Mickey Burke Sr. was a man I enjoyed chatting with over the years. We perhaps only had a few dozen conversations over the years but I always enjoyed his willingness to give me his unabashed opinions. There was no sugarcoating on his words. He spoke his truth and wasn’t ashamed to share it. Never was this clearer to me than during an October 2022 in-depth interview where he discussed his journey in harness racing. He didn’t hold anything back and truth be told, I may’ve eliminated a name or two to protect him. You can read the entire interview here.

Mickey was 87 years old at his passing on May 6, and while I only knew him in his 70s and 80s, to me he always seemed to be a larger than life figure. He was a good story teller and didn’t worry about your feelings when telling the tale, something I always appreciated. In an era when everyone seems to walk on eggshells to avoid conflict, Mickey was a throwback to an era when you just said what was on your mind.

Whether he gets enough credit for it or not, Mickey transformed the modern sport of harness racing in North America. He created the concept of a big stable that could dominate across the country at every level from $2,500 claimers to stakes horses. Mickey wasn’t the first to reach the 2,000 start plateau (Robert Belcher did it once in 2003) but he did create a new mold for success that allowed his son Ron to build a training empire.

In his own words, Mickey did it “step by step” and to this day still owns a few spots in the top 20 in terms of yearly starts and wins, trailing only the 15 consecutive seasons compiled by his son Ron Burke from 2009 to present.

While in theory Mickey called it a career after the 2008 season, he was certainly a participating cog in the operation until the end. He spent his winters in Florida handling the organization’s young horses and was a constant presence at the horse sales signing tickets for yearlings.

Harness racing lost a builder of the sport this week, a man who invested in the industry and created a training empire. I’ll remember him.

CONTINUED ON PAGE 3
YEARLING PAYMENTS DUE MAY 15*

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* per USTA rule 12.02 all payments must be postmarked by midnight Thursday, May 16

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telling me he couldn’t talk because the Pittsburgh Steelers were playing. I’ll remember him holding court in the Burke barn at The Red Mile as the flies ate me alive. I’ll remember him sitting in his chair at the Lexington Selected Sale just inside the second door on the right with a big smile on his face. I mourn his loss and submit below a collection of thoughts posted on social media from those equally saddened by Mickey’s passing. Rest in peace.

**Nancy Takter (Facebook):**

So incredibly saddened to get the call this morning that Mickey passed away. Despite the obvious competition between the Takter and Burke families we have always had a lot of respect and admiration for each other. Last year when I won the Hambletonian Mickey was the first person to call to congratulate me, before I even made it to the winner’s circle. I didn’t have my phone on me but Mickey left the most heartwarming congratulatory voicemail. Even though the Burkes were the beaten favorites that day, Mickey wanted to tell me how proud he was of me. I still have the message on my phone and once in a while I listen to it. Mickey would call me every Thanksgiving, Christmas and Easter. He was always good for a good story while jogging at The Red Mile, often causing our horses to jog extra laps so he could finish it. Heaven gained an angel today I am sure of because we had an angel on Earth while he was here. Condolences to the entire Burke family.

**Darin Zoccali (X):**

Condolences to @RonBurkeRacing and the entire Burke family. Mickey Burke Sr. was a game-changer in the sport of harness racing and his impact on the sport will be long-lasting. May he rest in peace.

**Gabe Prewitt (X):**

Sad day in harness racing, as we’ve lost the original architect of Burke racing that his family continues to grow to unprecedented heights. He was a legend and a character; enjoyed interacting with him throughout the years. His legacy will forever be embedded on the sport.

**Michelle Crawford (X):**

Mickey Burke was a legend and will be greatly mourned and missed by all in the harness world and beyond. Condolences to his family and friends.

**Joe Bongiorno (X):**

Rest in peace Mickey Burke Sr. You were a great man and will be missed by many! I enjoyed all the moments I got to be around you and all the stories I was able to hear while being around you! May you rest in peace! My thoughts and prayers go out to the entire Burke family!

**Heather Vitale (X):**

I’m heartbroken to hear about the loss of Mickey Burke Sr. I adored this man! Loved running up to him, surprising him out of nowhere every day and planting a big one on his cheek! I loved just sitting with him and listening to his beautiful life stories! Love you Mickey!

**Vicki Gingras (Facebook):**

He certainly started something that no one else has done in the harness racing industry, by building an unmatched racing empire with his vision and help of his family. We are blessed to be a part of it. Most will remember his wit, funny jokes, brutal honesty, and infamous storytelling. What stands out the most to me was his deep love, pride, and devotion to his family. It’s quite special what they share. Although he was recognized for a few career milestones, I am still saddened by the fact he was never inducted in to the Goshen Hall of Fame. He deserved the honor as much as anyone, if not more. We have lost a good one……may he rest in peace.

**Dot Morgan (Facebook):**

My head is grieving but my heart is soaring. Mickey knew where he was going and now he has arrived! He lived life to the fullest and actively enjoyed it until the end of the chapter. He was a man of faith; a great horseman; a devoted family man and a generous giver. He always told me he was so blessed, and indeed, he is.

**PJ Fraley (Facebook):**

Through the ups and downs, maybe a disagreement here and there, from the bottom of my heart thank you for the opportunity, Mick, to ride along with the Burke Brigade. My deepest condolences and sympathies to Ronnie, Mickey Jr, Becky, Michelle and most of all Miss Sylvia. I hope you all find peace and solace knowing the path Mickey left us for all to follow. Thank you Mickey Burke Sr, I will always cherish our time together. May You RIP Boss.

**Tom Charters (Facebook):**

I am saddened to hear of the passing of Mickey Burke, a friend for almost half a century and a friendship which began long before the Burke Brigade had splashed on and reshaped the national harness scene. I’ll remember him as a kind and generous soul with strong opinions, always very supportive of other horsemen, especially at the Meadows and their causes. In recent years I would always enjoy sitting down with him at Delaware, or at the Meadows, or wherever we’d meet along the Grand Circuit and rehash — especially those early years!

I first met Mickey when I went to the Meadows as assistant racing secretary in 1976. Mickey had a barn full of horses, at that time of a cheaper variety, with a local trainer Earl Cordwell, all of which were owned in partnership with Earl. They would race their stock at the Meadows in those years and at the fairs; I think Mickey sometimes drove. As I remember, and as he told in recent years, they didn’t do very well in those years but loved it! I remember they always entered and raced their horses without a problem, a quality that endeared him to me as a racing secretary.

One day, as Mickey delighted in telling the story, he stood Earl at one end of that barn and Mickey walked clear to the other end to the last stall and announced they were selling everything in between and buying some good stock — which he did! He cited that moment as the start of the Burke Stable that everyone recognizes today. A complete refresh.

That was before Ron and his brother Mickey Jr were even on the scene. A decade or so later when their name first appeared in the program at The Meadowlands I told people that this was no overnight success story to be questioned; Mickey was a seasoned horseman who had paid his dues!

In recent years when we would get together, Mickey would embarrass me on more than occasion, announcing to all within earshot that, “I was the best race secretary he ever raced under!” His hyperbole was appreciated; he could be as generous with his compliments as he was with his time and money. However, after I thought about it a bit, I admit that I was flattered. He certainly was a compliment well grounded. He and the Burke Brigade probably raced at more tracks on any given weekend than many other horsemen do in their lifetime. The Burke stable has redefined harness racing in the past couple decades and as patriarch Mickey deserves a sizable share of the credit along with Mickey Jr. and Ron and the entire family these days.

I think in recent years, Mickey had comfortably assumed a sort of senior statesman in harness racing, taking a deep seat outside the motor home at Delaware or in the hospitality suite at the Dan Patch dinner as old friends (such as myself) and new acquaintances would make a point to stop by and visit, and Mickey would offer his opinions on the current state of racing or reminisce about his seven-plus decades in the sport, from the fairs in Pennsylvania to the highest plateaus of the Grand Circuit.

I’ll miss my friend especially on those occasions in the future and I want to offer my sincere sympathy to Sylvia, sons Ron and Mickey Jr., daughters Michelle, Rebecca, and Melissa and their families, members of the Burke Brigade and all of Mickey’s friends throughout the industry. Many ways irreplacable, he will certainly be missed by all.

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Friends will be received Friday (May 10) from 2-8 p.m. in the John B. Greenlee Funeral Home, Ltd., 2830 Main St., Beaverdale, PA 15313. A mass of Christian Burial will be held Saturday (May 11) at 12 p.m. at the St. Katherine Drexel Parish Richveley campus with Rev. Michael Zatage as Celebrant. Interment will follow in Queen of Heaven Cemetery, McMurray, Pa.

Mr. Burke patronized multiple charities. In lieu of flowers, consider donating to New Vocations Racehorse Adoption Program, your local Food Bank, St Jude’s Cancer Hospital or a charity of your choice.
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The 2023 mixed sale concluded with a new gross sales record of $27,972,000 from the two-day auction of broodmares, racehorses, weanlings, yearlings and stallion shares!

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Consigned by Preferred Equine Marketing, agent and purchased by Winning Key.

Hip 1606 Heaven Hanover
Consigned by Diamond Creek and purchased by Robert Lindstrom, agent.

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It’s hard to get partial credit when you were the original trainer of both a Horse of the Year and a stakes record-breaking sophomore performer. Trainer Brian Brown somehow managed to keep an even keel despite the roller coaster that saw a pair of pacers he broke and trained as 2-year-olds reach the highest of highs in 2023.

Brown put Confederate on the map initially in 2022 and then had to watch from a distance as the colt became Horse of the Year in 2023. Stablemate Seven Colors had success under Brown’s care and then blossomed late in the year after a private purchase found him in the Andrew Harris stable.

Perhaps what separates Brown from many others is that he can keep his composure and accept what happens in the business we call a sport and continue with a new crop of horses. Such is the case as spring will roll into summer and Brown prepares another solid group of freshmen and a few sophomores that he will guide into major stakes action commencing in a few short weeks.

On the 3-year-old front there’s a hint of familiarity for Brown. In Confederate and Seven Colors, Brown was in many ways responsible for the valuable lessons learned that would push that pair to the pinnacle of success. According to the record books, Confederate is the fastest and richest son of Sweet Lou to date and Seven Colors is the fastest and richest son of Stay Hungry. To have both of those horses pass through your stable regardless of where they eventually landed is a testament to Brown’s ability. Now in 2024, Brown appears poised with a pair from the exact same stallions that could land him in the winner’s circle as well when the major races are contested later this year. In Geocentric, a daughter of Sweet Lou, Brown has what he considers the best overall filly he has ever trained.

“She’s as good a filly as I’ve ever trained,” said Brown on Tuesday. “I’ve had some other top fillies, like Blazing Britches and Colors A Virgin, but they had different personalities. With Geocentric you can do whatever you want with her, and she has the speed.”

Geocentric looked invincible for a major portion of her 2-year-old season, cruising to nine consecutive victories while doing double Sire Stakes duty in Kentucky and Pennsylvania. Despite the travel, she managed to win both finals within the span of 15 days and continue to win in Grand Circuit company at the Red Mile and capture a Breeders Crown elimination at Hoosier Park. Her year didn’t end perfectly, with the Crown final seeing her finish off the board for the first time in her career.

“She tied up that night,” said Brown of the Crown defeat. “She had a right front cannon bone bothering her through the latter part of the season.”

Given the travel and the miles necessary to capture dual Sire Stakes finals, Geocentric overcame plenty of obstacles to make her mark and Brown is hopeful to have his filly ready for action in Pennsylvania Sire Stakes company at The Meadows on May 17.

“We’re going to qualify her one more time [May 8] at Hoosier and then go on to the Sire Stakes,” said Brown. “She’s doing good right now.”

Geocentric, in rein to Trace Tetrick, qualified effortlessly in 1:51 4/5 with a final quarter of 25 3/5. Brown said that Tim Tetrick would pick up the driving duties when the filly comes east.

Last year the Sweet Lou-sired colts and geldings were the stars on the Grand Circuit, with Confederate and It’s My Show taking down the North America Cup suggesting he has high hopes for the unproven colt.

“Her first big race will be the Fan Hanover,” Brown said of Geocentric. “The Fan Hanover is slated for a June 15 final at Woodbine Mohawk Park, with both Geocentric and My Girl EJ among 54 remaining eligible sophomore pacing fillies.”

On the pacing colt front, Brown is very high on Special Menu, a son of Stay Hungry, like Seven Colors.

“He had some colt soreness last year,” said Brown of Special Menu. “I really like the way he’s come back so far but he has to prove it on the track.”

Special Menu was explosive in his first qualifier of the year on May 1 at Hoosier Park, winning in 1:52 3/5 with a snappy 27 1/5 final quarter.

“We’re going to qualify him again and hopefully not go as much with him,” said Brown prior to watching the 3-year-old qualify in 1:53 4/5 on May 2 at Hoosier while closing from last to miss a nose with a final quarter in 25 2/5.

Special Menu took his personal-best 1:51 1/5 record last year in just his second start, a late closer at The Meadows in July. His abbreviated season ended after the Delaware, Ohio Grand Circuit races with Brown giving him extra time off before embarking on the sophomore season.

“I gave him three months off before bringing him back. We’re a little behind with him and that’s why we missed the first leg of the Sire Stakes,” said Brown, who hopes to join the Pennsylvania action with Special Menu for the second leg on May 18.

How Special Menu handles Sire Stakes competition will likely have an impact on the following schedule. Brown had nominated Special Menu to the North America Cup suggesting he has high hopes for the unproven colt.

Year in, year out Brown has cultivated many top 2-year-old performers and while he suggests there have been a series of ups and downs this winter leaving some horses behind, he is optimistic we’ll see some of his better horses perhaps later this season.

“I don’t baby them,” said Brown. “If they sore up and need time we back off and give it to them.”

Brown is a realist and understands the incredible demands on freshmen once they hit the racetrack. If they are going to make it, they are going to have to survive through training and be ready to go at high speeds the first time they are behind the gate.

Brown generally stated that he has a 2-year-old from the first crop of Cattlewash that he’s very high on. There are a pair from the first crop of Tall Dark Stranger that have come to the front of his 35 2-year-olds that remain in training.

“I’ve got one by Sweet Lou that was doing really, really well,” said Brown. “He got a bit sore so we’re going to wait on him and hopefully have him ready for August.”

“Stay Hungry, like Seven Colors.”
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Oldest foals are yearlings in 2025.

The road to victory begins here...
Moving into a new season does not always mean just a change in temperature. In racing, the greatest change in seasons happens when tracks open and stakes move into full swing. On May 4, the first major milestone of racing was hit, albeit on the “other side” of racing. The Kentucky Derby amassed over 156,000 fans inside the gates at the Louisville oval and millions of fans worldwide that tuned in through radio, television, social media, and more. When you mention horse racing in most atmospheres, the general assumption is that you are referring to the horses that race in the Derby. Those little jockeys riding on the horses’ backs. Seabiscuit, Secretariat, Man O’ War – the list goes on. Although our sports fall under the same umbrella, harness racing and thoroughbred racing feel worlds apart.

In Saratoga Springs, New York, though, it is only one street that separates those worlds: Nelson Avenue.

Saratoga County is located within the Capital Region of New York. If you visit the city of Saratoga Springs, there is no secret that it is the mecca of horse racing – statues, stores, décor, restaurants, street names, and more are dedicated to the equines. In fact, from May through October, it’s difficult to drive down many of the streets that border the track without being stopped by a crossing guard to allow horses to pass by the masses.

Nelson Ave is just a small two-lane road that hosts those two similar but widely different worlds – Thoroughbred and Standardbred – on each of its shoulders. Both tracks share in storied histories, especially notorious upsets in which Niatross snapped a 17-race win streak at Saratoga Raceway after going over the hub rail and Secretariat faced defeat in the Whitney Stakes at Saratoga Racecourse after coming off the Triple Crown victory.

Wins, and even losses, are monumental in the upstate New York region, and the waiting list to gain entry to the historic track, whether as a horseman or a fan, is extensive. Just imagine having the best of both worlds and hopping Nelson Ave every day as part of work.

Natalie Rutigliano and Kiara Morgan share in that characteristic.

Together, Natalie and Kiara work side-by-side in Chad Brown’s barn at the flat track. Brown runs an operation of nearly 200 head that spans across the country. His career stats rank at 2,619 wins and nearly $285 million earned. Brown is a four-time Eclipse Award winner for Outstanding Trainer from 2016 through 2019 and he has multiple stakes wins and titles to his résumé. He had two entries in the 2024 Kentucky Derby, with his student Sierra Leennon nipped at the wire by a nose for the win by Mystik Dan.

Natalie has been ponying horses for 23 years, since the age of 17. She has worked on the thoroughbred side as both an outrider and as part of stables. Originally from Queens, New York, Natalie has traveled across the country through work. She landed in Saratoga in 2017 where she has resided permanently since.

Kiara Morgan, the daughter of harness racing’s Virgil Morgan, Jr. is from the Midwest and moved to Saratoga in 2023.

“I was born into the business, but I didn’t start doing anything with the harness horses until I started working for my dad when I was 20,” Morgan said. “I would go watch the harness races here and there growing up but was never around them even though my dad had and still has between 80 and 100 head.

“I jumped full force into harness racing working with my dad. For four years, I was training with him six to 10 sets a day, working in the barn, and driving horses whenever I could. That was my favorite part. I had a blast racing in the amateur races and at the Ohio tracks.”

Kiara earned her first training and owner’s win in 2023 at the Spa. Though still new to the harness circuit, she is no stranger to riding.

“I started riding when I was four years old and never looked back. I was very busy showing on the AQHA circuit all the way through high school. I moved here from Ohio in July and met some awesome people who introduced me to the thoroughbreds across the street. Natalie Rutigliano and Abigail Adsit, whom I both met at the harness track, sparked my interest in ponying here at Saratoga.

“I just started working for Chad last summer so I’m very excited to continue working for him and experience the full meet here at Saratoga,” Morgan continued. “Chad and his team have been more than welcoming to me with being new on that side. I’m very grateful for that. I love ponying the horses and getting to know them and then getting to watch them race.

“Chad runs an extremely professional operation and I couldn’t feel more blessed to work for a trainer like himself,” Morgan added.

CONTINUED ON PAGE 8
Work at the thoroughbred track for the ladies begins at 5:30 a.m. sharp. The girls tack up their horses and they embark on a tour for several ‘sets’ each day.

“There’s usually around nine sets on a busy day,” Rutigliano said.

In thoroughbred racing, a group of horses all go out at the same time through sets. With 100-150 to move, it’s likely the only way to get through the day (And some days moving 10-15 seems like a feat on the harness side).

Kiara has seven horses in the barn, but she says the number fluctuates slightly with selling and claiming horses. After her duties are done at the flats, she handles her own barn work and then, prepares for the day or night of racing at the harness track depending on the time of year.

“My schedule lines up perfectly,” Morgan said. “I’m done between 9 and 10 a.m. and I go directly to my horses at the harness track and get things going. I don’t work the thoroughbred races during the meet, so after I’m done in the morning, I can focus solely on my harness horses.”

On the other hand, Natalie leaves the flat track after 10 a.m. and works ponying at the thoroughbred races into working nights at the harness track during the full swing of the race meet. Right now, from early May through to the start of the actual thoroughbred races, Natalie leaves the flats and heads right over to the afternoon card at the harness track. Once the flat track starts racing, the harness track moves to a night schedule and so, Natalie starts her day ponying in the morning, moves to the races in the afternoon at the flats, and then heads over to the harness track for even more races through to the end of the night.

In addition to her seven harness horses, Kiara has her pony horse, who works the flat tracks with her in the mornings.

“He is a 12-year-old red roan Quarter Horse who I adore. He loves his job and was so happy to get back to work after he had the winter to rest!”

Wally is Natalie’s main pony horse, though she has five in total. He splits his own time between the flat track and harness track, too. The 16-year-old quarter horse was rescued by a cowboy and later purchased by Natalie. He has worked over at the flat track for eight years. Together, Natalie and Wally have worked at the harness track for two years.

Last year, Natalie and Wally caught their first loose harness horse. It’s a challenge in itself to catch a loose horse, but then add the fact that you’re on horseback, going at top speeds, there’s a race bike that you aren’t used to that you have to account for, and there are no lines because they have both fallen off – quite daunting for anyone.

After a jawbreaker broke, that is exactly the feat Natalie and Wally accomplished. The pair chased the horse and driver down after the race was safely cleared. Natalie grabbed ahold of the only thing still attached, the headpole, and the quartet of them slowed into the far turn without further incident.

“It was actually really scary, to be honest, because there were no lines to grab. It was great, though,” Natalie said. “Great, scary, an adrenaline rush. Once we finally got stopped I was like, it’s not that bad.”

Natalie is also spending her time training an off-the-track retired standardbred to work with her on the track in the future as a pony horse.

As if balancing stables full of horses, two worlds of racing, and schedules to boot wasn’t a full plate as is, both Kiara and Natalie are also mothers. Kiara has a son named Jackson and Natalie has two boys named Agustus and Maximus.

And now is the time that the weather changes and the seasons change with it. The Derby is over, but the races are just beginning, especially with the first-ever Belmont to be hosted at the Saratoga Springs oval. The harness track will move to a Thursday through Saturday evening schedule and the stakes will ramp up while the flats will host cards most afternoons of the week.

Although crossing the street does not seem like much, in the bustling city of Saratoga Springs, crossing Nelson Ave is crossing between worlds. Moreover, this feat is something that is no anomaly to horsemen Natalie Rutigliano and Kiara Morgan.

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**ROAD TO THE ELITLOPPET**

The European trotting world has May 26 circled on their calendars for the Elitloppet at Solvalla racecourse, but North American trotting fans won’t want to miss this year’s edition of the historic race, as it is filled with a strong field of contenders.

DRF Harness will have expanded coverage of the big race this year and below we present the horses that have been invited so far. Ultimately 16 are expected to compete in two eliminations and the top four in each will return the same day for the final.

**I DAO D E T I L L A R D ( F R A N C E ):**

* 6YO With 29 Wins In 39 Starts
  * 2024 Prix d’Amerique winner

**F R A N C E S C O Z E T ( S W E D E N ) :**

* 6YO With 21 Wins In 23 Starts
  * Winner of nearly $1.7 million in just 23 starts

**J O V I A L I T Y ( S W E D E N ) :**

* 5YO With 26 Wins In 42 Starts
  * Taking on the boys. She was third in the Prix d’Amerique

**H O H N E C K ( F R A N C E ) :**

* 7YO With 21 Wins In 59 Starts
  * Defending Elitloppet champion

**A FAIR DAY ( S W E D E N ) :**

* 5YO With 13 Wins In 25 Starts
  * Was the fifth horse chosen for the 2024 Elitloppet

**G O O N B O Y ( F R A N C E ) :**

* 8YO With 14 Wins In 51 Starts
  * 2023 Elitloppet runner-up

**H O R S Y D R E A M ( F R A N C E ) :**

* 7YO With 19 Wins In 42 Starts
  * Declined invitation in 2023 but will race this year

**D O N F A N U C C I Z E T ( S W E D E N ) :**

* 8YO With 25 Wins In 46 Starts
  * 2021 Elitloppet winner

**ÖNAS PRINCE ( S W E D E N ) :**

* 7YO With 30 Wins In 49 Starts
  * Off very impressive wire-to-wire win on 5/4 at ABY.
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**PAYMENTS DUE MAY 15**

*Per USTA rule 12.02 all payments must be postmarked by midnight Thursday, May 16

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The Hambletonian Society and Breeders Crown
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By Jay Bergman

Trainer Noel Daley will have four from his stable in this Saturday at The Meadowlands in a series of New Jersey Sire Stakes events, with a pair of trotting fillies getting primed for major campaigns.

Miss I LA, a Walner-sired filly, will get the evening underway in the second race of 14 on the program, a division for sophomore trotting fillies with a purse of $30,000.

“"I was very happy with her two qualifiers,” said Daley. “She was more controllable this year than she was at times last year.”

Miss I LA cracked the $100K mark in earnings during her freshman campaign for Daley, winning twice in 10 starts. On Saturday she meets six rivals with Scott Zeron to guide her from post three.

The field includes a pair of $100K earners as freshmen in French Champagne (post 4) and Walcango (post 6). Tove Palema (post 7) makes her New Jersey debut following a second-place finish in the Weiss at Pocono on April 30.

Daley doesn’t know is in store from Robinhood, a Walner-sired gelding that has a mind of his own. “I really don’t know what to expect from him,” Daley said.

While Daley may have uncertainty as to what Robinhood may do on the track, he was more than aware of the competition.

“I would have preferred any division away from Karl,” admitted the trainer.

Karl makes his long-anticipated sophomore debut against Robinhood and five others in the $30,000 NJSS event carded as race four. Karl drew post seven for his debut with regular driver Yannick Gingras in the bike for trainer Nancy Takter.

Daley wasn’t sure whether to enter Buy A Round in the Sire Stakes given the six-time freshman winner had but one qualifier on May 3, but elected to put her in at the behest of driver Andrew McCarthy.

“Initially I had thought about just starting her in the second leg of the Sire Stakes,” said Daley. “There would have been a week off after that, so I decided to put her in.”

Buy A Round (post 4) faces seven others in the sixth race division for trotting fillies. When last seen in stakes action Buy A Round finished third in the Breeders Crown final at Hoosier Park on October 27. Daley suggested Buy A Round would likely be racing from off the pace, a place she's been quite accustomed to throughout her nine-race career where she's won on six occasions.

Trainer Ake Svanstedt will send out Volcanic Blue Chip (post 7) in this division. The Walner-sired filly earned $175K with much of that coming from a second-place finish in the Kentucky Sire Stakes championship last September at The Red Mile.

Daley feels that Avellino should be better this week in the New Jersey Sire Stakes event for 3-year-old colt and gelding pacers. The $30,000 event carded as race 10 puts Avellino on the outside (post 6) in the seven-horse field, with first-leg winner Endofstory (post 1) and Wish You Well (post 4) inside his charge.

Sire Stakes events dominate the Saturday card at The Meadowlands, with five other $30,000 divisions sprinkled throughout the 14-race card. Lockheed Martin (post 7) makes his sophomore pari-mutuel debut following a pair of winning qualifiers over this surface for trainer Tony Alagna in the third race division for sophomore male pacers.

Alagna’s Mars Hill (post 7) makes his first start of the year in another $30,000 division for male pacers (race 5). Mars Hill made nearly $200K during his freshman season with four victories.

Allegiant (post 2) makes her debut in a division for sophomore trotting fillies for trainer Vernon Beachy. A daughter of Tactical Landing, Allegiant won five times in 10 starts as a juvenile and comes into the race off a pair of winning qualifiers. Allegiant meets seven fillies in the NJSS in race seven.

On the pacing front, a $30,000 division for colts and geldings is slated as race nine with first-leg winner Arbitrage Hanover (post 2) meeting the highly-regarded Better Is Nice (post 3) for the second straight week. Arbitrage Hanover scored in a career-best 1:51 4/5 clocking in last week’s (May 4) first Sire Stakes leg. Better Is Nice, a seven-time winner as a freshman, had a long grind from post eight in his debut and was just a length behind Arbitrage Hanover at the finish.

Odds On Steno (post 5) will be looking for her second straight Sire Stakes win in the nightcap for trainer Tony Alagna and driver Andrew McCarthy. A daughter of Bettor’s Wish, Odds On Steno faces seven rivals.

Daley confirmed that Captain Albano will be in the box for Friday’s qualifiers at The Meadowlands.

“He did everything we wanted him to do in the first qualifier,” said Daley, who along with the rest of the racing world watched Captain Albano finish last in his first qualifier on May 3. “I think Todd will be a little more aggressive with him this week.”

Daley hopes to have Captain Albano join the Pennsylvania Sire Stakes for round two on May 18 at Pocono Downs.
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HOME OF FOILED AGAIN’S 20TH BIRTHDAY CELEBRATION ON SATURDAY, MAY 11
Captain Fear Not looks to keep rolling in Pocono’s All-Stars

By Ken Weingartner

Captain Fear Not was healthy for nearly all last year but picked the most inopportune time to come up under the weather. Sickness derailed the horse as he prepared for the biggest potential payday of his season, forcing owner Troy Ryder to scratch the lone horse in her stable from the $252,000 Pennsylvania Sire Stakes final for 2-year-old male pacers.

Troy hopes the stakes-winning 3-year-old gets the opportunity to make up for it this season.

So far so good. The gelding began his sophomore campaign last week with a 1:51 2/5 win in a $51,257 division of the Pennsylvania Sire Stakes at Hollywood Casino at The Meadows. On Saturday, he will compete in the third of four $30,000 divisions of the Pennsylvania All-Stars at Mohegan Pennsylvania’s Pocono Downs.

Last year, Captain Fear Not won two preliminary rounds of the PASS and a division of the Keystone Classic. He hit the board two additional times and earned $73,651. His mark of 1:51 2/5 was fourth best by a 2-year-old male pacer on a five-eighths-mile track.

“He was sick only two times last year, when he first shipped from Harrisburg (following his purchase at the Standardbred Horse Sale) to Florida, and then not again until that final for $252,000,” Troy said. “You can’t make that up. That was heartbreaking. Really heartbreaking. That could have made our year.

“I’m not going to say he could have won it, but he would have been OK in there. He would have been good. That hurt our final earnings for the year, for sure.”

Troy purchased Captain Fear Not, a son of Captain Crunch-Mikayla Rose, under the name Salty Dog for $45,000 at the November 2022 Standardbred Horse Sale. Troy went to the sale with the intent of buying a Captain Crunch-sired yearling and decided on the colt after looking at all of them.

“I liked him right off the bat,” said Troy, who shares training duties with Paul Reid. “The look of him was just so beautiful and his video sold me. He videoed tremendously. I was lucky that no one went too high. I probably paid a little bit more than I really wanted to; I think I wanted to spend about $40,000. But once I was there, I wasn’t going to go. I was standing right in front of the bid catcher. I was thrilled to get him.”

Captain Fear Not was a handful in his early days but developed into a pleasant surprise.

“He had everybody on their toes for a while,” Troy said with a laugh.

“Paul has done a great job with him. He’s come around and surprised us all. He’s just such a smart horse, exceptionally smart. That’s what I saw in him when I looked at him in Harrisburg. You have to start with some intelligence. That’s what I love the most about him. You show him something once and he’s good. He’s just such a good boy.”

Captain Fear Not is the 3-1 second choice on the morning line in his All-Stars division. He will leave from post four in the seven-horse field with Matt Kakaley in the sulky. Booming Economy, also a PASS winner last week, is the 5-2 favorite. He starts from post two with David Miller driving for trainer Ron Burke.

“He’s been a real enjoyable horse to own,” Troy said about Captain Fear Not, whose stakes schedule includes the North America Cup, Max C. Hempt Memorial, and Matron. “I’m cautiously optimistic about the season. I’m just going to have fun with this guy, not be stressed out, enjoy it.”

In the second All-Stars division, returning Breeders Crown champion Gem Quality, one of the top-five rated horses on the road to the North America Cup and Meadowlands Pace, will make his season’s debut for trainer Chris Ryder and driver Dexter Dunn.

In the second All-Stars division, returning Breeders Crown champion Gem Quality, one of the top-five rated horses on the road to the North America Cup and Meadowlands Pace, will make his season debut for trainer Chris Ryder and driver Dexter Dunn.

Last year, Gem Quality won four of eight races and hit the board two more times. The homebred son of Captain Crunch-Twinkle earned $438,940 for owners Let It Ride Stables, Odds On Racing, Brad Grant, and Enviro Stables.

He captured the Breeders Crown at odds of 23-1 by 1-1/4 lengths over Captain Albano in a track-record 1:50 at Harrah’s Hoosier Park.

“I know he was a longshot, and maybe it was justified, but the horse has always had good speed,” Ryder said after the race. “He’s a really good sprinter, even against good horses. It’s not a surprise to me. I’m thrilled. We thought twice about coming here, but we thought, why not? And we pulled it off. You’ve got to be in it to win it. That’s what makes racing such a terrific business. You never know who’s really going to win.”

Gem Quality heads to the All-Stars off two qualifiers. He won the first in 1:52 1/5 with a 25 1/5 last quarter and won the second in 1:52 4/5 with a 26 final panel.

“He’s doing very well,” Ryder said. “We’re happy with him. I think we’re going in the right direction. When I go to qualify him, he shows me more than he shows me at home, when you go to race. I kind of like that. He just seems to have more pep in his step when he gets behind the gate. Hopefully, we do well and head up to the North America Cup.”

Gem Quality is the 5-2 favorite in his All-Stars division. He will leave from post six in a field of eight. The 5-2 favorite in the first division is Solid Character, who will start from post five in a field of eight. He is trained by Burke and will have Miller in the sulky. In the fourth division, McCrunch is the 2-1 favorite for driver Yannick Gingras and trainer Nancy Takter. He will leave from post one in a seven-horse field.

Racing begins at 1 p.m. (EDT) at Pocono Downs.

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DRF Harness Digest | 12 | May 9, 2024
Visit us online at drf.com/harness
A quartet of SBOA Stakes Finals for Ontario sired 3-year-olds will be held Saturday night at Woodbine Mohawk Park.

The SBOA Stakes is the season kick-off event for Ontario’s top 3-year-olds. The SBOA was introduced many years back for fillies, while the colt and gelding events were held for the first time last year.

The four SBOA Finals have been carded as Races 4 through 7 on Saturday’s 12-race card. Below are some of the horses to watch in Saturday’s feature events.

Race 4 - 3-Year-Old Filly Trot

O’Brien Award winner Willys Home Run (PP5, James MacDonald) didn’t miss a beat in her season debut, taking one of two eliminations after three lengths in 1:56 1/5.

The elimination scored by Willys Home Run was capped off by a wicked 26 3/5 final-quarter, rallying from sixth for the score. It was the seventh win in 11 career starts for the Kyle Fellows trainee.

A daughter of Archangel, Willys Home Run swept the OSS Gold season last year, winning six times, including the Super Final.

R Liza (PP3, Jody Jamieson) took advantage of miscues by prominent rivals to post an 8-1 upset in last Friday’s other elimination. The Susie Kerwood trainee made a break in last year’s Super Final after having won a Gold division the start prior. The daughter of Muscle Mass has a career record of five wins from nine starts.

The SBOA Filly Trot Final goes for a purse of C$138,400.

Race 5 – 3-Year-Old Filly Pace

Last season’s standouts Pass Line (PP4, Louis-Philippe Roy) and Its A Love Thing (PP5, James MacDonald) both appear poised for more success after their stellar rookie campaigns.

Pass Line kicked home in 27 seconds to win her elimination in 1:51 1/5. The Dave Menary-trained daughter of All Bets Off was making her season debut after winning 10 of 13 starts as a 2-year-old and finishing second in the Breeders Crown.

Its A Love Thing, also trained by Menary, came up just short in her elimination despite a 25 3/5 final-quarter. The daughter of Bettor’s Delight raced off the pace and rocketed home from seventh to finish a half-a-length behind winner Sorcha Seelster (PP6, Bob McClure) in 1:51 1/5.

The John Pentland trainee Socha Seelster shot home in 26 1/5 for the career-best victory over last year’s Shes A Great Lady Stakes winner.

The SBOA Filly Pace Final will be held for a purse of C$141,500.

Race 6 – 3-Year-Old Colt Trot

The SBOA Colt Trot was the lone event to not require eliminations. A field of nine will square off Saturday, with a pair of last year’s stars, Willowtime (PP7, Bob McClure) and Griff (PP9, James MacDonald), making their season debuts.

Most eyes though will be focused on the Bob McIntosh trainee Convoy Hall (PP4, Sylvain Filion), who is a perfect six-for-six to start his career. The gelded son of Muscle Mass will face his toughest challenge on Saturday, having won all six of his starts convincingly against lower competition.

Convoy Hall’s last start was a career-best 1:55 2/5 victory in the Ontario Spring Series Final on April 27.

The SBOA Colt Trot Final will go for C$124,000.

Race 7 – 3-Year-Old Colt Pace

Pepsi North America Cup eligible Funtime Bayama (PP3, Sylvain Filion) is the headliner in the SBOA Colt Pace. The Richard Moreau-trained Funtime Bayama posted a sharp 1:51 2/5 elimination score, pacing home in 25 4/5. The gelded son of Hes Watching was making his season debut after a strong rookie season that saw him win four of seven starts, never finishing outside the top three.

Enforcer (PP4, Doug McNair) got things all his own way in the other elimination, posting soft fractions before a 27-second kicker to win in 1:54. It was also the yearly debut for the Gregg McNair trainee.

Storm Shadow (PP10, Bob McClure), another prominent Pepsi North America Cup eligible, will have to overcome the outside starting spot Saturday. The Dr. Ian Moore trainee and third-place finisher in last year’s Breeders Crown was making his seasonal debut.

Unrivaled Hanover (PP6, Jonathan Drury), Always A Thrill (PP8, Jody Jamieson) and Do Better (PP9, James MacDonald) are also Pepsi North America Cup eligible horses competing in Saturday’s SBOA final.

The purse for the SBOA Colt Pace is C$127,000.

Post time for Saturday’s 12-race card is 7:10 p.m.

-edited release (Woodbine)
Harness racing Hall of Fame member Alan J. Leavitt, well known for breeding horses under the banner of Lana Lobell Farms and Walnut Hall Ltd., died May 6, 2024, in Lexington, Ky. He was 88.

Born in Baltimore, Md., Mr. Leavitt graduated from Harvard University in 1958. Although he had been deeply involved with Saddlebred and show horses at the time, in 1959 he entered the Standardbred breeding industry with fervor by establishing Lana Lobell Farms at his parents’ Hanover, Pa. property. Leavitt later expanded the enterprise to include locations at Bedminster, NJ, established in 1977, and Hamptonburgh, NY, in 1979.

Lana Lobell Farms was known for standing some of the top sires in the Standardbred sport, notably pacing stallion No Nukes p,3, T1:52 1/5 ($572,430) and trotting stallions Noble Victory, Speedy Crown and Speedy Somolli. Among the horses bred by Lana Lobell was 1987 and 1988 Horse of the Year Mack Lobell, considered by many as the greatest trotter of all time, and Garland Lobell, who became an influential trotting sire.

For many years, Leavitt was a major player when it came to syndicating stallions. His 1964 syndication of Noble Victory put him on the map when he put together a deal which valued the stallion at $1 million.

Lana Lobell Farms ceased operations in 1989. In the early 1990s, Leavitt married Margaret Jewett and began standing stallions and breeding horses under the banner of Walnut Hall Ltd. at Jewett’s Lexington, Ky., property that was once a part of her family’s historic Walnut Hall Farm. Leavitt brought the trotting sire Garland Lobell from Quebec to Walnut Hall Ltd. and there the stallion made his mark on the trotting breed. One of Leavitt’s top accomplishments as a breeder was mating Garland Lobell with the broodmare Amour Angus. The duo produced the successful full brothers Angus Hall 3,1:54 3/5 ($830,654), Conway Hall and Andover Hall 3,1:51 3/5 ($870,510).

Walnut Hall Ltd. also bred the top stakes filly Cameron Hall 4,1:53 4/5s ($1.816 million), who fetched a record-setting $1.1 million for racehorses at auction in 2001. In addition, Walnut Hall Ltd. bred 1999 Pacer of the Year Blissfull Hall p,3,1:49 2/5 ($1.468 million) and Cantab Hall, a stakes winner who became a leading trotting sire.

In 2008, Leavitt was elected to Harness Racing’s Living Hall of Fame. Leavitt received numerous acknowledgements for his work in the harness racing industry. He was the recipient of the USHWA Proximity Award in 1981 and later received the President’s Award in 1983. Leavitt was also honored with back-to-back USHWA Breeder of the Year awards in 1987 and 1988. He served as a director of the USTA for 30 years, and a director of The Hambletonian Society for 40 years. He was also a former member of the Kentucky Horse Racing Commission, where he led an initiative to ban one-handed whipping at the state’s harness tracks.

He is survived by his wife, Margaret, and children Josephine Leavitt, Harris Leavitt, and David Leavitt. Services will be private.

-Release (USTA Communications)
WOODBINE RELEASES “ROAD TO THE NORTH AMERICA CUP” WEEK ONE

Woodbine Entertainment today (5/9) released its initial “Road to the Pepsi North America Cup” rankings for the 41st edition of Canada’s most prestigious harness race.

The 41st Pepsi North America Cup for 3-year-old pacers will have take place on Saturday, June 15 at Woodbine Mohawk Park. The eliminations for the $1 million event will take place on Saturday, June 8.

2024 LIVE RACING SEASON BEGINS THURSDAY AT SCIOTO DOWNS

The draw for the first three cards of the 2024 Eldorado Scioto Downs race meet have been completed, with 16 races scheduled for each night.

“We had 267 horses in the box for Thursday, so there was quite a bit of shuffling races around and re-writing them for Friday,” explained Jason Roth, Scioto’s Director of Racing. “We appreciate the horsemen’s support of filling the box and look forward to everyone racing this year.”

Opening night events include four divisions of the Jerry Knappberger, three divisions of the Overcomer and a single division of the Full Count.

IT’S MY SHOW DOESN’T DISAPPOINT IN KENTUCKY SIRE STAKES

North America Cup champ It’s My Show made a successful 4-year-old debut in one of seven $50,000 Kentucky Sire Stakes (KYSS) splits on a betting record-breaking Monday (May 6) at Oak Grove Racing, Gaming & Hotel.

Off the 1-2 favorite in his division, Scott Zeron sent It’s My Show from post six to the point through a 26 3/5 first quarter and snagged a breather to a 56 second half before encountering a fierce first-over challenge from Blue Lou (driven by Yannick Gingras). Blue Lou pressed It’s My Show to three-quarters in 1:23 4/5 and but It’s My Show kept a head up on Blue Lou to snatch the win in 1:50 2/5.

MICHAIL “MICKEY” BURKE SR., 87, DIES

Michael “Mickey” Burke Sr., the 2006 Trainer of the Year and first trainer in history to surpass $10 million in purses since the inception of official trainer statistics in 1991.

Mr. Burke, the patriarch of the Burke Racing Stable now led by his son Ron, won 3,167 races and $35.4 million in purses since the inception of official trainer statistics in 1991.

LEGENDARY FOILED AGAIN TO APPEAR ON SATURDAY AT SHENANDOAH

Legendary harness horse Foiled Again will celebrate his 20th birthday at Shenandoah Downs this Saturday (May 11) in afternoon festivities that include a Happy Birthday singalong, free cake/cupcakes, and a Meet & Greet with the equine legend where fans can get their picture taken with him.

Retired for six years now, the son of Dragon Again bankrolled over $7.6 million ---the most ever by a Standardbred horse --- from a stellar career in which he won 109 races and scored 225 top-three finishes from 331 starts. Win number 104 of his illustrious career came at Shenandoah Downs on September 29, 2018.

After that 2018 win, Foiled Again returned to Woodstock twice while retired, including a 2019 appearance where Hall of Fame driver John Campbell put on his former racing colors and led Foiled Again for a lap around the half-mile oval. The popular pacer also returned in 2022.

On Saturday, fans can also meet star harness driver Montrell Teague, who piloted Foiled Again to victory number 105. Teague will be making his first appearance ever at Shenandoah Downs though it will be in a promotional capacity --- instead of driving.

Shenandoah Downs is located at I-81, Exit 283 halfway between Winchester and Harrisonburg in the northwest part of Virginia. More event details are at shenandoahdowns.com.

SHARE THE MOMENT RETURNS TO RED SHORES

The Glamour Gals will square off again Thursday evening in the featured Fillies and Mares Preferred Pace at Red Shores Racetrack and Casino at the Charlottetown Driving Park.

The Thursday card will kick off at 6 P.M., with the $3,700 Fillies and Mares Preferred Pace hitting the track in race 9.

Share The Moment is back on the East Coast after a winter campaign in Ontario for trainer Jodie Cullen. One of the top pacing mares on the East Coast in 2023, Share The Moment is back in the Bo Ford stable for owners Luke Beck, Scott Bridges and Arnold Myers. An open-length winner in 1:57 1/5 at Flamboro Downs in Ontario in January, the six-year-old daughter of Control The Moment snapped home in 28.3 in her qualifier last week with regular P.E.I. driver Gilles Barrieau in the seat. Share The Moment has post 2 Thursday.

Rail control belongs to newcomer The Ideal Huntress, who resides in the Ellen Stevenson stable in New Brunswick. Dr. Mitchell Downey owns and drives the Huntsville mare.

Chelaski won this class last week with Corey MacPherson aboard for trainer Jennnifer Doyle and owners Jeffrey and Robert Skinner. She has the outside post 5 this week. Also in the field are Tobins Brownie (To be driven by David Dowling) and Ms Moyse (Adam Merner).

The Ise Pick 5 kicks off the program in race 1 as Islebetu Islebeatu (Mike McGuigan) is the morning line favourite. The five-dash wager has a $2,000 guarantee pool beginning in race 1 through five with Super Hi5’s in races 5 and 10 and a late Pick 4.

SHARE THE MOMENT RETURNS TO RED SHORES

The deadline for HHYF scholarship applications is approaching fast - completed online applications are due by June 1, but early submission is encouraged. Log on to https://hhyf.org/scholarships/ to access the applications and each scholarship's eligibility requirements and general information. Applicants for HHYF scholarships must be at least high school seniors and preferably under the age of 25. The selection criteria for all of the scholarships include demonstrated scholastic achievement, including but not limited to the applicant’s GPA; financial need; completeness of application; and quality of essay (where applicable).

The HHYF scholarships are the Harold & Marcia Snyder Memorial Scholarship for students in harness racing families, the Curt Greene Memorial Scholarship for students who have demonstrated a passion for harness racing and have financial need; and the Sweet Karen Memorial Scholarship for alumni of HHYF Summer Programs. For questions please e-mail the HHYF office at ellen@hhyf.org. The Lynn Fortna Memorial Financial Assistance Program is open to females who wish to further their education or expand their knowledge in any aspect of harness racing.

SHARE THE MOMENT RETURNS TO RED SHORES

The Ohio Harness Horsemen’s Association (OHHA) will again be offering scholarship opportunities to OHHA members and their families. Completed applications are due June 15, 2024.

Application and requirements are available on the OHHA website. The scholarships are available to graduating high school seniors and/or students enrolled in degree or certificate programs. Graduate students are not eligible unless they are enrolled in a harness racing-specific graduate or professional level program and provide complete details regarding the harness racing-specific graduate or professional level program in conjunction with their application. Scholarships will be awarded on academic merit. Financial need may be considered. These one-year awards must be used towards the costs and expenses directly related to coursework and a degree being pursued at a college or university.

The 2024 OHHA Scholarship recipients and the recipient of this year’s John “Red” Shaw Memorial Scholarship will be announced in August 2024.

OHHA FRESHMAN FOCUS TO FEATURE STECK AND MCCOWN BARN

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