

THURSDAY, FEBRUARY 20, 2025

Catch drivers - it's in their hands when the minutes count

The driver - the one holding the lines and calling the shots - have the ultimate control and influence over a harness race



HARNESS FOCUS

By Jessica Hallett

[@JHallettPhoto](#)

There are numerous variables and factors that go into a harness race and several things that can make or break a horse in their career. From weather and track conditions to race conditions and post position, the logistics of the race day can influence the result as well as the team behind the horse including the trainer, caretaker, blacksmith, and veterinarian. However, it's the one calling the shots that holds the most influence over the race, the one holding the lines: the driver.

Harness racing has evolved over time and since the establishment of the sport, the role of the driver has evolved. Back in the day, it was more common to see a trainer in the bike behind their horse, but today, catch drivers have become the mainstream.

Catch drivers can either sit behind the same horse every week or jump onto a new horse each week, but either way, they spend a limited amount of time with their mounts compared to that of the trainer. Despite this fact, a good catch driver knows their horse prior to the race, learns more during post parade and in the race, and then can iterate to the trainer what needs to be changed, if anything.

In less than 10 minutes together on the track, the catch driver can pinpoint an equipment issue, a call for vet work, or another change necessary.

How does the role of a catch driver and their skill vary across different degrees such as with top Canadian driver James MacDonald, up and coming driver Brett Beckwith, and a staple in harness racing Andy Miller?

James MacDonald is now a multiple-time O'Brien Award winner as he picked up his fourth consecutive Keith Waples Driver of the Year Award on Feb. 8 in Mississauga, Ontario.



JESSICA HALLETT

Driver Andy Miller is in the 10,000 win club. Shown posing with wife, trainer Julie Miller, after their Breeders Crown win in 2023.

MacDonald has set the bar high, making Woodbine Mohawk Park history by becoming the first driver to record three 400-win seasons among other accomplishments including winning his first Breeders Crown in 2024. With over 28,000 trips to the track in now 16 years of driving, he is closing in on 4,000 career driving wins and show-cases over \$76.6 million made.

While his home track is Mohawk, MacDonald drove at numerous tracks across North America in 2024. From the Grand Circuit appearances in the Little Brown Jug and Hambletonian to winning the Meadowlands Pace and Breeders Crown, his resume lengthened with notable triumphs and prolific drives.

His mounts have shared in his success as USHWA Dan Patch Award and O'Brien Award winners, including the 2024 Somebeachsome-where Horse of the Year in Canada, Chantilly. With his starts ranging from overnights to the stakes circuit to the Grand Circuit, MacDonald

[CONTINUED ON PAGE 3](#)

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has taken his career as a catch driver to a whole new level.

So how does he do it? Twenty-eight thousand miles, new tracks, new faces, and new fields with a lot of variables at play including weather, odds, post, track condition and more.

When getting ready to drive any horse, MacDonald uses the insight of the trainers to learn about the horse.

"I would say ask questions. The trainers generally know their horses inside and out," MacDonald explained. "When reading the program, I usually check if they have missed time, if they are dropping in class, and more. There is a lot of information to take in a short period of time."

Depending on the track, the post parades last five, maybe ten minutes. Some drivers score down while others just keep a horse moving.

"I try to get a feel for the horse, keep an eye on his ears. I try to have them sharp if I can without getting them hot," MacDonald said.

After the race, regardless of the outcome, the driver and trainer generally use the time it takes to get the bike and number off to discuss any key information about the race.

"I just try and inform the trainer of what the horse was doing. If they seemed off, I tell them where I think. If they are running in or out, I let them know. You never really learn exactly what will work for each horse, they are all different. All you can do is give the best advice from your experience.

"Every trainer is different and it's important to know your trainer. Some want every little detail and some want the bare minimum," MacDonald added. "It's your job to figure that out and communicate what happened during the race. Some are mad, some are happy, but all are different."

And the following week, the drivers can tell the difference if the change they suggested was made.

"Sometimes things are better, sometimes worse. You need to keep an eye out to see if it helped or not."

While MacDonald drives many overnights, his duties also include driving freshman and sophomores from the very start of their careers and throughout their journey, such as O'Brien Award winners Willys Home Run and Its A Love Thing.

"It's a team effort all the time. You work with the trainers and grooms to make sure the horse is the best it can be. Lots of horses do things racing that they don't do training. Young horses I find need a lot more finetuning starting out while overnight horses are mostly set up the way they like already."

With an emphasis on the 28,000 miles driven over 16 years, MacDonald has obviously sat behind a lot of different horses at different tracks with every different kind of variable at play. How would you remember any one horse for the next week?

"Some you forget and need reminding, but for the most part, if you drive them a few times, you get to know what they do and don't like fairly quickly," MacDonald explained. "When they have a big break or you haven't driven them for a while, it can take a few starts to remember everything about them. For the most part, though, drivers have a good memory when it comes to horses they drive."

With that memory at play, a driver can tailor their driving strategy to fit the horse as opposed to a 'one size fits all' approach.

"Every horse needs to be driven accordingly to all of them. Not only style will ever fit every horse. You need to be able to adapt."

And finally, MacDonald agrees that a horse may just not mesh with the driver for any given reason.

"Unfortunately, not every horse suits every driver. Some people for whatever reason get along better with some horses. I've recommended to trainers before that they should try so-and-so because they have had luck with the horse in the past. You never want to turn down a drive as a catch driver, but as long as you're positive and honest, I think the trainers will appreciate it."

More than a catch driver, MacDonald is a well-decorated and well-rounded driver with miles under his belt and miles to go seeking new

goals and achievements with every start.

"The best advice I could give a new driver starting out is to have confidence in yourself," MacDonald said. "It's normal to have self-doubt, but every time you step foot on the track, believe in yourself and believe you will have success with whatever horse you sit behind. Also ask questions. You're never too experienced to learn."

As one of the youngest drivers to top the charts, Brett Beckwith, at just 21 years old, earned the title of leading driver at Plainridge Park and Saratoga Casino Hotel in 2024. He was also third in the national rankings by wins. After a career year, Beckwith collected his first piece of national hardware as the USHWA Rising Star. In seven years of driving, he has made nearly 9,000 trips around the track with over 1,400 wins and \$14.5 million earned.

Beckwith drove at 12 different tracks in 2024 with starts ranging from overnights to stakes races to Saratoga's prolific \$250,000 Joe Gerrity Jr. Memorial Pace and Plainridge Park's \$250,000 Spirit of Massachusetts Trot.



JESSICA HALLETT

All in the family: Brett Beckwith (right) posing with father Mark after capturing Saratoga's leading driver and trainer titles in 2024.

His strategy starts by looking at the program.

"I like to look at the program, know the other horses and what they can do better than my own," Beckwith said. "I think that will always help, but I like to adapt to how the race plays out, whether that be behind the gate or the quarter pole. The trainers usually can give you some good insight about the horse prior when you walk over to grab the lines. They can let you know any personality traits and how their week went training."

From post parade to the race to getting off and informing the trainer, Beckwith has learned what to look for from his dad, Mark Beckwith.

"A lot has to do with asking questions," Beckwith explained. "I'm always willing to learn and broaden my knowledge. My dad has taught me so many things you can look for and if you truly pay attention, the horses tell us all."

"As far as recommendations go, I just try and give knowledgeable but basic feedback – if a horse was on a line, how they handle, and more. Great trainers know what changes they have to make watching and the other trainers probably won't listen to your feedback anyways. The great trainers will listen to your feedback and for the most part, will take what you say into thought, but 99 percent of the time, they had the same idea as well."

Beckwith agrees with MacDonald that the change the following start is noticeable.



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(Always B Miki - Shebestingin - Bettors Delight) • p,2,1:49.2; 3,1:48.1 (\$1,861,447)



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“There’s been countless times where you’ll come back next week and a horse is much sounder, straighter, less foot sore, or steered better among other things.”

Noticing the change plays into the memory factor of being a catch driver as well – remembering the horse, what needed changing and how the race changed the following week.

“I try and remember every horse and some trait or their equipment they wore to best of my ability, but it’s still something that can be really hard,” Beckwith said. “My dad is absolutely excellent at remembering everything as well as Jason Bartlett could tell you what a horse wore three years ago.”

One of the differences Beckwith has from many catch drivers is working in the morning under his parents when he is not racing, including owning some of his own horses.

“When it’s one of my own, for some reason I surround so much pressure with it. I expect so much out of them and want them to win every single start. As far as family goes, no one will disagree with the fact that doing anything with family is rewarding and just as challenging at the same time, but at the end of the day no matter how the races went, you’re family.”

Whether it be one of his own or any catch drive he has, Beckwith strives to stick with each driving opportunity.

“When I first turned 16, I couldn’t hold a horse. I got off and said someone else has to go with it, Beckwith explained. “It’s to this day one of my biggest regrets and thankfully I learned from it. The best drivers can drive any horse. Good, bad, hot, lazy. Doesn’t matter. I was just so inexperienced at the time it frightened me a bit. But now I’m fearless. I’ve been down 4 or 5 times already and broken bones. That hard ground will toughen you up quickly.”

On the other end of the spectrum with over 66,000 career starts under his belt, Andy Miller has upwards of 10,000 wins and nearly \$145 million amassed. His driving career spans 40 years and he has etched his name into numerous record books including charting among the top drivers of all time for wins and earnings.

From overnights to prestigious races, the veteran driver has earned his way into the winner’s circle and into an elite club with his recent 10,000-win milestone as Miller became just the 21st driver to crest the plateau in North America.

“In catch driver mode, a regular catch driver knows probably 80 percent of the horses that are racing on a weekly basis and remembers most of those horses from week-to-week, even the horses that they don’t drive,” Miller explained. “You learn a lot about those horses even if you’re not driving that specific horse. You go on the racetrack for a race and have probably glanced at the program, but you know a lot more just by knowing every horse.

“That’s one of a catch driver’s strong attributes,” Miller added.

Despite his many miles around the track, Miller centers himself around knowing the horses he drives as well as those he drives against.

“It’s not really a system, it’s like any job, you learn to remember the horses. Sometimes you don’t remember it right away, but when you’re on the track, you look over and you remember things about each horse from week-to-week. You can also remember things by looking at their lines in the program, too, but you probably know as much about the horses even without looking at the program. Just knowing every horse’s attributes and strengths and weaknesses.”

While the program can be a tool and remembering the horses is the key to success for Miller, he also has the ability to strategize on the go as needed.

“It’s based on the horse and how the race unfolds,” Miller said. “I think several years back, I had the outside and obviously, planned on taking the horse back and racing them easy. And then, you look over behind the gate and your instinct just takes over and see nobody’s really pushing out of

there and you leave. You cross over and get a one- or two-hole trip and the horse actually races good and might win the race.

“If you stick to the game plan in your head and can’t adjust, then you’re in trouble. If you can adjust on the fly, it’s all instinct. Obviously, every horse is different, some of them are great. Some you almost have to leave and put them in the race for them to know it’s race time. Others if you use too much of them early, you don’t have much left to finish.”

And while 66,000 starts have given Miller numerous catch drives, he sets himself apart as he teams up with his wife, Julie, with a stable of their own. Together, they keep a stable between 50 and 60 head. As a trainer, Julie Miller has won over 2,300 races and banked \$55.6 million.

“Between me and Julie, we train every day. Tyler [Miller] helps us part of the time. He’s focused on driving but he likes to drive the horses we train, too, so he does help out quite a bit. We are all there every day.

“It keeps you sharper when you’re doing it every day. When we have 50 to 60 horses, you see something new every day. You’re out there on the track watching other people, too, and always learning.”

Having his own horses and having someone catch drive for him gives Miller an additional perspective as far as catch driving goes.

“A good catch driver has a good instinct and knows what to do. Several years back I was out for six months when I broke my back, so we did use quite a few catch drivers and there were a couple instances where I had to say, ‘you need to do this. You need to put this horse in the race.’ Where maybe on paper or odds-wise, it didn’t look like the horse fit in the race as far as putting them in the race, I convinced them to do it and the outcome was very good.

“Most of the time, though, with catch drivers you don’t want to give them too much information. You tell them the horse’s tendencies and if they need to be in the race or need an easier trip and that’s about all there is. That’s their job. That’s what they’re supposed to do.”

For himself as a driver of his own and catch driver, Miller has a knack for pinpointing when a change should be made as far as equipment or otherwise; however, he echoes MacDonald and Beckwith in the most important part of catch driving: learning.

“After a while you figure out that this horse is on the right line, maybe a murphy would help or a sharper head pole or just equipment changes to make the horse drive better and go straighter down the racetrack. Sometimes going at the speeds they go, you see little soreness problems that people don’t see going slow. You pinpoint which corner it is.

“It’s experience and being around the horses,” Miller continued. “It’s just learning everyday things. Seeing different horses and seeing what people do different. What works for one horse might not work for another one, but you’re always learning and every race you drive, you’re trying to learn something new.

For 10 straight seasons, Miller has broken 100 in the win column and earnings more than \$3 million. In fact, every season since 1998, Miller’s stats have read that same notation or better; with the exception of 2014 where he was sidelined for a broken back and made a swift return, still yielding 99 wins and \$1.6 million. His stats include winning numerous Breeders Crowns, representing the United States in the World Driving Championships, and several driving titles.

“Always work hard and keep your head on straight. One of the biggest things is to turn the page. Once the race is over, you cannot go back and change it. You have to go on to the next one. If you made a mistake or if something went really good or really bad in the race before, you can’t let that carry over into the next race,” Miller concluded.

So, whether it’s a catch driver like James MacDonald with a broad range of skills on his resume or a fresh up and coming driver like Brett Beckwith who is just starting or a veteran reinsman like Andy Miller with a wealth of knowledge, the degrees of experience may vary as well as the approach, but with the same foundation underneath.

No matter what, the catch driver holds the key to success through the lines with the information and knowledge in their minds.

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Somebeachsomewhere - My Little Dragon | p, 3, 1:47.3 (\$1,303,709)

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Photo: Barbara Livingston

People need a good reason to travel to the track



EDITOR'S EYE

By Derick Givner ✕ [@harnessseguy](#)

We hear all the time that “the system is broken” in harness racing. Everyone is an expert in complaining, myself included, and pointing out problems is low hanging fruit. What we need are solutions – actionable, logical and viable courses of action that can make a difference.

I'm certainly not going to solve the industry's problems in one column and quite frankly we all have differing views on what is really broken. Many people see post time drag as a major issue; me, not so much. In a perfect world every race at every track would go off right around post time, but it is far from the most pressing issue from my perspective. But that is perhaps an argument for another day. I want to shine the spotlight on the live racing experience.

For all intents and purposes the expectation that people are going to come to the track to watch live horse racing as a “night out” is antiquated. Few people love the sport more than I do and outside of work I visit my local tracks maybe once a year. There are a number of reasons for my lack of attendance, including the cost of gas and tolls, the 150 to 210 minutes of travel time involved, and the lack of reasons to show up in person. The first two issues aren't going to change unless I move closer to the track but the last item can be corrected, or at least improved.

What are the current advantages to being at the track?

There is a social aspect to attending the races with friends or family. Back in my younger days I would go about once a month with friends to Yonkers Raceway or The Meadowlands. We often shared a meal in the restaurant and watched and wagered on both the live and simulcast tracks. I still know people who do that from time to time, but it has simply become too easy to sit at home and watch the races.

The main advantage I enjoy when visiting a track is the ability to watch the horses warm up and score down. There are many clues as to horse fitness and intent for those willing to spend their time observing. Sure, you can catch some of this at home but you are at the mercy of the in-house broadcast team and they might not show what you want to see.

How can we make the on-track experience more attractive?

I'm going to focus on two very simple wagering-related possibilities. The first involves rebates. While every Advance Deposit Wagering (ADW) service offers different rewards, a person in New York can sit in their house and collect a 5% rebate on every bet made at almost any harness track. For those that wager heavily, depending on your state, even higher rewards are available. So consider this for a moment, you can sit at home and get 5% or go to the track and get somewhere between 0% and 3% depending on your wagering level.

Let's do some simple math. You visit the track 10 times each year and handle \$500 per visit for a total of \$5,000 of money wagered each year. At many tracks you get nothing in rewards for wagering at the windows but for the sake of this example we'll use The Meadowlands. Your yearly total of \$5,000 puts you at the Bronze level in their Player's Club and would earn you a blended rebate of about 1.25% for wagers placed on The Meadowlands (slightly less for other harness tracks). That would equal 6,250 points which could be used for a \$60 betting or food voucher. Assuming you lived just 20-25 miles from the track and

there were no tolls along the route, the cost would be approximately \$57.80 for the year (\$2.89 per gallon for gas times two gallons per trip times 10 trips). Even if you got a 0% rebate for sitting at home there would be no advantage for showing up at the track because you'd simply be getting your costs back for the year. If you are getting even a small rebate on an ADW, staying at home is instantly better for your wallet than traveling to the track.

Most harness tracks get about 3% of every wager made at an ADW and we'll say a blended 20% (it could be a little lower or higher depending on the track and wagers made) through on-track wagers. So what if tracks dug deeper into their pockets and offered 10% back to on-track customers. Using the same example above, a person who shows up at The Meadowlands would get \$50 in points per visit, basically a free meal in Pink or Trotters. Now that is at least some incentive to come out to the track.

Another thought could be to use the same idea in a different light. Anyone who dines at the track and can produce at least \$500 in betting tickets gets \$50 off their dinner bill. This could easily be marketed to a more general audience and can be done at reduced levels as well: \$250/\$25 or \$100/\$10. A requirement would be that the person must provide their email and home addresses so they could be added to the marketing list. There would obviously be some short term cost to the track but it has the potential to create new customers, and it doesn't have to be a permanent promotion. It can be only for the first five visits for new customers, giving people enough time to enjoy the track and perhaps get acclimated to the environment.

Pivoting slightly, my next suggestion really only affects more serious bettors but it could be a game-changer. There has been some chatter online and in other publications about Computer Assisted Wagering (CAW) and how these groups of people make large wagers at the last possible second before the race starts. This action alters the final pools and can make horses go from 3-1 to 6-5 in a hurry. While I have mixed feelings about CAWs in general, why not provide an advantage to people who come to the track and support your product in person?

I suggest that all (or any) tracks close wagering at off-track locations when the pacers or trotters are called to the starting gate but leave them open until the field is released for on-track patrons. There is about a 30 to 45 second gap between those two periods of time. Think of the advantage being live at the track could be in terms of finding the right price, seeing which horses are on the gate and ready to leave hard, and being able to notice a breaker behind the gate. This practice would also keep players from showing up at the track and wagering via outside ADWs on their phones because they would lose the on-track edge.

The above suggestions are 100% designed to provide value to on-track players so they have more reasons to show up. They work in the same spirit as any promotion. I get a few offers every week via text and email from local restaurants where specials and discounts are included to entice me to show up. I get a bowling email at least once a week offering discounts or free games (one literally came in while I was writing this column). Sports betting sites send me daily emails with promotions (I got two already today). Even my credit card company sends me at least one email a week outlining potential offers.

I can't remember the last time I got an email or text from a track that outlined any special deal. They always simply tell me that there is something going on but rarely provide a “carrot on a stick” offer to get me to show up. If tracks want people to attend they need to provide a better reason than live racing.

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HESTON BLUE CHIP

p, 2, 1:50.4f; 3, 1:48f (\$1,781,881)

American Ideal-Shot Togo Bluechip-Cam's Card Shark

- USHWA Dan Patch 3YO Pacing Colt of the Year
- Sire of 2024 Jugette Winner, *Soft Shot*, p, 3, 1:49.3h -'24 (\$250,903)
- Sire of 2024 PA Stallion Series Final Winner, *Pressure Cooker*, p, 3, 1:50f -'24 (\$208,176)
- Sire of 2024 PA Sire Stakes Winner, *Rush In*, p, 3, 1:49.4f -'24 (\$189,455)

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Alexander is banged up but still looking to fire in 2025



JAYWALKING

By Jay Bergman ✕ [BergmanJay](#)

Trainer Travis Alexander's stable had a breakout year in 2024 with 264 wins and \$6.58 million in earnings, both career bests for the conditioner. With an expansive stable preparing in Florida and a Northeast base racing in overnights, Alexander's barn is hitting on all cylinders except one. The trainer was recently involved in a spill that will keep him off the track for approximately 10 weeks but did little to slow down progress towards a major 2025 campaign.

"I probably should have let go," Alexander said in hindsight of the incident that catapulted him from the bike and led to fractures serious enough to keep him out of action but fortunately not enough to require surgery. "They say eight to 10 weeks and I'm going to be very cautious not to push it," said Alexander. "The last thing that I want is to come back too early and then need surgery in the middle of the racing season."

Summing up the man vs horse scenario Alexander said, "We think we have them buffaloed that we're in charge. These are 1200-pound animals and they're in charge."

Frustrated a bit that the incident will keep him confined to Florida for the coming weeks, Alexander is hopeful that the New York-based contingent will round into form soon while his more than capable staff in Florida puts the finishing touches on a solid group of aged performers and some sophomores that are ready to have solid seasons after minimal success as freshmen.

Primary on that list is Desperate Man. The now 7-year-old son of Shadow Play is getting ready for the Borgata Series along with three others from Alexander's band. "He looks great," said Alexander, "He's put on some extra muscle."

Desperate Man, the 2021 North America Cup winner, won 11 of his 16 starts in his first full season for Alexander and though there were some disappointments (losing the 2024 Borgata Final) there were far more success stories.

"We're going to stake him a little more than last year," said Alexander, pointing to the William Haughton Memorial as an example, yet Desperate Man will not race in all the big ones. "The owners want to maximize his chances and not over-race him," said Alexander. The strategy paid handsomely in 2024 with Desperate Man earning \$486k with just 16 starts.

The Borgata is a tough enough series to wear out many horses, but Alexander is confident that he can have Desperate Man ready for action when the series kicks off in last March. "I doubt we'll race him before the first leg of the series," said Alexander who is hopeful he'll be able to join the horses in New York by then.

Desperate Man appeared on his way to capturing four preliminary legs of the Borgata and sweeping the final in 2024 but found himself in a head-to-head duel with Linedrive Hanover through torrid fractions, setting the race up perfectly for Hellabalou. Desperate Man settled for third and Alexander, while disappointed, defended his driver. "You know a lot of people criticized Matt (Kakaley) for the drive," Alexander said reflecting on the race last April. "But there was nothing he could do once Desperate Man got going like that; you have to just let him go." The racing attitude of Desperate Man was on full display in the 2024 Borgata final and the fact that he won the battle with Linedrive Hanover after the two duked it out through a 1:21 1/5 three-quarter clocking says much about his desire to win no matter the adversity. Desperate Man came back later in the year to win the \$250,000 Aria at Yonkers on International Trot Day and score in the Kane at Batavia, a path Alexander hopes to repeat this year. "We'll have him eligible to the Breeders Crown and hopefully the MGM Grand Prix at Yonkers at the end of the year," said Alexander.

Likely to join Desperate Man in the Borgata are Racing Rampage, Why Not Now and Pleaseletmeknow. "I may give Racing Rampage and Why Not Now a start or two before the Borgata," said Alexander, who expects the other two to be qualified and ready to race in the first leg of the series that starts on March 31.

Alexander is hopeful that a trio of sophomore pacers will emerge this



MIKE LIZZI

Desperate Man is tuning up for another run at the Borgata series for the Travis Alexander stable.

year and reach greater heights after promising juvenile seasons. War No More, a son of Papi Rob Hanover that Alexander acquired late last August, was first on that list. "We bought him off of Jake Leamon and he wasn't staked much after the Sire Stakes, so we stopped with him," said Alexander. "We've paid him into some stakes this year." War No More had a win and a few placings in Pennsylvania Stallion series action as a freshman and is bred very much like a pair of solid sophomores with a recent history of success, namely 2020 Little Brown Jug winner Captain Barbossa and 2021 North America Cup third-place finisher Whichway-tothebeach.

Odds On No Limit, a son of Sweet Lou, will also return this year as a sophomore after campaigning for Alexander in the Pennsylvania Stallion series in 2024. "He grew so much from last year," said Alexander with expectations raised for the coming season. Odds On No Limit was a 1:52 2/5 winner in 2024.

Lochlan Hanover, a son of Captaintreachorous, is another sophomore coming off the Pennsylvania "B" circuit as a 2-year-old that has trained back well for the coming season. Lochlan Hanover's pedigree is closely aligned with one of last year's top performers from the Alexander stable. Howlenthedhills earned \$558K last year as a sophomore for the stable after going winless as a 2-year-old. Howlenthedhills' dam Arielle Lynn is a half-sister to the dam of Lochlan Hanover.

All three have been nominated for the Bobby Weiss series at Pocono that will commence on March 29.

With 37 2-year-olds in training in Florida there is still plenty of work to be done before realizing expectations. While way too early to make any lofty predictions Alexander put things in perspective. "I'd say collectively this is the best group of 2-year-olds I have trained," Alexander said without naming names.



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STANDARD BRED
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Norman sending out pair at The Big M with Down Under roots

By Jay Bergman

Trainer Richard “Nifty” Norman will send out a pair of high-class pacing mares in Saturday’s \$22,000 featured pace at The Meadowlands with Southern Hemisphere roots. Dougs Babe A (post 3) has been a fixture in the Norman stable for years, but newcomer Millwood Bliss N (post 8) may be a horse we’ll be talking about following her U.S. debut.

“We paid a lot for her,” said Norman when asked about Millwood Bliss N, a mare that’s listed as a 5-year-old by American standards. “She’s actually a 4-year-old and we gave \$180,000. That’s the most I’ve ever paid but that’s what’s necessary to get a quality horse.”

Referring to her as a 4-year-old would be very close to true given that she was foaled in December in New Zealand in 2020 and thus raced in 2024 in Australia as a 3-year-old, completing a solid campaign at the highest level with five wins in eight starts.

“We were looking at other horses and not her,” said Norman of the journey that finally led to the purchase. “We were set to buy another, but horse and the deal fell through. Tom Pollack (Pollack Racing) was shopping as well, and he’d bought about six horses before he was offered Millwood Bliss N.” When Pollack passed on the filly Norman did some work investigating her quality with others. “I spoke with Luke McCarthy and he told me that there might have been one or two others that were better than her but you couldn’t buy those,” said Norman.

A look at the program lines on Millwood Bliss N show a winning mile in 1:50 3/5 last June. “That was over a seven-eighths track like the old Woodbine,” said Norman. “It’s not that big a deal a lot of races go faster now.” While the time in and of itself may no longer be that impressive it did put Millwood Bliss N in against the best horses in her final three races in Australia with all of them raced at the mile and five-eighths distance. In reviewing those miles, the filly was responsible for setting the fractions and raced with pressure against large and talented fields.

“We bought her to race in the Blue Chip Matchmaker and we’ll stake her to some other races as well,” said Norman about the likely future for the daughter of Sweet Lou from a Bettor’s Delight-sired dam.

“She’s got a good gait and great manners,” Norman said. With nine wins in 15 lifetime starts she also arrives as a fresh horse. “We’ve had her since last September and fortunately she got a little sick when she first came so we’re over that.”

Millwood Bliss N made her first appearance in East Rutherford last Saturday (February 15) in a qualifier and did everything that Norman wanted in the mile. David Miller drove her from the back of the pack, and she paced home strongly timed in 1:55 1/5. “David liked her,” said Norman.

Just getting Millwood Bliss N some racing experience here before her stakes campaign begins wasn’t going to be easy. “She’s got \$38,000 made in her last four starts so there weren’t many options. I’m glad they were able to find that spot on Saturday.”

With some handicapping necessary Millwood Bliss N was assigned post eight in Saturday’s tenth race with the conditions clearly calling for non-winners of \$12,500 in last four.

“We’ll be racing her from behind,” said Norman.

Dougs Babe A will be embarking on her third season under Norman’s care on Saturday. The 8-year-old daughter of Western Terror has 13 wins and \$357K bankrolled since her arrival. “She’s getting a little older and is probably not as good as when she first came over, but she fits with these,” said Norman.

Saturday’s contest should have Norman’s mares feeling somewhat at home given three of the other six mares in the field have Down Under roots. Trainer Jeff Cullipher has a pair in Elegant A (post 2) and Blood Moon A (post 5). Elegant A returns to the mile track having raced at Yonkers and Dover over the last month. Blood Moon A has been racing against tougher company than her stablemate winning three consecutive races at Dover prior to her third place finish in the \$25,000 Open Handicap on February 12 at the Delaware five-eighths mile track.



MIKE LIZZI

Dougs Babe A has been a fixture in the Nifty Norman stable and he now has a new barnmate in the highly regarded import Millwood Bliss N.

Leading trainer Ron Burke has two in the field as well with Dixie Dream (post 1) and Intothemysticmoon (post 7) having North American roots. Madrid A (post 4) and Tony’s Mom (post 6) round out the field of eight.

The Meadowlands Saturday night program begins at 6:20 p.m. with the first of 14 races.



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\$29,106 PICK-5 CARRYOVER SAT AT NORTHFIELD

MANDATORY JACKPOT HI-5 SAT AT MOHAWK PARK

OHHA launches new jobs platform

The Ohio Harness Horsemen's Association (OHHA) is excited to announce the launch of its new online platform, OhioHorseJobs.com. The website, designed to connect job seekers with opportunities in Ohio's growing Standardbred industry, is now live and accessible to all.

Ohio Horse Jobs is a resource aimed at supporting the state's horse racing industry by providing a centralized hub for employment opportunities. The site will offer a wide range of positions in training and care-taking as well as track maintenance, veterinary technicians, and administrative roles within the harness racing community.

"We continuously hear that one of the biggest challenges for horsemen is finding people to work. The launch of Ohio Horse Jobs is a pivotal step in strengthening the connection between employers and potential employees in our industry," said OHHA Executive Director, Frank Fraas. "This platform will help us build a stronger workforce, expand opportunities, and ensure the continued success of Ohio's harness racing industry."

The website is open to all individuals, from seasoned professionals to those interested in beginning a career in the equine field. It is free to use, with job listings updated regularly to reflect the evolving needs of the industry. Ohio Horse Jobs will also be promoted with a state-wide advertising campaign that includes digital and video advertising.

OHHA members with job openings can send information about the available positions to Susan Schroeder at sschroeder@ohha.com.

To browse job opportunities, visit www.ohiohorsejobs.com. For more information, call the OHHA Office at 614-221-3650.

-release (OHHA)



LONDON CLASSIC SALE SERIES DETAILS ANNOUNCED

With entries now being accepted for the 2025 London Classic Yearling Sale, The Raceway at Western Fair District has announced a new event slated for this May.

The new London Classic Sale Series for both trotters and pacers will kick off on May 12 & 13, featuring two legs and a quartet of \$40,000 (G) finals to be raced on Camluck Classic night, Friday, May 30.

This series replaces the long-running City of London Series and is open to both Ontario-sired trotters and pacers, 4 year olds and younger, who are non-winners of \$10,000 lifetime as of March 1, 2025. The nomination fee remains \$200 (cdn) or \$160 (usd) per horse and nomination forms are available at www.woodbine.com/mohawk/horsepeople.

"The London Classic Yearling Sale supports the event which will offer bolstered purses for each of the finals," said Director of Equine Programming, Greg Blanchard. "Supporting the local industry is important to us and this helps us do that while invigorating a series of races that has been traditionally important to our local horse people."

Nominations for the London Classic Sale Series close on April 1, 2025. Sellers and consignors are also reminded that the deadline to enter this year's London Classic Yearling Sale is Monday, April 21.

-release (Western Fair District)

\$250 + \$10

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THURSDAY, FEBRUARY 20

RACE 2

(5) BET NINETEEN was aggressively handled from post 10 in his most recent and yielded to a pocket trip. He was stuck behind a firing rival and paced evenly to be 3rd. He draws much better and should be given every chance at a winning trip.

-John Rallis



WOODBINE
MOHAWK PARK

FRIDAY, FEBRUARY 21

RACE 12

(1) PUSSYCAT DOLL GB appeared ready in her qualifier last Sat. as she blew by the leader out of the pocket on her way to a handy victory and trainer Burke seems to have a knack with these shippers from Great Britain.

-Greg Reinhart



MEADOWLANDS
RACING & ENTERTAINMENT

RACE 8

(5) HARPER SEELSTER appeared loaded in the pocket in her last try but had absolutely no racing room and had to settle for sixth. She should be raring to go tonight and it appears she's facing softer company to boot.

-Reinhart



EMPIRE CITY.
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YONKERS RACEWAY

SATURDAY, FEBRUARY 22

RACE 8

(7) REVOLVER N turned in another excellent performance last Saturday and has shown the ability to race well both on the lead and from off-the-pace.

-Reinhart



MEADOWLANDS
RACING & ENTERTAINMENT

FULL CARD ANALYSIS / PAST PERFORMANCES

Mohawk Park Analysis Thursday Friday Saturday

Meadowlands Analysis Friday Saturday

Yonkers Analysis Thursday Friday

DHP PPS

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INSTANT RACING UPDATES VIA TWITTER: @DRFHARNES

NEWS FROM AROUND THE HARNESS INDUSTRY

JACKPOT HI-5 MANDATORY PAYOUT SATURDAY AT MOHAWK PARK

Woodbine Entertainment has announced a mandatory payout will be offered for the Standardbred Jackpot Hi-5 this Saturday (February 22) at Woodbine Mohawk Park.

The Jackpot Hi-5 carryover currently sits at \$180,331.10.

The Hi-5 wager will continue to be offered on each card of live racing (Thursday and Friday) leading up to Saturday's mandatory payout.

The Jackpot Hi-5 requires horseplayers to select the top-five finishers in order. A horseplayer can only win the entire jackpot if they hold the only winning ticket for that evening's wager. If there are multiple winning tickets, half the pool is paid out, while the other half is added to the carryover.

The entire carryover will be paid out, plus new money wagered, during the mandatory payout. The Jackpot Hi-5 has a \$0.20 minimum and a 15 per cent takeout.

The Jackpot Hi-5 mandatory payout will be offered on the final race of this Saturday's card.

Post time for Saturday's card of live racing at Woodbine Mohawk Park is 6:30 p.m.

(Woodbine Entertainment)

DOUBLE CARRYOVER ACTION IN MGM NORTHFIELD PARK PICK-5

For the second consecutive card there were no winning tickets in the Pick 5 on Wednesday night at MGM Northfield Park. Without a winning combination, a tremendous-sized carryover of \$29,106 is rolled over to Saturday's (Feb. 22nd) sequence. The \$1 wager, which begins in the sixth race, will feature an estimated pool of a colossal \$150,000, and, as always, sports the player-friendly 14% takeout.

There is also going to be another 50-cent Pick 6 carryover of \$6,771 beginning in the eighth race with an estimated pool of \$20,000. The Pick 5 and Pick 6 guarantees are offered in conjunction with the U.S. Trotting Association's Strategic Wagering Program.

Post time for the 15-race program on Saturday is 6 p.m. MGM Northfield Park currently races four evenings a week on Saturday, Sunday, Tuesday, and Wednesday. For more information on live racing and promotions, visit www.northfieldpark.com.

-release (MGM Northfield Park)

DAN PATCH AWARDS DINNER TO BE STREAMED LIVE

The 2024 Horse of the Year will be announced Sunday night, Feb. 23, at the annual U.S. Harness Writers Association's Dan Patch Awards dinner, sponsored by Caesars Entertainment, at Rosen Centre in Orlando, Fla. But even if you aren't among the attendees, you will be able to watch the

announcement live via USHWA's Facebook page.

The banquet will be held in Grand Ballroom C, with the awards ceremony getting underway at 6:30 p.m. and available to view via the USHWA Facebook page. At approximately 9:30 p.m., emcees Roger Huston, Jason Settlemoir and Dave Little will announce the winner of the E. Roland Harriman Horse of the Year trophy, which follows the revealing of the names of the Trotter of the Year and Pacer of the Year.

To access USHWA's Facebook page, click [here](#). The entire video will also be available on the U.S. Trotting Association's website on Monday afternoon, Feb. 24, by clicking [here](#).

Post time for the evening is 5:30 p.m., with the cocktail hour and open bar sponsored by Meadowlands Racing & Entertainment. Also starring on the Courant Inc. Red Carpet will be Amy Hollar, who will broadcast live on the USHWA Facebook page. It's your opportunity to see who's wearing what and what the attendees have to say about the festivities.

-release (USHWA)

UF DRAGON'S QUEEN PASSES

Winbak Farm is sad to announce the passing of UF Dragon's Queen, p, 2, Q1:53 3/5s; 3, 1:50 3/5f (\$774,964). She was humanely euthanized due to a broken pelvis.

"Sadly, Winbak Farm was only able to be home to UF Dragons Queen for a short time since she was purchased in July of 2024," said Jack Burke, Winbak Farm General Manager. "She was a fast stakes mare with proven progeny, and we were looking forward to breeding her."

The 32x Winning daughter of Dragon Again was a stakes-standout at 2 and 3. She was bred by Hanover Shoe Farms and trained by Kelly O'Donnell and Mark Ford during her career. At 2, she won the Keystone Classic Stakes and was second in Bluegrass Stakes, Pennsylvania All Stars Stakes, and 3 Pennsylvania Sire Stakes legs. She was third in the Matron Final. At 3, UF Dragon's Queen won Pennsylvania Stallion Series and Valley Forge Stakes consolation. She was second in Nadia Lobell Stakes and Pennsylvania Sire Stakes leg. She was third Jugette heat and Matron Stakes elimination and Final.

"When shopping for broodmares, I really like to see mares from strong families with stakes-winning performance and this mare checked all the right boxes," said Joe Thomson, Winbak Farm Owner. "I also liked that she had already produced nice performers from limited opportunities."

As a broodmare, she is the dam of Pembroke Southie, p, 2, 1:55 2/5f; 3, 1:53f; 1:51 -'24 (\$200,654), and 2024 New Jersey Sire Stakes Development Fund Winner, Im A Believer, p, 2, 1:58 3/5h; 3, 1:53 3/5f -'24 (\$159,723).

"We will be offering an American Ideal daughter of UF Dragon's Queen, named Southwind Utah, at a sale in 2025," said Burke. "We also have UF Dragon Queen's half-sister, Queen Bee Hanover, in the Winbak Farm broodmare band to continue the pedigree."

-edited release (Winbak Farm)



STANDARD
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JACKPOT
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LAST RACE OF THE CARD

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