SOFTWARE & TECH

What Was The Last Triple Crown Winner

PUBLISHED
November 25, 2026

REFERENCE
#1795581819005462

The Ultimate Quest in Thoroughbred Racing: Understanding the Last Triple Crown Winner

In the world of thoroughbred horse racing, few achievements capture the imagination quite like winning the American Triple Crown. This rare and prestigious honor—sweeping the Kentucky Derby, the Preakness Stakes, and the Belmont Stakes in a single season—has been accomplished by only 13 horses in history. The question "What was the last Triple Crown winner?" often sparks lively discussion among racing enthusiasts and casual fans alike. The answer is **Justify**, who achieved this incredible feat in 2018. But to fully appreciate this modern champion, we need to explore his journey, the history of the Triple Crown, and what makes this accomplishment so elusive.

The Triple Crown: A Brief Overview

The American Triple Crown consists of three legendary races, each with its own history and unique challenges:

- Kentucky Derby – Run at Churchill Downs in Louisville, Kentucky, on the first Saturday in May. Known as "The Run for the Roses," this 1¼-mile race is the most famous in America.
- Preakness Stakes – Held two weeks later at Pimlico Race Course in Baltimore, Maryland. At 1 3/16 miles, it is slightly shorter than the Derby but demands speed and endurance.
- Belmont Stakes – Run three weeks after the Preakness at Belmont Park in Elmont, New York. At 1½ miles, it is the longest and often most grueling leg, earning the nickname "The Test of the Champion."

Winning all three in a five-week span requires a combination of speed, stamina, soundness, and exceptional training. The last Triple Crown winner, Justify, joined an exclusive club that remained largely dormant for decades.

The Long Drought Before Justify

To understand the significance of the question "What was the last Triple Crown winner?", we must look at the period before 2018. The previous Triple Crown winner was **American Pharoah** in 2015. Before him, the last was **Affirmed**in 1978. That means 37 years passed between Affirmed and American Pharoah—a generation gap that made many wonder if the Triple Crown had become an impossible dream.

During those decades, several horses came close but fell short. Spectacular Bid in 1979, Sunday Silence in 1989, Silver Charm in 1997, Real Quiet in 1998, War Emblem in 2002, Funny Cide in 2003, Smarty Jones in 2004, Big Brown in 2008, and California Chrome in 2014 all won the first two legs but were defeated in the Belmont. Each failure added to the perception that the modern thoroughbred was no longer bred or conditioned to handle the Triple Crown's demands.

Then came American Pharoah, a horse with a royal name and a powerful stride, who ended the drought in

spectacular fashion. And just three years later, Justify became the second Triple Crown winner in four years—a remarkable turnaround.

Justify: The Last Triple Crown Winner

Early Career and the Kentucky Derby

Justify, a chestnut colt sired by Scat Daddy and out of Stage Magic, was trained by Hall of Fame trainer Bob Baffert. What made Justify's story extraordinary is that he did not race as a two-year-old. He made his career debut in February 2018 at Santa Anita Park, winning a maiden race by nearly ten lengths. That late start meant he had to accomplish his Triple Crown run on just five career starts before the Derby—an unprecedented level of inexperience for a classic winner.

Justify entered the 2018 Kentucky Derby as an undefeated horse with a powerful running style. Breaking from post position seven under jockey Mike Smith, he stayed close to the pace, took the lead on the far turn, and held off a charging Good Magic to win by 2½ lengths. The time was 2:04.20, not exceptionally fast but visually impressive.

The Preakness Stakes

Two weeks later at Pimlico, the Preakness Stakes provided a different challenge: a sloppy, muddy track. Some horses struggle in the mud, but Justify handled it like a pro. He broke well, settled behind the early speed, and then took command on the turn. Despite being bumped at the start and racing wide, he powered home to win by half a length over Bravazo and Tenfold. It was a gutsy performance that demonstrated his class and determination.

The Belmont Stakes: History in the Making

The 2018 Belmont Stakes on June 9 was the final hurdle. Justify, now carrying the weight of expectations, faced a field of nine rivals including a fresh horse, Restoring Hope, and the filly Wonder Gadot. The day was hot and humid, and Justify again had to overcome a wide post position (post 6). But from the gate, he showed blazing speed, opening up a clear lead. Jockey Mike Smith wisely rated him just enough to conserve energy. Around the final turn, Justify still led by several lengths, and in the long Belmont stretch, he never slowed. He crossed the wire 1¾ lengths ahead of Gronkowski, becoming the 13th Triple Crown winner and the second for trainer Bob Baffert (after American Pharoah).

The winning time of 2:28.18 was notable, and Justify's achievement was immediate: he became the first horse since Seattle Slew in 1977 to win the Triple Crown while undefeated. His final record stood at 6 wins from 6 starts—a perfect season.

Why Justify's Triple Crown Was So Significant

Answering "What was the last Triple Crown winner?" is more than a trivia fact. Justify's accomplishment occurred in an era when horses are often retired early for breeding, and the Triple Crown schedule is more compressed than ever. His trainer, Bob Baffert, became the first to condition two Triple Crown winners, cementing his legacy. Jockey Mike Smith, at age 52, became the oldest jockey to win a Triple Crown, a testament to his skill and longevity.

Moreover, Justify's victory was a reminder that the Triple Crown can still be achieved in modern racing, despite concerns about breeding, medication rules, and horse welfare. It sparked renewed interest in the sport, generating huge television ratings and attendance numbers.

What Happened After the Triple Crown?

Justify did not race again after the Belmont. He was retired due to mild swelling in his ankle, a precautionary

decision that prevented any further racing. He was immediately syndicated for stud duty at Coolmore's Ashford Stud in Kentucky, where his initial stud fee was set at $150,000—among the highest for a first-year sire. His legacy, however, was already secured. He had accomplished the ultimate goal in thoroughbred racing in just 111 days.

Comparing the Last Two Triple Crown Winners

Aspect	American Pharoah (2015)	Justify (2018)
Trainer	Bob Baffert	Bob Baffert
Jockey	Victor Espinoza	Mike Smith
Racing Record	9 wins from 11 starts	6 wins from 6 starts
Last Race	Won Breeders' Cup Classic	Retired after Belmont
Notable Achievement	First Triple Crown in 37 years	First undefeated Triple Crown winner since 1977

Many racing fans ask whether Justify or American Pharoah was the better horse. It's a subjective question, but both are celebrated as champions of their time. American Pharoah went on to win the Breeders' Cup Classic, while Justify's perfect record remains unmatched in his cohort.

The Hunt for the Next Triple Crown Winner

Since Justify's triumph, several horses have entered the Triple Crown trail with promise, but none have succeeded. In 2019, Maximum Security won the Derby but was disqualified; later horses like Authentic (2020 Derby winner) and Medina Spirit (2021) could not win all three. As of 2025, the question "What was the last Triple Crown winner?" still points to Justify in 2018. However, the sport remains hopeful that another horse will emerge.

The modern Triple Crown is as much a test of training, luck, and soundness as it is of talent. With the growing influence of international breeding, the potential for a new star is always present. But until that day, Justify's legacy stands tall.

Conclusion

In the annals of horse racing, the last Triple Crown winner is **Justify**, who conquered the Kentucky Derby, Preakness, and Belmont in 2018 with a perfect record. His achievement ended a short drought following American Pharoah and demonstrated that the Triple Crown remains a living dream. For anyone wondering "What was the last Triple Crown winner?", the answer is a horse of power, grace, and historical significance—a champion who will forever be remembered as one of the greatest to ever run on dirt. Whether you are a lifelong fan or a newcomer, the story of Justify is a testament to the timeless allure of the Triple Crown.

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