

THURSDAY, MARCH 16, 2023

The rebirth of Walter Case Jr



Walter Case Jr's first win back in Maine after a long break came in 2021 with Trottin For Cash. STEPHANIE GRAY PHOTO



EDITOR'S EYE

By Derick Giwner
[@harnesseveguy](https://twitter.com/harnesseveguy)

Few people make it through life without some form of struggle. For some those moments can be few and far between while others wrestle with their vices so often that they spill over to affect their daily lives and family. Each person must decide whether to grow and learn from their mistakes, just as society must consider whether to accept said person as changed or rehabilitated.

Anyone who followed harness racing in the 1980s and 1990s is familiar with Walter Case Jr. His name alone can bring about powerful feelings due to a checkered history on and off the track which eventually led to his absence from society for a few years and from the sulky for the majority of nearly two decades.

Case's extended vacation from the bike ended in 2021 as Maine welcomed him back into the driver colony. The now 62-year-old horseman who missed the prime years of his earning life has made the most of his renewed opportunity. After a slow start with an un-Case-like 15 wins in 197 starts (7%) in 2021, the driver found his stride last year and won 166 races while putting up a 19% win rate.

"I believe in redemption," said Chris Schick, who operates the meet at First Tracks Cumberland via his Golden Bear Racing LLC and approved Case for duty at that track. "He had a license and we agreed to let him in. Bangor didn't let him in the first year but I guess they saw he was being a good citizen and changed direction last year."

In terms of winning races, Case was Aaron Merriman – the driver who has led North America in wins each season for almost a decade – before Mr. Merriman started driving full time. In

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JAN FARRINGTON PHOTO

Maine natives Bruce Ranger (Portland), Chuck Connor Jr. (Augusta) and Walter Case Jr. (Lewiston) have combined for 23,111 career wins.

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1998 he recorded a then-record 1,077 wins in an unfathomable 2,993 starts (36% win rate). In contrast, the only two men – Tim Tetrick (2007) and Aaron Merriman (2018 & 2017) – to eclipse his win total did so with 25%, 24% and 23% success rates, respectively.

From 1988 to 2003, Case won 8,634 races and posted a 29% winning percentage. Horses steered by him hit the top three 58% of the time. Then it all went away as a result of demons in the way of addiction, which led to the lowest point in his life.

Case was sentenced to five years in prison back in 2004 for stabbing his estranged wife Nadine in June of that year. He was released back into society in October 2008 expecting a somewhat return to normalcy. While he was permitted to compete in 25 races at Plainridge Racecourse during the year of his release from prison, that privilege was quickly revoked and Case became a man without a home, unable to find a state to license him to do what he does best.

Following a nine-year absence, the Maine native returned to his roots and surfaced on the track at Scarborough Downs late in 2017. After 53 starts and 11 wins, Case was once again gone from the spotlight of racing, unseen in the program for another four years until his true resurrection in June 2021.

That there was some rust for Case to wash off in 2021 was understandable and it was hardly a shock that he led all drivers in Maine in terms of wins in 2022. The 166 victories earned him the Driver of the Year award from the Maine Harness Horsemen's Association.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, Case didn't show up to receive his award, just as he didn't reply after multiple attempts to comment for this article. Whether those actions are in his best interest are up to the reader to decide. It does keep him under the radar and out of the spotlight which

possibly contributed to his downfall some 20 years ago. Interestingly, Case is relatively active on social media via Facebook and often makes multiple comments on posts or expresses his thoughts. So there is desire on his part to be part of society, just not the focal part of it.

"He's a completely different person than when he was driving horses for me, that's for sure," said Charles Malia, Presiding Judge at First Tracks Cumberland, who knows Case going back to when the driver was about 17 and driving for him as an owner. "If you know Walter Case, you know that when he was driving in his 20s he was the King of the Hill and got himself into a lot of jams. Now you wouldn't believe the transformation. He's one of the most humble, easy to get along with people you will ever meet.

"When I ask Walter to give me the truth, I get it," continued Malia. "The truth is somewhat missing in today's society, so it is nice to get it when you can. Walter is very truthful, very honest and a pleasure to deal with."

It is certainly not an understatement to say that Case's on-track history has seen its low points. While his driving statistics are impressive, his 78 pages of fines and/or suspensions (773 total inquiries) are mind-boggling when compared to current top drivers who have less than half that total. John Campbell, who retired in 2017, only has 75 records under his name. Case was handed over 200 days' worth of suspensions in 2003 by Ohio officials for "kicking" horses, which can often be confused with simply removing a foot from the stirrups. The "new" Case was fined just four times in 2022 for "failure to keep both feet in the stirrups" and once for "kick a horse," falling in line with the typical driver.

"The fines are substantial now and Walter is just a different person," said Malia as it relates to on-track infractions. "He's trying to make a living. He doesn't have a whole lot and he's in survival mode. He's pretty easy to get along with. When you are 20, you are trying to prove you are good enough. Walter knows he's good enough and is just trying to survive now."

CONTINUED ON PAGE 4

From the outside looking in, the past seems to be in the rearview mirror for Case and the here and now is all that matters. He will never get back the years he wasted or the ones when he languished, banished to the sidelines when he longed to compete on the track.

"My image days are done and I did my time. Either you hate me or like me," said Case back in 2021. "I drive horses to the best I can, sometimes good, sometimes bad, but I don't dwell on it anymore."

When speaking with other people who have come into contact with Case, the response has been positive. Said fellow Maine driver Matthew Athearn in a recent DRF Harness interview: "He's one of my favorite people to drive with and he's a great guy to be around. He helped me a lot and it was always good to have his support."

Some of the regular Maine catch-drivers including Bruce Ranger, who has amassed 9,965 driving wins of his own and finished third behind Case with 124 wins in the state in 2022, moonlight on the Plainridge circuit. There have been some rumors that Case may again try to drive at the Massachusetts track, but as of now Plainridge Park GM Steve O'Toole wasn't aware of any bid for Case to get his license in the state.

"It's news to me," said O'Toole about the possibility of Case racing at Plainridge. "If he reached out here he would have some hoops to jump through, and not necessarily by me. I know the Commission denied him swiftly the last time he applied here and he didn't make a good impression on them at that time. That was probably about 2015 or 2016.

"If he showed interest, that would be a conversation I would have to have at that time with my people," continued O'Toole on whether Plainridge Park would welcome Case.

While many people extol praise upon Case some 15 years after his release from prison, others will never be willing to erase his past actions from their minds. For some, there simply is no rehabilitation for his actions and no period of time can dampen the severity. This dilemma is one that society often struggles with on a daily basis and it is truly a personal decision as to how much time needs to pass before any wrongs can be washed away.

In the end, whether you agree or not with the decision, Case is back in the bike and seemingly doing what he loves on a daily basis. As long as it isn't hurting anyone, certainly everyone can agree that we should all be entitled to make a living and enjoy our lives.

WALTER CASE JR. LIFETIME DRIVING STATISTICS

| Year | Starts | 1st | 2nd | 3rd | Money Won | UDRS |
|------|--------|------|-----|-----|-------------|-------|
| 2022 | 853 | 166 | 126 | 106 | \$841,105 | 0.318 |
| 2021 | 197 | 15 | 28 | 37 | \$95,278 | 0.218 |
| 2017 | 53 | 11 | 5 | 11 | \$37,617 | 0.329 |
| 2008 | 25 | 10 | 6 | 5 | \$24,630 | 0.600 |
| 2003 | 727 | 201 | 133 | 88 | \$674,148 | 0.418 |
| 2002 | 2479 | 708 | 448 | 271 | \$2,636,573 | 0.422 |
| 2001 | 2850 | 800 | 481 | 359 | \$3,246,714 | 0.416 |
| 2000 | 1785 | 519 | 304 | 228 | \$2,492,542 | 0.428 |
| 1999 | 1833 | 509 | 288 | 229 | \$1,979,317 | 0.407 |
| 1998 | 2993 | 1077 | 566 | 366 | \$4,458,228 | 0.506 |
| 1996 | 1745 | 574 | 322 | 215 | \$2,935,535 | 0.473 |
| 1995 | 528 | 159 | 86 | 66 | \$496,487 | 0.433 |
| 1994 | 1186 | 337 | 221 | 140 | \$1,282,392 | 0.427 |
| 1993 | 1207 | 336 | 208 | 158 | \$2,288,742 | 0.418 |
| 1992 | 2841 | 843 | 529 | 364 | \$3,832,855 | 0.443 |
| 1991 | 2829 | 670 | 505 | 353 | \$3,085,231 | 0.378 |
| 1990 | 2337 | 606 | 367 | 315 | \$2,057,127 | 0.391 |
| 1989 | 2282 | 680 | 392 | 278 | \$682,593 | 0.434 |
| 1988 | 2216 | 615 | 346 | 248 | \$794,702 | 0.402 |
| 1987 | 1423 | 174 | 158 | 174 | \$2,103,094 | 0.225 |
| 1986 | 1512 | 190 | 185 | 165 | \$2,140,659 | 0.230 |
| 1985 | 1794 | 243 | 224 | 198 | \$2,800,465 | 0.242 |
| 1984 | 1613 | 234 | 197 | 180 | \$2,269,930 | 0.250 |
| 1983 | 1620 | 429 | 255 | 220 | \$686,737 | 0.398 |
| 1982 | 1850 | 471 | 345 | 254 | \$344,261 | 0.404 |
| 1981 | 1464 | 332 | 262 | 206 | \$200,734 | 0.373 |
| 1980 | 999 | 192 | 164 | 138 | \$118,368 | 0.329 |
| 1979 | 675 | 113 | 105 | 101 | \$64,254 | 0.304 |
| 1978 | 173 | 16 | 30 | 23 | \$11,828 | 0.233 |
| 1977 | 16 | 0 | 5 | 3 | \$943 | 0.236 |

*Stats Courtesy USTA

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Powerful Tritton trio could make serious noise in Borgata series

By Jay Bergman

Three years ago, Shane and Lauren Tritton made the cross-hemisphere journey to New York in hopes of duplicating the enormous success they achieved Down Under. Almost instantly the COVID virus hit and racing came to a halt.

Now, hardly overnight, the stable finds itself in a position of strength heading into the grueling yet financially rewarding Borgata Series at Yonkers Raceway. The premiere leg to the series finds four \$50,000 divisions, with the Tritton team well represented in three.

Leading the pack has been the sensational Lochinvar Art A, an 8-year-old Australian champion that the Tritton's feel privileged to be training and racing.

"We'd like this country to see the kind of horse he proved to be in Australia," said Shane Tritton.

In three races since his arrival in October 2022, Lochinvar Art A has been perfect, including his 1:51 victory on March 6 at Yonkers in preparation for Monday's Borgata leg opener when he drew post five in the third race first division.

"He knows his job," said Tritton of Lochinvar Art A, who came to the U.S.

as a millionaire and could add to that substantially with a good run in the Borgata Series that offers five preliminary legs prior to a lucrative final on April 24.

Having campaigned Nandolo N to last year's Borgata final, Tritton has the experience it takes to manage a horse through the legs but wasn't tipping his hand yet as to schedule.

"Lochinvar Art A is the type of horse that bounces back better after a tough trip," Tritton said, suggesting he's not concerned with the rigors and will monitor the horse on a week-to-week basis. Lauren Tritton, who will drive Lochinvar Art A, knows the horse well and will be in the bike behind him in round one.

With 32 entered in the opening leg it appears that Lochinvar Art A drew into one of the weaker divisions, with last year's Borgata contenders Jack's Legend N (post 7) and Bee Two Bee (post 8) on the outside looking in.

Anothrmastrpiece N is a horse Tritton has been prepping for the Borgata Series and the veteran drew post seven in the second division (race 4) with Jason Bartlett in the bike.

"He's coming into the race in great shape," said Tritton. "He had a solid qualifier and lacked room finishing behind Leonidas A in his first start."

While not as battle-tested as his stablemates, Tritton revealed some of the reasons why Anothrmastrpiece N has not shown his capabilities locally.

"He was right there with Lochinvar Art in Australia. He may have been a better horse. He's had physical issues and we've given him time," said Tritton. "I think he might be a bit underrated with these horses, but I think he can compete with them."

Tritton will likely find out a bit more on Monday as his horse gets tested with a field that is led by Jimmy Freight (post 2), a \$1.6 million winner. Hellabalou (post 1) makes his Borgata debut for the Burke stable and the veteran Backstreet Shadow (post 5) returns to Yonkers following a 1:50 1/5 winning effort at The Meadowlands on March 11.

Nandolo N (post 4, race 9) has been one of the best horses in training this winter and Tritton hopes that carries through the Borgata Series. "When he's in good form he's a hard horse to beat," said Tritton, praising the 9-year-old gelding with 25 career wins and a bank account nearing \$600K.

"He needs to race every week," continued the trainer. That's something Nandolo N hasn't done this year with regularity, having missed four



GABRIEL HESLOP PHOTO

Lochinvar Art A, who has yet to lose since arriving in North America, starts in the Borgata series at Yonkers Raceway on Monday night.

weeks prior to his March 4 1:49 4/5 victory at The Meadowlands. In that race driver Jason Bartlett took Nandolo N to the front and then converted on a pocket trip.

"I was concerned with this series coming up that if he left the gate and got involved in too much action it wouldn't be good for him," said Tritton. "But Jason made the right decision and it worked out perfectly."

As for Monday night and the Borgata series, Tritton is confident in his horse and hopeful that the trips will work out right.

"He's fine when he can come up first-over," said Tritton. "It's the times that he's had to follow too many horses on the outside that things haven't worked out for him."

With three wins in five starts this year, Nandolo N appears primed for this series. He'll face seven rivals including American Courage, who won the Messenger Stakes at Yonkers in 2021. Trainer Travis Alexander's New York-bred has won at Yonkers in all three seasons he's raced.

The luck of the draw found Tritton's threesome managing to stay out of what appears the toughest division as the last two Borgata Series champions – Funatthebeach N (post 5, 2022 champ) and This Is The Plan (post 8, 2021) – meet a formidable cast in the sixth race. The field of eight finds the pair joined by two finalists from last year's Borgata series, with Leonidas A (post 7) and Tattoo Artist (post 4) both primed for the opening leg. This field gets even strong with the presence of Aria Invitational winner None Better A (post 3) and 2022 Borgata Series consolation champion I'm Sir Blake A (post 2).

For Tritton and his stable it's taken a few years to get to this spot, but the trainer is more than happy with where he and his barn stands right now and hopeful the worst (including eight inches of snow on Tuesday) is in the rearview mirror.

"It took some time to get the right mix of horses that will do here," Tritton said. "I'm happy with the group of older horses we have and the younger ones too."

Add to the mix the recent Irish import Harry Knows IR, who will race Saturday (March 18) at Pocono, and the stable is running on all cylinders.

"We've staked him pretty well for a horse that had just \$40,000 in earnings," said Tritton of Harry Knows IR. "I've brought him to Yonkers to train him over the track and he was very good."

That likely sets up for Harry Knows IR first stakes engagement, the John Brennan series at Yonkers with a first leg on April 5.

Dougs Babe one of many imports in Blue Chip Matchmaker

By Jay Bergman

Shipping horses from the Southern hemisphere to the North has been a custom for more than the last 50 years as North American horsemen import some of the best from Australia and New Zealand to race at the top levels. The process for many had been long and drawn out between the actual purchase transaction and the subsequent shipment and arrival.

Times have changed radically and for the good, as a horse racing in the opening leg of this year's Blue Chip Matchmaker can attest. Dougs Babe A raced in Australia on February 4 of this year and afterwards made the trip into Nifty Norman's stable. She debuts in stakes company following a qualifying mile on March 11 at The Meadowlands.

"We actually bought her three starts ago," said Norman of the Western Terror-sired mare that landed post eight in one of three \$40,000 divisions at Yonkers on Friday night. "It actually worked out very well for us since she won her first two starts in December. One was in a \$100,000 race [Group One 4-year-old mares final]."

Dougs Babe A may have saved time in traveling to this country, but she gained an extra year in the process.

"She was racing in 4-year-old stakes races," said Norman of the mare that's listed as a 6-year-old in North America. "We bought her from the same trainer who had Belmont Royale N."

Norman's Belmont Royale N, second in last Saturday's (March 11) feature at The Meadowlands, will go in the first leg of the Borgata Series at Yonkers on March 20 (Race 4). "She was a bit more expensive than he was," added Norman about Dougs Babe A.

Dougs Babe A had a brilliant 4-year-old campaign, finishing first or second in 12 of her 19 starts, and Norman had the Blue Chip Matchmaker in mind when he and the owners of the mare made the purchase late last fall.

"I knew she'd be able to race on the smaller tracks," Norman said. "She was a top-five horse in Australia."

How was Norman able to make the purchase and get the mare to arrive as quickly as she did ready for action?

"I was able to get her registered with the U.S.T.A. before she even shipped over," said Norman. "As far as the shipping, it's gotten much quicker over time."

A late addition to the qualifiers put Dougs Babe A on the outside of the field last Saturday at The Meadowlands, but the trainer was most impressed with her effort. "She finished up pretty nicely," said Norman of the third-place finish with Dexter Dunn guiding the mare from far off the pace in the sprint home.

"She'll definitely need another run," said Norman of Dougs Babe A.

Given the outside draw in the initial Blue Chip Matchmaker leg, Norman suggested the mare would likely be coming from off the pace as she tackles new competition, as well as the quality of this year's open mare division.

Imports make up a majority of the field in the fifth race second division of the Matchmaker, with four New Zealand-breds joining Dougs Babe A. That six others from Down Under will line up in the other two divisions is indicative of the dramatic impact imports have had on the depth of the top class of racing in North America.

While foreign horses are rich in the Blue Chip Matchmaker this year, the presence of 4-year-olds is rather limited. Just three of the 24 mares entered for the \$40,000 opening legs were sophomores a year ago and Norman is hopeful he's got one that can make an impact in the series.

Gotthegreenlight, a daughter of American Ideal, has had plenty of chances to race in New York over the last two years and Norman's wish is that will make up for the difference in age among her rivals.



STU MCCORMICK

Dougs Babe won a Group 1 race in Australia before coming to the U.S.

"She gets around the half really well. This is one of the only stakes we nominated her to," said Norman, who indicated that one owner bought out the other after Gotthegreenlight's 3-year-old campaign because he's more interested in racing.

Gotthegreenlight was a winner of the New York Sire Stakes final as a 2-year-old at Yonkers in 2021 and returned as a sophomore to capture the Park MGM at Yonkers along with a host of Sire Stakes over the half-mile track. Facing older mares in her qualifier (March 11) at The Meadowlands, Gotthegreenlight was a respectable third in a crisp 1:52 mile.

Another 4-year-old with even less racing experience than Gotthegreenlight makes her season's debut in this division (race 8) for trainer Nancy Takter. Sweet Treasure, a home-bred daughter of Sweet Lou from She's Some Treasure, a full sister to Captaintreacherous, made just 13 starts as a sophomore in 2022, her first year of racing. She hit the board 10 times with earnings in excess of \$184K. Perhaps the highlight of her season was a pair of third-place finishes in the Jugette elimination and final, finishing behind her stablemate Treacherous Dragon in the finale. Following a brief rest, Takter brought back Sweet Treasure for a qualifier on February 25 at The Meadowlands and the mare was most impressive pacing home in 1:54, including a 25 3/5 final quarter sprint. A week later (March 4) Sweet Treasure was even more imposing going wire-to-wire in a 1:50 2/5 clocking for driver Andrew McCarthy, who will guide her from post eight in the final Blue Chip Matchmaker division.

Race eight also includes last year's Blue Chip Matchmaker consolation winner Gia's Surreal making her second start of the year for trainer Ed Hart. The 7-year-old by So Surreal missed a few legs of the series last year due to sickness and thus didn't have the point totals necessary to reach the final. Hart has her ready with a qualifier and a trip over the Yonkers surface in advance of Friday's opening leg. Gia's Surreal went on to earn \$289K racing with the top mares in training through last November's TVG Mares at The Meadowlands.

The Blue Chip Matchmaker is part of a 10-race card on Friday at Yonkers that kicks off at 7:00 p.m.

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Meadowlands streak of \$3 million-plus handles at 19

By industry standards, 2022 was a solid year at The Meadowlands as far as business goes. Average nightly handle was \$2.75 million and betting surpassed the “magic” \$3 million mark 23 times during a year that saw 85 race cards contested at the mile oval.

But 2023 – by any standard – has been a season that’s seen business boom.

Last Saturday (March 11) was just another night at the salt mine for Big M management and fans, as all-source betting totaled \$3,638,285 on the 14-race card, keeping The Big M’s streak of surpassing the \$3 million plateau intact.

There have been 19 Friday and Saturday night programs conducted during 2023 and every one has seen wagering exceed \$3 million.

March has been especially marvelous, with the average nightly handle currently standing at \$3.85 million.

“There’s no question, we are in a good groove,” said Big M Chief Operating Officer and General Manager Jason Settlemoir. “We are extremely appreciative of our fan base. They like what our racing office has done, creating the type of competitive racing with full 10-horse fields that makes for outcomes that are harder to predict, so payoffs have a great deal of appeal to our players.”

The handle projections for 2023 are big, to say the least.

The Friday and Saturday programs have seen a total of \$65,457,871 pushed through the windows, for an average nightly handle of \$3,445,151. If you include the two Sunday afternoon programs that were contested in January, that number dips to \$3,273,283, which is still far higher than the average handle per card during a superb 2021, when betting was at \$3.0 million per program.

PICK-6 CARRYOVER: Carryovers are something Meadowlands’ fans take to like a moth to a flame, and Friday (March 17), they’ll be something extra in the 20-cent Pick-6 pot of gold on St. Patrick’s Day.

There were no winning tickets sold on the wager last Saturday, creating a carryover of \$10,174. The last time there was a P6 carryover, \$59,027 in “new money” was put in the hat for a pool that soared to \$66,654.

It just so happens that on that March 3rd, the P6 went unhit again, which created a double carryover that attracted \$118,217 in new money the next night for a grand total of \$163,471. Those with winning tickets that evening cashed in for a handsome \$6,411, despite a sequence that saw five of the winners go off at odds of 5-1 or less.

“Our players love the opportunity to hit big,” said Settlemoir. “So, whenever there are carryovers on our multi-leg wagers, there is always a lot of excitement in the building. The carryovers create great opportunities. Take this Friday, for instance. In the event there is \$66,000 or less in new money bet in the Pick-6, those with winning tickets will cash in for more money than what was bet into the pool. That’s a negative takeout, which is something any player can get excited about.”

-edited release (Meadowlands)

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By Derick Gwerner

RACE 8: TRACKMASTER 74.25 FINAL

Looking back after (7) CRAZY FOOL won last week I felt like a fool to not take a shot with him at 40-1. This guy showed some ability as a 2-year-old and started his sophomore season off right. Maybe he is this good or better. (4) BET BIG ON BLUE has turned in two solid performances in this class and figures to be in contention. (10) GOES DOWN SMOOTH has turned the corner of late and while post 10 isn’t ideal, this guy can take air. (6) SCIROCCO PATRICK has a win and a third in this TrackMaster condition. (8) NORTHERN BLIZZARD deserves at least some consideration with Tetrick in the bike this week.

RACE 9: NW \$7,500 IN LAST 5/TM 83 (NW L2/2L5 83.5/84) OR LESS

This is a very interesting spot for (3) UPTOWN LADY N. She raced well and seemed fresh from off the pace after missing a few months of action. By keying her we are guaranteeing if our investment hits it will pay big since she is 12-1 on the morning-line and likely to offer good value. Of course if you only want to win \$600 or so you could bet her to win for the same amount . . . or add horses and increase your ticket.

RACE 10: NW \$7,500 IN LAST 5/TM 82.5 (NW 2L5 83.65) OR LESS

(1) NO DRAMA PLEASE was a very solid second best behind a nice-looking trotter last time in his first start since December. Classy veteran should take care of business unless (3) GOTWUTEVERIT-TAKES or (5) SHINKANSEN decides this is one of the weeks they want to race well. Both are capable and very unpredictable.

RACE 11: NW \$3,000 L5/TM 77.5 (NW L3/2L5 78/78.75) OR LESS/\$12.5K CLM.

(1) SPECIAL OLIVIA qualified back nicely and you have to wonder why the connections bring her down from Saratoga to race for less money than the class she fit up north. To me that says despite the layoff and lack of big track experience, she’s ready to roll and will take advantage of the cheaper spot. (3) SHELLIE DE VIE gets a monster drop in class. She makes a ton of sense on the win end but I fear the price will be unbearable. (4) ENGLISH ROSE N is capable of finishing fast if things set up nicely in terms of pace. (8) LITTLE HONEYBADGER also rallied well – at 33-1 – to be second in her last try in this class.

RACE 12: NW 2 (NW L3 3) RACES OR \$20,000 (NW L3 \$33,401) LIFE

(6) SHEER FAITH looked awfully good winning her 2023 debut against many of the same foes she faces tonight. Unless she regresses or one of these steps up in a big way, she’s a logical Pick 6 and Pick 4 single with Gingras coming back from Yonkers to take the drive.

RACE 13: TM 74.5 (NW L3/2L5 75/75.55) OR LESS/TM 76.92-12.5K CLM

(10) BRUSHING UP lands in a very soft spot and is first-time Izzy Estrada on the training end. If he picks this horse up even a touch, he’ll have a big shot of overcoming the bad draw. (6) ONLYTHETUFFSURVIVE was aired out for the new barn last time and that ended badly. I’m willing to give him a second chance. (1) DISMISSAL SLIP hasn’t been bad in his last two and I could make a case that he drops into a softer spot now. (4) SOMIKI had some late life last time. (5) KNOX THE FOX comes off an improved mile. (9) HOWTOTRAINURDRAGON has the speed to make the top. Last time he had to go too fast to get there.

.20 PICK 6: 4,6,7,8,10 / 3 / 1,3,5 / 1,3,4,8 / 6 / 1,4,5,6,9,10 = \$72

Rosecroft Raceway opportunities help drive Johnathan Ahle

By Ken Weingartner

Prior to this past December, Johnathan Ahle had never driven at Rosecroft Raceway. This year, the Maryland oval has become something of a home away from home.

Ahle, who lives in New Jersey, is third in wins among drivers at Rosecroft, where his total of 23 is two behind second-place Russell Foster. He also is third among the track's regulars in win percentage, clicking at a nearly 17-percent clip.

His performance at Rosecroft has helped the 26-year-old Ahle get his second full season in the sulky off to a strong start. Overall, he has posted 37 victories this year and is rapidly approaching his total of 45 wins for all of 2022.

In addition to driving at Rosecroft, Ahle has competed primarily at Freehold Raceway and The Meadowlands this season. He is tied for seventh in wins at Freehold, where his 14.5-percent victory rate is fifth among regulars.

"I didn't think I would be this far along so quickly," Ahle said. "I'm more than pleased, for sure. I'm just going to try to keep doing what I'm doing, and hope things go for the best."

Ahle first visited Rosecroft in mid-December as part of the inaugural Rosecroft-Freehold Drivers Challenge. A month later, Rosecroft-based trainer John Hollingsworth offered Ahle seven drives on the card the night the track reopened for its winter-spring meet.

"He was entering a bunch of horses and said he would put me down on all of them if I wanted to come down," Ahle said. "I did OK with those horses, and it just took off from there. So, he pretty much got me started. I'm grateful for the opportunities. I did not expect it to go this way when I first went down there. I thought it might just be a short-term thing."

On Thursday night, Ahle will drive in 12 of Rosecroft's 14 races. He will get behind seven horses with morning-line odds of 9-2 or lower, including Stag Party (3-1) in the Preferred Handicap, Walden Woods (7-2) in the Maryland Preferred Open 1, and Tom's Twilight (9-2) in the Maryland Preferred Open 2.

"I'm definitely picking up some power, which is what you need if you're going to do well," Ahle said. "No matter who you are, as a driver you need the horsepower to be successful. It's always nice to sit behind a horse that you're confident with and know you can do well."

Ahle knew nothing about horses or racing when he started working in the stable of trainer Shaun Vallee about seven years ago. At the time, Ahle was working in a restaurant, where Vallee's daughter Sarah also worked, and decided to give the equine job a try. Several months later, he left the restaurant to work fulltime with the horses.

Eventually, Ahle began driving. He started mostly in amateur races — which produced 21 of his first 25 wins — before getting his full licenses last summer. He finished last season by driving primarily at Harrah's Philadelphia and Freehold. Philly opens for its 2023 season on April 2.

"I was able to pick up good work toward the end (at Philly)," Ahle said.



LISA PHOTO

Johnathan Ahle is a driver willing to travel to further his craft.

"It's a fun place to drive too. Hopefully, I can pick up where I left off there."

Ahle, though, has no definitive plans for the remainder of the year.

"I'll see what opportunities come my way," Ahle said. "When Rosecroft came along, I decided to take it and see where it went. I didn't know things would progress the way they did. I like driving and I'll go wherever that leads me."

In addition to driving, Ahle now works for trainer Noel Daley as well as trains one horse on his own. Last weekend, Ahle drove Daley-trained Ignatius A — a multiple Group 1 winning pacer from Australia — to victory in the Preferred Handicap at Freehold.

"It was fun to win with him," Ahle said. "He's just a really cool horse to be around and nice racehorse."

"It's a blast over at Noel's. You sit behind a bunch of babies and a lot of nice racehorses. He's a cool guy to work for. You're learning something every day."

And Ahle is looking forward to every day and his continuing growth as a driver.

"Obviously, winning is fun, but all the drives mean something," Ahle said. "I'm just hopeful that everything keeps going the way it's been going."

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BY DERICK GIWNER

Charles Dickens started *A Tale of Two Cities* with the words “It was the best of times, it was the worst of times...” and those same words seem quite appropriate when telling the story of trainer Bill Rhoades. While in the midst of the best year in his career, he is also fighting a year-long suspension offered up by the Ohio State Racing Commission for an offense he says he didn’t commit.

Rhoades is at heart a fan of harness racing but also in his own words one of the best trainers of “bad horses” in the sport. He’s been among the top 25 trainers in North America for wins each of the last five years and currently has about 50 under his care.

Despite the ongoing litigation, Rhoades was willing to discuss that situation, his career, his personal issues, and much more. Enjoy!

TRAINER BILL RHOADES

How did you get started in harness racing?

My step-dad Roy Brown. I was 4 years old, maybe and he was stabled at Ashland Fairgrounds. My aunt had riding horses there and she would babysit me. He had a big ole stinking Billy goat and I would ride him around. One day I brought my mom to the fairgrounds and I introduced them. They ended up getting married.

Can you drop some names of people who helped you in your career?

Roy Brown made me who I am. Clay Faurot and Craig Stein have both made me a better horse trainer all around. But my wife Leah has educated me so much. We catch the things that a lot of trainers would never even think to look for. She’s such an intelligent person. What makes her great as an all-around vet is if she doesn’t know something she says “I don’t know” and searches for an answer. She doesn’t make up an excuse or diagnosis, which I think the majority of vets do because of pride or maybe their bottom dollar. I have to say Brian Brown too, not that it’s been a lot, but he’s always given me advice when asked and if anyone you would want to be like it would have to be him. I’m not sure if there’s a more class act and more liked guy in harness racing. Though I’m not on his level, I strive to be as successful as a human being as him.

You are an Ohio native that races in Ohio but you did take a shot at Yonkers a couple of years ago. Why did you abort?

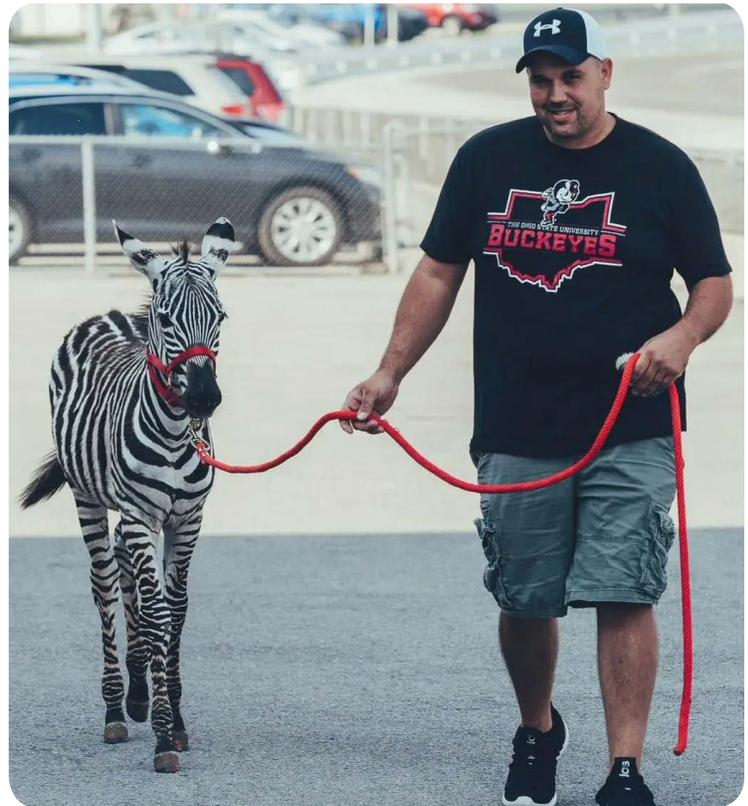
Multiple reasons. First, being away from my children and wife got to be unbearable. Second, I didn’t have the backing once I got there that I was supposed to. Third, the horses I took were not winning Yonkers horses. Fourth, I felt it was going to be difficult for me to make money and pay my bills had I stayed longer.

You’ve been in the top 15 in training wins for the last handful of years but in 2023 you are sitting third. What changed?

My percentages are pretty consistent, but I have doubled the amount of horses that I normally keep so that gives me the bigger number.

Was doubling your stable size by design?

Yeah. In November 2022 my doctor started me on a new med and it has me feeling like my old self. I’m back motivated, shoeing a lot and focused. People started calling and texting about taking horses this winter, which I usually decline. This year I said yes. My guess I’ll be around 25 through the summer. It’s tougher to race with the stakes going on.



CHRIS GOODEN

Trainer Bill Rhoades, pictured with his pet zebra Ziggy, has over 800 wins in the last five years.

Do you ever see yourself branching out into more babies and fewer overnight horses?

Probably not. I’m not very patient. Maybe as an owner in the near future. We have one baby currently in training with Jason Shaw. But who knows. I was happy with the year that I did babies, they all made it.

Let’s discuss the elephant in the room, the Class 1 positive test by Sheswildnfree, who you trained on November 8, 2022 in a victory. First, are you innocent and did you appeal the one-year suspension?

Yes I am innocent. I also declined their offer. By them going from one year to 60 days shows me they know that I didn’t do this.

You mentioned the Ohio Racing Commission offering a 60-day reduced sentence if you didn’t appeal. Was that ever a viable option from your perspective just to get it over with?

Never was it an option. I can’t admit guilt to something I’m not guilty of. By taking the 60 days would be saying I authorized my horse to receive methamphetamine.

The appeal is also to challenge the OSRC rules in general. The purpose of the rules is to prevent intentional use of medication for performance enhancement so that the integrity of racing is maintained. What needs to be reviewed by the Commission is the fact that laboratory instruments are becoming more and more refined, detecting the smallest amounts of substances, down to trace amounts, that were previously not detectable. When the sophistication of the equipment increases, finding substances that otherwise went undetected but were probably present, the next obvious question is, is the amount of methamphetamine found performance enhancing? The OSRC will not provide us with the quantity, yet, which is imperative to our argument.

[CONTINUED ON PAGE 12](#)

Some sources are claiming the positive was a result of tainted urine from a caretaker. Do you believe that to be true?

We are trying to discover what was contaminated that the horse came into contact with that resulted in possibly being found in her sample. We are not ruling out that the contamination could have occurred after her race, either while the sample was being drawn or at the lab. The source and timing of the contamination is questionable, knowing I did not administer the drug or any other medication that has Methamphetamine as a component.

The transmissibility of methamphetamine from human consumption through contact with a horse is a factor that has to be considered. The increase of recreational drug usage in humans has become so prominent that the opportunities for contamination have increased exponentially, making virtually impossible to monitor a horse every second of the day. Contamination can occur in stalls in the test barns. Stalls that a trainer has no control over cleaning and sanitizing. Bedding, stall walls, and drinking water are examples of how horses can test positive for a medication through contamination.

The application of what is known as the “absolute insurer rule” seems to have given the OSRC the attitude that a trainer never has a defense to a medication positive when there is no threshold listed. It is the OSRC’s responsibility to periodically review its policies and medication levels to keep up with the ever-changing technology and environmental contaminants that directly influence the testing done, but not answering the ultimate question, which is, in the mere presence of a prohibited substance, performance enhancing, which is in the OSRC rules.

[EDITOR’S NOTE: Due to the ongoing litigation in this matter, some of the above two questions were answered with the assistance of counsel.]

Do you feel confident you will win your appeal?

I don’t know. I just know I didn’t do it. I have a lot of good arguments and a lot of good people behind me.

To be fair, you have several fines or warnings for Class 4 and 5 substances on your record over the last few years. How should those be viewed from your perspective?

They were all approved therapeutic medications that are non-performance enhancing, each with their own set of circumstances.

You hit 1,000 career wins as a trainer earlier this year. What does that number mean to you?

It means a lot and I hope to get a few thousand more. From where I was to where I am now, it’s kind of a Cinderella story except I didn’t lose a shoe, I lost my career momentarily. I owe it all to my wife.

You mention losing your career. Does that relate to the gap in your training career from 2013 to 2016? What were you doing then?

I hit rock bottom. I was broke. I went through a divorce and lost all hope for a while. I did commercial and industrial roofing, then I stopped feeling sorry for myself and started shoeing horses on the side of my regular job. That’s when I met my wife Leah and she made me better than I could have ever dreamed of. She made me a better person and a better father. I went back to shoeing full-time and she helped me get my life back on track.



CASALINOVA PHOTO

A large group came out to the Northfield Park winner’s circle to celebrate Bill Rhoades’ 1,000th training win in January 2023.

You used to do some amateur racing. What are your thoughts on amateur racing in general and what it offers the sport?

I think they’re good; people seem to bet them. I don’t know how because I could never in good conscience bet \$2 on myself to win a race as a driver. But it gives people like me who don’t have the talent to be a catch driver a chance to shine for two minutes. Most of the people I know that drive in them do it because they really just love racing and it’s great they get the opportunity to do what they love to do.

What is your favorite track to race at? Why?

Northfield. We race here! It’s not a ‘line up and don’t pull’ track. It’s a very competitive place to race. There’s a lot of good trainers here who would do good anywhere they went with the right horses. So it keeps me on my toes with the competition.

What is your favorite big event in racing? Why?

The Battle of Lake Erie. As a kid I grew up racing \$300 horses. So when all the top trainers would send their horse to race at Northfield in the ‘Battle’ I would buy the program as soon as it would come out and would watch these guys ship in three to five days out and would get excited knowing all these great animals were in my presence. I remember the feeling to this day. It was better than ever meeting a celebrity to me. So that’s been my Hambletonian since I was very young.

What is your favorite thing to do outside of harness racing?

Texas Hold-em; I’m not good.

What is one thing about you most fans/bettors don’t know?

My wife and I do a lot of rescue, all sorts of animals. Any and all racehorses that I have had the privilege of training or owning that end up in bad situations, we purchase or buy from the kill pens. We [she] then rehab and find them forever homes. I think we saved around six last year. We probably have around 20-plus horses we have saved and keep an eye on.

What is one word that describes harness racing for you?

Life.

How many horses do you currently train and where are you stabled?

I fluctuate weekly. I’m currently just under 50 and everything is stabled at the racetrack [Northfield] in Cleveland.

What is the best advice you’ve ever gotten or given about harness racing?

It’s not a sin to buy a bad one, it’s a sin to keep one.



CONTINUED FROM PAGE 12

What was your best moment in harness racing?

I have a lot of good moments but the best feeling was just as a bystander.

It was 1999. I was two-thirds of the way through the last turn at the fence at Delaware and Roger Huston yells three-quarters in 1:21, which was crazy at the time. Every hair on my neck and arms stood up. I remember Jet Laag just rolling to win in 1:49 and it hooked me to racing. I still get goose bumps. I was only 12 but that was my first sub [1:]50 mile that I witnessed in person. That was one of the coolest feelings I ever had.

Which is the best horse you've ever trained?

I was recently told you get the kind of horses you win with. I win with bad horses and rejects, so I get a lot of them sent to me. I've never had anyone give me really good ones. Currently I have some of the best quality horses of my career thanks to some new owners. But I hope to change this in the near future. My horses get the some of the best care in the business so I don't see why I couldn't maintain and compete in the big races one day.



COURTESY BILL RHOADES

Bill Rhoades and his wife Leah.

If you had the power to change one thing in the sport, what would it be?

Commissions. There needs to be a universal set of rules and guidelines. Also accountability.

How do you view the future of harness racing?

Scary. Something needs to happen. A lot of people much smarter than I am still don't have the answers. Social media only focuses on the bad, never the good, which is really hurting us. Being in the mix of things I see way more good than bad. But we only see the bad.

Is it true that you own a zebra?

Yes. I bought Ziggy when he was 3 months old. He's almost 2 now. He is at a trainers currently, teaching him general handling and some tricks, like how to bow and stand on a bucket. I plan on breaking him to the cart. He's coming back to me in six weeks. I want to lead a post parade with him at some point. I've taken him to The Meadows for a meet and greet.

Time for the stretch drive.

Best Horse you ever saw: Moni Maker/Bulldog Hanover.

Best Driver Ever: Aaron Merriman.

Lasix – Yes or No: Yes.

Favorite TV Show: American Dad.

Trotters or Pacers: Pacers.

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THURSDAY, MARCH 16

RACE 2



WOODBINE
MOHAWK PARK

(4) BUSY MAKING MONI had every excuse to lose last week but he showed his mettle chasing down the leader after being parked most of the way. A four-peat looms for this gelding.

-Garnet Barnsdale

FRIDAY, MARCH 17

RACE 12



(6) SHEER FAITH looked awfully good winning her 2023 debut against many of the same foes she faces tonight. Unless she regresses or one of these steps up in a big way, she's a logical Pick 6 and Pick 4 single with Gingras coming back from Yonkers to take the drive.

-Derick Giwner

RACE 7



(3) MIKI ROSE had a very useful seasonal debut and followed that up with a second-place effort behind Rockn Philly. Engblom trainee finds a good spot here and looks ready to score.

-Matt Rose

SATURDAY, MARCH 18

RACE 10



(6) SOUTHWIND GENDRY was handled patiently in his first start as a 5-year-old. Burke trainee gets significant class relief and should be unleashed a bit.

-Giwner

FULL CARD ANALYSIS / PAST PERFORMANCES

Mohawk Park Analysis

Thursday

Friday

Saturday

Meadowlands Analysis

Friday

Saturday

Yonkers Analysis

Thursday

Friday

DHP PPS

HARNESS EYE PPS

TRACKMASTER PPS

FREE PPS

INSTANT RACING UPDATES VIA TWITTER: @DRFHARNES

NEWS FROM AROUND THE HARNESS INDUSTRY

NOMINATIONS RISE FOR PETER HAUGHTON, JIM DOHERTY STAKES

Two of the richest and most prominent 2-year-old Grand Circuit events -- the Peter Haughton Memorial Trot for colts and geldings and the Jim Doherty Memorial for trotting fillies -- will take place at Harrah's Hoosier Park Racing & Casino for the first time in 2023 and saw strong support from owners and trainers after the February 15 nomination deadline.

The Peter Haughton drew 144 initial nominations and the Jim Doherty (previously the Merrie Annabelle) drew 122, both up significantly from 81 and 86, respectively, in 2022.

The Hambletonian Society administers both events and Harrah's Hoosier Park, which has one of the wealthiest open stake programs in North America, will host the freshman trots on Friday, September 15, 2023.

"We couldn't be more pleased with the response we have gotten to the Peter Haughton and Jim Doherty Stakes races," noted Vice President and General Manager of Racing, Rick Moore. "These two legendary trotting affairs will only add additional luster to our already outstanding Open Stakes Schedule and couldn't come at a better time as we prepare to host this year's Breeders Crown Event."

In 2022, both races were designated as "Win and You're In" events for the 2022 Breeders Crown, with the Haughton winner and Doherty winner receiving entry to their \$600,000 Breeders Crown finals with the starting fees waived. The "Win And You're In" status will also apply again for the 2023 Breeders Crown, which will be hosted by Harrah's Hoosier Park on October 27 and 28, 2023.

Final preparations for the 2023 season are well underway at Harrah's Hoosier Park Racing & Casino with opening day of the 160-day meet set for Friday, March 24. With a daily post time of 6:30 p.m., the live racing season will be conducted through December 9.

Live racing at Harrah's Hoosier Park Racing & Casino will follow a Friday, Saturday schedule the opening week, a Thursday, Friday, Saturday schedule the second week and then commence a Wednesday through Saturday schedule before adding Tuesdays beginning on July 4.

The 2023 live racing season at Harrah's Hoosier Park will feature 160 days of live racing and will be headlined the \$300,000 Dan Patch Stakes on Friday, August 11 and the return of the prestigious Breeders Crown events. For more information on the upcoming live racing schedule or entertainment, please visit www.harrahshoosierpark.com.

-edited release (Harrah's Hoosier Park)

BETTOR'S WISH TO OFFER MULTIPLE MARE DISCOUNT

Bettor's Wish has returned from a busy season down under and the first round of pregnancy tests here have all come back positive.

At the training centers, trainers are equally impressed with what they are seeing.

Chris Ryder trained Bettor's Wish to back-to-back Dan Patch 3-Year-Old Pacing Colt and Older Horse of the Year Awards.

"I have 9 Bettor's Wish 2-year-olds training down. They are a lot like him; sensible, quick and correct," said Ryder. "Bettor's Wish colts and fillies are in my best sets of 2-year-olds in training. Everyone who has one likes them."

To offer value to breeders Bettor's Wish is now available with a multiple mare discount. Contact us at bettorswish@gmail.com or 908-451-4135. A limited number of breeding applications are available at Bettorswish.com.

-edited release (Bettor's Wish Syndicate)

PA HORSE BREEDING, RACING INDUSTRY WELCOMES BUDGET PROPOSAL

Stakeholders in Pennsylvania's horse breeding and racing industry expressed their appreciation to Governor Josh Shapiro, who presented his new administration's first proposed budget to the legislature last week. The proposed budget, unlike those presented by the prior administration, does not recommend any additional transfers of funding from the Race Horse Development Trust Fund (RHDTF), which serves as the major source of funding for breeding incentives and racing purses in the Commonwealth.

"Governor Shapiro's budget proposal signals his recognition of the importance of the racing and breeding sector to the overall state economy, and we thank him for his support," said Russell Williams, who

serves as President of the Standardbred Breeders Association of Pennsylvania (SBAP). "The equine sector is the second largest segment of Pennsylvania's overall agriculture industry, and we believe we are in an excellent position for continued growth. We look forward to working with Governor Shapiro and the legislature on initiatives that will strengthen Pennsylvania's breeding and racing sector and, in the process, benefit the broader agricultural industry."

"The support of the Governor and legislature is very instrumental to the success of the breeding and racing industry in Pennsylvania," said Brian Sanfratello, Executive Secretary of the Pennsylvania Horse Breeders Association, which represents the state's thoroughbred breeders. "Pennsylvania's breeding and racing industry is made up of many diverse small businesses that contribute to jobs and the preservation of hundreds of thousands of acres of open space. Breeders, owners, and trainers in the racing industry are also significant drivers of other sectors of the agriculture industry, including hay, straw, grain, and mushroom farmers; feed mills and tack shops; and veterinarians. A strong, viable breeding and racing sector is an important part of ensuring the overall stability of the broader agricultural industry in Pennsylvania."

In addition to serving as President of the SBAP, Williams also serves as President of Hanover Shoe Farms, Inc., the largest Standardbred horse breeding farm in the world. Situated on 3,000 acres in Adams and York Counties, the operations of the 97-year-old breeding farm underscore the important contributions of horse breeders throughout Pennsylvania to the overall state economy. At peak, over 1,000 horses reside at the farm, which are cared for by approximately 80 employees, which includes 40 families who live on the farm. Each year, Hanover alone is responsible for the purchase of 1,500 tons of hay and 1,500 tons of straw, much of which is sourced from local farmers. The farm contributes millions of dollars each year to the state's economy through the purchase of feed, farm machinery, fence boards, supplies, and equipment, as well as numerous contractors.

Collectively, the breeding and racing sector supports hundreds of small businesses and 23,000 family-sustaining jobs, delivers a \$1.6 billion economic impact, generates \$69 million in annual tax revenue, and protects hundreds of thousands of acres of open space. The impact of the racing and breeding sector extends well beyond those who work at a racetrack or breed horses. Purse money earned by a horse enables the owner to buy hay and straw from farmers, feed from local feed mills, as well as pay the horse's jockey, trainer, blacksmith, groom, veterinarian, and equine dentist. In addition, countless small businesses in the manufacturing, retail and construction industries count horsemen and breeders among their major customers for horse trailers and vehicles, feed equipment, riding tack and other supplies, the construction or repair of barns and fencing, and more.

-release (Pennsylvania Equine Coalition)

READER COMMENTS: NEED RACES WITH TRAILERS

I favor having trailers.

For example, on half-mile tracks, six across with two trailers. This gives everyone a real shot. It also puts pressure on the six drivers that are on the gate to be aggressive, else have to take back to 7th or 8th.

On the mile tracks, 8/2 maybe.

On five-eighths, 7/1.

Or how about this? Give them the option. Say on the five-eighths you draw post 8. I would give the trainer the CHOICE of lining up 8 wide on the gate, or instead opting to sit behind #1. In some cases he would opt for one choice, in other cases the other choice, depending on his horse's abilities and what he's facing.

I think this would also eliminate the need for a slanted gate--which I believe is a difficult variable for a handicapper to evaluate accurately.

-Geoffrey Coleman

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