

MORE MATRIX CONTENT FOR DEL MAR!

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Date: 11/21/26
Race 8: $100K Native Diver (G3) contested at 9-furlongs on the main track
Post: approx. post 4:03 p.m. PST

OVERVIEW

This is an interesting race because several of these have legitimate stakes credentials, but the established class horses aren't necessarily the ones in the best current form. There should be enough early speed to keep everybody honest, so may the best horse win!

#1 PONY EXPRESS (5/1), the first Sadler entrant, had mixed results against stakes foes a long time ago, but he's returning from a lengthy layoff, and asking him to tackle stakes-quality competition at 9-furlongs in his first start back is a tall order. Sadler can certainly get one ready,

but this looks like a difficult spot for a comeback—though he sure has had plenty of stamina works! GRADE: C.

#2 MIDWAY LANE (5/1), the second Sadler runner, comes off a victory to maintain his good dirt form (toss that one turf race), but he's stepping up considerably in class after winning a starter allowance at 7-furlongs. He does have two wire wins going a mile, but I'm not sure he'll be able to wire this group going an extra furlong. I hate betting against a Sadler who could still be just getting good, but I prefer others. GRADE: C.

#3 MR. A. P. (3/1) is a logical contender after winning the Tokyo City Cup at Santa Anita last time, overcoming some trouble before making a decisive move to draw away from the field in facile fashion. I like that he has enough tactical speed to stay within range without needing the lead. He's in good form and doesn't need everything to go perfectly to win. He's a 3-year-old with plenty of upside. I think he's the most talented horse in the race. GRADE: A.

#4 ZIHNAL (7/2) is an interesting sophomore who has been competing successfully against graded-stakes company outside California. He faces older winners for the first time, and that's never easy, but he's in good hands with Thomas, and it's hard to knock a horse who has done his best work at today's distance. GRADE: A.

#5 BULLARD (4/1) won a Grade 3 here back in 2024, and even though he's winless since then, he typically shows up with a good race. Three back, he put up a big fig when second in the Cornhusker Handicap (G3), and last time, he placed in an N2X at Keeneland, which is always a tough assignment. He's 2-for-2 at Del Mar, but he is winless in four tries at today's distance, so he'll need to show some extra oomph late. He's a contender but demand value. GRADE: A.

#6 LYELL'S SONG (8/1) is an honest horse who always shows up and runs his race—unfortunately, someone typically proves just a bit better. He was no match for Mr. A. P. last time, and I'm having a hard time seeing a reversal here at 9-panels when that foe was finishing and this one was slowing down at a mile last time. I've always liked this guy, but how much improvement can we expect from this 5-year-old? GRADE: C.

#7 BRITISH ISLES (12/1) is a Grade 1 winner, having captured the Santa Anita Handicap (G1) earlier this year, but that wasn't an especially strong edition of the race, and his more recent efforts raise legitimate questions. I respect his accomplishments, but I'm not convinced we're getting the same horse we saw in the spring. That said, this is an easier spot for him, so he'll have every chance to right the ship if he's ready off an August layoff. GRADE: C.

#8 VODKA VODKA (12/1) has some stakes credentials, including a convincing victory at Sunland Park, but his recent form has been uninspiring. He has enough tactical speed to get involved, so he should trip out—can he finish up like he did at Sunland? GRADE: C.

CONCLUSION

As mentioned, I think **#3 MR. A. P. (3/1)** is the most talented horse in the field and the most likely winner; I also think 3/1 is a pipe dream, so a short price might dampen the enthusiasm as a contest play. My other "A" horses **#4 ZIHNAL (7/2)** and **#5 BULLARD (4/1)** are fine alternatives, so perhaps one of them will sneak away at an okay price. At these morning-lines, however, Mr. A. P. at 3/1 is great value—but I can't see that price holding.

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