

THURSDAY, FEBRUARY 27, 2025

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The Breeders Crown will come to Scioto Downs for the first time since 1988

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EDITOR'S EYE

By Derick Giwner
[@harnesseveguy](#)

In what has become a rite of passage for states which have married casino profits with racing, the prestigious Breeders Crown year-end championships will be coming to Ohio's Scioto Downs in 2026 for the first time since 1988. The last time any Ohio track hosted the series was 1995.

Begun in 1984, the Breeders Crown originated as a roving series that visited multiple tracks each year until 1997 when a two to three tracks rotation became more the norm. Northfield Park and the Delaware County Fairgrounds were the last two tracks in the Buckeye State to play host to the event some 30 years ago. Two Crown races have been contested at Scioto, the 1986 Open Mare Trot won by Grades Signing with Herve Filion in the bike, and the 1988 Open Pace captured by Call For Rain in 1:53 2/5 for Clint Galbraith.

Other than 1998 when Colonial Downs made a cameo host appearance, The Meadowlands along with either Mohawk or Woodbine in Canada served as the site for the Breeders Crown series from 1997 to 2009. At that point The Downs at

Pocono helped place Pennsylvania firmly on the national map by hosting the series in 2010, and again in 2013 and 2018. Indiana joined the mix in 2017 and became the new partner with The Meadowlands and Woodbine Mohawk Park as part of a three-track rotation for the important division-deciding championships.

With Ohio horses making serious noise on the national scene over the last decade, there has been a strong calling from those within the state to bring the Breeders Crown back and the folks at Caesars, which runs both Harrah's Hoosier Park and Eldorado Scioto Downs, were happy to comply.

"We are thrilled to have it [at Scioto Downs]," said Caesars Senior Vice President of Racing Joe Morris. "I'm excited about it and the Ohio horsemen are excited. I've raced with a lot of horsemen's groups over the years and I don't think I've been involved with a better group of racers than the Ohio Harness Horsemen."

Ohio Harness Horseman's Association Executive Director Frank Fraas echoed the excitement shown by Morris.

"We are thrilled to have the Breeders Crown in Columbus at Scioto Downs," said Fraas, who also mentioned numerous positive comments he

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Cane Pace
Currier & Ives
Dexter Cup
Jim Doherty Memorial
The Elevation
Fox Stake
Hambletonian®
Peter Haughton
Hoosier Stake
The Horseman
Kentuckiana Stallion Mgmt.
*Fillies ONLY - Pace & Trot
Keystone Classics
Landmark Stake
Liberty Bell
Madison County
Matron Series
MGM Grand Messenger
PA All-Stars
Progress Pace
W.N. Reynolds Memorial
John Simpson Sr. Memorial
Tompkins-Geers
Ralph Wilfong
MGM Yonkers Trot

3-year-olds

*For these 2025 Events:
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Catholic Cowboy Series (New)
Circle City
Colonial Trot
Crossroads of America
Delmonica Hanover
Carl Erskine
Max Hempt Memorial
Jenna's Beach Boy Keystone
Classics Landmark Stake
Phil Langley Memorial
Liberty Bell
James Lynch Mem.
Matron Series
Monument Circle
PA All-Stars
Pegasus Series
Paul Revere Pace
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Star Destroyer Series
Thanksgiving Classic Series
Tompkins-Geers
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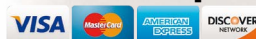
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Melissa Simser photo



We Accept



has gotten from harness racing fans and horsemen since the announcement. “I think it is just great that we’ll be getting the Breeders Crown in Ohio. With the history in the state – especially the fact that we have four pari-mutuel tracks and 66 county fairs that we race at – to bring this event here is unbelievable.”

When hosting an event such as the Breeders Crown there needs to be a certain infrastructure in place to accommodate the crowd and Morris feels Scioto is finally ready to take on the challenge.

“We put quite a commitment into that property. We tore down the old grandstand and built a new one. We built a 16-race indoor paddock. They have a great staff there and what a great place it is to watch a race,” said Morris. “It’s a five-eighths track and it has been a while since the series has been on a track that size. It is smaller facility but we have the old clubhouse still which seats 600 and the grandstand can accommodate another 1,000. In all we can get about 2,500 people in; that’s a good crowd to watch the races. And it is right next to the track. You can’t get closer to a track than where we put that grandstand.”



DERICK GIWNER

New VP and GM of Harrah’s Hoosier Park Gabe Prewitt (left) with Caesars Vice President of Racing Joe Morris.

In a world where casino companies that own racetracks tend to get a bad rap for not making major investments on the racing end, Caesars has bucked the trend when it comes to tracks like Scioto and Hoosier. They’ve made upgrades to the paddocks at both tracks and brought in new people like Gabe Prewitt, the recently hired Vice President and General Manager for Hoosier Park.

“Caesars likes racing and that energizes me because they give me the tools that the racing team needs to put on a world-class act, and that’s how Caesars wants it. They want me to put on as good a show as we can. I don’t get any pushback. I only get support,” said Morris, who also touched on the addition of Prewitt, who worked with the team at Pompano Park before it closed, and again as Director of Racing for Caesars properties.

“We are thrilled to have Gabe on the team,” continued Morris, who hinted that Prewitt may do some stuff to spark the Hoosier product. “Hoosier still has a couple of gears left in it. We are going to recalibrate it a little bit. It is a top three track in North America.”

For his part, Prewitt already announced the end of the Jackpot Pick 6 wager, and is clearly considering removing the passing lane, a change that appears to have strong support from the wagering world but we’ve been told lacks that same gusto from the horsepeople that compete over the track.

In addition to his new position at Hoosier, Prewitt, who can’t get enough racing action, plans to continue to have a presence at The Red Mile and nationally on the Fox Sports broadcasts.

Getting back to Scioto Downs and the Breeders Crown, the track will have to do some schedule shifting to host the event as it typically closes in mid-September while the Breeders Crown series tends to take place in late October. Whether that will mean an extension of the normal racing schedule or a mini-meet to accommodate the Crown races has yet to be announced. Morris did confirm that the event will remain in October and Fraas said the track has been discussing the possibilities with the Racing Commission.

While there have been rumors swirling for months about Scioto Downs getting the Breeders Crown, after it was revealed officially at the Dan Patch Awards in Florida, there was some chatter from people that don’t care for the series being contested over the smaller five-eighths surface. The smaller track (Meadowlands is a mile and Mohawk and Hoosier are seven-eighths) reduces the number of starters that can have their heads on the gate to nine, down from 10 at The Meadowlands for instance, and that is a fair point.

The other argument people bring up is about the difficulty level of winning from an outside post on a five-eighths oval. Statistically it really doesn’t hold water. At Scioto in 2024 horses starting from post nine won just 5.6% of the races and posts seven and eight won at 8.7% and 7.4% respectively. At Hoosier last year, post nine won a paltry 4.6% of the time and post eight was only slightly better at 7.6%. It is worth noting that post seven came in at 11.2% at Hoosier in 2024, 2.5% higher than Scioto.

“Scioto is a great five-eighths mile track, so I don’t think there will be an issue with it. There have been a few comments on Facebook about it but I think it will be fine,” said Fraas on racing over the smaller oval.

Whether people are excited or unhappy about the Breeders Crown moving to Scioto Downs in 2026, it is a moot point. The Crown is coming to Ohio and I’ll certainly be there! Perhaps standing next to Roger Huston, who called one of the last Ohio Breeders Crown races in 1995 at the Delaware County Fairgrounds.

Dan Patch Notebook

It was a great night in Orlando, Florida as the Dan Patch Awards were given out. Some of the highlights for me included:

- Sonja Booth gave a moving speech as she read a poem about the horses she cares for on a daily basis. It truly showed the love that caretakers have for their equine partners.

- Owner of the Year winners Burke Racing and Weaver Brussemi took out an ad in the journal saluting runner-up Patricia Stable on its “equally deserving” year. It was a classy tribute to the co-owners of Dan Patch winners Sig Sauer and Captain Albano.

- Watching Mark Beckwith tear up as his son Brett Beckwith spoke at the podium after receiving his Rising Star award was a touching moment. There is nothing quite as special as watching your children succeed and I felt overjoyed for both Mark and mom Melissa.

- Finally, there was Debbie Little, who will be enshrined in the Communicators Hall of Fame this year. Having been a member of the same chapter of USHWA for over 20 years with her and spending a number of hours on the phone, I knew this honor meant a lot to her and she most certainly earned it. Congrats!

In other news, Marcus Melander outlined the current plan of attack for pre-season Hambletonian favorite Maryland. As of now the trainer is expecting to race the son of Chapter Seven at Vernon in late May (NY Sire Stakes) and twice in June (Empire Breeders Classic/Zweig) before heading to the Stanley Dancer at The Meadowlands on July 12 and the Hambletonian eliminations (July 26) and hopefully the final on August 2. The trainer also added that the colt has filled out well as he prepares for his 3-year-old season.

Trainer Noel Daley said Captain Albano was coming back nicely and will be pointed to all the big races in 2025.

Trond Smedshammer mentioned that he is down to 14-head in his barn, and he didn’t seem all that upset about the low numbers. While he still has the desire to win major events like the Hambletonian, a race he won in 2004 with Windsong’s Legacy as trainer and driver, the 57-year-old seems very content with his accomplishments.

That’s a wrap for the Dan Patch banquet in 2025. Here’s to a great year of racing and seeing everyone next year!



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Mark Beckwith with Melissa Silverman-Beckwith.



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Bartlett firing on all cylinders through two months in 2025



JAYWALKING

By Jay Bergman ✕ [BergmanJay](#)

Jason Bartlett is off to a scorching start to his 2025 season. The perennial Yonkers kingpin, Bartlett has expanded his reach over the last couple of years taking his talents on the road to Pocono and The Meadowlands. While Yonkers was dark for the first three weeks of the year Bartlett kept busy in East Rutherford and then when Pocono opened found his way to the five-eighths mile track where last Saturday he captured seven of the track's 14 races before getting on the highway for an excursion to The Meadowlands.

"It usually takes me about an hour and forty minutes," said Bartlett of the travel time by car. "This time it took a bit longer since there was a sinkhole on route 80 that had traffic at a standstill." Bartlett relies on the Waze App to seek out the fastest route and despite the added time he remained glued to the prescribed route.

While many other Grand Circuit drivers have taken the last few months to refuel for the coming stakes, Bartlett has been energized and off to one of the fastest starts of his career in the first two months of the year. Through Tuesday (February 25) Bartlett had captured 115 races from just 316 mounts and a phenomenal .486 UDRS. Bartlett has also been a regular at Yonkers where he continues to dominate on a nightly basis, and has pulled doubleheaders on Saturdays and Mondays with Pocono's afternoon programs allowing him the freedom and enough travel time to return east for the Meadowlands or Yonkers evening cards.

"I started going to Pocono when Per (Engblom) asked me," said Bartlett of his original decision to add the Wilkes-Barre track to his schedule. "He's got about 100 horses now and has to find places to race them and I've followed."

It's been a win-win situation for the trainer-driver team as Engblom's growing stable has run at high efficiency with Bartlett aggressively steering the horses into the winner's circle. While many of the sport's leading drivers have made doubleheaders a regularity in their schedules, Bartlett's game plan remains quite different.

"I'm a homebody. I'm not going to travel to Kentucky," Bartlett said, clearly recognizing the dollar signs available with the rich programs in the Bluegrass. While other leading drivers have made that move, Bartlett knows it comes with certain risks and perhaps not enough rewards.

"I've got kids I want to be around," said Bartlett, who is currently quite active on that front. "I'm coaching my son's travel basketball team."

His 13-year-old son Carter is good enough right now to be starting on the high school junior varsity even though he's only in eighth grade. Bartlett makes the most of his free day (Sunday) to travel and coach, and is happy to help his son develop.

"He's learning how to play the game. It's not always about size and speed. He's a point guard and there are other ways to use your body to be effective," said Bartlett, who pointed to the recently traded Luka Doncic as an example in today's NBA.

Bartlett too has found a way to maximize his talent on the racetrack and perhaps the biggest asset he has is an ability to judge the pace of a race so accurately that he gives his horses the best chance down the

homestretch. Rival driver Scott Zeron competes against Bartlett and is amazed with his precision.

"He'll leave out of there a hundred and you'll think you're getting to the half in 56 but he's slowed the second quarter down to 30 seconds and you're there in 58," Zeron said. That kind of edge is a major advantage on all sized tracks and Bartlett has shown early in 2025 that he's as sharp as ever, and as difficult to beat.

Bartlett gives the credit to the trainers who he's been fortunate to drive for. "(Ron) Burke called me and asked if I would drive for him at Pocono," Bartlett said of the sport's leading driver, who like Engblom has a full complement of horses racing in Pennsylvania.

Perhaps one fly in the ointment these days that Bartlett must accept is that Yonkers earlier starting time (6:45 p.m.) makes it a bit more challenging to stay at Pocono through the entire card on a Monday and arrive at Yonkers in time for the first race.

"I didn't race at Pocono last Monday (February 24). I had to weigh whether it was worth it to make the trip and drive in just 10 at Pocono and I decided against it," said Bartlett, who obviously has seen Yonkers as his bread and butter for some time.

Bartlett expects to follow the same path he took in 2024 this year while leaving open the door to whatever calls come his way. "Right now, I'm committed to driving throughout New York for the Sire Stakes," Bartlett said of the season that is still a few months away. "I am looking forward to driving Sir Pinocchio." The now-4-year-old son of Met's Hall afforded Bartlett the opportunity for more extensive travel last year and he's hopeful the journey will be even better in 2025.

"He showed so much improvement from his 2-year-old season to his 3-year-old season," said Bartlett. "If he improves as much this year, he's going to be one of the best 4-year-olds."

Sir Pinocchio won 11 of his 17 starts last year for trainer Ed Hart with Bartlett not having to go that far to capture the Yonkers Trot or New York Sire Stakes finals, but he did travel to Ontario for the Canadian Trotting Classic where Sir Pinocchio captured an elimination race last September.

As most any catch-driver in the sport, Bartlett likes to keep his options open and while the phone hasn't yet begun to ring for the coming stakes season, 2024 should have planted the seeds with a large group of trainers that he is more than capable of winning the biggest races if just given the opportunity.

"I'm not saying I won't travel," Bartlett said, recognizing the possibility of taking a New York-bred horse like Sir Pinocchio to Grand Circuit events.

With \$12.6 million banked by his drives in 2024, Bartlett had his most successful year financially. His 633 wins was the highest he'd achieved since 2009. While winning is the main objective, Bartlett had two drives in last year's Breeders Crown finals at The Meadowlands that were exemplary. He drove Tarrific, a filly he campaigned for trainer Chris Ryder on the New York Sire Stakes, to a second-place finish just a neck behind My Girl E J in the \$600,000 Crown final for 3-year-old filly pacers. Bartlett had Tarrific on the lead early despite starting from post 10 and then worked out a pocket trip at odds of 31-1. He worked out a perfect trip for the 86-1 shot Seven Colors in the Crown Open Pace for \$600,000 and finished second behind Coach Stefanos.

Whether Bartlett is a homebody or not remains to be seen but given his start in 2025 I'd be willing to bet top trainers will be entrusting him to major talent for the Grand Circuit this year and perhaps draw him away from the Northeast occasionally.



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Some stakes races simply didn't receive a passing Grade



AT THE TRACK

By Darin Zoccali [X AtTheTrack7](#)

It was announced last month that harness racing would be moving to a Graded Stakes system in 2025, something that many of us who follow the sport have been requesting for quite some time. That request was often met with the sentiment of “with so many things that need to be fixed in harness racing, this is what you are worried about?” I always believed this was something that could be easily corrected, certainly easier than the more complex issues the sport faces. I, for one, am glad this change has come.

Over the years, it will be interesting to see how this graded stakes committee adapts from one year to the next in not just assigning a grade to each race, but how they adjust the criteria for each grade with time. With that in mind, let's take a look at the outcomes of the selected criteria and highlight potential needs for change moving forward.

Beginning with the 2-year-old colt and gelding divisions, the first item that jumps off the page at me is that there is not a single freshman trot or pace that carries Grade Two status. Every race is either Grade One or Grade Three.

The International Stallion Series and Bluegrass Series are given a Grade Three status, presumably because each of these races is split into divisions. But when combined, those purses can push close to \$400,000. This seems like an easy adjustment to make in 2026 in terms of filling that Grade Two void for the freshman colts and geldings.

The biggest issue I will have with the listed grades is the “Triple Crown” races for 3-year-olds. Now that there is a Graded Staking System, in order for a race to maintain its status as a part of the Triple Crown, it must be classified a Grade One race.

On the 3-year-old pacing side, only one of the three events that comprise the Pacing Triple Crown is a Grade One race, that being the Little Brown Jug. The Cane Pace and the Messenger Stakes are both listed as Grade Two events. Certainly an argument can be made and has been made by many, myself included, that the Triple Crown series in harness racing has become antiquated. We are ignoring the current landscape of the industry to protect history.

In 2024, The Messenger Stakes carried a total purse of \$275,000, with \$225,000 allocated to the Final. The staking rules require a race to carry a purse of \$350,000 to be considered for Grade One status. The Cane Pace carried a purse of \$248,000 and consisted of a five-horse field.

Simply put, if The Meadowlands and Yonkers want these races to remain a part of the Pacing Triple Crown, they have to guarantee the purse at \$350,000. That being said, many racing fans, including myself, believe the Pacing Triple Crown should be The North America Cup, Meadowlands Pace and Little Brown Jug. Either way, Grade Two races should not be a part of a “Triple Crown” or in my opinion the series loses even more credence. I believe this system being implemented can push those racetracks to boost those events to Grade One status or see them dropped from the Triple Crown altogether.

The same can be said for the Yonkers Trot, which is the only leg of the Trotting Triple Crown that does not carry Grade One status. The other two, The Hambletonian and Kentucky Futurity are both Grade One events. The 2024 Yonkers Trot carried a total purse of \$325,000 with the Final going for \$300,000. Yonkers should increase that purse to \$350,000 in order for the race to achieve Grade One status and remain a part of the Trotting Triple Crown. If they do not, the Canadian Trotting Classic, which is the only other non-Breeders Crown Grade One event for sophomore trotters, should become a part of the Triple Crown series.

Unfortunately, The Meadowlands reduced the William Haughton Memorial to a \$275,000 event, making it ineligible for Grade One status. For lack of a better term, that is a real shame.

The Haughton is not just a great race every year. It is an historic race. In 1996, while known as the Governor Alfred E. Driscoll Pace, Jenna's Beach Boy lowered the all-age World Record to 1:47 3/5 in an epic confrontation with the sensational Riyadh. That record would stand for 10 years until Holborn Hanover paced a 1:46 4/5 mile in what was then known as the U.S. Pacing Championship in 2006.

GRADES FOR TRIPLE CROWN RACES

PACING TRIPLE CROWN

MGM GRAND MESSENGER - G2
CANE PACE - G2
LITTLE BROWN JUG - G1

TROTTING TRIPLE CROWN

MGM YONKERS TROT - G2
HAMBLETONIAN - G1
KENTUCKY FUTURITY - G1

In 1999, the Driscoll was renamed for William R. Haughton and the purse was increased to \$600,000, and in 2022, while still carrying a purse of \$500,000, Bulldog Hanover paced the fastest mile in harness racing history and the first sub-1:46 mile, winning the event in 1:45 4/5.

Regardless of purse and regardless of what the graded stakes committee labels it, the Haughton is a Grade One race. But, The Meadowlands should increase the purse to \$350,000 in 2026 to ensure it is recognized as one.

The system will not be perfect initially and as outlined above, there clearly are some items that need to be addressed, but this will be good for harness racing and was a welcome change. Next, let's start timing these races in hundredths of a second!



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Cassar tries his luck with three on Saturday at The Meadowlands

By Jay Bergman

Trainer Darran Cassar will send out three horses on Saturday night at The Meadowlands with the homebred Write Me A Rose making his 5-year-old debut in the \$25,000 Winners Over pace carded as race 10 on the 14-race program.

Write Me A Rose, an Ontario-bred son of Sportswriter, has not raced since November when he captured a high-level conditioned race at Woodbine Mohawk Park in a snappy 1:50 2/5 clocking.

"He's going to need some racing," said Cassar of Write Me A Rose. "He's the type of horse that thrives with more work and hopefully he'll get more in the coming weeks."

Write Me A Rose had a solid 4-year-old campaign, primarily in Ontario. "We started him early last year to get him ready for the Ontario Sire Stakes," said Cassar, who prepped the horse in New Jersey before sending him north where Rob Fellows handled the training. Write Me A Rose won nine races as a 4-year-old and banked more than \$133K but returned home after the campaign.

"The classes worked for him in Ontario," said Cassar. "He qualified decently a few weeks ago and I was hoping to get him a race last week, but his class didn't fill. On Saturday Write Me A Rose landed post three in a field of razor-sharp horses.

"I think he'll be at his best in three or four weeks," said Cassar, obviously aware of the conditioning advantages many in Saturday's field have. Write Me A Rose has only one lone qualifier where he finished his mile strongly but paced in just 1:55 2/5, probably five or six seconds slower than Saturday's contest is likely to go.

Mad Max Hanover (post 4) moves into Saturday's feature following a 1:48 2/5 powerhouse performance last week for trainer Jake Leamon. The 6-year-old by Always B Miki rides a two-race win streak into the event.

For Once Inmy Life has won three of his four races this year for trainer Cory Stratton and returns to the mile track three weeks after capturing a high-level conditioned race at Yonkers. For Once Inmy Life drew post seven.

Trainer Ron Burke has bookends in the field with both Southwind Gendry (post 1) and Act Fast (post 8) making their first pari-mutuel starts of the year. Those two both qualified in the same race on February 22, with Act Fast off by himself at the wire winning by nine lengths in a

1:51 1/5 mile. A top 4-year-old a year ago, the Ohio-bred Act Fast earned \$201K and posted a career-best 1:47 3/5 mile in a leg of the Graduate series last June over the Meadowlands surface.

The hard-hitting Dribbling Bi is making his seventh start in 2025 and has finished on the board in half of his starts to date.

"He's an honest horse," said Cassar. "He can be a bit aggressive."

Dribbling Bi finds a better spot than he's been in for a few weeks, landing post seven in Saturday's \$10,500 seventh race, a non-winners affair of \$5,000 in last 4 starts.



Write Me A Rose makes his 2025 debut for trainer Darran Cassar against a strong winners-over field at The Meadowlands on Saturday night.

NEW IMAGE MEDIA

"It's been tough for him," said Cassar. "He ran into a strong pair from the Burke stable and was over-matched." The drop in class should help with Dribbling Bi, a solid third in action last Saturday (February 22) against better company.

Saulsbrook Hero is a newcomer to the Cassar stable and makes his debut in the 13th race, a Track-master-rated 74.5. "When he came to me, he was a little sore, but he's gotten better," said Cassar. "It's hard to gauge him off of those Batavia lines."

Saulsbrook Hero banked more than \$150,000 as a 3 and 4-year-old back in 2021-2. "He was a pretty solid horse at Yonkers, so he's got some back class," Cassar said.

"He should fit pretty well at this level."

Cassar is currently conditioning 14 horses in his stable, with three 2-year-olds showing promise thus far. "I've got a Papi Rob Hanover, a Tall Dark Stranger and an Always B Miki," said Cassar. "They all are training well."

On the sophomore front, Cassar sounded optimistic that a New Jersey-bred son of Cattlewash would emerge this year. "Twin Fury has definitely matured from 2 to 3," said Cassar. "He's bigger and stronger, and I'm hoping better."

Twin Fury was sharp enough as a 2-year-old to reach the New Jersey Sire Stakes final but then had the lights go out on him literally and figuratively. The original \$240,000 final was cancelled due to a blackout and the rescheduled event took place three weeks later, with Twin Fury getting the worst of it racing, parked from the start from post nine.

"We sent him to the Metro," Cassar said about the lofty expectations, but Twin Fury had even less of a chance in those eliminations coming from off the pace into a blistering final half.

"I'd say he's about three to four weeks away from qualifying and we're pointing him towards the Weiss and then the New Jersey Sire Stakes," said Cassar.

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Ride of a lifetime for Horse of the Year Twin B Joe Fresh's owners

By Ken Weingartner

When trainer Chris Ryder was recognizing the partners involved with female pacer Twin B Joe Fresh at Sunday's Dan Patch Awards banquet, he introduced Barry Spak by noting his fellow co-owner "likes to remain a little anonymous."

Well, those days are over. Spak, who has never attended one of Twin B Joe Fresh's races during her career to date, is ready to end his self-imposed exile following the now 5-year-old mare's coronation as 2024 Horse of the Year.

"They say it's hard to find a horseman that isn't superstitious about something," said Spak, who attended Twin B Joe Fresh's first qualifier as a 2-year-old in 2022 but never ventured to the track to watch her in action when money was on the line. "The more she won, the more I was hesitant to see her race live as a jinx. But the jinx thing is over. I plan on seeing as many races live as I can.

"When you have Horse of the Year, everything is done. You don't have to worry about jinxing anything."

He added with a laugh, though, "I guess my not showing up worked."

While Spak was not showing up, Twin B Joe Fresh always did. She finished no worse than second in all 13 of her races last year, winning 11 and earning \$895,562 to lead all older pacers in money. She captured eight of the nine most lucrative races for pacing mares, including the Breeders Crown Mare Pace, Dayton Distaff Derby, Roses Are Red, Milton, FanDuel Mare Championship, Lady Liberty, and Dorothy Haughton Memorial.

Dating back to November 2023, she has won 12 consecutive stakes or invitational finals. Only two of those victories were by less than a length.

"She didn't just win them, she won them," said Peter Trebotica, Ryder's longtime assistant who with Ryder, Spak and driver Dexter Dunn owns Twin B Joe Fresh. "She's an amazing horse. I've known for three years, but I didn't know it would reach this pinnacle. Anyone that asked me about her, I kept telling them she's unbelievable.

"So, I've known. Now, everybody does."

Dunn agreed.

"She's been great from day one," he said. "Before she even started qualifying as a 2-year-old, you knew she was something special. She was great at 2 and 3, and she got so much stronger for last year. She's a big girl. And she's super intelligent, unbelievably easy to drive; fast and strong."

Although Spak has stayed away from the races, he has visited Twin B Joe Fresh at Ryder's stable on a regular basis.

"I go to the barn quite often," Spak said. "I remember seeing her last year and she had almost doubled in size. She's like a tank. She's an intimidating sight to see. She's built tremendously."

A daughter of Roll With Joe-Fresh Breeze, Twin B Joe Fresh has finished outside the top three only twice in 40 lifetime races, winning

30 and finishing second on seven occasions. The mare, bred by Britany Farms and raised and sold by Twinbrook Farms, has earned \$2.33 million. She was purchased for \$65,000 at the 2021 Standardbred Horse Sale.

Ryder went to the sale looking to buy a yearling for the ownership group to replace a 3-year-old it sold a month prior to the auction. As hip No. 630, Twin B Joe Fresh was late in the sale.

"I missed on some horses, but I knew she was coming up, so I didn't push myself on the others because she was about the last one that I liked," Ryder said in a 2023 interview. He added with a laugh, "So, when she came in, I kind of had to buy her. You've got to believe in fate a little bit."

If Twin B Joe Fresh's 2024 success removed the weight carried by Spak over fearing a jinx, she also removed the wait for Ryder to have a Horse of the Year. Ryder saw his trainees finish second in the voting three times in the previous five years: Bettor's Wish in 2019, Party Girl Hill in 2020, and Niki Hill in 2021.

Twin B Joe Fresh became the second pacing mare in the 78-year history of the Horse of the Year Award to receive the honor, joining Shartin N in 2019.

"It's quite an honor," Ryder said. "All the credit goes back to the horse. She's a fantastic horse; she just goes and goes. She knows how to win, and she's got that speed. She's just given us a great ride."

The ride is not over. Twin B Joe Fresh is preparing for another season of racing and is expected to follow a schedule similar to last year.

"She's been back three or four weeks," Trebotica said. "We trained her before we left (for the Dan Patch Awards) and she's super. I see her every day and the difference in her is unbelievable. She's a woman now. Hopefully, everything works out. I don't see why not. She's got nothing to prove. We'll see what happens."

All of Twin B Joe Fresh's connections are looking forward to another season with the star.

"It's been a whirlwind," said Spak, who owned horses in the late 1970s but got away from the sport while raising a family only to return in 2019 with Ryder. "Now, we set sails for this year and just hope she stays healthy. (Last year), she raced in May and went all the way to Nov. 30, and how Chris managed that so well is a tribute to him. Horse of the Year meant a lot to me, but it meant a lot more for Chris, and I was happy for that."

Said Ryder, "There's a little bit of pressure, but that's our job. Touch wood, she's been sound enough to keep repeating, to come back and do it again and again. She's just fast, Dexter has driven her right, she's just a good horse."

Dunn added, "Hopefully, she comes back great and races great again. I'm looking forward to it. In my mind, everything she does now is a bonus, she's done everything that's been asked of her. For me, it's not pressure, it's more like just enjoy it. This is probably the ride of a lifetime."

Giwner, Taylor to Communicators Hall of Fame ballot

Derick Giwner and Ellen Taylor were selected as the two candidates advancing to this summer's balloting for the Communicators Hall Of Fame, as determined during the Saturday directors meeting of the United States Harness Writers Association (USHWA).

Derick Giwner is a two-time winner of the prestigious Hervey Award for writing who serves as editor for the Daily Racing Form's DRF Harness. He started his career at Sports Eye in 1996 and established the Form's DRF Harness brand in 2012. His weekly DRF Harness Racing Newsletter is must reading for many segments of the harness community.

In addition to his 2020 and 2023 Hervey Awards, Giwner has been honored with the Phil Pines Award and the Clyde Hirt Media Award, and he was named USHWAn of the Year in 2020. Derick is a member of the New York City Chapter of USHWA, has served as its Chapter Director on several occasions, and is chairman of USHWA's important Integrity Committee.

Tara Ellen Taylor has served for over 30 years as the Executive Director of the Harness Horse Youth Foundation, an industry organization which introduces young people to harness racing through

hands-on involvement with horses, seeking to live up to the Foundation's theme of "Kids + Horses = Magic!" Starting in 1996, she has been the person behind the efforts of several summer camps run annually by the Foundation in association with racetracks and horsemen's groups, and is a contributor to both HHYF's many promotional and educational pieces and several trade publications.

Recently elected to the Indiana Harness Racing Hall of Fame and a many-time award winner (including USHWA's own prestigious Stan Bergstein Proximity Award in 2009), Ellen follows in the tradition of her mother Margot, who is an Immortal of the Hall of Fame.

Derick Giwner and Ellen Taylor will go before the USHWA voters during the midsummer balloting for Communicators Hall Of Fame election, as will those nominees for the sport's Hall Of Fame during a July meeting of USHWA's Screening Committee, to be held in Goshen, New York. A nominee must get three-quarters of the yes-no votes in order to receive the grand honor. Announcements are usually made in the weeks before the Labor Day weekend.

-release (USHWA)

Beckwith's weekend took him from Big M eight to Rising Star

It would be hard to find another 22-year-old in harness racing who had a bigger last weekend (Feb. 21-23) than Brett Beckwith, who was the leading driver at The Meadowlands on both Friday and Saturday night before jumping on a plane to Orlando to scoop up the 2024 Dan Patch Rising Star Award at the yearly United States Harness Writers Association banquet.

"It was a great time and definitely special to spend with my family," said Beckwith. "But I'm not big on taking days off. I really enjoy my job and to take Sunday (the night of the banquet) and Monday off was tough enough."

Based on how things are going, taking a couple of days off are unlikely to stop Beckwith from getting wherever his sulky skills are going to take him.

Beckwith, after winning four races on both Feb. 21 and Feb. 22 at The Big M, now has 25 wins there on the year, and finds himself in second place in the standings at the mile oval, sandwiched in between a pair of veteran superstars, with Jason Bartlett ahead of him (with 28 wins) and Dave Miller right behind (24).

"I thought I had a few that had shots," said Beckwith, whose 608 wins during 2024 was good for third in North America. "But didn't think I'd win four both nights. I had some power the first few months I was there and was getting my head kicked in."

It was the son of longtime horse people Mark and Melissa Beckwith who doled out the headaches to his foes on Friday, registering his four scores while driving in just 10 of the 14 races on the card. Brett's winners paid \$9.80, \$2.60, \$6 and \$15.60, good for a profit of \$140 if one plunked down \$20 on each of his starters.

Saturday brought another four walks down victory lane, but did much more for Brett's backers bank balances.

His winners that night – from a total of 12 drives – returned \$28.80, \$4.20, \$4.60 and \$102.20. The \$20 bettor who wagered a total of \$240 on Brett's horses cashed in for \$1,398, a profit of \$1,158.

Brett was extremely appreciative of Mad Max Hanover, who won the ninth race as the 6-5 favorite while recording the fastest mile of the year in the sport after stopping the clock in 1:48.2.

"I told [trainer] Jake Leamon that's the most fun I've ever had driving a horse," said Brett. "You could feel him rattle through the lines. I watched that horse race a ton when Timmy [Tetrack] drove him. Timmy always kept him rolling, so I tried to do the same."

Mad Max Hanover at 6-5 is one thing, but Fulsome (in the 12th race) at 50-1?

"He surprised me," said Brett, who's currently fourth in the North American driver standings with 96 victories. "I thought I choked him. 20-1 would have been more fair for that horse."

"It's a huge honor [being second in the standings at The Meadowlands]. If you would have asked me two years ago if I would have been getting drives at The Meadowlands, I wouldn't have said yes. Things have progressed at an unbelievable pace."

CATCH THE SHOW: Check out the live "Racing from The Meadowlands" pregame show at 5:45 p.m. every Friday and Saturday when track announcer Ken Warkentin opens up the mic with a scene set and program changes.

Big M TV's Dave Little and Jessica Otten will reunite Friday after two weeks apart and will be on the Sam McKee Memorial Broadcast Set, from where the duo will provide news, notes, selections and a look at the night's featured races.

On Saturday, Little will be joined on set by the Editor at DRF Harness, Derick Gwerner, who, after the recently concluded United States Harness Writers Association's director's meeting in Orlando, FL, is now on the ballot for possible election to the Communicators Hall of Fame in Goshen, NY.



LISA PHOTO

Brett Beckwith won with Fulsome at 50-1 last weekend at The Meadowlands but opted off this Saturday.

Joe Romanelli will handle interviews from the back paddock while winner's circle host Gary DiLeo will provide commentary and selections on the FanDuel Television (FDTV) feed.

OH YES, IT'S LADIES' NIGHT: The Big M will celebrate women in racing on Saturday, March 8, as the track hosts International Women's Day, sponsored by Clinton Tractor.

Otten and The Red Mile's Emily Gaskin will host the night's live simulcast broadcast and paddock interviews will be conducted by Scioto Downs' Jenna Otten.

The night will include videos and interviews with the industry's top female trainers, drivers and grooms, plus a race with an all-female field.

A GRAND CONTEST: Calling all handicappers!

The third edition of the 2025 Meadowlands Monthly Handicapping contest takes place on Friday, March 14. The event, which takes place once a month, goes for prize money totaling \$1,000.

For those interested in taking part, these are the details:

- There is a \$1,000 prize pool and the top two finishers earn entry into a December invitation-only tournament that will go for \$10,000 in prize money.

- Contestants must be on-site to participate.

- For complete information, and to enter, go [here](#).

-release (Meadowlands)



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Donna Lee, 72, passes on Feb. 19

Donna Lee passed away peacefully on the evening of February 19 at the Ephraim McDowell hospital in Danville, KY after a courageous battle with health issues over the past few years. To a woman as successful as she, in what through her lifetime was largely a man's business, fighting adversity was something with which Donna Lee was well acquainted.



PHOTO PROVIDED

Donna Lee surrounded by her sons Peter (left) and Tony Alagna.

Born on September 5 of 1952 in Fairfield, IL, Donna Lee was a highly regarded horsewoman who had a knack for horses that required a little "TLC" to excel, competing on a high level during a time when Illinois racing was at its best.

Early on, Donna raced a small stable between Quad City Downs and Fairmount Park where she won an all-women's driving club race and captured the UDRS training title at Quad City in 1990.

With the closure of Quad City in 1993 Donna, along with her son Peter who did the shoeing and some driving before enlisting in the US Army, moved operations to the Chicagoland tracks where she sent out state champions like Chicago Jazz and Havana.

As the future of racing in Chicago became more uncertain, Donna left her home state to join forces with her son Tony Alagna, upon whom her love of horses and harness racing had a tremendous impact. She would play a vital role in one of the top stables competing on the Grand Circuit.

Perhaps Donna's greatest contribution was affording Tony the opportunity to remain state-side with one division of the stable while confidently sending many of his best horses to Canada for Grand Circuit stakes.

Under Donna's hand, the Canadian division of the Alagna barn would win three Breeders Crowns (Ramona Hill, Reflect With Me and American History), back to back Canadian Trotting Classics with Ahundredollarbill and Slay, the Metro with Exploit and a Peaceful Way with Ramona Hill.

Along with those accomplishments, Donna particularly enjoyed having a role in the development of Hambletonian winner Ramona Hill and a few of her personal favorites including world record holder Dr J Hanover and million-dollar winner Caprice Hill.

Dogs were always a part of the family and in later years the Cavalier King Charles Spaniels Tess and Freckles were her constant companions. Donna also encouraged Tony's love of the Morgan Show Horse and together they sent out a world champion named Akira Hamilton in 2023.

Time off for Donna Lee meant time on horseback, her great affection for trail riding and the endurance ride serving as her favored form of relaxation. Land Between The Lakes near Paducah, KY was a favorite spot to join friends for camping and a ride to celebrate Donna's life at that location is in the planning stages for later this Spring.

Donna leaves behind loving sons Tony and Peter and grandson Cameron. Donna, Tony and Pete have been united in the racing operation these past few seasons since Pete's retirement from the Sheriff's Office in Chicago. Donna and Pete joined in operating the family training center in Harrodsburg, KY while Tony remained at the New Jersey farm these past few winters.

Services for Donna Lee were held Thursday between the hours of 1-4 at Ransdell Funeral Chapel located in Harrodsburg KY. Any memorial contribution can be made to the Harness Horse Youth Foundation in her name.

[EDITOR'S NOTE: To read a profile of Donna Lee done in 2021, [click here.](#)]

-from Alagna family

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THURSDAY, FEBRUARY 27

RACE 10

(4) **KATIES BET** was aggressively handled as the choice in his latest and tired to finish 3rd. That was his second start back for trainer Mike Bishop who trained him to his lifetime mark of 1:50 2/5. He is better suited with a trip and will have speed to chase in this contest.

-John Rallis



FRIDAY, FEBRUARY 28

RACE 10

(7) **LYONS LIBERTY** is back in a \$15K claimer where he blew away a field at 2-5 on January 25. He should fire out here and sit no worse than a pocket trip.

-Derick Gwerner



RACE 10

(1) **COACHELLABOUT N** is a legit Open-quality mare who gets to drop to the winning level, lands the returning Bartlett and the rail to boot. Clearly the one to beat.

-Matt Rose



SATURDAY, MARCH 1

RACE 2

(4) **STELLAR YANKEE** just missed as the chalk last time while up a level in class. Seven-year-old is capable from on or off the pace and seems likely to be aggressive, like he was in his last start at this level on 11/2/24, a win.

-Giwner



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INSTANT RACING UPDATES VIA TWITTER: @DRFHARNES

NEWS FROM AROUND THE HARNESS INDUSTRY

USHWA CONDUCTS ANNUAL MEETINGS ON DAN PATCH WEEKEND

The United States Harness Writers Association (USHWA) held its annual meetings this past Saturday and Sunday, returning for the second straight year to the Rosen Centre in central Florida. The Dan Patch Awards Banquet, presented by Caesars Entertainment, on Sunday evening again provided the highlights of the weekend; the honors accorded Horse of the Year Twin B Joe Fresh and the other stars of the sport, both human and equine.

29 USHWA Directors, including Officers, Active Past Presidents / Life Members, and At-Large / Chapter Directors, worked from late Saturday morning until well into the afternoon to examine and plan a framework for the Association's operations in 2025 and for years beyond.

[READ MORE](#)

RACING APPLICATIONS DUE MARCH 1 FOR 10TH SEASON IN WOODSTOCK

Shenandoah Downs will celebrate its 10th year of pari-mutuel harness racing with a pair of seven-week meets at the Woodstock oval in 2025. The spring session will run from April 26 - June 8 and a fall meet will extend from September 13 - October 26. Dates for both campaigns were formally approved by the Virginia Racing Commission at its February 14 meeting.

The track will conduct racing every Saturday and Sunday at 1:05 PM this year with three exceptions --- Kentucky Derby Day (May 3), Preakness Day (May 17) and Belmont Day (June 7) --- when first post will be 3:05 PM.

[READ MORE](#)

LIVE RACING RETURNS FEBRUARY 27 AT FRASER DOWNS

Live harness racing returns to Fraser Downs on Thursday, February 27, as the track looks to build on its exciting momentum from last season. With wagering at its highest levels in recent years, officials are eager to continue delivering competitive racing action and exceptional value for horseplayers.

[READ MORE](#)

EMPIRE BREEDERS CLASSIC PAYMENTS DUE

Tioga & Vernon Downs would like to remind the stakes-minded participants in racing that Empire Breeders Classic stakes payments are due on March 15.

The Empire Breeders Classic will follow the same format as the past few seasons, raced as a single event with no eliminations. The stake will be split into divisions if more than 10 are declared to race with the purse equally divided and entry fee reduced by the number of divisions.

Payments are due by March 15 to sustain a three-year-old to race in 2025, nominate a two-year-old to race in 2026 or nominate a sire standing in New York to make the 2024 foals eligible to the 2027 race.

All details and **forms** are posted on tiogadowns.com. Questions may be directed to 607-972-5500.

-release (Tioga/Vernon)

SPIRITS AND STALLIONS WITH DIAMOND CREEK

What better way to celebrate Always B Miki moving to the great state of Kentucky than a bourbon tasting?

Come give Miki a big Kentucky welcome along with his stablemate Gimpanzee and sip some bourbon and charcuterie.

Bourbon and some special gifts will be there!

Anyone who attends can sign up to receive 1 free collection fee for 1 mare booked to any PA or KY Diamond Creek Stallion (2025 season only).

Wednesday, February 25 from 12-2pm at Diamond Creek KY. Address is 6146 Paris Pike, Georgetown, KY 40324.

-release (Diamond Creek)

WINNER'S BET BOOK FULL AND CLOSED

Syndicate manager David Reid has announced that the 2025 book is

closed for Winner's Bet (2, 1:54 1/5; 3, 1:51; 4,1:49 3/5-'24 - \$1,307,221), a multiple stakes winner and 2024 Dan Patch Older Trotting Horse of the Year.

Winner's Bet is fresh off his 4-year-old campaign in which he won nine of 13 starts, including the Breeders Crown. He posted an impressive 1:49 3/5 track record at The Meadowlands and a 1:50 4/5f track record at Scioto Downs.

A gorgeous individual, Winner's Bet is the richest and fastest son of world champion Walner.

Standing at Blue Chip Farms in New York, Winner's Bet, "is being backed by a strong syndicate comprised of many of the sport's leading breeders who will support him strongly," Reid said.

-edited release (Winner's Bet Syndicate)

PETE MEDHURST HONORED AT ROSECROFT



ERIK JONES/ROOM 9 PHOTOGRAPHY

On Monday at Rosecroft Raceway, Cole Olsen's Lyons Stealth (\$4.60) ground down Precision Bluechip and drew clear by five lengths for a 1:51 1/5 win in the sub-featured \$8,500 Pete Medhurst Memorial, for top-level conditioned pacers. Johnathan Ahle drove the 5-year-old Sweet Lou gelding for trainer Darren Olsen.

The race was named in honor of longtime Rosecroft track announcer Pete Medhurst, who died in January at the age of 55 after a valiant three-month battle with brain cancer. Following the race, many of Medhurst's relatives and friends joined Rosecroft horsepeople and management in the winner's enclosure to celebrate the broadcaster's life and legacy.

-edited release (Rosecroft)

CAL EXPO OPEN TROT LURES SOLID CAST

An Open Trot featuring Dylan The Great, All Champy and Lous Lancelot gets the marquee treatment Friday night at Cal Expo.

Watch and Wager LLC will present nine races with first post set for 6:45 p.m.

Dylan The Great is a 9-year-old son of Break The Bank K who is owned by David Dobbemann and takes his lessons from Alexia Kehl.

He picked up his second victory of the year in last week's Open Trot, as he was reserved early, made a sweeping move on the second turn and went on to an easy decision in a very strong mile with Sean Smithpeters at the helm.

All Champy has gone a number of big races at this meet and should have a major say in the outcome after missing last week's top dance for the sidewheelers.

He had a brutal trip in the Open two weeks ago and will be looking for some revenge for owner Steve Chambers, trainer Kathie Plested and pilot Nick Roland.

Lous Lancelot has a pair of Open victories to his credit this season and lost all chance last week when he made an early miscue. Elliot Gorov owns, Chip Lackey is the conditioner and Luke Plano has the assignment.

Looking ahead to Saturday night, the Open Pace will command the spotlight with Its Pointless, Sign Of The Times and Alilthundadownunda heading that cast.

-edited release (Mark Ratzky for Cal Expo)