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THURSDAY, FEBRUARY 5, 2026



HARNESS FOCUS

By Jessica Hallett

[X @JHallettPhoto](#)

It is morning in Illinois and the horsemen show up, the same way they do every day. No matter the day or the time, the horses need to be taken care of. Buckets are washed and refilled with fresh water; stalls are cleaned and bedded with fresh sawdust; and the horsemen prepare for a day of jogging and training. Though the outlook for racing is bleak in the Prairie State, there is still a looming hope that the lights will be turned back on and horses will make their way back behind the gate at Hawthorne Race Course.

While the situation at Hawthorne is unique to harness racing history, the stories of the horsemen racing at that mile oval in Cicero, IL should

resonate with every person in the harness racing industry, as it mirrors the months of jogging and training with no certainty of a future in racing during the times of COVID-19 in 2020. It's the same showing up day-in and day-out, not knowing when the next race date will be announced, with the only difference being that the horsemen in IL don't know if it will ever return at all.

When every other track in North America was gearing up for the new season in 2026, Hawthorne Race Course hit the brakes and released news that impacted the lives of hundreds of horsemen based in Illinois. The track is facing a financial crisis and in early February that led to the suspension of the harness racing license by the Illinois Racing Board (IRB) due to unpaid, bounced checks to horsemen and failure to submit required bonds. The fate of racing, both thoroughbred and harness, hangs in the balance as the situation is worked out.

[CONTINUED ON PAGE 3](#)

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STAY HUNGRY

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

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Frantic Hanover p, 2, 1:49.1f.

7 wins in 12 starts including the \$300,000
R1 Pennsylvania Sire Stakes Final and an
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Earnings of \$543,720

Millionaire Seven Colors p, 3, 1:48.1h
earnings of \$1,104,411

Hungry For Love p, 3, 1:49m earnings of \$564,436

Brue Hanover p, 5, 1:47.4s earnings of \$547,341

Redwood Hanover p, 3, 1:49s earnings of \$522,054

Binge On Yankee p, 4, 1:48.3m earnings of \$514,477

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Photos: Barbara Livingston

Although early reports of the situation focus on management, owners, politics and law, it's important not to forget the ones on the ground facing the gravity of the situation. Horsemen have homes and lives based near the track and it is not easy to uproot your whole world to start over somewhere else. It's similar to the story when Pompano Park and Freehold Raceway closed in recent years: either move out or get out. Move away from home and start again at a new track or get out of the business and start over that way.

One of the people affected is Wyatt Avenatti, a third-generation horseman rooted in Illinois racing history.

"My grandfather started racing back in 1968 and since then, his two sons, Tony and my dad David both race in the state of Illinois," Avenatti said. "Now the third generation – myself and my three siblings, Autumn, Matthew and Lane – are all actively involved in Illinois racing. Whether that is by owning, training, or driving, we are all impacted by the current situation."

Avenatti has been a regular driver at Hawthorne for the last eight years, making his debut on the track in May of 2017. He has routinely found himself in the top 10 performers as a driver. He and his siblings are all married with young kids and face the impact of the bounced checks in addition to the lack of racing opportunities due to the cancellation of racing.

"The last four or five years, I have been one of the top drivers in the state and have been fortunate enough to keep improving every year. My stable of horses has continued to grow larger as well, bringing in new owners and investors in our business," Avenatti said. "Even through some trying times, they have all stayed very positive, but the situation with Hawthorne has changed everything."

"Most everyone is waiting on different amounts of money and wonder if they should be investing in a different state and jurisdiction."

Though Avenatti believes racing at Hawthorne has played its course, he is hopeful for the development of a new track in Illinois.

"I personally believe that our time at Hawthorne Race Course is over, but I do not believe racing in Illinois will completely go under," said the 25-year-old driver. "There are a few paths to other options for racetracks that could present themselves, as long as the chips fall the correct way."

In the meantime, and as a plan for the future, Avenatti has dipped his toes into racing in Indiana and Kentucky.

"I have already been racing in Indiana and Kentucky and I will steer my investors toward them. I really hope we figure things out here because everyone from my team would really like to continue racing in our home state," Avenatti concluded.

Also with generational ties to Illinois racing is Richard Finn, a fourth-generation Illinois horseman.

"Like many, I got my start at the Illinois fairs and Balmoral and Maywood Park," Finn said. "I remember racing at Hawthorne with my dad back in the early 2000s. Illinois is where I consider my roots to be. My father drove the starting car at Hawthorne and my uncle Roy was the starter, so it was very much a family affair, even at Hawthorne. It became a second home."

Despite the ongoing situation at Hawthorne, Finn has made the best of what he can with what he has, taking advantage of opportunities at other states.

"Luckily, for the situation we're in, I've been blessed with so many friends that train out of state, so although Hawthorne has hampered my ability to train horses, I'm still able to own and watch them race at tracks like Hoosier and Oak Grove. As a driver, I've also gotten my foot in the door in other states," said the 36-year-old trainer and driver.

Finn has driven since 2010, with Hawthorne at the heart of several of his over 1,200 starts in the bike and 740 training appearances. A regular driver at the fairs as well, Finn's story carries extra weight as he faced unimaginable circumstances when his daughter, Harper, lost her life at the age of 5. The tragedy, which occurred at one of the Illinois fair tracks in 2023 and was caused by the starting gate, led to Finn taking time out of the bike.

His return to racing was gradual with a focus on honoring his daughter, prominently displaying her name on his helmet and carrying her with him every start. In 2024, Finn returned to the bike a bit more, but only making half of the starts that he had in 2023. Despite having even fewer starts in 2025, Finn concluded the year with his lines reading Hawthorne across the board.

"With what happened with Harper, it allowed me to take time off from racing, take a step back and look at what's important. What I found was how amazing, compassionate, and caring our community of horsemen

are. And with that, I found that I don't want to just race horses. I want to be an advocate for the betterment of horse racing – better facilities, safety measures, and care for the horsemen, horses and patrons that come to enjoy our sport," Finn concluded.

Hawthorne has had a long and full history, dating back to officially getting harness racing dates in the spring of 1970. The roots of the track, as Kurt Becker iterated, have included overcoming various challenges in the development of the facility and the procession of hosting harness racing. Despite these challenges, the track has

always turned the lights back on and the races have gone on, but this time, it is uncertain whether these challenges can be overcome or not.

The numbers can be read time and time again. The laws and the politics, the facts and the figures, can be broadcasted and analyzed, but all of those documents and all of that information do not tell the full story. They miss the most important factor: the people. The horsemen and the horses affected as well as their families, the fans, and everyone in between go unnoticed in the whole ordeal, despite being the ones feeling the full weight of the consequences.

Whether or not Hawthorne Race Course resumes operations or joins a sad line of tracks lost is only something that time can tell, but no matter what, the impact weighs heavy on the horses and on the industry as a whole.



WYATT AVENATTI FACEBOOK

Driver Wyatt Avenatti has driven horses to over \$1 million in earnings each of the last two years.

NEW TO OHIO IN 2026!

HESTON BLUE CHIP

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

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Proven sire of Rich & Fast Performers including:

Zero Tolerance, p, 3, 1:50.2f (\$980,736)

Save Me A Dance, p, 1:48.1 (\$657,353)

Fulton, p, 3, 1:48.2s -'23 (\$654,953)

Whats Stanley Got A, p, 1:50.2 -'23 (\$550,271)

Tony's Mom, p, 1:51.4 -'25 (\$414,367)

Soft Shot, p, 3, 1:49.3h -'24 (\$378,501)

Shake It, p, 3, 1:50.3 (\$370,088)

Odds On Hail Mary, p, 3, 1:48.2f -'23 (\$356,368)

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CAPTAIN OPTIMISTIC

(Captaintreacherous - Cinamony - Art Official) p,2,1:49; 3,1:48 -'25 (\$1,573,723)



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- U A **\$160,000 yearling**, his dam is a 1/2 sister to N.A. Cup winner **Fear The Dragon** p,3,1:48.4s (\$1,720,297).
- U Winner of the **Governor's Cup** at age two, as well as eliminations for the Metro Pace and Breeders Crown.
- U Winner of the **Cane Pace** and **Bluegrass Stakes** at age three, as well as his elimination for the North America Cup.

PERFECT STING

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



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Standing at Deo Volente Farms in N.J.
2026 FEE: \$7,500 (U.S.)

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1st crop of two-year-olds!

- U His first crop has earned over \$2.3 million ...an **average/starter of \$45,913**.
- U The sire of Kindergarten Series winner **BOOKIE J** p,2,1:51.1 -'25 (\$288,905).
- U The sire of NJ Classic Champion **PERFECT THOUGHT** p,2,1:51.1 -'25 (\$272,961).
- U The sire of NJSS Champion **BE PERFECT BG** p,2,1:50.1 -'25 (\$166,803).

SIX PACK

(Muscle Mass - Pleasing Lady - Cantab Hall) 3,1:49.1 (\$1,973,661)



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- U His 2YOs earned over \$1.2 million in 2025 ...an **average/starter of \$46,350**.
- U The sire of 2025 Hambletonian Champion **NORDIC CATHER S** 3,1:50 -'25 (\$1,124,113).
- U The sire of 2025 Peaceful Way Champion **SUGAR PACKET** 2,1:53.3s -'25 (\$327,147).



Lessons learned from an old-school office environment



JAYWALKING

By Jay Bergman ✕ [Bergmanjay](#)

Working remotely became essential as the world struggled through the COVID epidemic. Humans adapted through that period and once it was over many continued to operate from a distance. Some years later, a portion of offices have gone back to “normal” while others have closed with all employees working from home or any other comfortable environment.

For me it's impossible to think of what could have been lost had an epidemic struck during the early years I first started working at a small office in Great Neck, New York that housed a racing publication then known as *Sports Eye*. Just a fan of harness racing at the time and fortunate enough to know one person employed by the publication, the entry-level job would give me access to a wide range of minds that otherwise could have been hard to find. Sure, there were plenty of opinions to be garnered from attending a racetrack on a nightly basis, but most people were focused on picking a winner and getting on line to make wagers. There wasn't much time to share what dynamics they utilized in making their selections.

In the offices at *Sports Eye* co-workers would often discuss races they saw the previous evening, and most times unearth information that would never be readily available on the program the following week. Learned almost on the first day of employment was how cherished little nuggets of information was to most everyone in the building. To understand that those in the know had a decisive advantage over those that didn't was critical in discovering horses that would go off as longshots in the weeks ahead.

Sure, there were those in the building that wanted to have the most winners on a card no matter what the payoffs, and those that were “spot” players who were more focused on what could be perceived as “value” plays. The value of being in the company of varied opinions and betting strategies would have been impossible to garner had this group been working remotely and not interacting in person as we were lucky enough to be back in the day.

Most interesting in those early days for me was just how different gamblers could be in their own personal theories or betting strategies. There were some that painstakingly mused through the program spending hours trying to break down every facet of the data to make a reasoned decision. At times the effort would be compromised by deadlines, with the newspaper finalized to go to print and selections needing to be wrapped up. Then there were others that scanned the building asking nearly everyone in attendance their own opinions of a particular race as if they needed a consensus to arrive at a winning wager.

The conversations would always begin with the phrase: “What do you like about that horse?” The answers that followed would vary based on the handicappers own personal views. The reveal at times would find a different angle to pursue at best and something to ignore at worst. Not everyone shared the same mindset when it came to handicapping and to be surrounded by those with stark differences of opinion helped shape a gambling philosophy.

There were notable heated discussions as ego often played a major part in the battle for handicapping supremacy amongst a group of passionate players. There were Damon Runyan-type characters with stories to tell

and angles to pursue that bordered on illegal. Jack Rubin, the newspaper's editor at the time, was a bit older than most of us and his stories covered the years before we were of legal age to wager. Mr. Rubin was always asking questions and miraculously to me weaving stories into the pages of *Sports Eye* from just a few tidbits of information. A gambler in the truest sense, Mr. Rubin seemed to have a passion of trying to beat the bookmaker (the only avenue to place a bet off track at the time) by any means possible. What that meant was if you could place a wager on a race after the race had begun or finished and the bookmaker took the bet unaware of the time of the race, you could make a score. To succeed you would have to have a bookmaker that didn't record the time or had a watch that was a minute or two off. Mr. Rubin had access to press boxes in the local area and often placed calls to *Sports Eye* employees at the track while simultaneously on another phone with his bookmaker.

Mark Richman, a friend who lived on the same block as I did in Brooklyn, got me the job with *Sports Eye* and was their top handicapper. He studied the program intently and was disciplined in his approach. Mr. Richman watched races with purpose and combined his handicapping skills with impeccable visuals to formulate his selections. Before getting his actual name in the publication as the leading handicapper he went under the name “Misha Goss,” a Yiddish-term for craziness. *Sports Eye* followers sent in hate mail when Mr. Richman replaced Misha Goss, displeased that their favorite handicapper had been replaced.

While Mr. Rubin was looking for questionable angles to swindle bookmakers, Mr. Richman was looking for betting angles that would yield high payoffs and set up “big score” possibilities. Initially he would tell

me that he had a “system” horse and share it but was too secretive to explain how he arrived at the horse. A series of double-digit winners would soon follow, and the news would spread around the building with others asking almost daily if Mr. Richman's system had revealed another long-shot play.

One early evening Mr. Richman found a system horse, but it was racing at Liberty Bell Park near Philadelphia. A weekday excursion to the Philadelphia area track would be impossible, leaving Mr. Richman only the hope that his bookmaker would take a wager on an out-of-town track. The system horse was in the second race at Liberty Bell and Mr. Richman reached the bookmaker with enough time to place his wager. In

the middle of his conversation, Mr. Richman was interrupted by Mr. Rubin who shouted across the room, “Mark, use the two horse in the first race.” Mr. Richman was not playing daily doubles and he noted that right back to Mr. Rubin.

“Just play the double with the two,” Mr. Rubin said again.

Mr. Richman looked down at his program quickly at the number two horse in the first race at Liberty Bell and then shot back, “Jack I can't play a horse like that.” That said, Mr. Richman concluded his conversation with the bookmaker and hung up the phone.

At that point Mr. Rubin explained to Mr. Richman that the number two horse had already won the first race and he had missed out on the chance to past-post the bookmaker, infuriating Mr. Rubin at the time.

It was just one of many of the office conversations that took place, but it taught me something over the long run. Mr. Richman's virtue was that he listened to his own opinion first and foremost when making wagers. Regardless of the circumstances he trusted himself and wouldn't be swayed by other views. On this occasion he was unaware that it was not Mr. Rubin's selection but an actual winner.

Eventually Mr. Richman did enlighten me with the details of his “system” that proved extremely valuable to me as one of the better lessons learned in the office.

The collage consists of three distinct sections. The top section is a '7 HARNESS TRACKS PAST PERFORMANCES' chart for Sunday and Monday, listing various tracks like College-NBA Matchup and Yonkers. The middle section is the cover of 'SPORTS EYE WEEKEND MAGAZINE' for Monday, November 22, 1999, featuring a 'Crew Cut' Delaware Special and a 'Fast Photo Captures Valley Victory Final'. The bottom right section is a black and white photo of a football player, Rich Gannon, with a caption mentioning his performance against the Denver Broncos.



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Are you in?

Leamon ready to take Big M shot after weather cancellations

By Jay Bergman

Trainer Jake Leamon has been trying to get his horses raced this winter, but Mother Nature has not complied. On Saturday, with skies expected to be clear, Leamon sends out a quintet of pacers on The Meadowslands 15-race program – a few veterans and a sophomore pacer making his career debut.

Seaworthy Hanover, Leamon's charge in Saturday's second race, a winners of 1 but not more than 4 conditioned affair for a purse of \$17,500, has been a major victim of the cancellations.

"I raced him last on January 3 and haven't had any luck," said Leamon from his stable at Winner's International. "He won in a non-winners of two and I expect him to be competitive."

Seaworthy Hanover, a 4-year-old son of Captaintreacherous, matched his victory total from 2025 with the win. On Saturday he drew post eight in a higher class that is mixed with a majority making the step up as well. In The Moonlight (post 2) has been a solid second in his last two races, one that saw him gut it out in a virtual match-race with Seaworthy Hanover on January 3 from post 10. Trainer Tom Cancelliere has a second horse in the field with Pack A Punch (post 7), a winner at this level on January 11 and one of only two horses in the group with three starts in 2026.

Leamon seemed rather enthused about the unraced sophomore Northern Attitude, a son of Stay Hungry that will debut in the third race.

"I bought him off Troyce Thomas – who is the blacksmith here – for \$7,000," said Leamon. "I really like him a lot."

An original \$4,000 yearling purchase at Harrisburg in 2024, Leamon started training the 3-year-old last September to get him ready for racing this winter. Northern Attitude won his first qualifier on January 10 and then followed that up with a big second-place finish on January 24 in another qualifier over the Meadowslands strip.

"That was a brutal day," said Leamon of the second qualifier. "He was racing into a headwind."

Northern Attitude was timed in 1:53 1/5 while making up a ton of ground in the second half and looked to have more in the tank had driver Ridge Warren called upon him.

"We'll see how he does on Saturday and then stake him accordingly," said Leamon, recognizing the potential he sees in Northern Attitude.

Saturday's race will likely be a good test, though the \$13,500 contest for maidens has a few horses eligible through other conditions on the outside of the gate. Montana GB, a 5-year-old by Always B Miki, makes his North American pari-mutuel debut for trainer Ron Burke following a solid qualifier on January 17 at The Meadowslands where he paced home in 27 2/5. Montana GB landed post 10 in the field.

Another Stay Hungry-sired colt in the field, Best Of Hungry (post 6), finished in a dead-heat with Northern Attitude when the two crossed paths in the January 10 qualifier. Best Of Hungry makes his career

debut for new trainer Cote Keim, who acquired the colt from the Tony Alagna stable recently.

Leamon is hoping that Agedchedar Hanover, a 10-year-old, can continue his winning form. Agedchedar Hanover rallied from ninth to get up by a nose on January 24 at The Meadowslands on a frigid night.

"He loves closing," said Leamon. "It's a step up in class."

Saturday's eighth race is for Trackmaster rated horses of 90.5 or less, significantly above the 83.5 level Agedchedar Hanover defeated on December 20 at The Meadowslands.

Leamon sends out Pompeo Hanover (post 1) in Saturday's tenth race and the 7-year-old should be in contention. "The inside draw is always good, especially for a horse that's not the quickest out of the gate," said Leamon.

On a positive note, Pompeo Hanover did win at a lower level from the pole position at The Meadowslands on January 10.

Big Jack Hammer closes out Leamon's night in race 13 looking for his initial win of the season in his fourth attempt. "The inside should help him," said Leamon of the draw that puts Big Jack Hanover in post one against a Trackmaster rated 74.5 field. Big Jack Hammer has drawn post six or worse in his last four starts and won at the Trackmaster 71 level from post eight.

With 14 currently in his care, Leamon is excited about another 3-year-old that has returned to training and is pointing towards a late-March or early April debut. "I'm looking forward to Talbot Andretti," Leamon said. "He's filled out and grown up. Last year he came home in 25 and change a few times. He's a Sweet Lou colt with a lot of talent."

Talbot Andretti was last seen at The Meadowslands finishing fourth in the Governor's Cup at The Meadowslands.

Leamon has another horse in the barn that won't be racing anytime soon. The now 15-year-old Rockeyed Optimist, a career earner of \$826K, is a favorite of Leamon's and spends his retirement in the company of the racing stable.



NIKKI SHERMAN/DRF HARNESS

Trainer Jake Leamon will send out five horses at The Meadowslands on Saturday.

Meadowlands News & Notes: New Pick 8, Pick 6 Carryover & Payments due

This Friday, February 6, and Saturday, February 7, the Meadowslands Racetrack will kick off live racing with an early 6 pm post time.

This Friday also kicks off the PK 8 spanning Races 3-10 with \$50,000 seeded into the pool. This new wager has a \$1 minimum bet, with 75% of the pool carried over each night if there are no 8 out of 8 tickets.

"With 15 races each night, this was an easy call," stated the track's COO/GM, Jason Settlemoir. "This early post time will help alleviate time constraints and allow more horses to get raced. We are also excited to debut this new wager. We want to thank Peter Kleinhans for initiating this venture, and we hope our horseplayers will embrace the PK 8."

"My hope is that other tracks will want to do this as well," said Peter Kleinhans. "I think tracks should step up and take chances. This Pick 8 venture, the main payoff on this one, is harness racing

coming up the winner."

Friday's card also features a \$7,802 Pick 6 carryover spanning races 8-13 and the usual \$50,000 guaranteed Pick 4 pools will be in place on both Friday and Saturday in races 6-9 and 10-13.

Stakes payments

With the deadline for stakes nominations fast approaching, the Meadowslands would like to advise horse people that all pertinent information for the 2026 season, including the final **month-by-month calendar**, is currently available on the **website**.

Stakes payments begin on Feb 15.

Questions should be directed to (201) 460-4025.

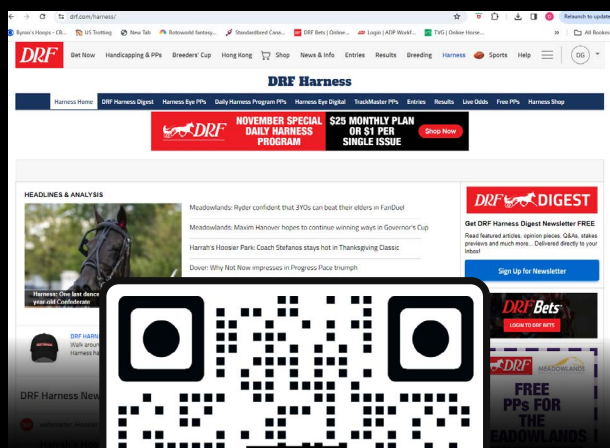
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-edited releases (Meadowlands)



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Harris hopes to keep career-year momentum in 2026 debut at Big M

By Ken Weingartner

After seeing one of his horses honored with a Dan Patch Award in each of the past two years, trainer Andrew Harris is hoping his stable can build on that success this season as he prepares to kick off his 2026 campaign Friday (Feb. 6) at the Meadowlands.

Harris set a career high for purses last year, with his horses banking \$4.01 million in 508 starts. His stable's average of \$7,909 ranked ninth among all trainers in North America and was less than \$300 from the top five.

Leading the way was Dan Patch Award-winner Yo Tillie, who last season at age 3 topped all female trotters in earnings, with \$979,195. She had 11 wins and a second in 12 races and counted the Grade 1 Breeders Crown and Delmonica Hanover Stakes among her victories for owners Bill Pollock, Bruce Areman, and Harris.

She became Harris' second Dan Patch Award recipient, following older male pacer Abuckabett Hanover in 2024. "Bucky" also was owned by Pollock, Areman, and Harris.

"We're hoping to try to make this a trend," Harris said. "Anytime you get your name called for one of those awards, it's phenomenal. It tells you that you've done something well, had a good horse to work with, and a good team behind you to support you and get you to that point."

"Now, we have to try to do it again. We're not resting on our laurels. We're trying to create more and more top-end horses. Hopefully, this year we can add another one to the list, or maybe a couple more."

Yo Tillie, who is being pointed toward an April return in the Kentucky Sire Stakes series for 4-year-olds at Oak Grove Racing, was among 10 horses trained by Harris to exceed six figures in purses last year. Others included graded-stakes winners Brandon Blvd, Topville Lucky, Captain Luke, and Heart For Two. All were owned by Pollock, Areman, and Harris.

"It was a good year," Harris said. "We went to Kentucky and made over a million dollars in purses, which was phenomenal because it's the best horses in the country. We did very well in Canada, which we went to mainly for Grand Circuit races. When we looked at our Grand Circuit record, we were very happy with it."

"It's an acknowledgment to the type of horses we've got, which is big thanks to Bill and Bruce that we were able to buy them and have some luck with them. We've had really good upper-class horses, some that were real standouts. We had some that were disappointments – we experienced both sides of it – but at the end of the year we were all happy. And we have some youngsters coming back this year that we're looking forward to, that were very nice horses last year."

Harris will get this season under way Friday at the Meadowlands with a Swedish import he co-owns, but not with Pollock and Areman. Harris shares ownership of Laferraridmanche S, an 8-year-old trotting mare, with Ray Lasky and Nathan Cockerham.

"I've had horses with them over the years," Harris said. "They always seem to buy one or two with me every year and I've maintained that. They're great guys, a joy to have horses with. Hopefully, we can have some luck for them, too."

Laferraridmanche S will make her North American debut in a \$12,500 conditioned event at the Big M, leaving from post one with Brett Beckwith in the sulky. The daughter of Brad De Veluwe-Ladonna Dimanche is the 3-1 morning-line favorite.

She heads into the race with 10 wins in 50 career starts and earnings of \$148,975.

"I'm thrilled to have her," Harris said about the mare, who won a qualifier in 1:55 3/5 on Jan. 17 at the Meadowlands with Beckwith. "She looked



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like she had a lot of gate speed, so we're hoping that she will be a real nice half-mile-track specialist at some point. I think Lasix here is going to be a big help for her. I don't think she is quite stakes material, but hopefully she is an upper-class-type mare."

After getting to know Laferraridmanche S, who last raced in September, Harris described the mare as "feisty."

"She's actually hard to deal with, but that said, she seems to have a big set of lungs," the trainer said. "And that may stem from her attitude. She's very mentally tough."

Racing begins at 6 p.m. on both Friday and Saturday this weekend at the Meadowlands, 20 minutes earlier than usual. This Friday also kicks off the PK 8, spanning Races 3-10 with \$50,000 seeded into the pool. This new wager has a \$1 minimum bet, with 75% of the pool carried over each night if there are no 8 out of 8 tickets.

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BY DERICK GIWNER

It is possible to pin most people in the world with a tag describing their main place in life; Dexter Dunn is a driver, Ron Burke is a Hall of Fame trainer. When it comes to Peter Kleinhans, one tag just won't do. Putting aside his law degree, singer/songwriter acumen and work in real estate, Kleinhans has played a prominent role in harness racing as an announcer, on-air host, trainer and even amateur driver.

The 60-year-old with varying interests is now adding benefactor in a way as he'll be putting up \$50,000 of his own money starting this Friday at The Meadowlands to seed a new Pick 8 pool. Kleinhans took some time from his busy home and work life to discuss the wager, his journey in the sport and much more. Enjoy!

DRIVER/TRAINER/ANNOUNCER/ ANALYST PETER KLEINHANS

How did you get started in harness racing?

That's a tricky question because my first time to the track, I was 6. It was the thoroughbreds at Belmont, and I was absolutely hooked, even though I thought #2 was the same horse in each race and no 2s were winners that day. But I was obsessed with the announcer, who turned out to be Dave Johnson, who is a wonderful guy and we're now best friends. But harness racing, that was from going to The Meadows near Pittsburgh, where my grandparents lived. You had to be 10, but I remember them sneaking me in when I was 8 and 9.

Did you have any family connection to harness racing or did you just catch the bug from a friend, etc.?

I had no connection at all. It was all from going that first time, and then begging my grandparents to take me to The Meadows every time I'd visit them. I'd look forward to it more than anything else. I remember hitting the 2-6 exacta in the first race at The Meadows one of those times and feeling like I was going to come out of my skin.

You've walked away from the industry in the past to pursue other interests. What always brings you back to harness racing?

Just love for the game. I can't explain it. After announcing at Hoosier Park from 1995-1998 – a job I absolutely loved – I felt I had to give something back to my family, which is in the real estate business. Our main attorney was 74 years old, so I felt if I went to law school I could learn to take on that role eventually. I interned with them the first summer after law school and it became clear that our attorney had no intention of retiring...so when I finished law school, I figured I'd take a real shot training at The Meadowlands. I had a great run there between 2002 and 2010, and only stopped when they closed the barn area and there was nowhere close enough to my family to keep training. But I've always stayed involved in one way or another because I love it so much.

Owner, trainer, driver, track announcer, on-air contributor... which is your favorite role in harness racing?

It's a lame answer, but I love them all. When I'm training, I love training. When I'm driving, it's the only thing in the world to me. Whenever I'm not announcing or doing the analysis, I think 'I should be announcing or doing the analysis.' I can't get enough of any of the roles.

Which role do you think you do best?

I'd have to say the combination of announcing and analyzing. I think I'm a good trainer, but I'm not Ron Burke. I'm happy with my driving



COURTESY PETER KLEINHANS

(right to left) Becky, Peter Kleinhans, Jack, Ivy and Quinn.

but I'm not Dexter Dunn. But put me in the announcer's booth or guest handicapper role and I'll gladly take on all comers. That's why I love my role as announcer and analyst at Oak Grove, where I work with Ray Coto. We make a great team. I'm very proud of my work there.

You live in the New York/New Jersey area but took the job as the announcer at Oak Grove in Kentucky. What went into that decision? Was it tough with a newborn son?

The first year I took the job was 2024 and my son hadn't been born yet. It was a lot of flying back and forth – every week – but I really enjoyed it. In 2025 it was definitely harder to have to leave the baby for the Monday and Tuesday, and the flying (and the delays!) were crazy. But this year, my son is older, we have childcare in place, and I'll be staying down there most of the time, and even training a few horses. I can't wait. I'm a very hands-on dad, though, so I'll still be flying back and forth – just every two weeks instead of every week. I have no regrets. Oak Grove is a wonderful place to work, and one of the few tracks where you feel a positive momentum. They've added a couple major stakes races this year that I think will really help put it on the map.

Amateur driving has also been a passion of yours. What do you think it brings to the sport?

It gives a chance for guys like me, who are never going to make driving our entire lives, the chance to compete. 2024 was my best year ever – obviously, the more you drive, the sharper you're going to be. Some year when my son is a little older, I'd love to drive around to where all the different clubs are and take a real shot at having a great season.

Whether as a driver or fan, what is your favorite track to visit? Why?

I still have to say The Meadowlands. It's not like the nights of 25,000 people at the old grandstand anymore, but I still think the style of racing is the best anywhere.

What is your favorite big event in racing? Why?

I had the good fortune to compete in the Elitloppet in Stockholm, Sweden – three years in a row with Enough Talk – and I just loved it there. I went back just to visit and for the race for a few years afterwards. I'd love to go again.

Did the experience with Enough Talk – racing in the Elitlopp, being the first trotter to break 1:50 – make your training career feel more fulfilled?

Absolutely. I saw one race of his and was instantly obsessed. After taking over his training and learning about him, I saw that he really

[CONTINUED ON PAGE 12](#)



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responded to interval training. Seeing him step up and put in one good performance after another was incredibly gratifying. And, as corny as it might sound, holding the American flag in front of the Swedish crowd was thrilling. Seeing him finish third in the final in 2008 was an incredible feeling. When he broke 1:50, I wasn't even surprised because he had gotten so good. I still think he should get a look for the Hall of Fame, but I don't really know how that works.

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

First, I'd have to just say spending time with my wife [Ivy] and family. We're practically inseparable, and raising our baby together has been great. I have two older kids as well and I value our conversations immensely. On my own, I enjoy analyzing economics, philosophy, politics, and all sorts of intellectually-stimulating things, and I use what I find in my personal investing. I'm also a Mets fan waiting for one more iteration of 1969 and 1986. Right now, I'm fascinated – as many people are – with AI, and over the last year I've really enjoyed interacting with it. And I love writing music- especially story-type songs that connect to real people and real emotions.

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

Probably that as a singer-songwriter, I have three published albums and am currently at work on a fourth. And that I perform regularly for a small but loyal following. I'll be at The Bitter End in New York on March 11 – my band is a great group of musicians; we only perform for an hour, but everyone seems to enjoy it!

What is one word that describes harness racing for you?

Home.

What was your best moment in harness racing?

When my first horse – Flip Collins, who I had bought after he bowed a tendon the year before, made it back to the races after babying him along – won the final race ever at Lake Shore Meadows. A \$1,500 claimer with an \$800 purse.

You are an investor in The Meadowlands. Why did you get involved? Are you always happy with the direction taken by management? Do you get any say?

As I said, The Meadowlands is like a second home to me; of course I wanted to be involved. As far as management, I don't second-guess.

Managing a track is hard and I don't envy anyone having to make decisions – some of which are inevitably going to annoy some people.

Along those lines, you are introducing a \$50,000 seeded \$1 Pick 8 wager at The Meadowlands starting February 6. What made you decide to put in \$50,000 of your own money?

It's something I've always hoped a track would do. Honestly it would have been a lot better 20 years ago. But no one seemed to want to do it, and it's better late than never. I'm willing to risk some of my money rather than spend the rest of my life wondering if it would have caught on. Maybe it will; maybe it won't. But it's a great bet. I'm hoping for a million-dollar carryover one of these times.

Let's say it gets hit a couple of weeks in, how many times are you prepared to pony up \$50,000 to kick-start the pool?

Four. That's the deal I made. It would be an absolute nightmare for me if it got hit right away four times in a row. I'm praying that doesn't happen!

What determines whether the bet is a success or a failure?

I'd say if it develops a BUZZ. That's what's missing in racing these days. Something where people come to the track saying, 'I'm going to hit this tonight,' discuss it with their friends and have some real excitement with it. What would really mark success to me is if the carryovers got big enough that they drew some big thoroughbred players in.

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

I'd have it focus on the horseplayers and make them stars, the way poker did. I did a pilot with the late Dave Brower back in 2004 of the 'World Handicapping Challenge,' that would have been handicapping's equivalent of the World Poker Tour. I think it might have worked, but no one wanted to take a shot with it. Everyone likes to see their name on TV and I think every night at the track could be framed as a mini-tournament with a chance to get 15 minutes of fame...and the best players could have been household names, the way poker fans all know Daniel Negreanu. I think the window has probably closed for that now, though.

How do you view the future of harness racing?

I wish I were more optimistic about it. Being dependent on other forms of gambling can work for a while and it's great what these deals have done for purses in a lot of places. But what I loved about the sport growing up, the buzz in the grandstand at The Meadowlands, Roosevelt, and Yonkers, I doubt we'll ever see that again. But hey, I'm trying with this bet to bring a little of that feeling back!

Time for the stretch drive...

Best Horse you ever saw: Somebeachsomewhere.

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Peter Kleinhans on the stage singing at The Bitter End in NYC.

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Monti off to a hot start in 2026

By Ken Weingartner

The frigid winter weather has done nothing to cool off Drew Monti. The 31-year-old driver, coming off a season in which he set a career-high with \$2.71 million in purses and captured titles at Batavia Downs and Buffalo Raceway, has been winning races at a nearly 24-percent clip since the calendar turned to 2026.

Monti has won 17 of 71 races this year and earned just shy of \$100,000 in purses. He will head to Thursday's (Feb. 5) final day of Batavia's brief January/February meet with 16 victories in 65 starts at the western New York half-mile oval, where he leads the driver standings by four wins over both Brett Beckwith and Kyle Cummings.

Last year, Monti won 293 races – coming up one triumph shy of his career best – and added a Top 10 finish at Plainridge Park to his crowns at Batavia and Buffalo.

"It's sort of picked up where I left off at the end of last year," Monti said. "It was a good year. It was busy and it went fast, but I was happy with where I ended up. I had a chance to race some good horses, and I had a couple of my own that I really liked. It's nice to have horses like that. It was a good feeling."

"Usually, the winter meet is not really my thing. My accounts don't really race in the winter, so it's like a different mix of horses. If you get lucky, and you end up on the right horses, it's OK. But it's not anything planned, per se. But this meet has been exceptional. The weather has been tough, but the racing has been good for sure."

Monti has been the leading driver at Batavia four times in his career (with 2025 joining 2024, 2018 and 2016) and also was the top driver at Buffalo in 2018.

"It's the same circuit, but to lead at Buffalo and Batavia is kind of difficult," Monti said. "Different people do better at each track, for whatever the reason; it isn't just the same group of people, business as usual. There are people that don't even really race at Batavia, but they do very well at Buffalo."

"With that being said, sometimes you just get dialed in. You hate to say it ever feels easy, but it just feels smooth. Things are going smoothly for a long period of time, rather than erratic. Whether it be with the horses, good or bad luck, there's a lot that can stop you."

Monti, who has won nearly 2,900 races in his career, will hope things continue to go smoothly on Thursday, when his nine drives include Rock Me Always and Kb'ssweetcaroline in Winter Series finals at Batavia.

Rock Me Always is 2-for-2 this season, with both victories coming in the preliminary rounds of the conditioned series for pacers. The 12-year-old son of Always A Virgin-Rock Me Mama is 7-5 on the morning line as part of a Mae Smith-trained entry and will leave from post three in the \$11,000 final.

"I love that horse," Monti said. "He went a huge trip last week. I moved him three high at the quarter pole back to the lead, it was a little ridiculous. It wasn't a good drive; he made me look good. He's been pretty dominant. It looks like he's in a good spot. He's got a lot of gate speed, and he's been so sharp, I think he'll be real tough to beat."

Kb'ssweetcaroline brings a five-race win streak dating to last year into her \$14,000 final. The 6-year-old pacing mare also is 2-for-2 this season thanks to triumphs in her series prelims. The Sam Smith-trained daughter of Shadyshark Hanover-Armbr Abstract will leave from post four and is the 2-1 second choice on the morning line.

"She is just unbelievable right now," Monti said. "Horses get confident and feel like they can do anything. I'm hoping that if I can get spotted close that she's capable of winning, for sure. Hopefully, we get it done."

Following the completion of the Batavia meet, Monti has no set plans for the days ahead of Buffalo's opening on March 4. He might race some at Hollywood Casino at The Meadows, or at other tracks in upstate New York, in addition to spending time with his dad, Darrin, working at their seven-to-10 horse stable.

"I get pretty busy through the summer, so to sit down for a minute isn't the worst thing," Monti said. "But I can't wait for Buffalo. Hopefully, we get out of this winter in one piece and everything is good to go. The money is going to be good, the racing is going to be good, at Buffalo. I'm looking forward to that."

"My better horses are on the shelf just waiting to come out. Everything will be really coming together by March 1. We'll be in gear. Hopefully we hit the ground running and have another good year."

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.

THURSDAY, FEBRUARY 5

RACE 10

(1) WHITE LOTUS appears to be a standout in here based on the classes he was racing at to close out 2026, and he squeezed into this event by a dollar as he has \$5,695 earned in his last five starts.

-Greg Reinhart

EMPIRE CITY.
CASINO
YONKERS RACEWAY

FRIDAY, FEBRUARY 6

RACE 9

(1) ABSOLUTION saved all the ground in her first start off the bench and raced quite well. I expect her to be tighter tonight and get the job done.

-Kevin Plowcha

WOODBINE
MOHAWK PARK

RACE 7

(3) DANCING LEW rolled in this class two starts back and then raced pretty well from the far outside post while up in class last time. He should be very dangerous this week.

-Derick Gwerner

MEADOWLANDS
RACING & ENTERTAINMENT

SATURDAY, FEBRUARY 7

RACE 3

(4) NORTHERN ATTITUDE turned in an excellent second qualifier as he waited early and charged home willingly with no shot to be second in a pretty quick mile. Three-year-old debuts in a perfect spot and should have every chance to win at first asking.

-Gwerner

MEADOWLANDS
RACING & ENTERTAINMENT

FULL CARD ANALYSIS / PAST PERFORMANCES

Mohawk Park Analysis

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

Meadowlands Analysis

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INSTANT RACING UPDATES VIA TWITTER: @DRFHARNES

NEWS FROM AROUND THE HARNESS INDUSTRY

ENTRIES BEING ACCEPTED FOR LONDON CLASSIC YEARLING SALE

The fifth annual London Classic Yearling Sale (LCYS) is now accepting entries for the 2026 edition, which is slated to take place on Oct. 13 & 14 at the J-AAR Expo Centre of the Western Fair District in London, Ontario. Yearling preview day will take place on Monday, Oct. 12.

The LCYS is coming off its strongest sale ever in 2025 with a total of 289 yearlings going through the sale ring and gross sales topping \$8.8 million - an average of \$30,650. The Cattlewash filly Roca was last year's sale topper, fetching a price of \$190,000.

Recent London sale graduates include 2025 O'Brien Award winner as 2-year-old Trotting Colt of the Year, Strobe Lite (\$379,900) and O'Brien Award finalist for 2-year-old Trotting Filly of the Year, Flowing Tribute (\$213,600).

The sale annually showcases offspring of Canada's premier stallions and this year's group will feature Ontario superstar names like Cattlewash, Bulldog Hanover, Green Manalishi, Alarm Detector, Muscle Mass and many more. Newer stallions like King Of The North, Beach Glass and Century Farroh, plus a selection of top American stallions, make the London Classic one of the leading sales in North America.

The London Classic Yearling Sale also directly supports the London Classic Sale Series which was unveiled in 2025. The series is open to Ontario sired 4-year-olds and younger who are non winners of \$10,000 as of March 1st. The deadline to nominate is March 15 at a cost of \$200 (\$160 USD). The series will feature four \$40,000 (guaranteed) finals to be held on Camluck Classic night, Friday, May 29th at The Raceway at Western Fair District.

Owners and consignors are urged to thoroughly read through the terms and conditions when submitting entries for this year's sale. For more information on how to enter, visit londonclassic.ca. The deadline for entries is Monday, April 21.

-release (LCYS)

DETAILS FOR 2026 VDM FESTIVAL TOUR IN AND AROUND IRELAND

Travelers seeking a premium international getaway can now reserve space on the Northern Ireland & VDM Festival Tour, a 7-day luxury adventure taking place August 3-9, 2026. The tour is priced at \$3,500 per person and features limited availability.

This exclusive package blends iconic destinations, cultural landmarks, dramatic coastal scenery, and VIP access to one of Wales' most exciting racing weekends—creating a seamless travel experience across Ireland, Northern Ireland, and Wales.

"This tour offers limited availability and exceptional value," said tour coordinator Heather Wilder. "Premium hotels, iconic attractions, and VIP racing access—all in one seamless package."

The adventure begins with pickup in Dublin, followed by an exclusive behind-the-scenes visit to the renowned Meadowbranch Training Centre. Guests will also visit the legendary Hill of Tara, a historic site associated with ancient Irish royalty and myth. The tour continues to Belfast, where travelers will stay overnight at the four-star Clayton Hotel Belfast City, located in the heart of the city. While in Belfast, guests will experience the Titanic Belfast Museum and a guided city tour featuring the city's renowned murals and history. Additional Northern Ireland highlights include the Giant's Causeway, a UNESCO World Heritage Site known for its striking geological formations, as well as the famed Carrick-a-Rede Rope Bridge, offering panoramic coastal views and unforgettable photo opportunities. Following Northern Ireland, the group will return to Dublin and travel onward via scenic ferry crossing to Wales. Guests will arrive in Snowdonia National Park and enjoy accommodations at the 4-star Ixora Hotel & Spa, then explore the historic Conwy Castle, one of Wales' most celebrated medieval landmarks. The tour concludes with a weekend of excitement at the VDM Festival of Racing at Tir Prince, where guests will enjoy premium access and front-row energy at this signature racing event.

Availability is limited. To register or request additional tour details, contact: Heather Wilder hkwilder@gmail.com.

-edited release (VDM)

BEAU JANGLES GETS SOMEBEACHSOMEWHERE HORSE OF THE YEAR AWARD

Standardbred Canada announced the winners of the 2025 O'Brien Awards, honoring Canada's best in harness racing over the past season, at the Black-Tie Gala on Saturday, Jan. 31 at the J-AAR Expo Centre at Western Fair District in London, Ont.

The event marked the 37th edition of the O'Brien Awards, named in honor of the late Joe O'Brien, an outstanding horseman from Prince Edward Island and member of the Canadian Horse Racing Hall of Fame.

The evening's highest honors went to Dr. Ian Moore, while James MacDonald achieved a historic milestone with his fifth consecutive driving title.

[READ MORE](#)

NEW MEMBERS FOR CANADIAN HORSE RACING HALL OF FAME

The Board of Directors of the Canadian Horse Racing Hall of Fame (CHRRF) recently approved new members of its Standardbred Nomination Committee and Planning Committee.

Following the passing of longtime Committee Member, Dow Clowater, the CHRRF Board of Directors has approved the addition of Dr. Ian Moore, CHRRF Honoured Member - Class of 2024, to the Standardbred Nomination Committee.

Born in Sheffield, England, Dr. Moore grew up in Prince Edward Island and has successfully balanced professions as a Standardbred trainer and practising veterinarian. Racing primarily in Ontario, Dr. Moore has trained horses to earnings of more than \$29 million through 2025. At the recent O'Brien Awards for 2025, Dr. Moore received his third O'Brien Award for Horsemanship and was named the Trainer of the Year, while one of his 2025 stable stars, Beau Jangles, was honoured as the Two-Year-Old Pacing Colt of the Year and Somebeachsomewhere Horse of the Year.

The volunteer Planning Committee is responsible for overseeing the planning and execution of the day-to-day operations of the Canadian Horse Racing Hall of Fame. The committee membership includes CHRRF Board Members, CHRRF Honoured Members and senior racing industry executives. Recent Board approved additions to the Planning Committee include Tony Elliott and Alexander Fanti.

Elliott is currently the Manager of Ontario Betting & Racing at Woodbine Entertainment. He has been very active in developing marketing strategies and promotional campaigns that strengthen wagering engagement and elevate the visibility of Woodbine's Thoroughbred and Standardbred brands. With experience overseeing racing operations and marketing initiatives across Ontario racetracks, including The Raceway at Western Fair District and Clinton Raceway, Elliott brings a deep passion for Canadian racing, strong industry insight and a steadfast commitment to growing the sport's profile nationwide.

Fanti has built a career in the racing and gaming industry, holding wagering, marketing and sales roles across Canada and the United States. He has held positions at Woodbine Entertainment as Marketing Manager and at *Daily Racing Form* (DRF) as Director of Data & Analytics. In his most recent role at DRF, he led initiatives to accelerate growth in advertising sales, retail product sales and eCommerce subscriptions. Currently, Fanti works in consumer-packaged goods sales and remains an avid horse racing fan.

The Canadian Horse Racing Hall of Fame thanks these new Committee Members, as well as all the volunteers who commit their time and knowledge to the CHRRF. A complete list of Committee Members is available on the CHRRF by clicking [here](#).

-release (Standardbred Canada with files from CDN Horse HOF)

