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Comments? Questions?

Email the Editor DGiwner@DRF.com

THURSDAY, JANUARY 8, 2026



EDITOR'S EYE

By Derick Giwner

[X @harnessveguy](#)

With the exception of perhaps a sunset from the shores of Normandy, there really is no such thing as perfection in this world. It is simply too easy to poke holes in just about any establishment or find fault in a plan or agenda, and in that light harness racing is in good company.

We've typed countless words over the years pointing out issues and attempting to provide solutions to perceived problems in harness racing. Some of those suggestions fell on deaf ears while others were taken to heart and experimented with by the industry. Admittedly living in a Standardbred bubble at times, it seemed as though the workings of that industry was simply worse than all of the other sports and gambling options. Well, if it makes you feel better, take solace in knowing that things are broken everywhere.

To pivot away from harness racing as a way to prove a point, consider the NCAA college football playoff selection process. In just the second year of the 12-team playoff system we've seen that sometimes the wrong teams are selected. How else do you explain James Madison and Tulane making the tournament this year ahead of teams like Notre Dame? The same goes for last year when the 11th and 12th seeds both were soundly defeated in their opening games. It is also worth

noting that the #2 seed has lost its opening game both years, so maybe just being a conference winner shouldn't mean as much as a more valuable measuring stick like strength of schedule.

How many times have we complained about the decisions of Judges in harness racing? Countless, right? These same problems exist in the NFL where seemingly every game contains multiple calls which were either missed or flagged incorrectly. A December 21 game between Detroit and Pittsburgh was decided by an offensive pass interference call. Then one week after that victory, Pittsburgh was denied a flag on clear pass interference in the end zone, potentially costing them a chance to score a touchdown and win the game. Playing the conspiracy theory side, it has seemed like since the December 21 game the referees have been stingier with throwing flags in key spots.

Want more sports with problems? MLB has a potential lockout looming prior to the 2027 season; NBA has been dealing with a betting scandal; and Thoroughbred racing has any number of issues from HISA to horse shortages to on-track injuries.

All of the above is to say that while everything isn't perfect in harness racing, that lofty goal is simply unattainable. We can complain about takeout, conflicting race dates, lack of medication conformity, unacceptable testing procedures, dearth of equine stars, post time drag, or my favorite topic – lack of cooperation. While all of it has merit to some degree, in the end our dissatisfaction with the status quo is unlikely to lead

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to a better tomorrow. So rather than start the year on a negative note, here are a few positive thoughts as we embark deeper into 2026.

Lots of returning talent

Beyond the obvious of getting to see how Beau Jangles handles the 3-year-old pacing wars after a dominating undefeated season in 2025, there are so many stars or potential breakout Grand Circuit players returning to the races for this year.

From the trotting ranks we have two nearly unblemished 4-year-olds in Yo Tillie and On To Norway who could hook up in the Graduate series or Hambletonian Maturity before moving on to older foes. The former is already a star looking to add to her Dan Patch-winning résumé while the latter seeks to prove his Indiana success was not a mirage. There are a number of others from that crop also coming back and we've heard a rumor that one slated for stallion duty is a possibility for an appearance as well. Stay tuned.

Of course the incoming 4-year-olds will have to take on Lexus Kody and that won't be an easy task. Can he continue his immense success from last year and get back-to-back Dan Patch awards for older trotters?

Over to the pacers, Miki And Minnie is the headliner in terms of last year's top 3-year-olds. It will be fun to watch her eventually compete with stablemate and former Horse of the Year Twin B Joe Fresh. Trainer Chris Ryder reports that "Fresh" has recovered well so far from early November surgery to deal with a hairline fracture in her left front cannon bone. "We believe so at this point," said Ryder when asked if Twin B Joe Fresh is still on track to race in 2026. He added that she had x-rays on January 6 and the report from the surgeon was good. "[She'll] begin work again in a month."

Other older pacers expected to return include the leaders of the male division in Ervin Hanover and Maximus Miki. Can Captain Albano as a 5-year-old threaten them on the bigger tracks in 2026? Time will tell.

In addition to Beau Jangles from the 2-year-olds of last year, there are a number of talented horses that could step up in that division, including Fragment, Frantic Hanover, Brandon Blvd, Ubrute and more. That doesn't even include the standout filly Loua Dipa. It could be a great year for pacing 3-year-olds.

What's interesting is that all of the Horse of the Year contenders – Lexus Kody, Yo Tillie and Beau Jangles – outside of Louprint are slated to race in 2026. That is great news for the sport in terms of creating name recognition and competitive racing.

Our Meadowlands team was hot hot hot

The weather may be chilly here on the East Coast but our handicappers for The Meadowlands both turned in stellar performances to close out 2025.

Greg Reinhart handicapped 15 cards during the year and turned in a profit of \$114.50 for a ROI of \$2.54. Meanwhile, for the fall meet covering the week after Hambletonian Day until the end of December (24 dates) I showed a profit of \$87.20 or \$2.26 ROI.

Greg hit on 24% of his top picks during the year while my click rate was 31% over the course of the year.

Breeders Crown coming to Ohio

Few things excite me more in harness racing than visiting a new track. When Scioto Downs hosts the Breeders Crown finals on October 23 and 24 this year, it will mark my first visit to the central Ohio oval. Whispers and discussions have been going on for years about the



NEW IMAGE MEDIA

Early signs point to Twin B Joe Fresh starting to gear up for a 2026 campaign in February.

Breeders Crown coming to the Buckeye State and it is well deserved for a region that has experienced a true racing renaissance over the last decade. Hopefully I'll see everyone there.

New stakes races and higher purses for 2026

Oak Grove announcing the addition of two new 3-year-old trotting events worth \$500,000 (boys – Oak Grove Trotting Derby) and \$300,000 (girls – Oak Grove Trotting Oaks) has the potential to change the landscape in harness racing once again. With just \$2,500/\$1,500 in total payments respectively, both races are very attractive options and perhaps enough to make trainers aim to have their best sophomore trotters ready to compete by the first Monday in May rather than the typical starting time towards the middle or end of that month.

With Sire Stakes offering bigger earning opportunities and the Good-times in early to mid-June becoming a less attractive option for U.S. entrants due to travel and lower purse value when converted from Canadian dollars, maybe the new schedule could be for an earlier start and a June break before getting ready for races like the Stanley Dancer and Hambletonian at The Meadowlands. Now should the unthinkable happen and the Hambletonian moves out west to Hoosier Park or another location, could we see 3-year-old trotters start in Kentucky and rarely travel east during the year outside of Sire Stakes?

And what do the new Oak Grove stakes mean for the Dexter Cup which is scheduled for the first Saturday in May at The Meadowlands? We'll be waiting to see how the eligible list stacks up when payments start arriving in February.

It will also be interesting to see if the stakes races at The Meadowlands that are seeing purse boosts due to the added payments also get a large increase in nominations. With a race like the Meadowlands Pace going from about \$650K to \$800K, one would think more horses will take the plunge and keep their horses eligible. Either way, higher purses and new stakes are never a bad thing for the sport.

Before you know it February payments, baby-race reports and stakes races will arrive. Wishing everyone a smooth journey to those moments and a wonderful 2026.



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In addition to the 2026 service fee, the amount of the stallion nomination fee must include a surcharge as follows:

a) For stallions that stand for a fee from US\$3,000 to \$5,999 (or \$4,158.77 CAD (Canadian Dollars) to \$8,316.14 CAD), an additional amount equal to 40% of 2026 service fee must be paid;

b) For stallions that stand for a fee from US\$6,000 to \$9,999 (or \$8,317.53 CAD to \$13,861.16 CAD), an additional amount equal to 75% of 2026 service fee must be paid;

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Note: To determine the surcharge in other than U.S. funds, the October 28, 2025 exchange rate is used; a rate of \$1.39 CAD per US\$.

Stallion nominations for other than first-year stallions that are postmarked after January 15, 2026, but on or before Dec. 31, 2026, will be accepted upon payment of an additional penalty amount equal to 50% of the above stallion nomination fee (including the above surcharge). Likewise, stallion nominations for first-year stallions that are postmarked after the above 60-day deadline, but on or before Dec. 31, 2026, will be accepted upon payment of an additional amount equal to 50% of the above stallion nomination fee (including the above surcharge).

Any payment on a stallion that does not commercially conceive a foal or breed a mare by any means during the entire 2026 breeding season may be refunded, provided, however, that it shall be the obligation of the stallion nominator to notify the Society in writing of any request for refund by Dec. 31, 2026.

Moreover, if a nominated stallion does not breed more than twenty (20) mares in 2026 or produce more than fifteen (15) registered foals in 2027, up to 50% of the stallion nomination fee may be refunded, provided, however, that it shall be the obligation of the stallion nominator to notify the Society in writing of any request for adjustment by Dec. 31, 2026 (mares bred) or by Dec. 31, 2027 (registered foals). No stallion nomination fee will be reduced to less than \$500.00 U.S. funds.

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Conditions for nominating yearlings will be published in the *USTA Stakes & Futurities Nomination Book*. Specific conditions for the races for which these foals are eligible will be published in the *USTA Stakes Guide* in the year of the races. The Hambletonian Society reserves the right to add to, amend or delete the conditions of all or any part of the Breeders Crown program, without liability. *For more information contact: The Hambletonian Society at (609)371-2211 or www.hambletonian.com*

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Name of Stallion _____ Age/Foal of _____ 2026 Service Fee _____
Sire _____ Dam _____ Sire of Dam _____
Farm address _____ State/Province/Zip _____
Owner(s) _____

Please check ☒: ☐ In-production stallion (by Jan. 15, 2026) ☐ With penalty (additional 50% after Jan. 15, 2026)

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The Stallion Nomination Fee is the amount of the 2026 Service Fee plus the above surcharge for fees \$3,000 US (\$4,158.77CAD) or over

2026 Service Fee _____ + Surcharge (_____ %) = Nomination Fee enclosed: _____

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Confederate's initial crop has quantity along with quality



JAYWALKING

By Jay Bergman ✕ [BergmanJay](#)

It's a brand new year and for all horses a significant random birthday. For those in the breeding business January 1 marked the physical date that weanlings become yearlings and such advance just one step closer to their purpose of becoming full-fledged racehorses. The long journey is something breeders are all too familiar with yet at the same time the buzz and optimism continues to build.

At Diamond Creek Farm, 2026 marks the first yearlings from the 2023 Horse of the Year Confederate. Shaun Laungani, Diamond Creek's Vice President, has a solid view of the first crop of the Diamond Creek-bred stallion.

"That's all we're talking about these days at Diamond Creek," Laungani said of Confederate. "We've got 23 (yearlings) on the farm and that's made it a lot different for me to get an overview. In the past I'd have to go to other farms."

Laungani not only has the numbers but the perspective. "He's been bred to a lot of different crosses but for the most part he's produced good-looking and leggy horses like he was," Laungani said.

While still a long way away from yearling sales, Laungani has the dual function of monitoring the progress of horses Diamond Creek will retain for training and others that will be prepared for the fall auctions as they move on to new homes with the prospect of stakes racing in 2027.



DIAMOND CREEK FARM PHOTO

Icarus (picture taken spring 2025) is out of Bree Hanover from the first crop of Confederate.

[CONTINUED ON PAGE 6](#)



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“He got an outstanding book of mares and we’ve supported him strongly in his second and now this his third year,” Laungani said when speaking about the commitment to Confederate that is generally implied – but doesn’t always live up to expectations – when a farm stands a stallion. In the case of Confederate, a son of Sweet Lou, the first crop is loaded with many of the sport’s elite maternal families as well as some of the most accomplished race mares and broodmares.

With 23 to view on a regular basis as they advance from weanlings to yearlings, Laungani has already picked out three of his favorites from the group and they are all future pacing colts.

“My favorite at this point would have to be a colt out of Bree Hanover,” said Laungani, referring to a horse called Icarus. “This is the first foal from a mare we paid a lot for (\$225,000 in 2023) and she’s a full sister to Boudoir Hanover out of Bedroomconfessions.”

The farm purchased Bree Hanover with the hopes that they were on to a budding superstar maternal line.

“We have two maternal lines that we believe are in the top one percent on the pacing side,” said Laungani while referring to the families of Blood Diamond and Western Montana specifically. The goal of the farm is to maintain full ownership of all foals that come from that vibrant tree, with the belief they will become the sport’s next superstars. Of course, within the mix are fillies that will eventually become broodmares. With Bree Hanover the possibility exists to expand to a third family that Diamond Creek retains.

Laungani also pointed to another Diamond Creek homebred in the first foal from the Downbytheseaside-sired homebred mare Charleston. His name is Investment and along with his stunning appearance is a direct example of the farm doubling down if you will on a great maternal family. Charleston, in addition to earning \$774K on the racetrack and taking a sub-1:50 mark, also happens to be a half-sister to Geothermal, the dam of Confederate.

Not all of the 23 yearlings at Diamond Creek are owned by the farm and Laungani wasn’t shy to point out that among his favorites is a colt with a royal pedigree owned by Thomas and Scott Dillion. Oxford Rebel is the second foal from the \$1.3 million-winning mare Blue Diamond Eyes, herself with a 1:47 2/5 mark taken as a sophomore. Blue Diamond Eyes is also a full sister to the 2024 Metro Pace champion Fallout.

While Confederate’s chances for success are in some ways bound by Diamond Creek’s support, there’s a solid chance that outside mares bred to the former Horse of the Year will have an impact as well, not just this yearling season but as 2-year-olds in 2027. That’s because there is a who’s who of top-quality mares with offspring from his initial crop. It’s hard not to be bullish when you look at just a small group from the hundred or so registered foals. Cannae Cammie, the dam of 2021 Horse of the Year Test Of Faith, has her first colt from the Sweet Lou-stallion line after enjoying success with both American Ideal and Art Major primarily as well as Somebeachsomewhere.

The \$2.1 million multiple Dan Patch Award winner Lyons Sentinel’s first foal is a filly named Kountry Lynn. Many breeders are excited about the prospects of breeding Sweet Lou-sired stallions to Somebeachsomewhere-sired broodmares and Lyons Sentinel fits that description as a daughter of Somebeachsomewhere’s most prolific stallion Captaintreacherous.

Pedigree and performance go together when singling out a broodmare for future success and with that in mind Mikala, a daughter of Always B Miki, seems to have a bright second career heading her way following some major accomplishments on the racetrack. Mikala defeated Test Of Faith in the 2023 Dorothy Haughton at The Meadowlands. Pickets Charge is her first foal and is a colt by Confederate. Mikala also happens to be a mare with impeccable bloodlines, with her dam Shes Some Treasure a full sister to Captaintreacherous.

The \$1.7 million winner Kissin In The Sand’s third foal and first along the Sweet Lou stallion line is named Dixie Highway. Given the rugged racing career of the 2020 Breeders Crown Open Mares winner, perhaps the third time is the charm with the melding of Confederate’s blood on the stallion side.

The 2023 Breeders Crown Open Mare champion Max Contract’s first foal is a Confederate colt entitled Kramer. With that pedigree there’s more chance for a future champion than a “Stupid, Hipster Doofus” you would have to believe.

It will be fascinating to see what’s ahead for Confederate as his first crop inches a step closer to the yearling sales and beginning the process of becoming racehorses. Looks can be deceiving and results matter most.



DIAMOND CREEK FARM PHOTO

Investment (spring 2025) is the first foal from Diamond Creek homebred Charleston and also from the first crop of Confederate.

Laungani, while optimistic, recognizes that not all stallions are instant successes.

“It took a few years for Sweet Lou,” said Laungani of Confederate’s sire that now is the sport’s leader.

Looking at the current landscape there are a host of Sweet Lou’s sons currently on the market hoping to at least in some way emulate his success. Guarantees do not exist but as Laungani pointed out, numbers make a difference and the farm is committed to supplying Confederate with another full book of mares this year, giving him the best chance possible to achieve the goal.

National, local and personal thoughts to start the New Year



CONFESSIONS

By Keith Gisser

I hope you had a great holiday season. Below are a few thoughts on this and that which have crossed my mind over the last month.

Jingle/Jangle

There was very little controversy when the divisional Dan Patch awards were announced in late December. The only close vote was for veteran trotting mare, where Warrawee Michelle edged M-M's Dream 64-56. Miki and Minnie was a unanimous choice as 3-year-old pacing filly, garnering all 133 votes. Loua Dipa tallied 131 votes to win 2-year-old filly pacing honors and stablemate Louprint received 128 votes as best sophomore pacing colt. Yo Tillie also was named on 131 ballots, while Lexus Kody (who inexplicably is not eligible for the Canadian O'Brien award due to lack of qualified starts in the country) garnered 125 votes.

The 6th leading vote getter was Beau Jangles. He received 124 votes for freshman pacing honors. On the surface this is surprising. Seven voters left him off their ballot, with two abstaining completely. The Cattlewash colt was 12 for 12 and earned nearly \$1.25 million. He is the fastest 2-year-old in Canadian history. And therein lies the rub. Beau Jangles never left Ontario in 2025 and only left Woodbine Mohawk Park once. While the O'Briens salute the best Canadian horse in each category, the U.S. Harness Writers salute the best horse in all of North America. And the United States organization has a Canadian chapter. But when it comes to the Dan Patch, there is no restriction. I like that. Leave it to the voters to decide. Don't tell me the horse has to start three times and the Breeders Crown doesn't count (as the O'Briens do). Trust your voters to do the right thing. Clearly in Beau Jangles case, they did. For the record, I was one of the seven. But I could not name anyone else, so I abstained in that category.

Ohio Stallions

Ohio's Standardbred breeding colony is getting stronger and stronger with the announcement that Seven Colors is coming to the state, joining another newcomer, Breeders Crown Champ Gem Quality. Seven Colors, handled by Dr. J Management, will stand at Crystal Springs Farm for a modest stud fee of \$2,500, while Gem Quality will be at Abby Stables and the stud fee is by Private Treaty with the Standing Stallions team.

These two continue an interesting trend in the Buckeye State; lots of stallions at reasonable stud fees. On the trotting side, only In Range commands five figures. His book is full and closed at \$10,000 after having a dominant first crop and standing for just \$4,000 in 2025. On the pacing side, Downbytheseaside commands a \$17,500 stud fee, but the next highest fee is \$6,000 (Pebble Beach and Catch The Fire). Monte Miki and Lou's Pearlman stand for \$5,000, as does newcomer Heston Blue Chip. I find this to be, perhaps, the most interesting move of all.

Winbak Farm made the call to move the son of American Ideal-Shototgo Bluechip to Joe McLead's Sugar Valley Farm with that \$5,000 stud fee. Heston Blue Chip stood for the same fee in Pennsylvania last year. The interesting part is that his full brother, Sunfire Blue Chip, already stands in Ohio, as does his Somebeachsomewhere half-brother Carbine. They both stand for \$2,500. While Carbine's first foals are yearlings this year, Sunfire Blue Chip has bounced around from New Jersey to Ontario to Ohio. While he has produced a number of very good racehorses, he has not been a commercial success, with only a couple foals selling for \$30,000 or more. As I mentioned last year, the quality of mares he has seen has left something to be desired. It will be interesting to see how Heston Blue

Chip is received given his common bloodlines to Sunfire Blue Chip. The former has been more commercially viable than his brother, but the jury is still out on whether this move will be a profitable one for all involved.

Riding the Roller Coaster

I have used this space several times to discuss the roller coaster ride that is harness racing ownership. In the summer of 2023 I chronicled one summer month of ups and downs and last spring I told the story of Maggie's Way (now in foal to Sunfire Blue Chip and due in late April). I have not said much about Our Honor Defend, other than mentioning her in the December 19, 2024 Newsletter in my "hopes for 2025," saying "I hope the 2-year-olds come back strong, especially Our Honor Defend. I bought her outright out of the fractional group Cedar Point Beach Racing and put together my own fractional group. It has been an education, to say the least."

We saw some potential in this filly and bought her for \$5,200, thinking she could be a nice conditioned claimer and make us some money. On a whim, we nominated her to the Buckeye Stallion Series, and she finished second in the first leg at 26-1. She picked up another 2nd in leg four, beat in



Our Honor Defend made her ownership group proud winning the Buckeye Stallion Stakes Final in October but sadly suffered a life-ending injury when turned out in December.

a photo at 20-1, and with checks in the other preliminary legs, she ended up tenth in the point standings. The top eight made the \$75,000 Final, so we planned on the \$25,000 Consolation. But the roller coaster ride continued when two fillies ahead of us did not declare in. Sent off at 24-1, Our Honor Defend got shuffled, found a seam late and came four-wide to win the race. That effort earned an invite to the Grade 3 Courageous Lady, as an also eligible. Continuing up the hill, there was a late scratch to the eight-hole flu and we drew in. Our conditioned claimer was going to race in a graded stake! She acquitted herself well, but was not talented enough to beat the likes of Juliette champ Rodeo Drive Deo, Juliette elim winner Odds on Chesapeake or Ohio Sires Stake Champion Prolific Fire. She got a few more starts and wrapped up her 3-year-old campaign in early December.

Our Honor Defend earned checks in 21 of 23 starts, posting a summary of 23-4-7-3 and earning \$84,242. That pushed her career earnings to \$97,788. She deserved a break and we looked forward to her 4-year-old campaign. And then the roller coaster went rapidly downhill. She will never get the chance to earn \$100,000 in her career. A freak accident while turned out just being a horse resulted in two severed tendons and after surgeries, on the recommendation of multiple veterinarians, we made the painful call to have her euthanized. All three vets said they had never seen an injury like this before. As I said. A roller coaster. Our Honor Defend has given me both my highest high and my lowest low, all within a couple months. You can say "that's horse racing," but it doesn't mean it hurts any less.

Finally, best wishes to you all for a happy, healthy and prosperous 2026. May you go cash every ticket.

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Stratton stable numbers expanding as they prep for big 2026

By Jay Bergman

Trainer Cory Stratton has seen his stable expand rapidly over the last couple of years. With a host of horses entered this weekend at The Meadowlands, Stratton is hoping to keep his horses fit and ready for the long and lucrative Yonkers season. Needless to say, he does have a half dozen that will go postward at the East Rutherford mile on Saturday that figure to be more than competitive.

"I'm trying to keep them fresh," said Stratton. "I could train them, but I think it's better if they get raced."

Stratton's stable has made a meteoric rise over the last two years. Noticeably in 2025 the stable nearly doubled its earnings output while doing the same in the win category. The numbers were impressive, with 222 wins leading to more than \$4 million banked by Stratton's starters. A stable that hovered around 50 at the start of 2025 now has 85 active horses in training.

While horses have expanded impressively to the stable, there's one new addition that has clearly changed Cory Stratton's life. "My first child was born," Stratton said of a son he and his wife Victoria recently welcomed to the world. "His name is Jaxson, like Jaxson Dart of the Giants, though I'm a Jets fan."

Also growing in numbers for Stratton is 16 babies that have now turned age 2 and are getting ready for the New York Sire Stakes and hopefully beyond. While it's clearly well too early in the training process to get overly excited, Stratton pointed to a couple from the first crop of Back Of The Neck along with a Captaintreacherous and Huntsville on the pacing side.

Stratton's rise in numbers was spearheaded by the quality that he added to his stable and that meant Open-caliber horses that could race over the half-mile track at Yonkers and beyond. One of those horses, For Once Inmy Life, was brilliant last winter and did go on to capture three legs of the Borgata series before things went sideways. The now 6-year-old by Downbytheseaside qualified well for the first time last Saturday (January 3).

"I'm going to put him back to qualify again this Saturday," said Stratton, expecting to race him again with the best at The Meadowlands and down the road in the Borgata.

"I've also got Chase H Hanover coming back soon," said Stratton of last year's Borgata final runner-up. The Captaintreacherous-sired 8-year-old has more than \$1.3 million banked through his career and has been idle since September. "He got tired, so we gave him some time off."

One horse that will not return in 2026 is the top-flight pacing mare Easy To Please. With \$721k banked through an impressive racing career Easy To Please moves on to become a broodmare following a seven-win 2025 campaign that saw her break six figures for the fourth time in six years of racing.

"She's going to be bred to Downbytheseaside," said Stratton of the daughter of Roll With Joe.

A late-season acquisition in 2025 was the Open-type trotter Security Protected. "I think he was just a little tired by the end of the season," said Stratton of the then 4-year-old son of Father Patrick that had campaigned against older horses for much of the year before moving into Stratton's stable. "His best race for me was probably the last one in the Grand Prix consolation at Yonkers."

A third-place finish saw Security Protected fight to the wire in the mile and one quarter contest. "We're going to race him mostly at Yonkers this year," Stratton said of Security Protected. "We'll put him in a few other stakes outside but concentrate on Yonkers and then hopefully have him ready for the Grand Prix."

A key to Stratton stables' success has been durability as many of his horses race more than 30 times over the year in an era where that has been hard to achieve for most barns. Whats Stanley Got A is a classic example of that, having made 73 starts in the past two years and banked \$380K in the process. The veteran import will once again compete near the top level at Yonkers this year. "I don't think we'll put him in the Borgata," said Strat-



COURTESY CORY STRATTON

Vicki and Cory Stratton welcomed Jaxson to their family in late November 2025.

ton, obviously not wishing to compete against himself with other higher-quality stock.

Adding to the stable's depth are a pair of sophomores returning that will see plenty of stakes action in 2026. Overall, a daughter of Devious Man that finished third in the 2025 New York Sire Stakes final for juvenile trotting fillies, should be able to add significantly to her \$143K bankroll racing within the Empire State. Vanna By The River is new to the stable and the filly by Downbytheseaside showed enough talent as a freshman to reach the \$300,000 Ohio Sire Stakes final.

As for Saturday's Meadowlands horses, Stratton pointed to Kwick Sand A in the second race on the card. "He finished up really strong last week and gets a drop in class," said Stratton, also noting a significant improvement in post position.

Belmont Major N has been racing sharp according to Stratton, but Saturday's eighth race finds the veteran import up in class a bit with the race earmarked for claimers with price tags ranging from \$25,000-30,000.

Stellar Yankee (post 8) could have a shot if things work out properly in Saturday's seventh race. "He's usually better when he's closer to the action," said Stratton.

In addition to his six horses entered on Saturday, Stratton will send out another half-dozen on Friday night including a few he will drive himself.

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DRF HARNESS TOP 10 HEADLINES FROM 2025

2025 was certainly a busy year in harness racing from a number of perspectives. We had tragedy, conflict, great racing and so much more. Here we look back at the top 10 headlines in terms of page views on the harness pages of DRF.com.

1 & 2 - HUNTER MYERS DIES IN TRAGIC ACCIDENT

Unfortunately the two leading stories of the year involved the tragic on-track accident which eventually took the life of driver Hunter Myers. It was a reminder of how fragile life is and that driving a horse comes with a higher level of danger than your average occupation.

<https://www.drf.com/news/harness-hunter-myers-27-dies-after-tragic-accident>

<https://www.drf.com/news/meadows-driver-hunter-myers-critical-condition-after-racing-accident>

3 - SVANSTEDT SPEAKS OUT ON HAMBO AS WINNER OUT FOR 2025

There was much controversy after Nordic Catcher won the Hambletonian in August due to comments made by owner Jeff Gural. Second trainer Sarah Svanstedt spoke out about the issue and informed us that the horse would miss the rest of 2025 due to an injury in this piece:

<https://www.drf.com/news/harness-svanstedt-speaks-out-hambletonian-nordic-catcher-s-out-remainder-2025>

4 - HAMBLETONIAN DRAMA LEAVES RACE IN LIMBO

When The Meadowlands decided not to renew its right to extend its contract to host the Hambletonian for multiple years it put the race in limbo where it remains to date.

<https://www.drf.com/news/harness-hambletonian-drama-leaves-race-limbo>

5 - BREEDERS CROWN POST POSITION DRAWS FINALIZED

Everyone wants to know how a draw plays out and the Breeders Crown races are some of the most important. This track release sent out a few days before the October finals at Woodbine Mohawk Park was a popular one.

<https://www.drf.com/news/breeders-crown-post-position-draws-finalized>

6 - IS TRAINER PER ENGBLOM BEING RAILROADED?

This was a story written by Editor Derick Giwner about the current situation involving trainer Per Engblom, who was appealing a year-long suspension.

<https://www.drf.com/news/harness-trainer-engblom-being-railroaded>

7 - HENNESSEY WEIGHS THE POTENTIAL END TO A LEGENDARY CAREER

Jessica Hallett penned this article about the potential end of the career of driver Wally Hennessey after a November appearance at Saratoga Raceway. Will the Hall of Famer appear in another race in the future?

<https://www.drf.com/news/harness-hennessey-weighs-potential-end-legendary-career>

8 - THE CHANGING QUEST FOR A LEVEL PLAYING FIELD

Jay Bergman wrote this piece just recently in December about the involvement with computers in harness racing. The speed at which people can place wagers has certainly altered betting patterns, especially late in the wagering.

<https://www.drf.com/news/harness-changing-quest-level-playing-field>

9 - HORSEMEN MUST PICK UP THE PIECES AFTER FREEHOLD'S CLOSURE

Freehold Raceway closed its doors during the last week of 2024 and Derick Giwner wrote the below piece discussing the shuttering of the track's doors and what the many horsepeople who compete there will do in the future.

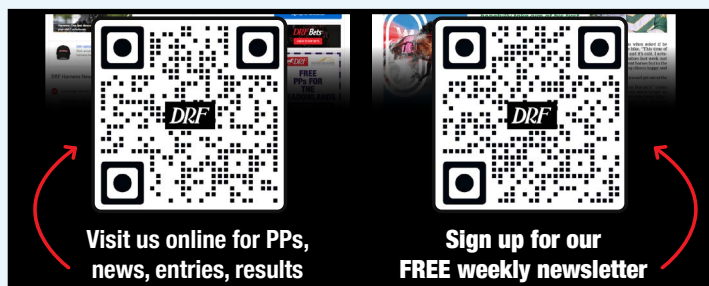
<https://www.drf.com/news/harness-horsemen-must-pick-pieces-after-freeholds-closure>

10 - "THE KING" TOPS 2025'S LIST OF RETIRING STANDARDBREDS

This annual story was in the holiday issue of the newsletter and covers the retiring 14-year-olds of 2025. Topping that list is of course JL Cruze, a double millionaire who trotted the first sub 1:50 mile in the history of The Meadowlands.

<https://www.drf.com/news/harness-king-tops-2025s-list-retiring-standardbreds>

DRF Harness' numbers continued to grow on social media. The DRFHarness handle on the platform X is creeping up on 10,000 followers (currently 9,697) and our Facebook following now sits at over 7,300.



Harness racing economic indicators down in 2025

All U.S. harness racing economic indicators across the board declined in 2025 compared to 2024. While race days declined by 2.51%, wagering decreased by more than 8% and purses were down 1.73%.

Total wagering for the year was \$1,351,161, an 8.10% decrease and \$119,114,666 less than the \$1,470,658,827 wagered in 2024.

In 2025, \$483,239,570 was distributed in purses in 33,412 races over 3,070 race days, \$8,848,920 less than in 2024 when purses totaled \$491,734,389 for 34,583 wagering races.

There were 3,149 race days in 2024, 79 more than 2025, a 2.51% decrease.

The amount wagered per betting interest decreased by 4.11% last year compared to 2024. In 2025, the average was \$5,226, \$79 less than the \$5,456 from the year before.

ECONOMIC INDICATORS ON U.S. RACES – JAN. 1 THROUGH DEC. 31, 2025

	2025	2024	% Change
Total Wagered	\$1,351,544,161	\$1,470,658,827	- 8.10%
Per Race avg.	\$40,451	\$42,525	- 4.88%
Per Betting Interest	\$5,226	\$5,456	- 4.11%
Purses	\$483,239,570	\$491,734,389	- 1.73%
Race Days	3,070	3,149	- 2.51%

Please note: The information above includes U.S. and Canadian common and separate pool wagers on races contested in the U.S.

-release (USTA Communications)

Austin Hanners aims to keep improving as 2026 season begins

By Ken Weingartner

Austin Hanners can look back on his 2025 season and enjoy the fact he won the three biggest races of his career so far, including a Breeders Crown, but that will not change his focus going forward.

The 26-year-old Hanners captured his first Breeders Crown with Always B Naughty in the \$400,000 Grade 1 Breeders Crown Mare Pace on Oct. 25 at Woodbine Mohawk Park, garnered his first Ohio Sire Stakes championship with Jailhouse Pearl in the \$300,000 final for 3-year-old trotting fillies on Sept. 27 at Hollywood Dayton Raceway, and won the \$250,000 Charlie Hill Memorial Trot (G2) with Hillexotic on Sept. 6 at Eldorado Scioto Downs.

Overall, Hanners won 205 races and earned \$4.31 million in purses, which fell just \$44,645 shy of his career high in 2024 despite making 401 fewer starts.

"It was a good year," said Hanners, who resides in southcentral Ohio. "I'm grateful for all the opportunities I had. The Breeders Crown and Charlie Hill were definitely highlights, along with winning my first sire stakes final. I'd won one other big race (in 2024), the Pacey Mindlin Memorial at Miami Valley, but to win the Hill at Scioto was a lot of fun. That's at home and it was my first big, big win. The Breeders Crown just topped it all off."

Hanners began driving in 2016, making 17 starts, and saw his workload gradually increase from there. He drove in more than 1,000 races for the first time in 2022, racing 1,618 times, and had his first million-dollar season that same year, collecting \$1.42 million in purses. He has topped 200 wins and earned more than \$3.2 million in purses each of the past three seasons. His back-to-back \$4 million campaigns put him among the top 30 drivers in purses nationally both years.

"I hope I just keep getting better," Hanners said. "I know a lot of people say that, but I really do. Looking at how far I've come in such a short period of time – I remember having my first million-dollar season just a few years ago – and now I've had three straight years where I've done triple that. To say that I thought I would be there that quickly would be a lie, but I was definitely hoping that I could get there. It has come a lot quicker and I'm hoping I can stay in that category and just keep improving."

As for what he would like to improve, Hanners said, "I just want to get better at driving horses in general."

"Our colony is so tough that you've got to be on your game at all times," Hanners said. "I just want to learn more, be a student of the game, and get better every day. I feel like if you're not getting better, then what's the point of being there. If you feel like you've learned everything, you're way off."

"I watch a lot of races from everywhere. If I'm not in a race, I never miss one. I'm always watching, trying to learn, trying to pick something else up."

Hanners' victory in the Breeders Crown with Always B Naughty came in only his second start in a Breeders Crown final. Always B Naughty won by 5-1/4 lengths in a stakes-record 1:48 1/5.

"She just peaked at the right time," Hanners said. "She was so powerful that night, as she was the week before (winning an Open for fillies and

mares at Mohawk in 1:48 2/5). It was a great way for her to get sharp for the right race.

"In the stretch, I could see myself on the (infield) TV and I didn't hear anybody else behind me; I knew she was a good ways ahead. The feeling was unbelievable. But it didn't really sink in until after the race and everything was over. People work for that all year long. To win a race like that was just awesome."

Always B Naughty's triumph also gave trainer Todd Luther and owner Greg Luther their first Breeders Crown trophy.

"They were as much on Cloud Nine as I was," Hanners said.

Hanners enjoyed numerous other successes with the Luthers, such as winning the Hill Memorial with Hillexotic and an Ohio Breeders Championship with 3-year-old pacing filly Prolific Fire, as well as finishing third in the \$600,000 Breeders Crown for sophomore pacing fillies with Skywalker Sea.

"It's worked out good," Hanners said. "I drive the majority of the stakes horses; all of them in Ohio and whatever we can fit in out of state. It doesn't always work out early in the year, but when we start slowing down (in Ohio), I start traveling with the older horses on the Grand Circuit, which is a lot of fun. It's somewhere I never thought I would reach. It's been one of those amazing rides."

Where that ride goes in 2026 will be determined as this season unfolds. Hanners gets his year under way Wednesday with seven drives at Miami Valley Raceway.

"I'll focus mainly on Ohio, and if other things happen, then that's how it happens," Hanners said. "If not, we're just going to try to keep going one day at a time and see where we go. I try to take it one day at a time because it all happens so fast."



NEW IMAGE MEDIA

Austin Hanners won his first Breeders Crown in 2025.

Woodbine Mohawk Park 2026 stakes schedule released

Woodbine Entertainment January 5 released the schedule for its 2026 stakes season, featuring a trio of million-dollar races and 12 Grade 1 events.

The North America Cup (Saturday, June 13), Mohawk Million (Saturday, September 26) and Metro Pace (Saturday, September 26) remain the crown jewels of the racing season at Woodbine Mohawk Park for 2026.

The trio of Grade 1 million-dollar (CDN) events highlight a prestigious C\$20 million-plus stakes program for 2026.

This year will mark the 43rd edition of the North America Cup, which showcases the finest 3-year-old pacers. The Mohawk Million for 2-year-old trotters enters its seventh year of existence, while the Metro Pace for 2-year-old pacers has been held annually since 1988.

Woodbine's Standardbred Racing Department did a review of its stakes program following the 2025 season and has made a few changes to conditions and dates for several stakes. The marquee race days remain unchanged in their placement on the calendar.

The following changes have been implemented for 2026:

- Slot price for Mohawk Million increased from \$50,000 to \$60,000.
- 2-Year-Old Summer Series Format Changed.
- Canadian Graduate Series removed due to lack of entries
- Date Change for Casual Breeze and Tompkins-Geers.

Woodbine Mohawk Park will offer 32 Graded Stakes in 2026, the largest number of any racetrack in North America. The Dream Maker, Whenuwishuponastar, Millard Farms and Pure Ivory each received graded status (Grade 3) this season.

The marquee event days for 2026 are listed below:

- North America Cup – Saturday, June 13
- Wellwood Memorial & Peaceful Way – Saturday, August 29
- Canadian Pacing Derby & Maple Leaf Trot – Saturday, September 5
- Mohawk Million & Metro Pace – Saturday, September 26

READ FULL RELEASE

January will be jumping at Big M

The start of Sunday racing and the first of 11 editions of the 2026 Meadowlands Monthly Handicapping Contest are the highlight happenings at The Big M this weekend.

The first of four consecutive three-program race weeks kicks off Friday (Jan. 9) night. Racing will then take place on the usual Saturday (Jan. 10) evening before the initial Sunday (Jan. 11) card is held.

Post time on Friday and Saturday is 6:20 p.m., while Sunday's program gets underway at 12:30 p.m.

After Friday's opportunity-to-make-a-score-filled 14-race program, Saturday's card will offer more of the same. In addition, Saturday will mark the first edition of the Meadowlands Monthly Handicapping Contest.

There will be \$1,000 in prize money up for grabs in the monthly competitions as well as two spots in the end-of-year, invitation-only contest, where only the 22 monthly qualifiers will be eligible to participate in the \$10,000 battle.

For complete details and to sign up, [click here](#).

Sunday will offer a 14-race matinee card that is sure to be a hit with football fans, as harness racing bettors can double up and wager on the NFL playoffs as the trotters and pacers go at it on the track.

Patrons can watch and wager on the NFL games in the FanDuel Sportsbook.

Right around the same time as the second race at The Big M, the Buffalo Bills and Jacksonville Jaguars will face-off in Jacksonville. Kickoff is at 1 p.m.

At the tail-end of the race card, the San Francisco 49ers will pay a visit to the City of Brotherly Love and take on the Philadelphia Eagles at 4:30 p.m.

"Being able to offer a variety of choices is what makes a day or night at The Meadowlands a complete experience," said track Chief Operating Officer and General Manager Jason Settlemyer. "The first three of our Sunday race cards will have NFL playoff action for our patrons to enjoy and the handicapping contest was a home run last year and we are hoping for more of the same in 2026."

To make the day extra special, patrons can head to the Big M's Pink Restaurant for a sumptuous Sunday Brunch Buffet for just \$39.95 (plus tax and gratuity).

For reservations, call 201-THE BIG M.

To take a look at the brunch menu, go [here](#).

-edited release (Meadowlands)

Dexter Cup/Lady Suffolk-Late yearling payment update for 2024 foals

Due to the sudden relocation of the Dexter Cup and Lady Suffolk races to The Meadowlands Racetrack following the closure of Freehold Raceway in 2025, an accommodation has been approved for certain horses.

Two-year-olds (foals of 2024) sired by Rebuff and Temporal Hanover will be permitted to make the \$25 yearling payment that was originally due in May 2025 for the race of 2027.

This \$25 yearling payment will be accepted on or before March 15, 2026, and must be submitted along with the regular sustaining payment, as follows:

- \$400 for colts and geldings
- \$200 for fillies

This accommodation applies only to foals of 2024 sired by Rebuff and Temporal Hanover and is being granted in light of the circumstances surrounding the race relocation.

Please ensure all applicable payments are submitted to The Hambletonian Society by the March 15, 2026 deadline to maintain eligibility.

-release (Hambletonian Society)

HUSTON TO RECEIVE OHHA'S HAGEMEYER CONTRIBUTION AWARD

The Ohio Harness Horsemen's Association has awarded the prestigious Maynard and Stella Hagemeyer Significant Contribution Award to track announcer Roger Huston for 2025.

Now in his 67th year behind the mic, Huston has announced races all over the world with 184,841 calls to date. He has served as the announcer for the Little Brown Jug at the Delaware County Fair for 58 years with his favorite being the 2015 edition when Wiggle It Jiggleit defeated Lost For Words. He also cites Falcon Seelster setting a world record at Delaware in 1985 and Dragon's Lair defeating Nihilator to win the Breeders Crown at The Meadows in 1984 as some of his most memorable calls.

[READ MORE](#)

DRF HANDICAPPER'S CORNER

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 head to your nearest ADW and simply make a win bet.

FRIDAY, JANUARY 9

RACE 4

(6) SOUTHWIND INFUSION might need a setup again, but he was bionic last week and drew away with minimal urging. I'll give him the call to repeat.

-Kevin Plowcha



WOODBINE
MOHAWK PARK

RACE 4

(3) PISCES RISING really has no chance last time against tougher from an outside post in his first start since August. Ron Burke-trained charge is every bit as fast as any in here and certainly seems likely to be aggressive with some sluggish foes to his inside.

-Derick Gwerner



SATURDAY, JANUARY 10

RACE 10

(1) DONT DROP THE BALL takes a clear step up in company to face some seasoned older foes. While it took him some time to find his groove, I do think he might be this good now.

-Gwerner



RACE 3

(10) MANDESTINY tried to make two moves in his first start back. Look for him to be tighter tonight despite working from the high draw.

-Plowcha



WOODBINE
MOHAWK PARK

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FULL CARD ANALYSIS / PAST PERFORMANCES

Mohawk Park Analysis

[Friday](#) [Saturday](#)

Meadowlands Analysis

[Friday](#) [Saturday](#)

DHP PPS

HARNESS EYE PPS

TRACKMASTER PPS

FREE PPS



INSTANT RACING UPDATES VIA TWITTER: @DRFHARNES



NEWS FROM AROUND THE HARNESS INDUSTRY

CHRIS GOODEN NAMED PRESIDENT'S AWARD RECIPIENT

"Grief is the last act of love we can give to those we loved."

Documenting the Honor Walk for the late Hunter Myers was one of the most difficult moments of Meadows track photographer Chris Gooden's career. While the task felt deeply painful, Gooden knew it was something the Myers family wanted and deserved.

Myers, 27, tragically passed away on March 19 following an accident at Hollywood Casino at The Meadows. His death sent shockwaves throughout the harness racing industry. The loss was deeply personal for Gooden.

[READ MORE](#)

JANET TERHUNE HONORED WITH USHWA PRESIDENT'S AWARD

Michael Carter, president of the United States Writers Association (USHWA), has selected Janet Terhune as the recipient of a 2026 President's Award.

Currently the executive director of the Harness Racing Museum & Hall of Fame, Terhune is being recognized for a lifetime of dedication to the sport's data accessibility and the preservation of its rich history.

[READ MORE](#)

SHAW'S TO BE ENSHRINED INTO THE OHIO HALL OF FAME AS IMMORTALS

John "Red" and Betty Shaw, recognized by industry peers throughout the Midwest for their over 40 years of involvement in racing, have been elected as the Hall of Fame Immortals, by the Ohio Chapter of the United States Harness Writers Association.

Mr. Shaw was raised on a farm in Newcomerstown, was a member of 4-H, and worked showing cattle in New Philadelphia, Sunbury, and finally Mt. Vernon, where he met and married Betty, a partnership that lasted 50 years, coinciding with "Red's" new business, John Red Shaw Auctioneer, which he operated for 52 years.

It was in Knox County where "Red" and Betty formed a liking for Harness Racing, that started at the local County Fairs, which led to attending and purchasing at horse sales throughout the region. It is said that Betty had a "good eye" at the sales and enjoyed spending time at the family farm with those that she had picked, many of whom went on to successful racing careers.

While the family was growing with a daughter Brenda and sons Tim and Andy, so was the size of their racing stable. While their great trotter, Victory Is Coming, was their most successful and popular horse, over the course of 35 years the Shaw's stable owned or bred over 325 horses. They raced all over the Midwest and were recognized by their peers not only for their talent in and around racetracks, but equally as some of the nicest, hardworking people in our industry.

"Red" passed away in October of 2020 at the age of 81 and Betty passed away in April of 2023 at the age of 84. At the time of their passing, the family had grown to include three grandchildren and one great granddaughter. Their contributions to harness racing were significant and everlasting.

The Shaw's will be inducted at the Ohio Harness Horsemen's Association banquet on Saturday, January 10 at the Renaissance Westerville.

- release (by Michael Langer)

VICTORY IS COMING VOTED INTO OHIO HARNESS HORSE HALL OF FAME

Victory Is Coming, a three-time Ohio Sire Stakes champion, has been selected to be the latest standardbred to be enshrined into the Ohio Hall of Fame by the members of the Ohio Chapter of the United State Harness Writers Association.

The Victory Sam mare out of Norse Comer (Overcomer) was bred by Success Acres.

She was purchased as a yearling for \$13,500 by John "Red" and Betty Shaw of Mount Vernon, Ohio and trained for most of her career by Ammon Hershberger.

As a two-year-old, she won half of her 10 seasonal starts and finished second in the Ohio Sire Stakes Final.

Her sophomore season saw 16 wins in 23 starts, and another runner-up finish in the OSS Final.

Victory Is Coming would win back-to-back-to-back OSS Finals as an aged trotter in 2014-2016.

A tough open trotter who often raced against the boys, Victory Is Coming won seven straight races in 2016 as a nine-year-old.

Victory Is Coming retired from racing in 2017 with 68 wins in 163 starts, earning \$711,159.

As a broodmare, she produced six foals, including Johnnyreds Victory (\$122,948).

-edited release (Ohio Chapter of USHWA)

BIG M 2026 EARLY CLOSER PARTICIPATION PAYMENT REMINDER

For the upcoming season, The Meadowlands will institute an Early Closer Participation (ECP) payment on foals of 2024 which will be required to be made to The Meadowlands to gain eligibility for nomination to all Meadowlands 2-year-old Early Closers in 2026.

This \$400 payment is not a stakes payment.

It is a separate one-time payment that will provide eligibility for nomination to Meadowlands administered races only, for the life of the horse.

[READ MORE](#)

MEADOWLANDS MONTHLY HANDICAPPING CONTEST SCHEDULE RELEASED

The Meadowlands Racetrack is bringing back the popular monthly handicapping contests in 2026. The top two finishers in each contest qualify for the invite-only \$10,000 tournament in December.

The first contest of the year is set for Saturday, January 10. The \$1,000 prize pool will be split amongst the top four finishers.

[READ MORE](#)

HERMAN ELECTED TO THE OHIO HARNESS RACING HALL OF FAME

Noted Grand Circuit driver/trainer Billy Herman has been elected as the 52nd member of the Ohio Harness Racing Hall of Fame by the members of the Ohio Chapter of the United States Harness Writers Association (USHWA).

Herman was born Feb. 21, 1940, in Frankfort, Ohio, and grew up in Good Hope, Ohio. He developed a love for horses at a young age while riding his pony to school and cleaning stalls at the Washington Court House, Ohio, fairgrounds.

[READ MORE](#)

OHHA AWARDS BANQUET AND ANNUAL MEETING SCHEDULED FOR JAN 10

The Ohio Harness Horsemen's Association Awards Banquet and Annual Meeting will be held on Jan. 10 at the Renaissance Columbus-Westerville, 409 Altair Parkway, Westerville, Ohio.

[READ MORE](#)

PEBBLE BEACH 2024 FOALS MAY BE SUPPLEMENTED FOR 2027 PACE

The 2024 foals of Pebble Beach, previously excluded from nominating to the 2027 Meadowlands Pace as yearlings by the Stallion Restriction Condition (Gural Rule), may now be supplemented to that stake by making the 2-year-old supplemental payment.

This has become possible due to the nomination of Pebble Beach to the **Stallions Eligible for Meadowlands Early Closer Participation Payment for the foals of 2024**, which is required to make the above mentioned supplement and will also permit all 2024 foals of Pebble Beach to be nominated and sustained to all **Meadowlands Early Closers** for 2-year-olds in 2026 and for the life of the horse, providing the February 15, 2026 \$400 ECP payment is made.

Payment of the February 15 **\$400 ECP payment** is required of and any/all foals of 2024 **nominated as yearlings to the 2027 Meadowlands Pace** to continue with the 2-year-old March 15 sustaining (or supplemental) payment and all subsequent payments on the stake.

The Meadowlands Pace requires a **2-year-old supplemental payment of \$1,000** by March 15, 2026 along with all future sustaining payments.

-release (Meadowlands)