he went right out and almost won his first start in the US, just gettin caught by a neck. Then he had a race at The Meadowlands where he finished sixth, but he was totally blocked the whole way down the stretch (and still finished in a crisp 27 seconds flat), and he followed that up with a solid closing second-place finish in a race with a slow pace- something that isn't usually kind to horses coming from behind at The Meadows. Now he's facing this mostly unproven field, and he hails from the Burke stable, hands-down the most successful stable in the country. If they send a horse to Oak Grove, it's not just for laughs.

4. CAN'T STAY TOO LONG just doesn't seem to have quite the ability to go with the top horses in this race. She has finished second twice in a row... but those were in races with purses of $150... so what do you do with that? Her races last year were pretty dull and she looks like a toss-out.

5. ROCKONBIGSTAR won his qualifying race, but the 2:05 time, while good for the 1970s, isn't going to blow anyone over, and neither are his lackluster two-year-old races. He does get Tony Hall in the bike tonight, though, and that's a plus. But it would be pretty shocking to see him step out and win this right off the bench.

6. BAPA'S DOUBLE KNOT has yet to show much of anything in his career. He did finish third last September... in a four horse field.

7. FIGHTFORYOURRIGHT is interesting. He wasn't good enough to win the minor stakes series he was in at The Red Mile last year, but he missed by less than two lengths in that $50K event. His qualifier was also promising. Coming from the back of the pack, he finished fourth and paced in 1:58.4 on the same day that Designated Freak (#2) only went his mile in 2.00. He seems well situated here to pass some tired horses and get third or fourth.

8. HERESTHEDESIRE was reasonably-competitive on the Indiana fair circuit last year, although he wasn't facing the state's best. Last race- his first since last August- was very poor... but he adds lasix. Normally, lasix is added if a horse 'bleeds', restricting his breathing capacity. We can deduce from his poor finish last time and the addition of lasix today, that he probably bled last time, and thus he'll probably be better today. But even aside from that, post eight is going to be very hard to overcome. Pass.

9. PRETTY N SASSY is the wildcard in this race. First of all, when you see #9 here at Oak Grove, don't panic. Unlike post 9 at The Meadows (discussed earlier), post 9 at Oak Grove is in the second tier. In other words, instead of starting from way way outside, you're starting on the inside, right behind #1. (The driver is allowed to start behind any horse but they almost always pick #1 to follow for obvious reasons of not giving up inside position). So Pretty N Sassy isn't going to have to come from last to win this. And her last couple race were quite good. Her 1:53.2 performance at Miami Valley wasn't bad at all- she finished seventh but she only lost two lengths in the last half of the race which went in a blistering :55.1. After qualifying at Hoosier Park in Indiana, she raced there and was a very fast closing second with a 26.4 final quarter- a very nice effort.

So how do we put a bet together on this race? The key- as it so often is- is the odds. If you're getting high odds on horses you legitimately like, and you're watching your bankroll, you should catch enough winners at high enough prices to post long-term gains. Of course, you have to wait a few minutes into the betting to get a sense of what the odds are going to be. My feeling is that JD Camden (#3) is going to get most of the money; Designated Freak (#2) and Pretty N Sassy (#9) should get some of it. While #3 might be the most likely winner, #9 might be the best bet. That's how I'm going to structure my bet here:

$5 win, $5 place #9 Cost $10
$4 exacta box (2-3-9) Cost $24
$2 trifecta box (2-3-9) Cost $12