OVERVIEW:

Justify is trying to give trainer Bob Baffert his second Triple Crown winner in three years. But the fact that there were 38 years between American Pharoah's 2016 win and the last Triple Crown winner proves this is a very difficult feat. Justify will be favored, but not overwhelmingly so as he faces a strong field of nine challengers with only one or maybe two that can safely be disregarded.

The Belmont often produces huge upsets. At 1 1/2 miles, the race is an oddity in America. Horses never run that far and the current trend of racing young horses only sparingly means none of these horses is really ready for something like this. That often leads to remarkable long shots winning. Last year I touted 14-1 Creator and those that followed my suggested wagers made thousands. I also had the cold exacta of 29-1 Lemon Drop Kid and 62-1 Vision and Verse in 1999 and encouraged a bet on 73-1 Sarava in 2002. Scores like that can put you up for life. No guarantees this year and it's unlikely we'll have super payoffs like those I just mentioned but it simply doesn't make sense to bet Justify at short odds when there are alternatives who will pay much more money if they win.

Justify is a super horse but, having never raced until February of this year, has been asked to do a lot in a very short period of time. If he can win the Belmont, he will rightly be regarded as a horse for the ages. But the odds are against it. The majority of horses that win the first two legs are denied the Triple Crown in this race.

The Kentucky Derby and Preakness were both run on insanely muddy tracks. At the time I'm preparing this, there is a chance for rain in New York Saturday but we should have a better track than in the first two races. I'll assess the field in post-position order.

THE FIELD

#1 JUSTIFY—He's still unbeaten but he has had two incredibly taxing races with strong pace pressure. He didn't beat Bravazo and Tenfold by much in the Preakness and looked awfully tired to me after the race. But he has trained very impressively at Churchill Downs since the Preakness and trainer Baffert has a history of being able to get horses to hold their form. Justify will probably again be sent to the lead but it is very hard to win a race like this wire to wire. He may well lead when they turn for home but the acid test will be in the long Belmont Park stretch.

#2 FREE DROP BILLY—He's had a couple of fast workouts since an awful performance in the Derby. It's hard to toss out any horse in a race as historically unpredictable as the Belmont but this horse hasn't won a race since October.

#3 BRAVAZO—I liked him in the Preakness and he ran a strong second which made the wagers I posted on this site profitable. This might be legendary trainer D. Wayne Lukas' last chance to win a Triple Crown race. But I prefer horses that have had more rest than the three week Preakness turnaround.

#4 HOFBURG—This lightly raced horse ran a very respectable seventh in the Derby and was one of the only horses gaining ground late in the race. He is bred to get this marathon distance. Trainer Bill Mott took this horse to upstate New York's Saratoga after the Derby and has trained him on Saratoga's "Oklahoma" training track. Trainer Nick Zito mastered that formula in his successful Belmont Stakes races. Hofburg has been coming from way off the pace and that style often flops in the Belmont. But I think he has enough tactical speed to be closer on Saturday. Jockey Irad Ortiz won the Belmont last year and is very, very good. There are two negatives: Hofburg has only one win and every "wise guy" in the country is touting him as the upsetter. Those horses never seem to win. On the other hand, this horse has unlimited upside and comes into this race fresh and rested.   Maybe……

#5 RESTORING HOPE—It's hard to see why trainer Baffert is running him here when he already has Justify. This one hasn't done much and was awful in a race on the Derby undercard five weeks ago.

#6 GRONKOWSKI—Named after, and now partly owned by, the Patriots' tight end. He was eligible to run in the Derby by virtue of winning qualifying races against very soft competition on synthetic surfaces in England. They wisely bypassed the Derby. He seems like an automatic throw-out except for two things. His new trainer, Chad Brown, wins everything in sight. And, his on-track workouts at Belmont actually looked very good. He's never run on dirt in his life and may be overmatched but stranger things have happened.

#7 TENFOLD—This is another lightly raced horse who was closing fast and very game in the slop in the Preakness. He was just nipped for second and could move forward off that effort. He has two wins in his four races and has never run poorly. He is the best bred horse in the race and is also the best bred for this long distance. His running style is perfect. He stays fairly close to the lead and finishes strongly. Trainer Steve Asmussen won the Belmont last year with Creator.

#8 VINO ROSSO—He was my pick to win the Derby but the ridiculously wet tack and a wide post position did him in. He was an OK ninth in that race. he has been working out at Belmont Park since and has looked very sharp. I have a theory that New York-based owners and trainers outperform in the Belmont because the race is a bigger deal to them than the Derby. That's certainly the case here as Vino's owner has come right out and said this race is bigger to him than the one in Kentucky. In other words, this is the race he's been pointed to all year. He was very impressive in winning the Wood Memorial in New York in his race before the Derby. Trainer Todd Pletcher and jockey John Velazquez are two of the best of all time. My lone knock is that this horse has no early speed and will have to come from way back.

#9 NOBLE INDY—Also trained by Pletcher and the majority owner also has Vino Rosso. This horse should sit just off Justify. They're taking the blinkers he's worn his last two starts off and Pletcher is deadly with that move. He ran horribly in the Derby but has trained well since. His breeding suggests the distance here is iffy.

#10 BLENDED CITIZEN—Talk about mixed signals. He won the Peter Pan Stakes over this track four weeks ago and that path has been used quite a few times by Belmont Stakes winners. He was plain lousy as a two year old but improved quite a bit this year and was outstanding in winning a race at Turfway Park in March. But that race was on a synthetic track and dirt may not be this horse's best surface. He doesn't have any truly fast speed figures, his jockey is rather unheralded and his breeding says the race distance is too far. But he will be ignored in the wagering and his chances are better than his odds. Possible upset winner.

PREDICTION:

HORSE #	HORSE	PROGRAM ODDS
4	HOFBURG	9-2
8	VINO ROSSO	8-1
1	JUSTIFY	4-5
7	TENFOLD	12-1
10	BLENDED CITIZEN	15-1
9	NOBLE INDY	30-1

SOME WAGERS:

The wagers posted here in both the Kentucky Derby and Preakness produced net profits.   My focus here is to try to cash if Justify loses with a small saver on him if he wins.

#4 and #8 to win place and show (choose your amount)

$1 trifecta 4-8 with 1-4-7-8-9-10 with all ($80)

50-cent trifecta 1-4-7-8-9-10 with 4-8 with all ($40)

$2 daily double (starting in race 10, the Woodford Reserve Manhattan and ending in race 11, the Belmont)) 1-3-8 with 1-4-7-8-10 ($30)

MY RACES

A horse I co-own, Talk Veuve to Me, is running in the Grade 1 race for three year old fillies at Belmont Saturday, the Acorn (race 4). This is only her fourth career start but she ran second in a Grade 2 at Churchill Downs five weeks ago. Veuve is #7 and is 8-1 in the program. I think she will run well but there is a potential superstar in the race, #3 Monomoy Girl, who won the Kentucky Oaks and is 6-for-7 lifetime. On Thursday at Belmont, I have #2 La Sardane in Race 7, the Grade 3 Intercontinental. She's a whopping 20-1 in the program but I think she has a legitimate chance to win.