

THURSDAY, OCTOBER 16, 2025

HAMBLETONIAN ECONOMICS



Darin Zoccali goes over the economics of hosting the Hambletonian and expresses his frustration with the uncertain future location of the event

NIKKI SHERMAN/DRF HARNESS

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AT THE TRACK

By Darin Zoccali ✕ [AtTheTrack7](https://atthetrack7.com)

The Hambletonian has been synonymous with The Meadowlands for more than my entire lifetime. While I certainly know the history of the event at Goodtime Park and Goshen, and I have seen editions of the Hambletonian at the Duquoin State Fair, I have only ever known it personally being held at The Meadowlands. The idea that 2026 could be the last edition of the American Trotting Classic at The Big M hits awfully close to home and quite frankly, is something I take personally. It's hard not to, being someone who grew up at The Meadowlands.

Having previously worked at The Meadowlands in a racing operations role, I understand better than most the financial implications of hosting the Hambletonian. So, when I read that the 2027 Hambletonian is up for bid, I understand what those racetracks will have to do to try and make that day profitable. Try as they

might, it will prove incredibly difficult.

I don't know the 2025 financials in terms of how much money was accumulated through staking payments, but I know that when I was at The Meadowlands the cost to the racetrack from a purse standpoint for the Hambletonian and Hambletonian Oaks was typically in the mid to high six figures. In other words, in order reach the guaranteed purse for both races, a total of \$1.5 million, the racetrack contribution was quite high.

If you look at just those two races from a purse liability standpoint, the full card handle falls short of covering the purses.

The Meadowlands handled \$7.5 million this year on Hambletonian Day. If 10 percent of that number was wagered on-track, that is \$750,000 (the last three years averaged \$825,000), then \$6.75 million was wagered through export signals.

\$750,000 live handle x 20% blended takeout rate = \$150,000. Of this, \$75,000 goes to racetrack operations and \$75,000 goes to the purse account. This is before any required taxes. Even at the three year average of \$825,000, the revenue is \$165,000 with an \$82,500 split between operations and purses.

[CONTINUED ON PAGE 3](#)

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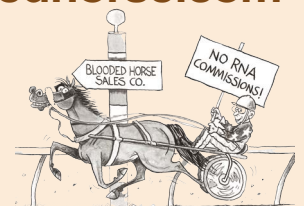
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\$6.75 million in export handle x 4% host fee = \$270,000 revenue. Of this, The Meadowlands pays half to the Hambletonian Society, leaving \$135,000 in revenue. From that figure, \$67,500 goes to racetrack operations and \$67,500 goes to the purse account, again before any taxes.

Therefore, the \$700,000 or so it costs The Meadowlands to contest the Hambletonian outweighs the revenue collected from the full-card betting handle by a sizable margin. That is before factoring in the purse responsibility for the other 14 races on the program.

The racetrack has to try to fill the gap between purse liability with revenue from other avenues, like sponsorships, food and beverage, admission, and vendors like food trucks renting space, etc.

In the 1990's and early 2000's, this liability did not matter as much because The Meadowlands had enormous live on-track handle and it was the horse racing venue that had the highest import handle in the country. In other words, the amount of money wagered on other tracks being simulcast at The Meadowlands was higher than any other venue in the country. Again, when I was at The Meadowlands the revenue from the importing of signals was nearly two-thirds of the overall contributions to the purses at The Meadowlands.

In addition, The Meadowlands would get such a massive crowd on Hambletonian Day that its live handle was enormous and they would limit the importing of signals on that day to just Saratoga and Monmouth. For example, in 2002, of the \$8.8 million wagered on the Hambletonian Day card, \$3.3 million was wagered at The Meadowlands. Using the same formula cited earlier, \$3.3 million produced \$660,000 in revenue, plus another \$275,000 in revenue from the export signal, a stark contrast from the estimated \$150,000 in live handle revenue estimate from this year.

To further complicate matters, over time that revenue from the previously mentioned handle from signals being imported has declined. First, off-track wagering facilities opened in New Jersey. Most notably, Favorites at Woodbridge, which took some of The Meadowlands handle. Next, The Meadowlands took a hit in import handle when the ADW (Advance Deposit Wagering) site was born. People started betting from home and stopped going to the racetrack. Then, The Meadowlands consolidated into a smaller facility, producing smaller handle while at the same time, TVG took over the New Jersey Advance Deposit Wagering site, improving the handle significantly, some of which organically shifted from The Meadowlands to 4NJBets. Lastly, COVID gave players another opportunity to wager from home and some never returned.

I am not sure people understand the financial reality of The Meadowlands hosting The Hambletonian, being a racetrack that does not have its purses supported by expanded gaming (casinos). Unless they have

found a way to offset the cost through other areas, like food and beverage, sponsorships, etc., The Meadowlands dollar-for-dollar loses money on Hambletonian Day. In other words, the revenue produced from the betting handle, live, export and import on that Saturday is not enough to cover the purse responsibility of the day.

This becomes less of an issue for a track like Hoosier Park, which benefits from a casino on-site. Hoosier does a tremendous job promoting its signal. I have nothing but great things to say about the track. They are the example of what every track who has the benefit of expanded gaming on-site should be. For them, the purse expenses tied to a Hambletonian Day will not hit as hard as it does at The Meadowlands. While I love Hoosier Park and I love The Red Mile (another site being mentioned as a Hambletonian host), I will say something that I imagine someone said in 1980 about DuQuoin. The Hambletonian belongs at The Meadowlands. Any major event – whether it be the Hambletonian or the Breeders Crown – held at The Meadowlands simply produces more handle. It is still the premier harness racing venue in North America and its quite upsetting for those of us close to that facility to read open letters and a back and forth in the media between The Hambletonian Society and The Meadowlands. It honestly looks petty. These are conversations that should remain behind closed doors, between the parties.

I started this column by saying this hits me hard, personally. I think about 25 years' worth of Hambletonians spent with my dad at The Meadowlands. I think of the last few years I have spent there with my son. I understand the Hambletonian Society needs to secure the event's future and I understand their points. I also understand the financial reality of hosting a Hambletonian and why The Meadowlands is taking the position they are taking. But I will say this, if 2026 is the final Hambletonian at The Meadowlands, then I will be attending my final Hambletonian.

Handle on harness racing in North America is down \$153 million, which is 10 percent. Somehow, nothing has really changed as a collective to address that. Now there is a public argument between two of the most important institutions in the industry. For nearly a decade I have written column after column about a lack of marketing, handle declines, fighting between racetrack management and horsemen's groups, becoming complacent due to casino purse subsidies, etc. Nothing has changed. Now, we have gotten so sideways as an industry that moving The Hambletonian away from The Meadowlands, which will guarantee a handle decline for the event, has become a serious possibility. So, this is me, throwing my hands up and saying this is the last straw. Get your house in order. If not and this happens, not only will the 2026 Hambletonian be my final time attending the race, but I'll have to reflect upon the last decade and think about how much personal time I want to commit to this industry going forward. For me, this could very well be the straw that breaks the camel's back.

Fashion Farms dispersal provides opportunity to connect with HOF trainer

By Derick Gwerner

Those who did a deep dive into The Black Book for the 2025 Standardbred Horse Sale at Harrisburg saw about a dozen yearlings from Fashion Farms listed, providing an opportunity for other breeders to get into families that have been privately owned for years but also for perspective owners to hook up with a Hall of Fame trainer that has been otherwise occupied with the homebreds.

For the previous 31 years Jim Campbell has been the "go-to" trainer for Jules Siegel's Fashion Farms. They have combined to win major races like the Hambletonian Oaks with Fashion Schooner and many Dan Patch Awards for divisional honors with horses like Broadway Donna, Broadway Schooner and others. Now, as Siegel approaches 100 years on the planet, the end of an era is imminent.

"As far as I know it is a complete dispersal of all of Fashion Farms' horses," said Campbell. "It creates a big hole for me to lose an account like that. It is a big void and I'm going to fill it as best I can."



In addition to yearlings, Fashion Farms is selling a selection of 22 broodmares and weanlings as well as stallion shares during the mixed portion of the sale.

For Campbell, who started the year with 18-20 horses and currently has 10 in the barn, four for Fashion Farms, he'll be down to just a few after the sale. The 63-year-old 2024 Hall of Fame inductee with multiple Hambletonian wins – Cool Papa Bell (2022) and Tagliabue (1995) – only has two other clients outside of Fashion Farms currently and while he has some yearling prospects lined up, he is certainly open for business.

"I'm not concerned but I'd definitely like to get more clients and keep the stable going," said Campbell. "Ultimately the lord will guide me wherever he wants me to go."

Dating back to 1991 when the United States Trotting Association started keeping training statistics, Campbell, who was named Trainer of the Year in 2022, has nearly 1,500 wins and stable earnings just under \$56 million. His barn is currently on a 17-year streak of earning over \$1 million.



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Stoebe, Bax take aim at spots in Breeders Crown finals



JAYWALKING

By Jay Bergman ✕ [BergmanJay](#)

There are many questions and only a few will be answered when 2-year-olds take the stage this Friday in multiple Breeders Crown elimination races. Perhaps at no other time in the sport's history have so many horses found fame and fortune racing strictly in one jurisdiction. The results bring champions from far and wide, with Woodbine Mohawk Park the destination to find out just how well they will match up when confronted by new competition.

If there's a home court advantage for the Ontario-based conditioners, trainer Matt Bax, who sends out a pair of freshmen trotting fillies in two Crown trials, doesn't think it's that great. "I guess the fact that we're five minutes away from the track and don't have to ship our horses," said Bax when queried on the subject. "Everyone knows it's a hard track and prepares for it."

What's difficult to gauge, especially for young horses, is how to compare mile times from different racetracks to assess realistically whether horses will be competitive. For Bax the justification came easily when he raced Storybook Love, a second-place finisher in the Big Apple Trot at Vernon Downs this past Saturday (October 11).

"I thought my filly raced very well against Melander's (Nezuko Kamado S) and she trotted in 1:52 and change at Hoosier," said Bax, alluding to the comparative time quandary. "I think a 1:54 and change mile up here is similar to a 1:52 and change mile at The Red Mile."

Given the numbers, Bax has confidence in his pair of fillies based on their early season performance but more than that how they are entering the Crown.

"They are both coming in off solid miles," Bax said. "One Belle has had some issues tying up that we've had to deal with but went a solid mile beating Carl Jamieson's colt."

One Belle's 1:54 1/5 victory over a male rival on October 9 was the perfect prep race on what was a bit of a cool night.

One Belle is a Walner-sired filly from the Muscle Hill-sired mare Ms Savannah Belle, herself a Breeders Crown elimination winner as a 2-year-old in 2019 over this track. One Belle has won four of her six career starts. She drew post seven in Friday's eighth race and needs a top four finish to guarantee a spot in the final.

The field is deep, with Nezuko Kamado S (post 1) the likely favorite looking for her fourth consecutive stakes win. Bax's original driver choice James MacDonald opted for Red Mile Grand Circuit winner Jailbird Jog (post 2), leaving the trainer to seek a substitute. "Todd McCarthy will drive (One Belle) but she's pretty easy to handle," said Bax.

This field also includes Ontario Super Final winner Bingo Night (post 5), a daughter of Green Manalishi S that overcame post 10 to capture that contest over this surface on October 10, and Denarius (post 9), who has won three of four starts this year including a Champlain division here on September 12 for trainer Domenico Cecere.

The first Breeders Crown elimination for filly trotters (race 6) finds Storybook Love (post 2) in a solid position. The daughter of Chapter Seven has continued to improve as the season has progressed while racing on the New York Sire Stakes circuit as well as Grand Circuit events at Woodbine Mohawk Park. A winner in her Big Apple elimination in a career-best 1:54 4/5 clocking at Vernon Downs on October 4, Storybook Love followed that performance up with a strong placing in the final.

On Friday she'll have to contend with another from the powerful Marcus Melander stable, with the Ohio Sire Stakes final champion Setyoursightshigh (post 4) in quest of her eighth win of the season. The field also contains back-to-back Red Mile Grand Circuit winner Southwind Chaska (post 3), who has captured six of her eight career starts for trainer Jim Oscarsson.

Trainer Annie Stoebe is very much looking forward to one of the two Breeders Crown eliminations Friday night for 2-year-old trotting colts and geldings. The primary reason for that is the return to Woodbine Mohawk Park of Diabolic Hill, making his first competitive start since a

fourth-place finish starting from post nine in the Mohawk Million.

"I'm excited. He's finally going to have a good post to start from," said Stoebe of the Muscle Hill-sired colt that drew post five in Friday's fourth race.

"He was giant in the Mohawk Million," said Stoebe. "He was parked two and three wide and then charged home the fastest last quarter of the group."

Diabolic Hill survived an extra-wide trip and still finished his mile with a 26 3/5 final quarter, closing in but coming up short of race-winner Apex.

Stoebe went back to steel shoes from aluminum prior to a 1:56 1/5 qualifying win at The Meadowlands and that's the way Diabolic Hill will race on Friday night.

Endurance, the runner-up in the Mohawk Million, only his second defeat of the year in eight starts, looks to get back on the winning track in this division. The colt from the first crop of Captain Corey drew the pole position for trainer Chris Beaver and should be favored.



FOTOWON

Storybook Love won an elimination of the Big Apple Trot at Vernon and will hope to have similar success at Mohawk Park on Friday.

The first Breeders Crown trial for juvenile colt and gelding trotters will be Woodbine Mohawk Park's second race of the evening, pitting recent Big Apple Trot champion Spencer Hanover (post 2) against Mr Big Spender (post 6), a recent 1:51 2/5 winner at The Red Mile in a division of the Bluegrass.

Spencer Hanover was a winner for the first time in 10 starts but picked the right time to break his maiden for trainer Marcus Melander, capturing the \$250,000 Big Apple Trot in a sparkling 1:52 3/5 mile.

Mr Big Spender had a tough draw in the Peter Haughton at Hoosier Park on September 12 and finished third behind Apex (who earned a bye to the final of the Breeders Crown). Mr Big Spender, another by Captain Corey, rebounded from post eight at The Red Mile on September 25, getting used quite hard to get the front and then battle back late for a career-best mile. Mike Wilder drives for trainer Norm Parker.

Stoebe has entered two others in the Crown, with Pink Chou Chou, a Chapter Seven-sired filly, going in the second of two eliminations for 3-year-old filly trotters on Saturday night.

"She's coming off an injury and we give her a long prep," said Stoebe of the filly that has only raced three times this year. "She trotted in (1:)55 and change in her qualifier and I think she'll drop a few seconds and hopefully be perfect for the final."

Pink Chou Chou is a half-sister to the \$3.1 million winner Manchego.

Elista Hanover has had to deal with some poor post positions and difficult racing luck since her powerful performance in the Hambletonian Maturity at The Meadowlands in July. The 4-year-old mare most recently finished third from post eight in the Dayton Distaff on September 27.

"I was hoping to get a race for her, but they didn't fill so we'll qualify her on Friday here (Woodbine Mohawk Park)," said Stoebe.

Post time for the two cards of Breeders Crown eliminations on Friday and Saturday is 6:35 PM (EDT).

Pedigree could shine for Pelling in Breeders Crown elims

By Jay Bergman

Breeders seek perfection but often come up short. To reach the Breeders Crown it sometimes pays to breed horses that are previous winners of the sport's year-end division defining race. For trainer Brett Pelling, 2025 marks the second straight year he will have a horse in the preliminaries with a pedigree that more than hints at greatness.

For Pelling, Disney lit up the board in capturing a Breeders Crown elimination at The Meadowlands last year against the sport's premier sophomore pacing fillies. The daughter of two-time Crown champion and World-Record setter Always B Miki on the sire side and double Crown winner Pure Country on the dam's side, rallied from last to first at sky-high odds of 66-1. Making just her 11th career start Disney showcased her talent against the best.

This year Fusion has followed a similar path for Pelling, starting out in the Kentucky Sire Stakes program and working his way up to Grand Circuit competition at The Red Mile. Fusion, unlike his older full sister, did race and show some talent at age 2 but never rose past second-tier status in his division. This year Pelling saw Fusion win at the Golden Rod level on a pair of occasions before stepping up for a win and then second-place finish in the Commonwealth final.

A move up to the Bluegrass during the first week of Grand Circuit action at The Red Mile appeared a stretch but not after the colt swooped the field in the stretch and took a career-best 1:48 4/5 mile.

"He's fine chasing speed but he has to get the right kind of trip," said Pelling of Fusion, who drew post four in the first of two Crown eliminations for sophomore pacing colts and geldings.

In his Bluegrass triumph, Fusion was relaxed as others dueled through hot fractions that paved the way for his late kick to pay off. The move was enough to give the trainer confidence to put him in the Tattersalls, a race with more players at the highest level of the division. The decision forced driver Todd McCarthy to stay loyal to Prince Hal Hanover and that left Dexter Dunn to pick up the assignment.

In the Tattersalls, Dunn utilized his rail position to get away third through a blistering 26-second opening fraction. Fusion had no difficulty keeping pace in a race that saw Prince Hal Hanover on the front and rival Madden Oaks pressing him hard through fractions of 52 4/5 and 1:19 4/5. While those two matched strides Fusion was in a world of trouble. Early speedster Papis Pistol was struggling to keep contact with the leaders and that kept Fusion and Dunn boxed in.

"Dexter was in all kinds of trouble," said Pelling. "Papis Pistol is a very fast horse on the straights but he's a bit compromised on the turn and he was slowing down."

So while others had a clear shot on the outside to gain position Fusion was pinned between horses and on two occasions lost his gait momentarily before recovering. "He had plenty of pace but nowhere to go," said Pelling.

Finally, a hole would emerge, and Fusion kicked into gear but would not be able to overcome the momentum longshot Handsome Stranger had on the far outside and would miss by a neck timed in 1:48 1/5, the fastest of his career.

"Dexter said if he had found room he could have won by five," said Pelling.

That was the type of confidence booster that pushed Fusion (post 4) into Saturday's field where many of the same players he faced in Kentucky will meet him again. Madden Oaks (post 2) returns to the Woodbine Mohawk Park surface where he lost a photo to division leader Louprint in the North America Cup in June. The difference this time around for the Cam Capone-trained son of Huntsville is that local star driver Louis Philippe Roy picks up the assignment. Madden Oaks was beaten just a length after a brutal journey in the Tattersalls.

Prince Hal Hanover (post 6) finished third in that Tattersalls mile but he too failed to give up ground in the stretch despite the hectic pace under duress through a wicked middle half. The Dr. Ian Moore-trained colt has been a consistent force all season long.

Adding more speed to this contest will be Kentucky Sire Stakes champion Sippinonsearoc for trainer Ron Burke, a 1:48 2/5 winner at The Red Mile this season with six wins in 13 seasonal starts. Sippinonsearoc drew post eight.

Asking Pelling to compare the sister-brother tandem of Disney and Fusion he felt that last year's Crown elimination upsetter probably had more will and grit than Fusion but suggested the colt has come on strongly towards year end and can go with most anyone in this class under the right trip conditions.

Faze's resume before Grand Circuit action at The Red Mile gave more indication that she might have been better suited for Kentucky action at Cumberland Run this week as opposed to a trip North for the Breeders Crown. The daughter of Sweet Lou, when put in against the top fillies in North America, defied the odds on consecutive weeks. Tim Tetrack gave her a winning drive in the Bluegrass on September 27, leaving aggressively from an outside post and working out a pocket trip that she converted at 15-1 to earn a 1:49 career-best clocking. A week later on October 5 Faze faced an oversized field once again with an outside post and though she didn't win the race her performance was outstanding.

"That's a hell of a trip over that track," said Pelling. "You don't see horses live on the outside through those kinds of fractions and still hold up to the wire."

Indeed, Faze did much of her racing on the rim through a middle half clocked in 53 flat, eventually ending up without cover for the long straightaway. Faze still paced home in 27 1/5, missing a length and a half to Unreasonable, a filly she will meet again on Saturday night.

With The Last Martini and Rodeo Drive Deo taking byes into next week's final, eight of the 10 fillies entered in Saturday's ninth race will reach the final. Faze must overcome another tough draw (post 7) as well as division leaders Miki And Minnie (post 2) and Chantilly (Post 9). This will be just the second meeting for last year's Breeders Crown champion Miki And Minnie and last year's Canadian Horse of the Year Chantilly. The two met in the Lynch Memorial with Miki And Minnie outkicking Chantilly in a thriller.

While Pelling doesn't have the same firepower that saw him capture the 3-year-old Crown filly pace with Test Of Faith in 2021 or the 3-year-old Crown colt and gelding pace in 2023 with Horse of the Year Confederate, he has a pair coming into this year's edition in peak form just seeking a chance to reach the lucrative final. Then again, it's not easy to have champions every two years.

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MGM Yonkers withdraws bid for full casino; Faraldo says it won't affect purses

By Derick Givner

On October 14, MGM Yonkers issued a [press release](#) stating it was withdrawing its bid for a full casino license due to the shifting of the “competitive and economic assumptions” since submitting its application. It read in part:

“The newly defined competitive landscape – with four proposals clustered in a small geographic area – challenges the returns we initially anticipated from this project. Also, our proposal to renovate and expand Empire City Casino was predicated on the receipt of a 30-year commercial casino license but based on newly issued guidance from the State of New York we now expect to qualify for only a 15-year license. Taken together, these events result in a proposition that no longer aligns with our commitment to capital stewardship, nor to that of our real estate partner in Yonkers, VICI.”

Reached for comment on how the decision will affect the purse account and horse racing community at Yonkers Raceway, Standardbred Owners Association President Joe Faraldo didn't seem the least bit concerned, citing a stipulation in the law which mandates that the Empire Resorts facility in Newburgh is required to make up any difference to maintain purses at 2018 levels plus consumer price index increases.

Faraldo said that some loss of revenue could occur due to the potential addition of up to three full casinos but felt that it was also possible that it may not happen.

“The general feeling is that it is going to cannibalize your product but I'm not so sure about that. The people who frequent the one-armed bandits or slot machine, they are not the same people who will play the crap tables and games like that. I think it is a different demographic to some extent,” said Faraldo.

The SOA of NY recently signed a contract with MGM Yonkers that will extend through the end of 2028. That along with stipulations in the law which require the maintaining of racing in order for a casino to exist have Faraldo feeling good.

“I sit here and I'm not worried. Can situations change? Anything can happen,” said Faraldo, who did admit he was surprised by the announcement. “Yes, I was surprised. I had heard that perhaps they were not going to get a casino but I think that their decision is one they have the right to make as a business.”

“To me this is just an economic decision and I don't think anyone can criticize it if they were standing in MGM's shoes.”

With MGM Yonkers out of the running, three downstate entities remain and the New York Gaming Commission can issue up to three licenses in December. The suitors include Resorts World New York (Aqueduct), Metropolitan Park (Citi Field) and Bally's Bronx (Ferry Point).

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2025 HOLIDAY ISSUE



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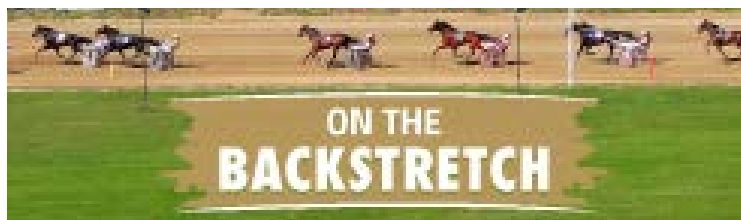
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BY DERICK GIWNER

Hunter Oakes is having a career year and perhaps the first of many considering he is only 27 years old. A native of Buffalo and a second generation horseman, his path was very much halted in the sport when his father Chris Oakes was sentenced to 36 months in prison stemming from a drug misbranding and adulteration charge.

Buoyed by the success of multiple stakes winner Dandy Ideal, Hunter Oakes is edging close to \$2 million in barn earnings and hopes to increase those totals in the Breeders Crown. Ahead of his first appearance in the series, Oakes took the time to discuss his stable star, his father and the toll it took on him, plus much more. Enjoy!

TRAINER HUNTER OAKES

How did you get started in harness racing?

I grew up around it through my father and was around horses from the get-go.

Was there ever a chance that you wouldn't pursue a path in harness racing?

I'm actually allergic to horses so it was never a huge pull-in for me until I had a few 'regular jobs' and ultimately decided to battle through it and stick with the horses.

How have you dealt with the allergy issues?

In high school I got allergy shots once a week and that pretty much subsided it. Luckily after getting the shots it isn't too bad. I'll have my bad days but I can deal with it.

It is difficult to discuss your story without bringing up your dad, Chris, who was sentenced to three years in prison back in 2022 for misbranding medications. How hard was that on you?

Very hard. It kind of came as a surprise. I would help him with the babies and we went from a full barn to nothing in a few days. It kind of left me wondering what was going to happen. Overnight my last name went from being a good thing to a bad thing.

Is your dad out? How is he doing?

He's been out for a little over a year now. He is doing good. He's still probably my biggest supporter and critic. He knows it was a long journey for me after everything that happened with him and he's just hoping I do well.

Is it difficult being a trainer in the shadow of your father's "reputation"?

In certain situations it can be. I try not to think about that and just try to pave my own path, but it definitely has come with challenges. I still can't race at The Meadowlands but I'm in good standing with the New Jersey Racing Commission. Stuff like that is tough. I cross the obstacles when they come to me but I try not to look at it as a handicap. I still think my dad was a good horseman and I'd like to think it was a good thing growing up around him.

Does the guilt by association rub you the wrong way?

Yeah, it definitely rubs me the wrong way. In over 2,000 starts I've never served a suspension day. That is the only thing that bugs me. I'd at least like a chance.



DERICK GIWNER

Hunter Oakes has over 500 career wins as a trainer including a career high 100 (thru 10/14) in 2025.

You do have one listed positive for a class two but it cites "mitigating circumstances." What does that mean?

I got a positive on capsicum. I was familiar with the word and it is a pepper. The levels were in the single picograms. The horse had just started wearing bandages and he was trying to chew them off, so I sprayed a product called RAPLAST that is sold over the counter at the tack shop on the track grounds. I thought maybe that caused it and brought the bottle to the hearing along with the receipt. The first ingredient in it is capsicum. I went from trying to do a good thing for the horse and next thing I know the positive happened. I thought they were very fair to me in my hearing.

Was your father the first generation for the Oakes family in the sport?

Yes. His father was a gambler and would take him to the track and bet on races. My father always told me from the first time he went to the track that he wanted to work with the horses.

Your stable already has set career highs in wins (100) and earnings (\$1.9 million) with a few months to go. How have you been able to build your barn up to that level?

It has definitely progressed but the numbers have really been helped out by Dandy Ideal in terms of the money. I try to be smart about the horses I take. I'm not interested in taking just any horse and I try to make sure they will be competitive at the tracks I race at. I've also had a good year with the claimers and that helps with the numbers. The purse structure with the claimers is a little superior to the non-winners conditioned races. You have to be willing to spend a lot of money to get a good conditioned horse and in some cases the money isn't better versus the claimers. I've tried to structure my barn by focusing on stakes horses and claimers. It has worked out really well. You have a greater freedom to classify claimers. If they race bad I can just drop them.

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Some of your horses are owned by your mom Susan. How supportive has she been in getting your barn going?

She has her own career aside from harness racing that she does really well at. Thank God for her, even after everything happened with my dad, she was the first person to help me get on my feet with a horse or two. Thank God it has worked out well for this year. I'm really happy for her and all the other partners that have gotten a good return. She's been very supportive.

You've tried your luck in the bike as well and have 134 wins in 751 starts. Why did you stop driving in 2021?

I really enjoyed driving. I only had about one or two horses to myself after my dad got in trouble. It was nice, I could get into the barn early, get my stuff done and drive at Monticello. Then I had an owner call me up to claim some horses. I didn't really imagine what he had in mind. He sent more money than I anticipated and told me to claim whatever I wanted. The next weekend I had like six or seven in on a Saturday and I was driving them all myself. It was a little overwhelming trying to make sure all the equipment was right, warming up and other catch drives. So I thought until I get a little help I'll just use the catch drivers and once I get situated I'll go back to driving. Things were going well and I never went back to it. I missed it a little at first but at least now all the pressure isn't on me. Making the decision to stop driving has allowed me to grow my barn.

Recently someone mentioned on social media that they saw your dad in the winner's circle after a win by Dandy Ideal, which turned out to be false. To clear things up, where are you stabled and where does your father live?

I'm stabled at Silver Springs Ranch which is about 20 minutes outside of Pocono and my dad travels a lot between Florida and Buffalo. His whole family lives in Buffalo but he likes being warm in the winter.

How many horses are in your barn?

With the claimers it changes but between 20 and 30.

What is your favorite track to race at and why?

I had a really good experience going up to Mohawk for the North America Cup and I thought they did a great job with everything. They put on a great show. On top of that, Mohawk is a track I enjoy watching. They do a great job with the commentary between races and everyone should take a note out of their book. It keeps everyone interested between races. When I'm watching Mohawk I'm not tempted to switch to another track the second they cross the wire.

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

Get a good dinner and relaxing with my friends.

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

I driven in a race in Belgium.

What is one word that describes harness racing for you?

Business.

What is the best advice you've ever gotten about harness racing?

Be able to turn the page after a bad race. It is a hard one to follow.

Do you have a bit of a temper after bad races?

More of an internal bad temper. I'm just hard on myself.

What was your best moment in harness racing?

Winning the Max Hempt with Dandy Ideal. A close second would be when I took Homicide Hunter back to the paddock [at The Red Mile] after he won in 1:48 [4/5] and the crowd was cheering. That was pretty cool. Any time there are a lot of people involved it is a lot of fun. At Pocono in the Hempt when Dandy Ideal won, a lot of my friends came out. They don't come to the track a lot and they love the energy of winning a big race. Even winning the Sire Stakes at Batavia, I'm like the only one on my mother or father's side that doesn't live in Buffalo. We had a really big crowd there too.



NIKKI SHERMAN/DRF HARNESS

Dandy Ideal won the Max Hempt pace at Pocono Downs in 2025.

You have a number of very nice horses in your barn led by Dandy Ideal who had won eight straight races before a loss on October 11. Is he good enough to win the Breeders Crown versus Louprint?

I think he has a shot at it. Obviously Louprint is extremely talented but I think my horse can step up versus the big horses. I've been around a lot of nice horses my whole life and he ranks right up there for me with the way he emits class off himself. I think he can surprise some people.

Have you trained a horse in the Breeders Crown before?

This will be my first one. I'm very excited. It's nice for me after just having to restart everything a couple of years ago. It's surreal.

Did you always know you had a special horse with Dandy Ideal?

I bought him last year [private purchase] and only had him for about a week before the Matron. Then I turned him out, so I didn't really have a lot of time with him. Training him back over the winter time, he really impressed me. I didn't think maybe he was going to be this good but I knew he was very talented.

Do you see your 2-year-old Imagine Heaven or anyone else in your stable stepping up in the near future?

Imagine Heaven is Dandy's sister and that's why I bought him. I bought her before I bought him. I think I bought him two days later. She was off to a really good start and hit some road bumps, but I've tried to change some things around hoping for some better luck in the

CONTINUED ON PAGE 11

later part of the year. She is extremely talented and I knew that training her down.

You are just 27 years old. How do you see your future in harness racing?

Hopefully the same way it has been the last couple of years – steady growth.

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

Uniform rules between States. I think all of the horsemen would appreciate that.

How do you view the future of harness racing?

We need to keep looking to make changes for the better, not only for the horsemen but for the bettors, and keep trying new things.

Meadowlands returns to action Saturday; Thursdays start in November

After a four-week break, live harness racing returns to The Meadowlands on Saturday (Oct. 18).

In fact, this weekend will be split between “the runners” and “the trotters” as the final evening of the “Monmouth at The Meadowlands” Thoroughbred turf meeting takes place on Friday (Oct. 17) before the trotters and pacers get back on the track the next night.

The Thoroughbred program begins at 7 p.m., while the Standardbreds begin at 6:20 p.m.

There are 27 harness programs remaining on The Big M schedule for 2025. Live action will take place every Friday and Saturday, effective Oct. 24, through the end of the year. In addition, six Thursdays have been added to the schedule. Those dates are Nov. 6, 13 and 20 and Dec. 4, 11 and 18.

GRILL ME SOME STAKES: When the leaves turn brown and temperatures turn chilly, that’s normally a time when big-time harness racing events go into hibernation.

Not so at The Meadowlands, as the mile track still has a pair of huge nights left on the 2025 calendar.

First up will be four Kindergarten Series finals that go for purses totaling \$500,000 (gtd.). The races, which take place on Saturday, Nov. 1, are for 2-year-olds of each sex and gait.

Two weeks later, on Saturday, Nov. 15, will be the final big night of the year at The Big M – and the entire sport – as an estimated \$2.65 million in purses will be on the line on Fall Final Four/FanDuel Championships Night.

The events are:

- \$400,000 Governor’s Cup (2-year-old colt and gelding pace)
- \$400,000 Three Diamonds (2-year-old filly pace)
- \$400,000 Valley Victory (2-year-old colt and gelding trot)
- \$400,000 Goldsmith Maid (2-year-old filly trot)
- \$350,000 FanDuel Open Pace
- \$350,000 FanDuel Open Trot
- \$175,000 FanDuel Open Mare Pace
- \$175,000 FanDuel Open Mare Trot

—edited release (Meadowlands)

As a young person in the sport, is it possible for the industry to improve and get people your age involved?

I think it really isn’t bad for the horsemen right now. You really can make a living at this and I think you can argue it is better than it was 25 years ago for the horsemen. We need to do more to get bettors involved. Even some of my friends that I bring around, they have a little trouble because it really isn’t the most attractive sport to bet on. We need to find a way to make the sport more attractive to young gamblers. It needs drastic improvement.

What does a day in the life of Hunter Oakes look like?

Get rolling at the barn about 6 am and that’s about it when I’m not racing. I’m either at the barn or on the road racing.

Time for the stretch drive.

Best Horse you ever saw: I was very impressed with Confederate.

Lasix – Yes or No: Yes.

Favorite TV Show: White Lotus.

Trotters or Pacers: Pacers. I like trotters but I deal with more pacers.

London Classic Yearling Sale wrapup

By Greg Reinhart

D A Mindcraft, a Muscle Mass colt, led the first of two London Classic Yearling Sale sessions on Tuesday, as he was purchased by Pollack Racing for C\$140,000.

Bred and consigned by Ashley and Dean Wilson and sold as HIP 80, D A Mindcraft is a brother to four horses who have earned more than C\$250,000 and to six who have banked over C\$100,000. His full brother Stable Genius took a mark of 1:51 1/5 at the Meadowlands last year and is also owned by Pollack Racing.

Also making it into six figures during the session were Bulldog Hanover colt Code Name Jack (HIP 62), another offering by the Wilsons who went to Power Racing Stable for C\$135,000, and two Seelster Farms-breds in HIP 66 Panache Seelster and HIP 81 Valor Seelster. Panache Seelster, a filly from the first crop of King Of The North, was acquired by Roger Mayotte for C\$120,000 and Valor Seelster, another colt by Bulldog Hanover, was taken by Jack Darling for C\$110,000.

A total of 145 yearlings were sold for a sum of C4,599,000 and an average of \$31,717. These are both year-over-year increases, as 2024’s opening session saw 123 horses go through the ring for an average of C\$28,341 and a gross of C\$3,486,000.

Cattlewash filly sets top mark in Wednesday session

Cattlewash filly Roca fetched a winning bid of C\$190,000 to end up as top seller in the 2025 London Classic Yearling Sale, which concluded on Wednesday afternoon.

Bred by Blair and Erna Corbeil and sold as HIP 202, Roca was consigned by Ashley and Dean Wilson and was purchased by Power Racing Stable. Roca is out of the Rocknroll Hanover mare Rockumentary and is a half-sister to C\$344,276 earner This Dragon Rocks and to C\$352,506 earner Cusdmagicdragon.

Behind Roca were HIP 183 King Sullivan at C\$150,000, HIP 179 Century Nantucket at C\$115,000 and HIP 173 Gilcrest Seelster at C\$107,000. King Sullivan, a King Of The North colt consigned by the Wilsons, went to Shane Weber, Century Nantucket, a Bettor’s Delight colt consigned by Century Springs Farm, was purchased by Rich Stiles and Gilcrest Seelster, a Cattlewash colt consigned by Seelster Farms, was acquired by Lindsey Rankin.

289 yearlings were sold over two days for a total of C\$8,798,000 and an average of C\$30,442. Both the gross and average were up from 2024’s C\$7,015,000 and C\$28,516.

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Sabonis to join stallion ranks in Indiana next year

Diamond Creek announced on Sunday afternoon (Oct. 12) that multiple graded stakes winner Sabonis (1:47 3/5, \$814,233) will stand stud in Indiana beginning in 2026, in partnership with Cornerstone Stock Farm and Premier Acres, for a stud fee of \$3,500. The stallion has been recently retired to Diamond Creek where he has already impressed with his libido and fertility.

Sabonis is a son of Tellitlikeitis-Gypsy Bellevue-Roll With Joe and was declared "Hoosier's Winningest Horse of 2024" with an impressive 15 wins from 17 starts. His 3-year-old season also included wins in the G2 Carl Milstein Memorial at Northfield Park and G3 Jenna's Beach Boy for trainer Aaron Stutzman. Purchased as a 4-year-old by Diamond Creek Racing and Pelling Racing, Sabonis scored a 1:47 3/5 victory in the G2 Graduate Series Final at the Meadowlands and returned to Indiana to capture the Grade 2 \$300,000 Dan Patch Stakes.

"Anyone that follows the Indiana program knows just how dominant Sabonis was," said Jeff Fought of Cornerstone Stock Farm. "It was no surprise to see what he went on to do nationally as a 4-year-old. We'll be heavily supporting him as he comes back home to begin his stallion career."

Trainer Brett Pelling added, "Having been around successful stallions, I see similar traits in Sabonis in regards to his strength and intelligence."

Sabonis is now being syndicated and will be available for inspection at the upcoming Midwest Standardbred Horse Sale at the Indiana State Fairgrounds on Wednesday, Oct. 15. We welcome all breeders to come and see Sabonis and talk to our team about syndication details. A special offer will be available to breeders who reserve their shares at the sale! Limited number of shares available and expected to sell out quickly.

For syndication details, please contact:

Diamond Creek Farm

Email: office@diamondcreekfarm.com / Phone: 717-638-7100

Cornerstone Stock Farm

Email: jeff.fought@cornerstonestockfarm.com / Phone: 260-463-1649

-edited release (Diamond Creek)

TUIS STAR, THISKISSFORMARYELL VICTORIOUS IN DSBF TROT FINALS

A pair of \$110,000 Delaware Standardbred Breeders Fund (DSBF) trotting finals for 2-year-olds headlined the Wednesday program at Harrington Raceway.

Don and David Wiest's Tuis Star (\$3, Corey Callahan) was an easy 1:59 4/5 winner from post seven over Dancing Willow and Wolfpack One. The EL Platinum filly settled in fourth early and was urged confidently first-over before clearing and drawing off from the field for her third straight win for trainer David Wiest.

In the colt and gelding final, Nanticoke Racing, Jim Magno and Joe Fonte's Thiskissformaryell (\$5.60, Jim Morand) was a 2:01 3/5 winner, narrowly defeating Pappy's Deal and Prime Yield. The Iron Mine Bucky gelding achieved his fourth career win for trainer Les Givens in front-end fashion, holding off pocket-sitter Pappy's Deal in a photo finish.

E&K Stable and Robert Nibblet Jr.'s Top Flight Champion (\$12.60, Eddie Dennis) was a 2:01 4/5 winner in the \$20,000 DSBF Consolation. The Top Flight Angel gelding earned his first career win for trainer/driver Dennis.

In the \$18,000 overnight feature, the Open Trot, J&T Davis' All Wrapped Up (\$7.60, Allan Davis) was a 1:56 2/5 winner over Dyladmar and Navy Blue. The Archangel 9-year-old notched his sixth win of the year off a ground-saving trip for trainer Tyler Davis. It was his 43rd career win.

Shirley Shand's Snow Burst (\$4.20, Ross Shand), a graduate of the DSBF program, started the card with an impressive 1:57 win in a \$7,500 conditioned trot. The 6-year-old Anders Bluestone gelding won his 12th career race in the 99th start of his lifetime.

Also on the undercard, Wagenhoffer Racing and E&K Stable's Tom Creek (\$15, Eddie Dennis) was a 1:56 4/5 winner in a \$14,500 winners-over trot. The 4-year-old Long Tom gelding continued his successful meet for trainer William Wagenhoffer with his seventh win of the season.

-edited release (Harrington)

DRF Bets Handicapper's Corner

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At DRF Harness we strive to provide the best handicapping information in the sport. Each week we'll use this space to bring you some of our handicappers' best bets and value plays. Use this information as one of your tools when wagering or simply click on the link above and head to DRF Bets to wager now.

THURSDAY, OCTOBER 16

RACE 9

(6) REDLAND SAPHIRE was moving extremely well from the back while under a big hold from McClure. She is a filly who should take plenty of support tonight; I think she backs up that support.

-Kevin Plowcha



WOODBINE
MOHAWK PARK

FRIDAY, OCTOBER 17

RACE 2

(2) SPENCER HANOVER has turned into a new horse with hobbles added and was absolutely spectacular last time winning the Big Apple Trot. This is a chance for him to prove he belongs with the big boys.

-Derick Gwerner



WOODBINE
MOHAWK PARK

RACE 8

(3) AARDIE B MIKI N gets the post draw that could give her the tactical advantage after missing a neck and a nose last week; her turn tonight.

-Matt Rose



SATURDAY, OCTOBER 18

RACE 8

(9) ALTA BLUES A improved in his second start back from multiple months on the sidelines. Veteran has a bit of class and can overcome the outside draw versus a softer TM77 field.

-Giwner



FULL CARD ANALYSIS / PAST PERFORMANCES

Mohawk Park Analysis

Thursday

Friday

Saturday

Meadowlands Analysis

Saturday

Yonkers Analysis

Thursday

Friday

DHP PPS

HARNESS EYE PPS

TRACKMASTER PPS

FREE PPS

INSTANT RACING UPDATES VIA TWITTER: @DRFHARNES

NEWS FROM AROUND THE HARNESS INDUSTRY

LOUPRINT STAYS ON TOP IN TOP 10 POLL

By Ken Weingartner

There were no changes in the Top 10 in the Week 18 edition of the Hambletonian Society/Breeders Crown poll released Wednesday.

Only one horse in the Top 10, Beau Jangles, raced last week. He won his Ontario Sire Stakes Super Final at Woodbine Mohawk Park to improve to 10-for-10 this season.

Louprint remained the unanimous pick for No. 1 for the second straight week, receiving all 35 first-place votes.

The Hambletonian Society/Breeders Crown poll, which will continue weekly on Wednesdays through the Grand Circuit season, does not determine year-end awards. The members of the U.S. Harness Writers Association vote on all Dan Patch Award division winners plus Trotter of the Year, Pacer of the Year, and Horse of the Year.

Rankings based on the votes of harness racing media representatives on a 10-9-8-7-6-5-4-3-2-1 basis.

Hambletonian Society/Breeders Crown Standardbred Poll: Week 18 – 10/15/2025

Rank	Name (1st Votes)	Age/Sex/Gait	Record	Earnings	Points	Pvs
1	Louprint (35)	3cp	10-10-0-0	\$1,013,773	350	1
2	Twin B Joe Fresh	5mp	9-6-2-1	\$526,714	264	2
3	Emoticon Legacy	3ct	9-7-1-0	\$948,905	213	3
4	Yo Tillie	3ft	10-9-1-0	\$636,783	211	4
5	Beau Jangles	2cp	10-10-0-0	\$866,130	204	5
6	Lexus Kody	7gt	18-9-3-3	\$1,074,472	183	6
7	Miki And Minnie	3fp	12-10-2-0	\$810,091	172	7
8	Sylvia Hanover	5mp	12-6-5-1	\$433,292	80	8
9	Loua Dipa	2fp	10-7-1-1	\$381,045	63	9
10	Ervin Hanover	5hp	14-8-1-1	\$532,218	47	10

ALSO: Periculum 26; Apex 23; Super Chapter 22; Odds On Mr Mamba 11; Chantilly, M-M's Dream 7; Captain Albano, Ken Hanover 6; Monalishi, On To Norway, Prince Hal Hanover 5; P L Spencer 4; Crack Shot 3; Delaney Hanover, Elista Hanover, Go Dog Go 2; Aetos Kronos S, Windemere Skye 1.

\$4,713 CARRYOVER, \$15,000 GUARANTEED POOL IN THURSDAY'S PICK 5

No tickets had five-of-five in the Pick 5 on Wednesday night (October 15) at MGM Yonkers Raceway, leading to a \$4,713.68 carryover and a \$15,000 guaranteed pool in the sequence on Thursday night (October 16).

The guarantee in the Pick 5 is being offered as part of the United States Trotting Association's Strategic Wagering Program and free Harness Eye past performances for the Pick 5 are available [here](#). The Pick 5, which begins in race five and has a \$1 minimum, has a takeout rate of 20 percent.

-release (Yonkers)--

BLACK BOOK #2 AVAILABLE SOON

Black Book #2 Mixed Sale Catalog has gone to the printer. There will be limited mailings, catalogs will be available at the sale. It is now available on [equineline.com](#) and will soon be available at [theblackbook.com](#) along with a sortable roster.

We are super excited about the quality in both catalogs.

Thank you to our consignors and owners for your continued support of the Harrisburg Sales.

We look forward to seeing old friends and making new friends, in a few short weeks!!

-release (Standardbred Horse Sales Co.)

NEW JERSEY PROMINENT SHOWING AT LEXINGTON YEARLING SALE

For the second year in a row, New Jersey-eligible yearlings sold for more than \$20 million at the annual Lexington Selected Yearling Sale in Kentucky.

This year, New Jersey-eligible yearlings brought a total of \$20.46 million at the recently concluded five-day event at the Fasig-Tipton Pavilion in Lexington. The gross was an increase over last year's total of \$20.27 million.

Trotting stallion Walner, who stands at Southwind Farms, was the sale's top-grossing sire, at nearly \$10.5 million. He also led in average, at \$131,188, for 80 yearlings.

Walner sired the sale's two highest purchases, both fillies: Dejeuner for \$1 million, and Turtle Dove for \$900,000. Dejeuner became the highest-priced yearling filly ever sold at auction, bettering the previous record of \$925,000 for Rani Hanover (also sired by Walner) in 2024. Only three other yearlings, all colts, have ever sold for at least \$1 million.

In addition, five other New Jersey-eligibles were among the Top 10 sellers: Valorous (by Alrajah One IT), Social Hour (Walner), Temple Of Trot (Walner), Umbria (Tactical Landing) and Temperamental (Muscle Hill).

Muscle Hill ranked third in gross among all sires at the sale, with 37 yearlings totaling \$4.14 million, and his average of \$111,973 also was third. Tactical Landing was fifth in gross among trotting sires, with 40 yearlings totaling \$3.17 million. Both stallions stand at Southwind Farms.

Overall, New Jersey-eligible yearlings averaged \$94,327. The average for all yearlings in the entire sale was \$68,417.

Buyers from New Jersey spent \$21.4 million at the Lexington sale, by far the top total at the event.

-release (SBOANJ)

WARREN'S CHARM TALLIES IN HER DSBF FINAL

Rodney Wyatt and Jason Skinner's Warren's Charm (\$14.80, Art Stafford Jr.) was a 1:55 4/5 winner in the \$110,000 Delaware Standardbred Breeders Fund (DSBF) 2-year-old pacing filly final at Harrington Raceway Tuesday.

[READ MORE](#)

MILLER, GINGRAS DOUBLE IN KENTUCKY SIRE STAKES

The first week of Kentucky Sire Stakes action at Cumberland Run wrapped up on Tuesday with 3-year-old trotters on the oval in seven \$40,000 sections.

[READ MORE](#)

UPCOMING RACING & EVENTS AT THE MEADOWLANDS RACETRACK

Live harness racing returns to the Meadowlands this Saturday, October 18, and runs through Saturday, December 27th, with a 6:20 pm post time.

The fun kicks off this Saturday, October 18th, with the track's first-ever Corgi Cup. This family-friendly event features Corgis racing at the track between live harness racing. It's a night of fun, laughs, music, doggies, and horse racing. Eighty doggy contestants will compete in eight heats that begin at 6 p.m., with the Corgi Cup Final on the track at 9:25 pm.

Big simulcasting weekends hit back-to-back with the Breeders Crown Finals from Woodbine Mohawk Park on October 24 and 25, and the Breeders' Cup Championships from Del Mar on Friday, October 31, and Saturday, November 1. Buffet dining opens early for Breeders' Cup weekend with doors opening at 4:30 pm and food service beginning at 5 pm. Dining reservations can be made by calling 201-The-BigM (201-843-2446).

Saturday, October 25, is also the track's monthly handicapping contest. There is no entry fee (a \$100 live money bankroll is required) for players, and the prize pool, guaranteed at \$1,000 and funded by the Meadowlands Race-track, will be paid out to the top four finishers. The top two finishers will be eligible to play in the \$10,000 tournament on December 13 (20 total players).

On Saturday, November 1, this year's freshman trotters and pacers take center stage in the Kindergarten Finals sponsored by Crawford Farms.

It is a SaturSLAY at the Meadowlands on Saturday, November 8 – a Dinner and Drag Show experience. Crystal Envy, RuPaul's Drag Race 2025 Miss Congeniality Winner, hosts this night of fun with delicious buffet fare, specialty cocktails, fierce performances, and games. Tickets are just \$65 and include dinner, a live racing program, a \$10 voucher, and the show.

The FanDuel Championships and Fall Final Four round out the Meadowlands stake season on Saturday, November 15. Fans can enter to win one of eight \$500 win wagers by registering here.

The last chance to qualify for the Meadowlands \$10K Handicapping contest is Friday, November 21. There is no entry fee (a \$100 live money bankroll is required) for players, and the prize pool, guaranteed at \$1,000, will be paid out to the top four finishers. The top two finishers will be eligible to play in the \$10,000 tournament on December 13 (20 total players).

-edited release (Meadowlands)