

THURSDAY, MARCH 23, 2023

Reviving the sport via rivalries



AT THE TRACK

By Darin Zoccali [@AtTheTrack7](#)

Sports are at their best when they feature rivalries. They bring about debate, strong feelings to one side or the other, as well as an emotional connection to one of the teams or individuals in the rivalry.

Harness racing is no different. After it all, it is a sport and like all sports, it benefits from rivalries.

In baseball there are several rivalries that pique the interest of fans. Sure, as a Yankee fan, I follow them religiously, regardless of that fact. But I can tell you firsthand, that the lure of being a Yankee fan is no greater than when the Yankees and Red Sox "hatred" for one another is at its zenith and both teams are playing excellent baseball.

In football, part of the fun of being a Giants fan is the absolute disdain we have for the Eagles and Cowboys (and vice versa).

Horse racing has been a sport where in the past rivalries have lifted it into national headlines. Granted, the vast majority of these occurrences have belonged to thoroughbred racing. But that doesn't change anything. Whether it was Swaps and Nashua, Secretariat and Sham, Affirmed and Alydar or Sunday Silence and Easy Goer, the fans long for rivalries.

In 2023, a rivalry could be more fun than ever, thanks to the advent of social media and the idea that perception is reality.

If I can use the example of professional wrestling, a scripted soap opera that includes incredible athletics. The best "stories" in professional wrestling have always centered around rivalries as well, and in modern times, fans can be a part of those rivalries. When a wrestler takes to social media to call out his rival, fans get the opportunity to jump in and engage with the two wrestlers.

Why can't we do that in harness racing?

To be clear, I am not looking for legitimate animosity between individuals. But if two horses are likely to meet repeatedly in a series of races, why can't we create a story, similar to what we see in professional wrestling?

Kayfabe is a word used in professional wrestling which is defined on a Google search as "the fact or convention of presenting staged performances as genuine or authentic." Professional wrestling has excelled at times at leaving the audience wondering what is real and what is not. Why can't harness racing do the same?

I admit this idea is a bit "outside of the box." But to stand out in today's world sometimes that is how we need to think.

It wouldn't take much. If in a post-race interview a winning trainer took a shot at the trainer of a horse he or she just defeated, it would immediately send shockwaves through the industry. Social media would explode and journalists would undoubtedly reach out for comment from both parties and the story would be off and running, thus a rivalry would be created.

Does it have to be genuine? Of course not. If two trainers have seen their horses battling it out at the highest level a few times, they could get together and decide to stir the pot a bit. From that point on, it would be a massive story, one that would captivate all those interested in the sport and if done properly, could reach out across lines and capture other audiences as well.

One of the most viewed clips in horse racing for the last 20 years has been a winner's circle fight between jockeys Calvin Borel and Javier Castellano at the 2006 Breeders' Cup.

I am certainly not suggesting people should legitimately fight in the winner's circle, but a bit of jawing back and forth with people standing in between them would get attention.


The horses can certainly settle their score on the racetrack. Rivalries between horses have captured the imagination many times. But adding a human element to that rivalry would take that to another level.

Disney didn't seem to think the rivalry on the

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Revised **GRAND CIRCUIT RACING SCHEDULE** *The Red Mile*

THURSDAY	FRIDAY	SATURDAY	SUNDAY
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	OCTOBER 6 INT'L STALLION S.	OCTOBER 7 INT'L STALLION S.	OCTOBER 8 FUTURITY DAY

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racetrack between Sham and Secretariat was enough to make the movie stand out. So, they added a personal rivalry between Sham's trainer, Pancho Martin (played by Nestor Serrano) and the trainer and owner of Secretariat, Lucien Lauren and Penny Chenery.

Martin was the antagonist of the rivalry, a crude and brass man who hurled misogynistic insults at Ms. Chenery in press conferences leading up to the three legs of the Triple Crown. In reality, none of that happened. By all accounts, including jockey Ron Turcotte who rode Secretariat, there was no bitter rivalry between the human principles. In fact there was a mutual respect. But, that doesn't make for good theater.

Would this be difficult to pull off? Yes. In a world where it seems we are held accountable for every moment of our lives and every word we say – acting immature in a public setting; hurling insults at another trainer – it would admittedly be tough. Racing jurisdictions may not take too kindly to it. Some things could theoretically be worthy of a fine or suspension. But, if the parties involved were working together to create the appearance of disdain for one another, which of course eventually would come out, can that work?

Admittedly, I am not sure. But I do know this, rivalries lead to better ratings. What would be more appealing to you as a viewer? Two trainers or two drivers talking about the mutual respect they have for one another as competitors and how great their respective horses are, or two trainers or driving taking shots at one another, appearing to genuinely dislike one another and creating some theater? I know what would capture my attention more.

DRF Harness online platform revamped

DRF Harness Digest Newsletter is just one outlet for the DRF Harness brand. We also have an online platform at drf.com/harness which is constantly updated with industry news, analysis, entries, results, past performances and more.

Those who have visited DRF Harness online may have noticed some changes since the calendar turned to 2023. First, you can now access the harness section of DRF.com from any page on the site – Thoroughbred or Standardbred – by simply clicking on “Harness” in the main menu bar at the top right of the screen.

The newest functionality now allows visitors to navigate from page to page inside the DRF Harness world via a sub menu that carries through all articles. This menu provides easy access back to the harness homepage, past performances, entries, results, free pps, and more.

We've also included a widget on the right side of the harness homepage to make it easier to sign up for the Harness Digest Newsletter and streamlined the sign-up process. Should you encounter any trouble with getting the newsletter emailed or if you signed up previously and for some reason are not getting it, feel free to reach out to me at dgiwner@drf.com and I'll do my best to rectify the situation.

A widget on the left-hand side of the homepage now provides quick access to our [harness merchandise shop](#) where you can purchase a shirt or DRF Harness hat.

We hope you enjoy the changes made to the harness portal of DRF and appreciate everyone who stops by to read articles, buy past performances or simply catch up on the latest news and analysis.

When the drivers are away, the live drives go away



EDITOR'S EYE

By Derick Giwner [@harnessveguy](#)

Absence may indeed make the heart grow fonder, but in harness racing it makes the bank account drier. That is the lesson learned by a number of elite drivers at The Meadowlands thus far in 2023.

It is amazing to see names like Tim Tetrick and Todd McCarthy unable to access the winner's circle at The Meadowlands. The statistics are quite glaring. Tetrick, who returned to the East Rutherford oval at the start of March, is only 1-for-38 through three weeks of racing while McCarthy, who started back on February 17 at The Meadowlands, is sitting on a 2-for-79 record and was 0-for-61 at one point.

Compare the above with the fact that Tetrick was third in North America in wins and second in earnings in 2022. McCarthy finished last year sixth in earnings.

Of course, neither driver lost their ability to achieve at a high level on the track. While they simply are dealing with the aches and pains of acclimating back into the regular rotation of drivers, and trying to get live drives from various trainers, it isn't fun losing race after race.

“For me, mentally it does,” said Tetrick on whether the losing takes its toll. “I don't like to be 1-for-38. I've had a lot of checks but I expect it to be slow for a while. Years past I've taken time off and it takes right off. A lot of the stables I drive for don't race at The Meadowlands. I miss not getting Jeff Cullipher's horses back, but that is just part of it.

“I think I've had two horses since I've been back that have had a dot between their numbers on the odds board.”

There are two sides to every story and while being away from the races hurts at the start of the year, it hardly affects the bottom line in terms of getting important stakes drives that don't develop until late March or April. With the grind of driving Grand Circuit races from May through November, the winter months are also the only opportunity for these drivers to get a little rest and spend time with family.

“The reward of it is being fresher come July and August when it actually means something,” said Tetrick, who stressed that family time is important to him. “I didn't even race at Dover this winter. I raced one day a week from January 1 to this past week.”

Tetrick and McCarthy are hardly the only drivers who have seen their records decline due to a less active schedule at The Meadowlands. Corey Callahan went from 196 starts and 21 wins in 2022 to just four wins in 73 starts in the current year. Andy Miller's starts similarly have declined from 120 starts (16 wins) to just 39 (two wins), and it was completely by design.

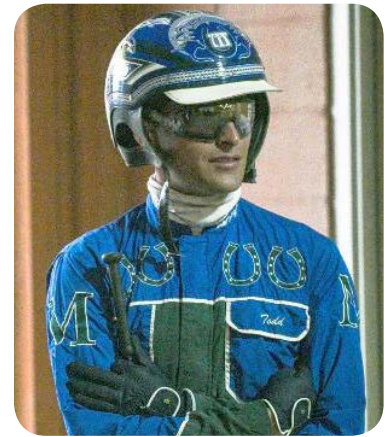
“There really isn't any reason other than to have time to press the reset button and freshen up a bit. It gives me time to spend with family and take a couple of vacations,” said Miller. “It's not necessarily that I'm getting older but as you age you realize there is more to do than race every night.”

When some drivers are away others have their day and Jordan Stratton has been the main beneficiary in 2023. The former Yonkers Raceway driving champion who is a mainstay in the top five at that track, sits fourth in wins with 25 while starting 165 times. With Pompano Park no longer in existence, David Miller stayed at home in New Jersey and has picked up 39 wins to be second behind Yannick Gingras (48).

The absence of some top drivers also creates opportunities for younger reinsmen. Brett Beckwith and Tyler Miller have both been seeing nice increases in the number of horses they're driving at The Big M in 2023.

There are exceptions to every rule and at The Meadowlands it is Dexter Dunn. The reigning four-time Driver of the Year took most of January off and came back fresh off the bench to pick up 11 February wins (tied for third in standings) and already 12 (tied for second) in March. Apparently Dunn is immune to a slump at this point in his career.

For all of the drivers who may have started slowly, new stock in the way of 3-year-olds will be arriving at The Meadowlands soon and that will certainly change the dynamic. Even better, we are just six weeks away from the start of the Championship meet when all of the stats reset.



TGS PHOTO

Todd McCarthy was 0-for-61 at one point during the current meet at The Meadowlands.

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Magical start to the Borgata series for trainer Cory Stratton



JAYWALKING

By Jay Bergman [@BergmanJay](#)

Good things come to those who wait is a cliché that may be past tense to most these days, but fortunately the wait and some persistence was what was necessary for owner Ron Buker to finally purchase a horse he was interested in.

“He was trying to buy that horse for two years,” said Cory Stratton, the trainer of Idealsomemagic A, a now-9-year-old that made a triumphant debut in the Borgata series opening leg at Yonkers on March 20 and will look to continue his hot streak in the second round this Monday.

“I think it was finally a situation of the owner down there just not having the help necessary to run a racing operation and deciding to let go,” said Stratton of the purchase, while pointing to the fact that in 2022 Idealsomemagic A made but six starts.

Stratton gave Idealsomemagic A time to get back into race shape upon his arrival and unleashed the acquisition earlier this year, hoping that the purchase would work out.

“It wasn’t until my brother sat behind him before we were ready to qualify that I got any feedback to what kind of horse he was,” said Stratton. “Jordan thought he was a top horse.”

Cory’s driving brother had guided Idealsomemagic A to five consecutive wins racing on the front end as they climbed the conditioned ladder at Yonkers in January and February before the horse showed up in the Open Handicap on February 27. Then Jordan had to honor a commitment to last year’s Borgata champion Funatthebeach A. In that mile, Idealsomemagic A’s winning streak ended with a second-place finish, but the trainer and his brother were still impressed with the results.

“That was a huge effort,” said the training Stratton. “It was the first time we took him from off the pace and he came home in 27 seconds.”

Stratton suggested big money wasn’t paid for Idealsomemagic A to bring him to North America, but now that he’s arrived the sky appears to be the limit. With his first-round victory, a 1:52 effort with Idealsomemagic A finishing sharply off a cover trip to chase down American Courage near the finish line, Idealsomemagic A has now won six of his eight starts with a seasonal bankroll of \$82,125. The horse went winless in 2022 with less than \$8K earned.

“He was a good horse when we got him,” said Cory Stratton. “I believe he raced against Lochinvar Art but was probably a step below him.” The reference of course to Lochinvar Art A, a horse Idealsomemagic A will eventually face in the Borgata series, though he avoided the first-leg winner on March 20 and will again race in separate divisions this Monday.

That said, Idealsomemagic A does find the going a bit more intriguing in Monday’s second leg, again drawing post five but this time finding some quality competition with origins Down Under in the form of Nandolo N (post 2) and Leonidas A (post 3). Leonidas A was an impressive winner as well in opening-round action and Nandolo N provided cover for Idealsomemagic A in the opening leg but may be in for a better trip this week. This seventh race grouping also includes dominant first-leg winner Hellabalou (post 6), providing a useful test.

“When it comes to this series, I think it helps to have a horse that is versatile,” said Stratton, who currently has a stable of 34 horses at Mark Ford’s training center. “He’s already showed us that he can leave the gate and race on the front, and with his last two starts was just as good racing from behind. When Jordan popped the plugs in the stretch he took off.”

Stratton wasn’t sure whether his horse would race in all preliminary legs, but considering the number of divisions in the opening two legs, all systems are go to gain enough points to secure a spot in the final. Stratton is aware of the benefits of piling up points early on with the risks of outside draws compromising a horse’s potential to reach the final.

“I think he’s going to get better,” said Stratton. “It wasn’t my intention to miss three weeks before the Borgata but that’s how it worked out



MIKE LIZZI

Idealsomemagic A charged home to pick up a first-round MGM Borgata victory for driver Jordan Stratton and his trainer brother Cory Stratton.

because the Open didn’t fill. I think he’ll be better off that last trip.”

The 2022 season was a breakout year for Stratton and his stable, with the 30-year-old conditioner seeing his horses earn nearly \$1.9 million, a figure that was \$1 million more than the year before.

“I think the biggest difference is the quality of horses we’re racing and the ownership,” said Stratton. “I’ve got great help that includes my wife Victoria, who is a big part of the operation.”

Stratton over the years has been what most would call a driver-trainer. In 2021 he drove 208 winners with his mounts earning close to seven figures that year. Stratton drove much less in 2022 and appears to be moving away from driving nearly completely this year.

“Now I just drive for fun and to get my mind off of just training horses,” Stratton said, while laughing a bit at his 2023 statistics where he is winless in 36 drives. “I think that’s more about the horses I’ve been driving.”

For what it’s worth, Stratton is more than wise to focus on his budding stable, not just because of the presence of Idealsomemagic A but also the quite potent pacing mare Easy To Please. That mare finished second behind Amazing Dream N in the opening leg of the Blue Chip Matchmaker on March 17 and faces her again, along with defending champion Drama Act in a \$40,000 division in round two on Friday (March 24) at Yonkers.

“Last year we were able to race her in the non-winners class to prepare for this series,” said Stratton of the now 5-year-old daughter of Roll With Joe. “It’s taken a few more starts but I’m happy with where she is right now.”

Easy To Please ended her 2022 season finishing ninth in the Breeders Crown as a 4-year-old racing the top mares in the sport but Stratton suggested they will not go into the race again this year. “I think she’s at her best on a half-mile or five-eighths mile tracks. We didn’t make her eligible to the Breeders Crown this year,” said Stratton, recognizing the value of campaigning a mare of this caliber on a regular basis at Yonkers and other local tracks.

Stratton is looking past the current Yonkers series towards the arrival of a pair of horses to his stable.

“I’ve got what I hope to be a very nice New York-bred pacing filly in B On The Hunt,” said Stratton. “She raced in the Excelsior last year and didn’t finish out the year as well as I would have liked. She’s training down in Georgia and I’m getting good reports.”

Another future Stratton stable horse is currently in quarantine in Chicago with a trainer anxiously awaiting his arrival.

“Ron [Buker] bought a horse off the same connections as Idealsomemagic A,” said Stratton about Whats Stanley Got, who should be arriving in New York shortly, with the trainer hoping lightning can strike twice.

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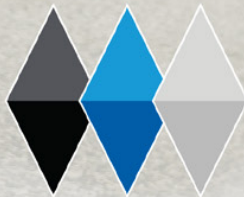
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Continuing the discussion of third-crop stallion success



ON THE MARK

By Bob Marks [@BobMarks3](#)

Long-time harness writer Jay Bergman hit the nail on the head in his recent [DRF Harness article](#) in which he explains how so many stallions tend to suffer a third-crop lethargy in which that group is somewhat beneath its two predecessors in terms of quality.

The reason for this is simple in that many breeders – farms included – will back off from third-year stallions given the uncertainty, as by the time that third crop actually hits the auction rings it will be known if the stallion is a success or failure.

Jay points out that super-sire Somebeachsomewhere had somewhat of a lesser quality third crop, though the reason for that was obvious in that he did not receive the caliber of quality mares that he did in his initial two crops. Actually, he got just 98 mares in crop number three, producing 69 live foals.

So excellent were his first two crops – Captaintreacherous, Sunshine Beach, etc. – that his third group sold reasonably well despite the lack-luster mares they were from, with the top sellers being Bodacious at \$355,000, Some Power at \$270,000 and Mohegan Blue Chip at \$215,000.

As Jay indicated, there was a performance drop-off as not one member of crop number three is included on his Top 10 earnings list or his Top 10 fastest performers list. Conversely, members of crop number four, like Pure Country and Check Six, are included on both lists, but by then the stallion prowess of Somebeachsomewhere was evident thanks to “The Captain” and friends!

Conversely, Rocknroll Hanover bred 190 mares his third year, similar to his first two years, and that crop included major performers in A Rocknroll Dance, Pet Rock and Panther Hanover. Thus there was no third-crop drop-off.

Jay mentioned the ill-fated Windsong’s Legacy getting his optimum performer Chapter Seven in his third crop, thus there wasn’t much of a drop-off in that season. Furthermore, Muscles Yankee bred 220 mares in his third year, accounting for more than just one quality performer.

Perhaps a reason for this is that at Perretti Farms we tended to overload on the stallion in his third year providing that we totally believed in him. We figured that with others “moving away”, we’d have the yearlings they’d want at the sales the following season, assuming of course the stallion “hit”. That was the gamble. For us it worked out well as many of our larger-selling yearlings were members of that precarious third crop.

For the record, if we didn’t “trust” the stallion, we’d hit him hard the first year and then back off to see what would happen.

Basically the situation is similar to a “crap shoot” as nobody knows what you’re getting while breeding the first year. You know what the stallion looks like and you should have a pretty good idea what your mare generally throws. Still there’s uncertainty. If you’re managing the stallion, hopefully he’ll receive a cross section of differently sired mares in order to determine if a “nick” will occur, as some stallions do better with mares by certain sires.

Of course the maternal family is paramount, but many first-crop yearling buyers will focus on those from broodmare sires they may particularly favor, which will influence how the initial crop actually sells.

In the case of Somebeachsomewhere, Captaintreacherous from the brilliantly-bred Artsplace mare Worldly Treasure, was the only first-crop “Beach” that pedigree maven Myron Bell actually looked at. Obviously they liked him and the rest is history as “The Captain” is an all-time great racehorse and sire.



CONRAD PHOTO

Pet Rock was from the strong third crop of Rocknroll Hanover.

By the time one is ready to breed in what will be the second crop, there will be some first-crop foals hitting the ground. At least there’s an inkling as to what they look like so you’re not exactly riding blind.

In crop number three, those first-crop babies are now early yearlings slated to reach the auction sales that Autumn, so there’s not much more one can go on in terms of assessing market desirability. Moreover, performance won’t happen for another year leading to the potential third-crop drop-off as many top mares are sent elsewhere.

Moreover, you know where the first-crop stallion stands in terms of contemporary performance with his age group peers! As for the second-crop stallion, there may be drop off to an exciting “new” first-crop stallion but those that like what they see with their own initial crop babies tend to stick around another year.

Getting back to the third-year drop-off on Somebeachsomewhere, there were those suspect about what kind of sire he’d become for two very distinct reasons. One, his sire line by Mach Three-Matt’s Scooter did not exactly inspire confidence. Second, his maternal line being from a moderate at best Beach Towel daughter Where’s The Beach seemed somewhat obscure at best.

In addition, he wouldn’t be the first super-performer not to replicate his racing abilities in the stud as the annals are loaded with superstars like Adios Butler, Speedy Scot, Overtrick, Bret Hanover, Romeo Hanover, Niatross, Nihilator, Nevele Pride, etc., who for a variety of reasons, ultimately failed to measure up. As Mack Lobell was not fertile, he doesn’t count here, although his racing efforts were on a par with the above named.

In the case of Niatross and Bret Hanover, both had superb initial crops only to drop off in succeeding years despite retaining outstanding mares on the basis of first-crop success.

Consequently, that third-crop drop-off was no surprise for “The Beach,” but given the performance of his first crop it was remedied in subsequent crops. At this point Somebeachsomewhere is in the argument as potentially the greatest stallion ever. Furthermore, he has emerged as a sire of outstanding sires, like Captaintreacherous, Huntsville, Downby-theseaside, Stay Hungry, and Canada’s Sunshine Beach.

Given his acknowledged reputation as a “sire of sires,” I counseled good friend David McDuffee to ensure that whatever farm his stallion Papi Rob Hanover (Somebeachsomewhere-Panera Hanover) wound up standing at, there would be no third-crop drop-off in terms of the quality of mares they personally would breed.

As for me, we’re breeding an extra mare to “Papi Rob” in this his third season.

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MacDonald takes a swing at a New Holland sweep at Mohawk

By Jay Bergman

James MacDonald has been successful driving top horses and getting results, and on Saturday he's in prime position in two New Holland series finals at Woodbine Mohawk Park.

MacDonald will steer Locatelli, a second leg winner in the series for trotters that were non-winners of \$150K in 2022 – a number he was shy of by just five grand – in the C\$72,000 final carded as race five. A couple of races later MacDonald has the likely favorite Nautical Hanover in the C\$70,500 New Holland series final for pacers. The Captaintreacherous-sired 4-year-old has won his last two starts, both with MacDonald in the bike.

"His first start was just ok," said MacDonald of Locatelli, who finished third but was placed fifth in the March 6 first round of the New Holland. "He was much better in his last start and raced more like the horse that trotted in 1:50 4/5 last year."

Locatelli made a bold move at the half and then cruised to a 1:54 3/5 victory in second leg action on March 13. MacDonald will have to overcome post nine in the field of 10 for the New Holland final, but he believes he's sitting behind a horse with enough talent to overcome such an obstacle.

"He's not the greatest leaving horse," said MacDonald. "It's not like he can't leave though."

Indeed the 5-year-old gelded son of Muscle Hill does have gate speed and certainly gives his driver the options to set sail for the top or look for cover.

"It's a good bunch of horses but I like my chances," concluded Macdonald, who drives Locatelli for trainer Harry Poulton and owners Thestable Locatelli Group and Hutchison Harness LLC.

Locatelli starts outside a solid rival in Sermon, a 6-year-old from the Per Engblom stable that made a break in the opening New Holland leg but bounced back nicely with a 1:53 2/5 effort on March 13 for driver Bob McClure.

First leg winner Ritson (post 6) and the 5-year-old mare HP Mama B (post 4) have shown the talent to win at this level, with HP Mama B a top-class mare that has a 1:51 4/5 mark over this surface.

MacDonald has only driven Nautical Hanover twice, but he's been more than impressed with the talent and potential of this budding star.

"He was electric last week," said MacDonald of the Ben Baillorgeon-trained stallion that made a blistering move on the backstretch and then won convincingly in 1:51 1/5 in the second round of the New Holland pacing series.

"He was just terrific in his first start," MacDonald said of the race on March 11 when Nautical Hanover came from sixth at the half and swept the field, kicking home in 26 2/5 of a 1:50 3/5 career-equaling clocking.

"They'll be looking for him," said MacDonald of Nautical Hanover, who drew post eight in the seventh race at Woodbine Mohawk. The driver's suggestion was that post wouldn't be a concern because the horse's performance is likely to earn the respect of rivals, especially when racing for big money.

While MacDonald is quite confident, Nautical Hanover faces a solid



NEW IMAGE MEDIA

Locatelli winning a leg of the New Holland series on March 13 at Woodbine Mohawk Park.

field that includes Snowshoe series champion Camara Moment (post 9), a 4-year-old gelded son of Control The Moment that has captured six of eight starts this year. His win streak was broken in the March 18 second New Holland leg where he struggled in the early stages and was some 19 lengths off the field at the halfway mark, eventually finishing seventh by around six lengths. Prior to that mysterious outing, Camara Moment took a career-best 1:49 4/5 record in the March 11 first leg of the New Holland series, getting the best of finalist The Longest Yard by a head at the wire.

The Longest Yard (post 4) was used hard during the middle half in last week's second leg, losing contact with Nautical Hanover after that one cleared the lead at three quarters. The son of Rockin Image has a 1:50 2/5 record taken at Hoosier Park last year.

The New Holland final has a pair of quality horses on the inside of the field with Southbeach Hanover (post 1) and Ario Hanover (post 2) hoping for an upset. The former drew poorly in the elimination legs but previously was a winner in 1:49 4/5 over this surface on March 4. Ario Hanover was a solid second behind Nautical Hanover in the first leg but never got involved in round two, finishing fifth after racing far off the pace.

MacDonald likes his chances on Saturday night and is focused on continued success through the 2023 season.

"My focus is on trying to be consistent and doing the best I can behind the horses I drive," MacDonald said.

The 13-race Saturday card at Woodbine Mohawk Park gets underway at 7:00 PM. It will be the last card before the track takes a week break and returns on April 1 with an early 6:00 PM post.

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Hoosier opening night starter Crooked Smile brings grins to owners' faces

By Ken Weingartner

Rhys Helt has known Tim Wilson Jr. for as long as he can remember. Their families have shared a connection going back to the 1970s when a female pacer named Ma Ma's Bret, trained and driven by Tim Sr., was an Illinois Topline Stakes winner and the boys would pal around together at the county fairs, united by friendship and a love of harness racing.

Over the ensuing years, their passion for racing never waned. Tim Jr. embarked on his own career as a trainer and driver while Helt followed in family footsteps on the breeding and racing side. They continued to remain connected, though, by sharing ownership in horses, now most notably with 6-year-old male pacer Crooked Smile.

Crooked Smile joined the stable as a 3-year-old in August 2020. Since then, the Wilson-trained gelding has won 17 of 75 races, including multiple Opens at both Harrah's Hoosier Park and Oak Grove Racing, and earned \$233,922.

On Friday, the son of Panther Hanover-Amilewidesmile will make his 2023 debut in the \$22,000 Open 1/Open 2 at Hoosier Park as the track hosts the first card of its 30th season. Kyle Wilfong will drive Crooked Smile, who starts from post three and is 9-2 on the morning line.

"He's been awesome," said Helt, who lives near Hoosier Park and works as a financial advisor in Indianapolis. "He's the best horse I've ever had. I'd never had a sub-(1):50 pacer before him. We usually raise babies and bring them along to race, but he was bought privately. We just feel so fortunate to have him."

Crooked Smile was a steady check-earner at 3, then blossomed the following season, working his way through the conditioned ranks to the Open at Hoosier Park. But before racing in the Open, his connections put the horse in a claiming handicap with an \$80,000 price tag. It was not because they hoped to sell the horse, but because they were uncertain of his full potential.

"He raced himself out of the conditions and had to go in the Open, but

we didn't know if he could go right into the Open and do well," Helt said. "I didn't want to lose him. I was nervous, but we thought surely no one would take him the first time. He won, and we said no more claimers.

"And then he goes right into the Open, and he wins it."

Crooked Smile captured the Open in his first attempt, rallying from seventh at three-quarters to score in 1:49 2/5 over a sloppy track. The time equaled his career best, which he had just set the previous week in the claiming handicap.

"He came from way off the pace and he beat some really good horses," Helt said. "I was audibly crying when it was (1):49 2/5. I can't even tell you what that meant to us. When you win an Open at Hoosier Park, that means something. I don't care who is in the race, it's some of the best racing in the country.

"If you can win an Open anytime at Hoosier Park, you've got a horse. I was over the moon. It was the best."

Helt and his family continue to enjoy Crooked Smile. His wife and children are involved, as well as mom Donna and sisters Danielle and Kylie. The group competes under the Turn For Home Racing stable name.

"Incidentally, when they turn for home, that's when Crooked Smile does his best work," Helt said. "He has extreme talent, especially in the last eighth (of the mile). He loves to pick off horses. You know if he feels right, you just have to show him the track and he's going to give you everything he's got every time.

"He's everything I ever wanted. He loves the game, loves being a racehorse, loves his work. He's always happy. He's been a joy."

Hoosier Park stalwart Little Rocket Man, starting from post six with John DeLong in the sulky, is the 8-5 morning-line favorite in Friday's Open. Goldie's Legacy, with the track's 11-time driving champion Trace Trerrick at the lines, leaves from post eight and is 7-2.

Racing begins at 6:15 p.m. EDT at Hoosier Park.

Northfield/Pompano Driver Challenge is coming April 11-12

While winter tends to hang on in Northeast Ohio, things will heat up on April 11 and 12 as four regulars who drove at Pompano Park and four drivers from MGM Northfield Park will take center stage in a charity event hosted in partnership with the Ohio Harness Horsemen's Association.

When interim announcer Gabe Prewitt began in mid-February, he brought with him an idea to host the drivers challenge, something Director of Racing Dave Bianconi fell in love with.

"In association with the Ohio Harness Horsemen's Association, we're proud to host this event at MGM Northfield Park. Pompano Park had a long-storied history in the sport, and we're glad to have these four drivers and Pompano's Goodwill Ambassador Gabe Prewitt in town for this fun competition, which also benefits two great charities," said Director of Racing Dave Bianconi. "The only question is, how did we let Ohio native David Miller on Team Pompano?"

The competition will feature a \$3,000 prize for the charities. Those charities, which will be announced later, will receive \$2,000 if their team wins and \$1,000 for finishing second.

The teams will be comprised of the top-tiered talent from both facilities.

Team Northfield

Aaron Merriman, the 2018 Driver of the Year, enters the competition having won six straight dash titles at MGM Northfield Park. Merriman, who has over 14,000 career victories and just shy of \$105 million in earnings, has won the national dash title eight years in a row.

Ronnie Wrenn Jr., who began his career in 2008, eclipsed 7,000 wins in October when he won with Just Bookem. Wrenn won the national dash titles in 2013 and 2014; he now has over \$54 million in career earnings.

Chris Lems joined the driving colony at MGM Northfield Park in 2017. A staple on the New York circuit for most of his career, he has become a household name in Northeast Ohio, putting together some of the biggest seasons of his career since moving. Lems has earned over \$21 million in career earnings and has won 2,745 races.

Billy Davis Jr., who split his time between Ontario and New York for quite some time, began driving in Ohio regularly in April 2021. Davis recently eclipsed the \$27 million mark in career earnings and has visited the winner's circle 3,549 times.

"This is a super event that MGM Northfield Park has organized; I've been privileged to drive in many of these challenges across the country," said Merriman on behalf of Team Northfield. "It's exciting to have one here at home with some Hall of Famers and budding young stars."

Team Pompano

Inducted into the Harness Racing Hall of Fame in 2007 and the Canadian Horse Racing Hall of Fame in 2014, Wally Hennessey, who resides in Florida, was a staple at Pompano Park through much of his career. The reinsman has earned over \$76 million in career earnings with 11,454 victories. Hennessey is best known for his association with champion mare Moni Maker. Hennessey is the all-time leading driver at Pompano Park.

David Miller entered the Harness Racing Hall of Fame in 2014. In a career that has spanned 42 years, Miller has earned over \$270 million and has won 13,927 races. While known for driving some of racing's greatest superstars, one of his most memorable stars was Always B Miki, who he drove to a world-record 1:46 victory at the Red Mile.

Midwest native Peter Wrenn would travel to South Florida each year with his wife Melanie, and while training babies, would race some at Pompano Park. Wrenn, who has 1,012 training wins, has accumulated 10,545 driving wins and over \$82 million in career earnings.

The youngest member of Team Pompano is Joseph Chindano Jr., who began driving horses in 2015, joined the driving colony in South Florida in 2019. Chindano Jr. is an accomplished trainer and driver. As a driver he has earned more than \$2.5 million and entered the winner's circle 441 times.

"I think this is an awesome promotion and we're looking forward to having a great time," said Wally Hennessey on behalf of Team Pompano. "We're glad to see the charities get rewarded as part of this competition as well."

First post on both Tuesday, April 11, and Wednesday, April 12, will be 6:00 p.m.

The standard \$10,000 guaranteed late Pick-4 (R11) and Super High 5 (R13) will also be featured.

-edited release (MGM Northfield)

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Boyd hopes to get lucky in Blue Chip Matchmaker at Yonkers

By Ken Weingartner

Braxten Boyd and Lucky Artist A came a head short of collecting their first Grand Circuit victories in last week's opening round of the Blue Chip Matchmaker Series, but the driver and mare will get another chance Friday as the six-weeks event for older female pacers continues at MGM Yonkers Raceway.

Lucky Artist A and Boyd will start from post four in a field of six in the second of Friday's four \$40,000 Matchmaker divisions. Lucky Artist A is 5-2 on the morning line, the second choice behind Gia's Surreal at 2-1.

"It's exciting to be able to drive this mare in this series," said Boyd, who has appeared in a handful of Grand Circuit events during his budding career, but almost entirely with longshots. "I've gotten some checks, but I've never had a chance like I do in this one. She's a legitimate horse."

Boyd, who turned 23 on March 8, is coming off a 2022 campaign that saw him set career highs for starts with 2,245, wins with 270, and purses with \$3.96 million, which more than doubled his previous best in the money column. He entered Wednesday with 617 lifetime triumphs, including several in state-bred stakes.

"I've got to keep putting my time in, but you always want to latch on to a real good horse," said Boyd, who put more than 90,000 miles on his car last year as he competed up and down the East Coast, from New York to Florida. "You're always trying to improve. It's a grind, but it's better to be busy than not. It's been good."

Boyd began driving Lucky Artist A for trainer Ricky Bucci in October. The two have clicked, with five wins and five seconds in 14 races together. Three of the wins, and three of the seconds, came in the Open Handicap for female pacers at Yonkers.

"Right from the get-go, I loved her," Boyd said. "She's a tough gritty mare, and she will race any way you want. She can literally do anything. She can race from the back, she can cut it, come first over, come out of a hole very hard, she can grind; she's not anything specific."

"She's not super fast off the starting gate, but she'll get there, and she'll do anything you want. She's a very nice mare."

Australian-bred Lucky Artist A, a 10-year-old daughter of Artistic Fella-Corella Magic, has won 24 of 106 races and earned \$421,966 since arriving in the U.S. from Down Under in 2019. Overall, she has captured 35 of 159 starts and banked \$468,184.

In last week's Matchmaker opener, Lucky Artist A got away fourth in an eight-horse field, moved second over at the half, and battled down the stretch to finish second to Karma Seelster in 1:52 4/5.

"She just got outpaced a little bit, but she raced very well," Boyd said. "She's been in very good form."

"She's got a good foundation under her right now. Ricky did the smart thing and gave her the week off before the series. Hopefully we can accumulate enough points that he can pick a spot (to take a week off during the series)."

The top-eight horses at the completion of the series' five preliminary legs are eligible to advance to the Blue Chip Matchmaker final on April 24 at Yonkers. Horses receive 50 points for winning, 25 for second, 12 for third, eight for fourth, and five for fifth. In addition, all starters in each round receive 25 points.

Joining Karma Seelster in the win column last week were Drama Act and Amazing Dream N.

Six-year-old Karma Seelster is the 3-1 second choice behind Racine Bell at 7-5 in the third of Friday's four divisions. Drama Act, a 6-year-old who is the Matchmaker's defending champion, is the 9-5 choice over 7-year-old Amazing Dream N at 5-2 in the fourth division.

The 2-1 favorite in the first division is 6-year-old Mabalene N, who was scratched sick from last week's first round.

Another newcomer to the series this week is 5-year-old Hot Mess Express, a multiple winner on the Grand Circuit who is making her seasonal debut.

Familiar faces lead round two entrants in MGM Borgata Pacing Series

The second leg of the MGM Borgata Pacing Series is ahead on Monday night (March 27) at MGM Yonkers Raceway, and three of the first round winners will face off in one of the four \$50,000 splits on the 12-race program.

Leonidas A (post three, Austin Siegelman), Idealsome-magic A (post five, Jordan Stratton), and Hellabalou (post six, Yannick Gingras) all made trips to the winner's circle last night (March 20), and they will butt heads in race seven, which is the third of next Monday's Borgata battles.

As for the other opening leg winner, Lochinvar Art A (post six, Lauren Tritton), he landed in the third race, which kicks off the MGM Borgata Pacing Series action on the card.

Defending MGM Borgata Pacing Series champion Funatthebeach N (post two, Stratton) will compete against the likes of Jimmy Freight (post four, Scott Zeron) and Backstreet Shadow (post five, Matt Kakaley) in the fifth race, and the final division (race nine) will see Tattoo Artist (post five, Dexter Dunn) and This Is The Plan (post seven, Gingras) look for better luck than they had in leg one. Priceless Beach (post three, David Miller) was second to Leonidas A on Monday night and is also in that tilt.

To complement the MGM Borgata Pacing Series, the Empire Terrace dining room will be open 6 p.m. to 10 p.m. on Mondays through April 24. Owners and fans are invited to attend the races and enjoy food from an ala carte menu. No reservations are required.

Stakes action will resume at MGM Yonkers Raceway on Friday night (March 24)'s 11-race slate with four \$40,000 sections (races two, four, six, and eight) of the second leg of the Blue Chip Matchmaker Series for



MIKE LIZZI

Lochinvar Art A remains perfect on the year after a first round MGM Borgata series victory last week.

pacing mares. Leg one winners Amazing Dream N and Drama Act are both entered in race eight, and the other first round victor, Karma Seelster, will look to improve to two-for-two in race six.

MGM Yonkers Raceway is currently operating on a Monday through Friday live racing schedule with post time at 7 p.m. (EST).

-release (Yonkers)

Red Mile adjusts Grand Circuit dates

The Red Mile announced today (3/22) that the racing dates for the first week of the Grand Circuit meet have been moved up one day to begin on Thursday, September 28, which includes the Bluegrass Stakes for 2-year-old trotting colts and 2-year-old pacing fillies.

Racing will continue on Friday, September 29 with additional Bluegrass Stakes events for 2-year-old pacing colts and 2-year-old trotting fillies. The third and final day of racing for the first week will be held on Saturday, September 30 with 3-year-olds of both gaits and genders competing in their respective Bluegrass events. These dates supersede the originally planned Friday-Saturday-Sunday initial week timetable.

The schedule for the second week of live harness racing at the Red Mile remains unchanged and is set to begin as originally planned on Friday, October 6 with the International Stallion Stakes for freshmen. Racing continues on Saturday, October 7, and culminates on Sunday, October 8 for Kentucky Futurity Day.

Post Time is 1 p.m. for all six of the world class harness racing dates at the famed Lexington oval.

For further information about racing and sponsorships, contact Cindy Solverson at 847-845-0659, or Email: redmilesindy@gmail.com

-release (By Chris Tully for The Red Mile)

MEADOWLANDS SEEKING CHARITIES FOR ANNUAL CHARITY CONTEST

The Meadowlands Racetrack is seeking local New Jersey charities interested in having a night at the races for a good cause in the track's annual Charity Handicapping Contest, scheduled for Saturday, May 13th.

The Charity Contest is a free handicapping contest open to 501C3 organizations. It offers a \$15,000 total donation/prize pool, with all ten charities receiving a donation. Prizes will be awarded as follows: 1st Place: \$5,000, 2nd Place: \$3,000, 3rd Place: \$2,000, 4th Place: \$1,500, 5th Place: \$1,000, 6th-10th: \$500.

For the Charity Handicapping Contest, organizations will select one (1) horse in each of the 10 designated Meadowlands live races. The organizations will amass a mythical bankroll if their selection officially finishes first, second or third in the designated race. Official \$2 WPS (Win, Place, Show) payoffs will be added to the mythical bankroll. Official race results will serve as the order of finish. The organization that accumulates the highest mythical bankroll is the winner.

"This Charity Contest is a feel good event for us," said Jason Settlemoir, COO and GM of Meadowlands Racing & Entertainment. "It is wonderful to see all the charities with their friends and family enjoy a night at the racetrack and it is great to see the community benefit from this promotion."

Act Now won the inaugural contest in 2019 and Horse Rescue United is a two-time winner, taking home the top prize in both 2021 and 2022.

Participating organizations will also have the opportunity to make winner's circle presentations and be featured on the track's jumbotron.

Interested not-for-profit organizations must apply to participate by emailing Rachel Ryan at rryan@playmeadowlands.com by Thursday, May 4th. The email must include:

1. Charity/Non-Profit Name
2. 501C3 letter
3. Charity/Non-Profit Mission
4. Website URL & Social Links
5. Charity Representative/s that will be onsite for the contest on May 13th.

If more than 10 organizations apply, 10 will be selected via a random drawing. Selected organizations will be notified by Friday, May 5th.

-edited release (Meadowlands)



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THURSDAY, MARCH 23

RACE 2

(3) MUSCLING VEGAS couldn't have looked any better winning her sophomore debut and she likely repeats as a big chalk tonight.

-Garnet Barnsdale



WOODBINE
MOHAWK PARK

FRIDAY, MARCH 24

RACE 6

(7) DREAMONHIGH was wide into the first turn and raced big in defeat in his first start with Lasix added. A similar effort would make her tough. An improved effort makes her a sure winner.

-Derick Giwner



RACE 6

(1) RACINE BELL has come up just a touch short in her last two at the hands of Drama Act, who she gets to avoid tonight. Bartlett can secure control early and rate comfortably to get it done.

-Matt Rose



SATURDAY, MARCH 25

RACE 2

(5) BULLVILLE STEPHANO took a shot in his 2023 debut and tired, which is understandable. He was back on the track just four days later and aborted a leave attempt then came home with steady pace. Tonight he catches a suspect field with a potential 3-5 favorite that has never won in his career.

-Giwner



FULL CARD ANALYSIS / PAST PERFORMANCES

Mohawk Park Analysis [Thursday](#) [Friday](#) [Saturday](#)

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INSTANT RACING UPDATES VIA TWITTER: @DRFHARNES

NEWS FROM AROUND THE HARNESS INDUSTRY

MOHAWK PARK POST TIME CHANGE FOR APRIL 1 AFTER BRIEF BREAK

Woodbine Entertainment today (3/20) announced a post time change for live racing on Saturday, April 1 at Woodbine Mohawk Park.

Post time for live racing on Saturday, April 1 will be 6 p.m.

The earlier start time on Saturday, April 1 will provide flexibility for extra races, as Woodbine Mohawk Park will be taking a short break from live racing following this Saturday's (March 25) program.

The regular post time of 7 p.m. remains in place for all other cards of live racing.

-edited release (Woodbine)

TRUE SEELSTER WINS \$16,800 MEADOWS SERIES FINAL

True Seelster moved easily first over and captured Wednesday's \$16,800 championship of the Donna Dunn Memorial for 3- and 4-year-old filly and mare pacers at Hollywood Casino at The Meadows.

True Seelster paced patiently in third until the three-quarters when Brady Brown moved her off the cones and asked her for go. The 3-year-old daughter of All Bets Off-Tanis Seelster overpowered the leader, Imelda Hanover, and prevailed in 1:54 2/5, matching her career best. Beth Dutton shot the Lightning Lane for second, 2 lengths back, while Imelda Hanover saved show.

Owners George Kehm and Jerry Kehm purchased True Seelster from trainer Brady Jenson before the start of the series and sent her to the stable of trainer Mark Goldberg.

"Brady Jenson did all the work with her," Goldberg said. "We were just happy to be able to get her."

Goldberg said True Seelster would be pointed to an April series at The Meadows but could have richer engagements in her future.

"She's eligible to sire stakes in Ontario," he indicated. "Depending on how she does, we might send her to Canada for some of those."

Burke Ends 7-Year Drought — As Driver



CHRIS GOODEN

Trainer Ron Burke drove Rose Run Yorick to victory on Wednesday at The Meadows.

It's hardly unusual to see Ron Burke in the winners' circle; he's the sport's all-time leading trainer after all. But Burke winners' circle sightings as a driver are rare, since he usually names others to pilot the horses he conditions. His last purse start had been the 2022 Hall of Fame Trot at Goshen on July 3. His most recent pari-mutuel driving victory had come on March 16, 2016.

That all ended Wednesday at The Meadows when Burke steered the 3-year-old trotting colt Rose Run Yorick to victory in his career debut. The son of What The Hill-She's Nutz brought \$160,000 as a yearling; alas, poor Yorick didn't make it to the races at 2.

On Wednesday, he trotted like a seasoned pro for his trainer, coming off the pylons late to split horses and triumph in 2:00.3 for owners Burke Racing Stable, Hatfield Stables, Knox Services and Weaver Brussemi LLC. Remains to be seen whether the trainer will allow this Burke guy to keep the driving gig.

Hunter Myers collected three wins — including a pair for trainer Stacey Currie — on the 13-race card.

-edited release (By Evan Pattak for MSOA)

HARRAH'S PHILADELPHIA QUALIFIERS SET FOR THIS FRIDAY

Horsemen are reminded that Harrah's Philadelphia Casino and Race-track will hold pre-meet qualifiers on March 24 (Friday) and March 28 (Tuesday) mornings, with first post at 9:30 a.m. each day. Entries will be accepted the day prior on both occasions, with the box scheduled to close at 11:00 a.m.

Following the April 2nd Opening Day card, qualifiers will be held weekly on Tuesdays, with entries accepted on Sunday mornings until 12:00 noon.

Horsemen are once again reminded to provide the Race Office with all applicable health documents for their horses, including Coggins and rabies paperwork dated 2023 and a health certificate from the last 30 days. They may be faxed to the race office at 484.490.2230. Additionally, horsemen are also reminded that they need to have their USTA membership up to date. Racing applications are available through the Harrah's Philadelphia website: www.harrahsp Philly.com, and following the "Horsemen" link.

-release (Harrah's Philadelphia)

2023 HHYF SUMMER SCHEDULE IS NOW AVAILABLE

The HHYF horses have been delivered to their 2023 conditioners: CD's Miss M to the Ross Leonard Stable, I Want Another to the Hank LeVan Stable, Royal Attire to the Ryan Miller Stable and Ima's Hit to Vicky Rouch. Many thanks to these generous volunteers for their time and energy in getting the stable fit for a busy summer.

Speaking of HHYF summer, as usual, the schedule is packed full of a variety of programs and many locations. With stops in Ohio, Indiana, Kentucky, New York, Maine (tentatively), and New Jersey - so much education, excitement and increased awareness for harness racing is anticipated.

"HHYF summers are important to the industry" explained HHYF Executive Director Ellen Taylor. "Not only do our events create invigorating energy from new horse-loving participants but the potential to increase awareness for harness racing venues close to our camp locations stimulates even the hardened trainer to take in a breath of fresh air when he/she sees the kids having fun and learning."

Spoiler alert: HHYF's first stop will actually be at Shenandoah Downs on April 29 so technically HHYF is now offering spring programs in addition to the regular months of June/July/August.

Many thanks to those who help make the HHYF programs possible. To date, those who have generously donated include US Trotting Association, OH Harness Horsemen's Association, Lindy Farms, Meadows Standardbred Owners Association, VA Equine Alliance, The New Meadowlands/Vernon Downs/Tioga Downs, Martin Granoff, Brittany Farms, Cameo Hills Farm, Fair Island Farm, Hambletonian Society, Chris McErlean, Pinske Stables, Joe Holloway Stable, Pacesetter Farm and Jim and Georgia Simpson. HHYF continues to seek funding for the programs. Please contact the HHYF office by mid May if you are interested in contributing to these important initiatives to help ensure harness racing's future.

Please visit <https://hhyf.org/summer-programs/> for complete list of all HHYF events including those requiring pre registration. The horses and staff are looking forward to seeing YOU at a HHYF event this summer!

-release (HHYF)

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