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Comments? Questions? Email the Editor [DGiwner@DRF.com](mailto:DGiwner@DRF.com)



## EDITOR'S EYE

By Derick Giwner  
 @harnesseveguy

One of the hardest things for any athlete to do is to retire. Perhaps a close second is sitting on the sidelines with an injury, unable to participate in the sport you love, or in the case of driver Mark MacDonald, powerless to earn a living.

So what does an injured driver do to pass the time?

Some may take a vacation. Others may workout all day to the extent that the injury allows. Maybe they simply veg on the couch and binge shows on Netflix. Not MacDonald. He's pouring his energy into a newfound passion – the stock market.

"I love [the stock market]. I started a few years ago. I had a few bucks that I had sitting around and I had invested and I started watching what the brokers were doing and why they were doing

it," said MacDonald, who added that fellow driver Yannick Gingras helped him out by hooking him up with Manchego's owner Barry Guariglia.

But we are getting ahead of ourselves in terms of the root cause for MacDonald's abundance of free time over the last six months. The 47-year-old has been a bit snakebitten when it comes to injuries in his career and the past two years have been particularly unkind. He suffered a tough blow in October 2024 at Yonkers Raceway when an accident left him with fractures of his ribs, tibia and vertebrae in his back. When he finally returned in April 2025, another on-track incident about a month later took him out of commission with a broken hand and another fractured tibia. While that stay on the sidelines was short-lived, he never quite felt 100% over the summer and into early fall.

"I kept feeling like I just didn't feel right. Like I was going to pass out all the time. It would come and go. I would feel good for a day and then I

[CONTINUED ON PAGE 3](#)



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wouldn't," said MacDonald about his situation from July to October 2025.

Originally the doctors told him it was just an adjustment period to being on blood pressure medication, but when his leg started swelling up again and one day he couldn't even zip up his driving boots, it was clear the situation was more serious. His wife took charge.

"Honestly, I have to give credit to my wife [Alea]. She's like, 'enough, we got to take care of this. You're going to die.' And she was so supportive and she helped me through it all and she did everything so I could just lay in bed for a month when I got home."

Cutting to the point, MacDonald had a rare bad reaction to the contrast dye used for the many MRI's he had to undergo. It left him to the point where he was dealing with kidney failure and hospitalized for a week.

"I was knocking on heaven's door there," said MacDonald about his time in the hospital. "I don't know how else to explain it other than you just feel like you're being held underwater a little bit. You want to get breath, but you can't. It's terrifying. It's scary. It is. And it was, it scared me."

Once finally out of the woods in terms of his health scare, MacDonald got back to work on his recovery. That included not just the usual rehab and workouts, but a lot of time spent on his newfound stock market hobby.

"I bought a book, and then I bought another book, and then I started going to Goshen Library," said MacDonald about his homework on the road to financial wisdom. "I don't have any extra education for finance or anything like that, but I started. I went and rented The Intelligent Investor, and I put a lot of work into it, and I started doing my own thing."

While he stills leans on Barry Guariglia a little, MacDonald says he gets up at 6 a.m. each morning to watch business news on CNBC. He has his own portfolio with a mix of stocks, options, calls and puts.

"I actually really wish I had done it for a living," said MacDonald, who can often be found on X discussing the stock market. "It's the only thing I'm really good at, numbers. I guess I'm okay at driving horses, but I'm really good with numbers."

MacDonald has also gotten his daughter Kiara involved to the point where she comes home from school discussing the bulls and the bears. That's pretty advanced for a 6-year-old. As for his own advice, it centers on the future.

"You have to think long term. Thinking you're going to go in and out of stocks, you will get your head handed to you because you end up buying at the top and selling at the bottom almost every time," MacDonald said.

While MacDonald may want to spend his days in front of a computer studying the market trends, there is another voice calling loudly in his head to return to his true calling on the track. He may lead you to believe he is just an average driver but the numbers say otherwise. Since 1997 when he got started, MacDonald has amassed 6,743 wins and horses he has steered have earned north of \$107 million.

A Canadian native, MacDonald made a decision during the winter while he was prohibited by the doctors from driving that he would return to his roots to drive mostly at Woodbine Mohawk Park. Originally the plan was to return to the bike during the first week of March, but he had a minor setback in the way of a pinched nerve that delayed the inevitable.

Looking at the entries, the time is now as MacDonald is slated to head behind the gate nine times on Saturday at Woodbine Mohawk Park. It will be his first on-track appearance in nearly six months.

"I miss racing at Mohawk. That's like home. All my brothers are there and all my daughter's family's there; her cousins and stuff. And I love the track," said MacDonald, who plans to stick up there as a regular through the Sire Stakes season before considering U.S. options like Pocono, Yonkers and The Meadowlands closer to his New York home during the late fall and winter. "I can do a little New York, too, up there. Batavia is not that far away and Buffalo and those tracks are close."

"I don't know how it will go," admitted MacDonald about the move to Mohawk. "I haven't been there in a while. It was 2011 when I moved down [to the U.S.]. So it's been 14 years, but I still know a lot of people there and I have a lot of friends."

"I want to really hustle this summer. I feel like I barely worked in the last year and a half, to be honest with you."

A dual citizen of the U.S. and Canada, MacDonald should have no issues shuttling back and forth. He's holding out hope that the change of scenery on the work front will be a positive move and that just maybe the stars will finally realign for him on the track.

"In this game you just never know for sure when something great might happen if you just stay consistent and show up," concluded MacDonald.

## 2026 Mohawk Million draw results

On Thursday, Woodbine Entertainment held the draw to determine the slot owners for this year's Grade 1 Mohawk Million.

A total of 34 entrants were in the draw to determine the 10 slot owners that will hold a spot in the million-dollar race for 2-year-old trotters. Each slot was priced at C\$60,000.

The 10 owners selected in the draw are listed below:

**Matt Bax**  
**Paul Van Camp**  
**Al Libfeld**  
**Celebrity Farms**  
**Bill Pollock**  
**Mark Weaver**  
**Andrew Harris**  
**Michael Venneri**  
**Dustin Jones**  
**Courant Inc.**

Each slot is an entity that may be traded, leased or sold prior. A 2-year-old trotter must be declared for each slot by Monday, September 21.

The 2026 Mohawk Million is scheduled for Saturday, September 26 at Woodbine Mohawk Park.

-edited release (Woodbine)



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# Time to reexplore a national harness handicapping tournament



## AT THE TRACK

By Darin Zoccali [✕ AtTheTrack7](#)

Earlier this month I attended the National Horseplayers Championship (NHC) in Las Vegas. I witnessed a large ballroom in the Horseshoe Casino play host to nearly 1,000 of the leading thoroughbred tournament players in both the United States and Canada.

Of course, I asked myself the question, why can't harness racing support a similar event? Certainly, everything thoroughbred racing does is on a larger scale. They out-handle harness racing more than 10:1 over the course of a year and have more players. That does not mean a version of the NHC cannot exist for harness racing.

Thoroughbred racing is full of tournaments over the course of the year. Every day there are tournaments on a variety of different sites and there are several "major" or "mid-major" events throughout the year, including the NHC, Breeders Cup Betting Challenge and Kentucky Derby Betting Challenge. That did not happen overnight. Years of companies within thoroughbred racing developing tournaments and growing participants through player development has led to this point for their industry.

I am not suggesting that harness racing could snap their fingers and put forth an event like the NHC next year. But they could certainly begin by taking small steps towards such a goal.

In thoroughbred racing, the NTRA is the governing body of the NHC. The tournament is managed by employees of the NTRA (National Thoroughbred Racing Association) and managed quite well. It certainly would seem possible for the United States Trotting Association to help manage a similar event in harness racing.

There used to be a scaled-down version of the NHC in harness racing, known as the World Harness Handicapping Championship. It took on different forms over the years and was interrupted by the COVID pandemic and ultimately contested for the last time in September of 2022 at The Meadowlands.

For the first time in 35 years, the Hambletonian went out for bidding, and I would be curious if any of the locations included a tournament for the Hambletonian in their proposal. I certainly would have included such an event as part of my proposal if I were one of the three racetracks. There is plenty of time to launch a year-long build-up to such an event, contesting qualifier events for the Hambletonian contest. The track could utilize some of the websites that thoroughbred races use for their contests for some feeder and qualifier contests. The event could be a two-day format that includes a great on-track experience, hotel accommodations, meals, etc.

Certainly the Hambletonian is the one event in harness racing that does not need any help and historically betting handle for that day has not needed a tournament for support. But if the race is finding a new home, or even if it is not, this looks like a logical time to build such an event. In addition, it is far easier to launch such an event on your biggest day of racing to achieve success and work backwards from there to expand harness racing tournaments in the coming years.

Beyond the Hambletonian, could there be a national tournament on the level of the NHC in Las Vegas? Maybe. But it doesn't have to be at that level to be successful. There are other desirable destinations that could prove attractive to horseplayers and would be the start of working towards such a huge event.

The interesting thing to note about the NHC is I spent four days watching players wagering on state-restricted claiming races, maiden claiming races, etc. The best of the best racing was not required to make this event a draw for horseplayers. That proves that if you can put together a year-long campaign for such an event, attract enough players, the event sells itself to everyone.

This is not something that would cost a racetrack or the industry money. The costs associated with hosting such an event are accumulated through player registration fees for the year-long feeders and qualifiers leading up to the major tournament. It just requires a creative mind and organizational skills.

In addition, this could be a tool to attract thoroughbred tournament players to cross over and participate in such an event and thus, get them more involved in harness racing. Tournaments are about strategy and a



Nearly 1,000 people showed up at the 2026 National Horseplayers Championship.

thoroughbred horse player will learn how to handicap a harness race if he feels as a tournament player he holds a strategic edge in such an event.

There are many positives that could come from trying to launch such an event. The downside is minimal, if any. At the end of March, harness racing handle in North America is down \$19 million. That is on the heels of a year that saw handle down \$180 million on harness racing across the continent – \$80 million of which was in the first quarter of 2025. Being down \$19 million for a quarter against an \$80 million decline last year is not a good place to be.

[EDITOR'S NOTE: While total handle is down about 6.5% in North America, per race average is off just 2.3%.]

It is long since past the time to try things and this is an idea that is proven to work in thoroughbred racing. The Meadowlands is running contests on some weekends leading into a larger contest with a \$10,000 prize pool in December. This is a small-scale version of what I am presenting to the industry. Let's ramp it up!



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# Strength in Borgata numbers for trainer Scott Blackler at Yonkers

By Jay Bergman

The influence of imported horses from the Southern Hemisphere continues to grow on these shores. It comes as no surprise that 13 of the 28 horses entered in Monday's first leg of the MGM Borgata Series at Yonkers Raceway have been imported from the region. One trainer, Scott Blackler, has four horses among the five \$50,000 divisions, a rather impressive feat given the relative size of his own stable.

"I've got 18 horses in training and 13 are imports," Blackler said from his barn at Mark Ford's training center. "Chad (Kowal) got the itch and we keep growing."

Kowal is the owner of the four horses racing on Monday night in the Borgata legs and he's had a pretty good string of fortune in finding just the right horses.

"Frank Ranaldi is our agent and he looks for horses that can go on the half-mile track at Yonkers," said Blackler. "We're looking for horses that can race at the top level with the minimum being the non-winners of \$10,000 class,"

The success of the stable over the last year – where Blackler sent out an incredible 50 winners from just 208 starters – has put the trainer in an awkward position this winter.

"Last year we started with horses in lower classes and they were able to move up the ladder," said Blackler. "This year most of the horses are racing in the top classes and it's been difficult to find races for all of them."

With horses starting less frequently, Blackler has been forced just to enter qualifiers to keep horses ready. The decision to nominate as many as he did for the series was a combination of talent and opportunity.

"We entered four because we were expecting short fields," said Blackler.

Of the four, Skylou N is a relative unknown in North America that first qualified in late February. "I really didn't know much about him before he got here but when I started to train him, he felt like he could be a top horse, so we nominated him," Blackler said of Skylou N, who drew post six in the first \$50,000 division (race 2) on Monday. "I really thought he would win his first start (March 10) but he might have been battling a virus," said Blackler.

Skylou N is one of five imports in the six-horse first division with the already proven Soho Firestone A (post 1) making his 2026 debut following a stunning 1:51 2/5 qualifier at Yonkers on March 20.

Blackler believes that Heza Charttopper A may benefit from week-to-week action in the Borgata. A 13-time winner in 2025 with nearly \$250K banked racing at Yonkers almost exclusively, Heza Charttopper A is looking to regain winning form.

"He got into himself last year and injured a fetlock," said Blackler. "We had to give him six weeks of stall rest. It was right about the time of the MGM Grand Prix and we were fortunate they let us put Catalpa Rescue A into the series to take his place."

Heza Charttopper A has won just once in five tries in 2026. "I think he'll do much better on a seven-day rotation. It's our plan to race him every week if he's healthy," said Blackler.

Heza Charttopper A drew post five in the third race and second division and will have to deal with Redwood Hanover, a multi-leg winner in the MGM Grand Prix making his 2026 debut from the pole position for trainer Per Engblom.

Catalpa Rescue A was an instant hit for Blackler when he arrived state-side in 2025, winning five of his first six races beginning last August. A son of American Ideal, Catalpa Rescue A closed out the year with a third-place finish behind Coaches Corner and Captain Albano in the \$250,000 MGM Grand Prix final.

"He's a versatile horse that I think does his best racing coming from off the pace," said Blackler.

Catalpa Rescue A drew post five in the third \$50,000 division carded as race four and could have an edge with three of his rivals making their first starts in 2026. In that group will be Huntinthelastdollar, a 10-time winner in 2025 including a pair of MGM Grand Prix legs. Huntinthelastdollar (post 2) won a lone qualifier on March 14 at The Meadowlands in 1:52 2/5.

Captain Moore A (post 2) drew the best of Blackler's quartet but may have the toughest task given the competition in the seventh race and fifth MGM Borgata division. Coaches Corner (post 6) likely has the class edge



DERICK GIWNER PHOTO

if not the conditioning as he starts back up again for trainer Per Engblom racing for the first time since his December 19 score in the MGM Grand Prix.

"We bought him as a non-winners-of-2 horse," said Blackler.

Last July Captain Moore A won in non-winners of 2 races on multiple occasions. The then 4-year-old marched all the way up the class ladder and not only raced with the best at year's end in the MGM Grand Prix but managed to capture the \$100,000 consolation for Blackler.

With literally no classes, Blackler sent Captain Moore A to race at Pocono in February and the horse has slowly been rounding into top form. "He won on the front end last time (March 16 in a Yonkers Invitational) but he got slow fractions," said Blackler.

As for Monday night: "I think if he's in position, he can kick home with any of them."

In addition to Coaches Corner this division marks the North American debut for Aroda N, a 7-year-old by Art Major that was racing at the top level in Australia late last year. He has qualified exceptionally well over the Yonkers surface in preparation for the Borgata. Aroda N drew the rail.

Blackler won't have a horse in the sixth race division where last year's Borgata champion Mossdale Ben N (post 6) will meet Captain Albano (post 1) and four others.

While there's more than enough talent for Blackler just in the Borgata series, he sounded excited about the prospects of another horse on the comeback trail and one on a flight due to land imminently on U.S. soil.

"I expect Captain Hammerhead to be arriving shortly," said Blackler. "He's been racing Grade 1 competition." A son of Captaintreachorous, Captain Hammerhead is a 15-time winner.

Closer to home Blackler is happy thus far with the progress of Jamaican Rock A. "I'd say he's about six weeks away from qualifying," said Blackler of the 7-year-old by A Rocknroll Dance that won half of his 12 starts following his arrival last year and earned \$119K on these shores alone. Most notable for Jamaican Rock A was a 1:48 1/5 winning effort taken on Hambletonian Day. He would win multiple Invitationals at Yonkers and was a solid third in the Aria Invitational racing on the outside the entire way following a post eight getaway.

Given the depth of Blackler's stable, 2026 may turn out to be his best year yet.





## CAPTAIN OPTIMISTIC

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



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- 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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- 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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# Pelling pair takes aim at Friday's opening leg of McIntyre series

By Jay Bergman

The more things change, the more they look the same. Such is the case of the inaugural Ursula McIntyre series at Yonkers Raceway that commences on Friday with four \$50,000 divisions in its opening round.

The re-named event formerly known as the Blue Chip-Matchmaker series has many familiar faces in the lineup, with last year's champion Aardie B Miki N providing Yonkers' leading trainer Per Engblom a chance to repeat. Though the name of the race has changed, six of the eight mares in last year's \$490,000 final have entered for the first round.

Trainer Brett Pelling had two of those mares in 2025, with multiple-leg winners Walkin On Sunshine and Rocket Deo reaching the final but not enjoying great success. Walkin On Sunshine dictated a brutal pace and eventually lost her stride while Rocket Deo put in a flat performance in a fourth-place finish.

While some of the others in the four divisions spent last week either resting or racing at other locations, Pelling had his pair in action at Yonkers and both Rocket Deo and Walkin On Sunshine were victorious in their final preps, giving Pelling positive feedback.

"I didn't know what to expect from her in the stretch," Pelling said of Rocket Deo as his 5-year-old Captaintreacherous-sired mare trailed off a slow pace. "She really picked it up nicely and finished her mile."

Thus far in 2025 Rocket Deo had been a bit slow in getting into form and that surprised Pelling to a degree. "She would train great on the farm and then when we sent her to qualify, she just didn't seem to give it her all. We've made some tweaks and she's gotten better."

Rocket Deo captured the \$35,000 Filly and Mare Invitational at Yonkers on March 20 in 1:54 and that may set her up differently than a year ago when she entered the series only off qualifiers at The Meadowlands. A three-leg winner in the Matchmaker in 2025, Rocket Deo kicks off her stakes season from post six in the first of the four divisions.

While Rocket Deo has been tested against the top mares in the sport, Louies Girl N (post 2) has yet to race against the best horses in North America, but so too was her stablemate Aardie Miki N before dominating last year's event. Trainer Per Engblom once again finds himself with a promising mare from Down Under. Louies Girl N has won all seven of her starts, with six coming last year at Yonkers and the most recent a victory at Pocono on March 16 prepping for this series. Driver Jason Bartlett will guide Louies Girl N in favor of Rocket Deo who he drove to last week's victory, and that suggests his confidence.

Walkin On Sunshine won at a lower level in her Yonkers season's debut on March 20. It was the second start of the year for the Always A Virgin-sired mare and her second victory.

"I was very happy with her performance," said Pelling of the wire-to-wire 1:53 2/5 victory. "Last year she had some problems not going straight but she was perfect last Friday."

Walkin On Sunshine had two wins and three seconds in the five preliminary legs in the 2025 series and she'll kick off this year's event facing last year's champion Aardie B Miki N. Last year Aardie B Miki was the dominant of the two, but the balance of power may be shifting in 2026 with Aardie B Miki racing actively this winter and missing a check in three of her last four starts. Perhaps post position and preparation for this series was responsible for those stats but Aardie B Miki N (post 4) has the draw advantage over her rival Walkin On Sunshine (post 6) in the first round.

Newcomer Coastal Babe N (post 1) drew in with Aardie B Miki N and company in the fifth race and fourth division of the McIntyre. She looks to be a serious contender. Trainer Jared Bako had her ready for action when she made her North American debut at Yonkers on February 27, a 1:53 3/5 open-length score. Coastal Babe N advanced into Invitational company and won again on March 6. Conservatively driven in her March 20 outing Coastal Babe N finished third.

Leading trainer Per Engblom has a third mare with potential in this



MIKE LIZZI PHOTOS

Rocket Deo (above) and Walkin On Sunshine (below) form a strong pair for trainer Brett Pelling in Friday's Ursula McIntyre series.



series and Bath Bomb, a beast in the Bluegrass state last year, could be primed for success in the McIntyre. A 5-year-old daughter of Lather Up, Bath Bomb drew post four in Friday's third race and will be making her season's debut following a pair of solid qualifiers at The Meadowlands. With 12 wins in 18 starts last year, Bath Bomb's brilliance in Kentucky helped her earn \$375K in 2025. She did make one start over the Yonkers strip in October winning a high-level conditioned event in 1:52 2/5 from off the pace while defeating a few of the mares entered this Friday. Bath Bomb drew post four and could see some solid competition right to her outside on the starting gate with Fearless Ginger (post 5) and Always Bstunning N, a pair that have shown high stakes potential.

The sport's leading trainer Ron Burke is never short on talent or depth when it comes to major Grand Circuit races and this year is no exception. In addition to Fearless Ginger, Burke will send out Seaside Diva (post 2) in the fourth race division on Friday. Seaside Diva earned \$295K last year and could prove even better as a 5-year-old. That certainly seems to be a strong indication given a solid third-place finish in her season's debut on March 12 in a Miami Valley featured event.

Turn The Page N (post 1) finished on the board in all five legs of last year's series and made the final despite not winning a leg. Driver Ron Cushing has a chance to put the 7-year-old in the winner's circle on Friday with the mare already riding a three-race winning streak that includes a pair of game wins at the top class at Pocono earlier this month.

The Ursula McIntyre Pacing Series has five \$50,000 preliminary legs beginning Friday and continuing on April 3, April 10, April 17, April 24, with a \$200,000 added final on May 8.



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BY **CHAPTER SEVEN** OUT OF **STEAMY WINDOWS**



# Top catch drivers return for Meadowlands and stakes races

By Derick Givner

Spring will have officially sprung on Saturday at The Meadowlands with the arrival of five of the top six drivers in terms of 2025 earnings. While names like Yannick Gingras and Jason Bartlett have been seen on the programs at Yonkers Raceway, others – Scott Zeron, Todd McCarthy and Dexter Dunn – will hit the bike in a pari-mutuel race for the first time this year.

Weekly Meadowlands appearances for the leading drivers will be predicated on the stakes schedule as busy season hits high gear when the calendar flips from April into May. In the moment Saturdays should be free since all six only have engagements at Yonkers Raceway on Friday and/or Monday nights for the Ursula McIntyre and MGM Borgata Series.

At the end of April they will also have to juggle racing in Kentucky on Mondays as those Sire Stakes kick off at Oak Grove on the 27th. May brings new challenges, like on May 2 when there are \$100,000 and higher races at Miami Valley, Plainridge and The Meadowlands, as well as Pennsylvania Sire Stakes at The Meadows. Then the 16th has Oak Grove hosting the new \$500,000 Oak Grove Trotting Derby and companion \$300,000 Oaks race for 3-year-olds on the same date that The Meadowlands has the A.J. Cutler Memorial.

“It’ll probably complicate things on one or two dates but for the most part it won’t be too much of a problem,” said McCarthy, who had a nice three-month vacation and is eager to return. “I’m really looking forward to getting back to The Meadowlands to start my season. It’s a great place to start and a great track.”

“I spent the majority of [vacation] down in Australia and came back in February,” continued the driver. “The weather is starting to break a little bit and I think everyone is in the same boat with coming back this weekend.”

McCarthy has taken some friendly jabbing from his peers over for his dislike of the cold weather since coming to the U.S. in 2020. For what it’s worth, he wasn’t shying away from it. “The cold is not something I’m really fond of. I never really experienced the extreme cold weather until I moved to the States. I don’t handle it too well and I try to avoid it as much as possible.”

Another guy has been enjoying fun in the sun is 2023 USHWA Driver of the Year Scott Zeron. Just prior to embarking on his journey north from Florida on March 25, the driver admitted he wouldn’t have minded a few more weeks in the warmer weather but conceded that it was time to officially get back to work.

“I didn’t even touch a jog cart for two and half months, but in the last 45 days I’ve worked really hard,” said Zeron, who last sat in the bike on December 5 at Yonkers Raceway.

The 36-year-old has plenty to look forward to in 2026 after completing a season which saw him steer horses to \$9.39 million in earnings, the third straight year at that level or higher. He cited William Wellwood Memorial winner Ardonne, multiple stakes-winning millionaire Maximus Miki and Breeders Crown 2-year-old filly trot third-place finisher Nezuko Kamado S as some of the stakes horses he is eager to work with again.

While Zeron will have to wait some time to get going with those stakes drives, McCarthy jumps right into action Monday at Yonkers Raceway with Captain Albano and then has another standout on his dance card at the end of April.

“[Captain Albano] ended last year really well and I’m looking forward to driving him, and there are a few other 2- and 3-year-olds from different divisions that I’m pretty excited about. I hope they’ve all had a good winter and will come back healthy and happy,” said McCarthy. “One



Scott Zeron (top left, Derick Givner photo), Todd McCarthy (top right with Captain Albano, Conrad photo), Jason Bartlett (bottom left, New Image Media) and Dexter Dunn (bottom right, Nikki Sherman) will be at The Meadowlands Saturday.



horse I’m really looked forward to is Yo Tillie. She was pretty awesome last year and I’m pretty excited to get behind her again.”

Yo Tillie was named Dan Patch Award winner as the best 3-year-old trotting filly in the sport last year and she is expected to be ready for the Kentucky Sire Stakes series for 4-year-olds at Oak Grove at the end of April.

McCarthy is listed to drive five horses on Saturday, the same total as Gingras, who has been making regular appearances at Yonkers Raceway during the winter months. Zeron is programmed to drive a trio of horses on the evening while five-time Driver of the Year Dexter Dunn and reigning holder of that title from 2025 Jason Bartlett have a six-pack of drives each.

Bartlett led the industry with \$16.7 million in purses won last year. While he already has nearly 400 starts under his belt in 2026 and is running away with the driving title at Yonkers Raceway, he is looking forward to sitting behind stakes horses again.

“I’m excited that stakes season is finally starting up here at Yonkers and look forward to driving some nice horses at The Meadowlands as well in 2026,” said the 44-year-old Bartlett. “Hopefully I can build on my success from last year.”

The one “top-sixer” not in attendance on Saturday night at The Big M is Tim Tetrick. He was listed on just two horses later on the card (in the same race) and understandably elected not to stick around for five hours (after the qualifiers ended) to compete in one race.

For all of the other leading drivers in the sport, the action is just starting to heat up in 2026. While winter is a time for rejuvenation or a light schedule, the summer and fall months bring doubleheaders and long hours for the top catch drivers. Time to get back to work.

# 2026 SALE ENTRIES ARE NOW OPEN!

## Important Dates

### Ohio "Jug" Sale

Friday, September 18, 2026

Entry Deadline: Sunday, March 15, 2026

### Lexington Selected Yearling Sale

Monday, October 5 – Friday, October 9, 2026

Entry Deadline: Wednesday, April 1, 2026

### Harrisburg Standardbred Sale

Monday, November 2 – Friday, November 6, 2026

Yearling Portion: Monday–Wednesday

Entry Deadline: Friday, May 1, 2026

Mixed Portion: Thursday–Friday

Entry Deadline: Friday, October 2, 2026

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- **Second-highest grossing consignor** at the Harrisburg Mixed Sale

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# Hoping for a 'Stunning' debut on the Grand Circuit at Yonkers

By Ken Weingartner

Always Bstunning N dazzled her connections with her work at Plainridge Park last season, with the then 6-year-old female pacer even beating an Open field of male rivals that included several winners of multiple Grand Circuit stakes.

Now, Always Bstunning N will get her own opportunity on the Grand Circuit. The New Zealand import, who debuted in the U.S. this past spring and won 11 Stateside starts, was among 26 pacing mares entered in Friday's first round of the MGM Ursula McIntyre Series (formerly the Blue Chip Matchmaker Series) at MGM Yonkers Raceway.

Tim Tetrick will drive Always Bstunning N for trainer Gretchen Athearn and owner Richard Poillucci. She will leave from post six, in a field of six, in the second of four \$50,000 opening-round McIntyre Series divisions. The daughter of Always B Miki-Simply Stunning is 7-2 on the morning line.

"After her performance last year, we decided that we had to at least give her a shot against some of the better mares," Athearn said. "It might not work, but we're at least going to give her a fair shake. She's given us no reason not to.

"I've never had a horse like this in my entire life. It's still sort of like a 'pinch-me' moment with her, like is this really real? There are no words for her. She's just purely amazing."

Always Bstunning N raced twice in New Zealand in January 2025, winning once, before heading to the U.S. for owner Poillucci. Her first start for Athearn came on May 6 at Massachusetts' Plainridge Park, where she made an early break and ended up being fifth-placed-sixth. From that point on, she did little wrong, finishing off the board only once in 18 races, with 11 victories, five seconds and a third while competing primarily in the Fillies & Mares Opens at Plainridge with regular driver Kevin Switzer Jr.

Her final two races last year, though, were against the boys in the Opens at Plainridge. She finished second in her first attempt on Nov. 17, then a week later posted a 1:51.1 triumph to bring her campaign to an end. That field also featured multiple Grand Circuit winners Rocknroll Runa A (including the 2024 Sam McKee Memorial), Binge On Yankee (including the 2025 Joe Gerrity Jr. Memorial) and Its Saturday Night.

"Rich had promised me that he was going to buy me an open mare for about a year," Athearn said. "So, he took a long time looking at horses before he bought her. When he did buy her, this is what she was supposed to be, but none of us – including Rich – thought she was going to be this good.

"To be honest, I hate to say this, but I'm not sure she's reached her potential yet. She never gets tired. She comes back after a race and she's not even blowing. I don't want to get my hopes up, but she's been ... stunning."

Always Bstunning N, who has won 18 of 60 lifetime races and earned \$226,487, paced a career-best 1:49.3 mile on Aug. 14 at Plainridge, when she beat a field of mares that included two 2025 Blue Chip Matchmaker Series finalists – Talk Curdy To Me (third in the Matchmaker final) and Turn The Page N (fifth). She prepped for her start in this year's McIntyre Series opener by winning a qualifier on Yonkers' half-mile oval in 1:55.4, back half in :56.1 with a :27.4 kicker, on March 13 with Jordan Stratton in the sulky. She was second in a :30 opening quarter before moving to the front and controlling the tempo from there.

"It was unbelievably windy that day and she was absolutely fabulous," Athearn said. "They went :30 to the quarter, and I thought Jordan was going to run over (the horse on the lead), so he had to pull her. When she gets on the front, she's very lazy. She just sits there and waits and waits. But when the race was over, Jordan couldn't pull her up in front of us by the paddock because she wouldn't let the (second-place) horse by her.

"I find that I like her racing from off the pace better because she loves a target. She loves to chase a horse down. She doesn't really look like much, my husband (Mark) described her as a 'deer' the other day, and she does look like a deer. She's not a great big mare, she's sleek looking. But she loves her job."

The Maine-based Athearn, who trains on the half-mile track at Cumberland, noted that taking off a week following the qualifier was



TOM MELANSON PHOTO

**Always Bstunning N showed she has talent at Plainridge. Now she gets tested for class in the Ursula McIntyre series at Yonkers Raceway on Friday.**

part of the plan to prep for the McIntyre, which features five preliminary rounds through April 24 followed by the \$200,000 (added) final and \$100,000 (guaranteed) consolation on May 8.

"We didn't race her right back because our ship is five hours," Athearn said. "We wanted to qualify her and then give her a week and then take her down six weeks in a row. We qualified her early for that reason."

Poillucci is no stranger to success in the mares' pacing series at Yonkers. His Shartin N, the 2019 Dan Patch Horse of the Year, won the Matchmaker Series in 2018 and 2019. She is the only two-time winner of the event.

Athearn is looking forward to seeing how Always Bstunning N fares in this year's series.

"I was just thinking about how fast my heart is going to be beating when I send her out to race," Athearn said with a laugh. "But she does everything you ask of her. She's not your typical snippy mare at all. She's a happy horse and does nothing wrong. She's a horse that everybody could like."

Racing begins at 6:45 p.m. (EDT) at Yonkers.

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# Bongiorno's has 'Sweet 16' at Big M

By Dave Little for The Meadowlands

Driver Joe Bongiorno has been as hot as a raging fire in a windstorm of late at The Meadowlands, as the 32-year-old pilot, who was named the track's Driver of the Week on March 20 for the six winners he had the weekend prior, did far better the week that followed, taking 10 trips down victory lane last weekend (March 20-21) with back-to-back five-winner nights to cop a second straight DOTW trophy, which will be announced officially on the Friday (March 27) night pregame show.

Over the four racecards, Bongiorno won 16 races from just 38 starts, for a gawdy win percentage of 42.1.

"You kind of look at a card and see what chances you think you have going into the night," said Bongiorno of last week's 10-bagger. "I definitely thought I had a few chances going into each night, but that doesn't always work out as planned. When things start rolling early, you kind of feel like you are doing everything right putting horses in the right spots, and that kind of carried over through the whole weekend.

"I mean, that was probably one of the best weekends I've ever had in my driving career. I've been focusing on trying to trip horses out and put them in the right spots. When you get on a roll, you feel like you can't do anything wrong."

The numbers back Bongiorno's words up.

At the current Big M meeting, Bongiorno is 30-for-122, and that win percentage of 24.6 is the driver colony's highest among the 12 pilots with at least seven winners. He's currently tied for third in the standings with Mark Herschberger, and trails only Brett Beckwith (60 winners) and Colin Kelly (34).

"Right now, thankfully, everything is good in my life," said Bongiorno, who has put his battle with depression in the rear-view mirror. "I'm enjoying (harness racing) again for the first time in a long time. Getting to drive for Ronnie (Burke) through the winter has been fun, and my own stable has been racing well. I've picked up a lot for smaller stables and had a super amount of luck for them the last few weeks."

Bongiorno is a young man, but spoke the words of a wise, old one when referencing the most important thing in his life.

"My son, Parker, is 18 months old, and there is nothing better in the world than being with him," said Bongiorno. "You could win 20 races over a weekend and that would still be very minor compared to being a father."

Bongiorno said Parker "is the light of our world" for him and his fiancé, Nicole DiCostanzo.

Yes, Bongiorno loves his son, and driving horses, but with all of that on his plate, he still finds time to be a serious force when it comes to training as well.

His numbers as a conditioner are also prolific. He's 12-for-54 (22.2 percent), and with 35 on-the-board finishes, his horses finish in the top three 64.8 percent of the time. He sits second in The Meadowlands standings behind only Per Engblom, who has 24 victories.

Bongiorno currently has 55 horses in his barn, and is hoping to get 10 more by the time summer begins.

The driver knows that also being a trainer will help in the coming months after the return of the bigger-name drivers to the colony. Dexter Dunn, Yannick Gingras, Todd McCarthy, Scott Zeron and Jason Bartlett will all be making their Big M 2026 debuts on Saturday. Andy McCarthy is also on the card after making his return a week ago.

"I have to create my own power at times, having my own horses to race is very important," said Bongiorno. "It puts me on the sheet and gives me an opportunity to pick up other drives on the card. Right now, I like being able to do both."

Bongiorno has a plan, and the plan will no doubt please his Big M fans.

"I want to stay at the Meadowlands on Friday and Saturday, for sure," said Bongiorno. "That's where I'm happy."

**CARRYOVER REPORT:** The stage was set for the \$1 PK 8 to get hit Saturday (March 21) night, but for an 11th consecutive offering, the wager did not yield a winning ticket.

Heading into the 10th race – which is the payoff leg – it seemed like a handful of players had set themselves up to collect a handsome payoff, since the total pool was over \$100,000. There were \$3 of live tickets with even-money favorite Bettors Donttell and \$2 worth of action on 3-2 second choice Typhoon Banner N, who was in search of a third straight score.

But after 6-1 chance Sun Of A Show stormed home to take the featured event, only tickets with seven correct selections were redeemable. The payout was \$371.10.

When racing resumes Friday, the carryover will be \$108,452.

DRF



## HANDICAPPER'S CORNER

THURSDAY, MARCH 26

RACE 9

(1) BRONZER squeezed into this race by a dollar as he has \$21,500 earned in his last five starts and just missed last Thursday after he took the lead from first-over in the stretch.

-Greg Reinhart

EMPIRE CITY.  
CASINO  
YONKERS RACEWAY

FRIDAY, MARCH 27

RACE 7

(4) PIZZAZZ HANOVER was given every chance on the front last week and dominated with a sharp mile. She faces a near identical field to last week, and I don't see her getting pressured enough in the early stages.

-Kevin Plowcha



WOODBINE  
MOHAWK PARK

RACE 9

(6) ALMOST KAREN is a very capable mare who seems to be coming around lately. Two back she took a shot at the leader and last time she rallied well from far back.

-Derick Gwerner



SATURDAY, MARCH 28

RACE 2

(5) JUMPIN' JACK DEO was in a tough spot and trapped until the stretch before pacing home very willingly in his career debut. It is worth noting that he dropped six seconds off his last qualifier and more can be expected now that he's down to speed.

-Gwerner



FULL CARD ANALYSIS / PAST PERFORMANCES

Mohawk Park Analysis

Friday Saturday

Meadowlands Analysis

Friday Saturday

Yonkers Analysis

Thursday Friday

DHP PPS

HARNESS EYE PPS

TRACKMASTER PPS

FREE PPS

INSTANT RACING UPDATES VIA TWITTER: @DRFHARNES

# NEWS FROM AROUND THE HARNESS INDUSTRY

## MOHAWK PARK MANDATORY PAYOUT HI-5 SCHEDULED FOR SATURDAY

Woodbine Entertainment today (3/25) announced a mandatory payout will be offered for the Jackpot Hi-5 this Saturday (March 28) at Woodbine Mohawk Park.

The Jackpot Hi-5 carryover currently sits at \$198,445 heading into this Friday's card, where the wager will continue to be offered ahead of Saturday's mandatory payout.

An overflow field of 12 claiming pacers are scheduled to compete in Saturday's mandatory payout event (Race 13 – 11:19 p.m. ET).

[READ MORE](#)

## TRIPLE GUARANTEES ON THURSDAY'S HOOSIER CARD

Racing resumes at Harrah's Hoosier Park on Thursday (March 26) with a 14-race program featuring a carryover in the Early Pick 5 in addition to the traditional guarantees in the Late Pick 4 and Late High 5.

Full fields will be the theme of the night on Thursday, with 136 horses in the box for the program which gets underway with a first post of 5:30 p.m. The first race kicks off the Early Pick 5 (races 1-5) which features a carryover of \$1,293 with that pool being guaranteed at \$10,000.

[READ MORE](#)

## INGRAHAM COLLECTS 8,000TH LIFETIME DRIVING VICTORY

Sunny skies and warmer temperatures brought out a nice crowd for opening day at Cumberland Raceway on Saturday (March 21), with several regulars picking up where they left off, along with some new faces also grabbing the spotlight. However, the brightest star of the day was driver Dave Ingraham, who secured his 8,000th career victory.

[READ MORE](#)

## CANADIAN HORSE RACING HALL OF FAME ANNOUNCES 2026 FINALISTS

As the Canadian Horse Racing Hall of Fame proudly celebrates its 50th Anniversary, the Nomination and Legend Committees of the organization have determined the induction categories to be recognized in 2026, along with the finalists for each category as follows:

The Standardbred categories and finalists appearing on the 2026 Election Ballot include:

- Standardbred Builder - Al Libfeld, Hugh Mitchell, Dr. Maurice Stewart
- Driver - Mary Clare MacDonald, Roger Mayotte, Mike Saftic
- Standardbred Trainer - Doug Arthur, Fred Grant, Rod Hennessy
- Standardbred Female Horse - Emilie Cas El, Put On A Show, West Of LA
- Standardbred Male Horse - Arch Madness, Majestic Son, Marion Marauder

• Standardbred Veteran - Frank Daniels, James "Roach" MacGregor, Western Dreamer

The Thoroughbred categories and finalists appearing on the 2026 Election Ballot include:

- Thoroughbred Builder - John Burness, Dr. Robert McMartin, DVM, Stanley Sadinsky
- Thoroughbred Communicator - Michael Burns, Jr., Neil Campbell, Bill Tallon
- Jockey - Richard Dos Ramos, George HoSang, Emile Ramsammy
- Thoroughbred Trainer - Gerald Bennett, Dale Saunders, Laurie Silvera
- Thoroughbred Female Horse - Careless Jewel, Hard Not To Like, One For Rose
- Thoroughbred Male Horse - Joshua Tree, Rahy's Attorney, Fatal Bullet

Those in the Legend Category include horses and people whose impact on Canadian horse racing took place at least 50 years prior to induction, with a particular focus on individuals considered "Unsung Heroes" and "Trailblazers" whose contributions helped shape the sport in Canada.

• Standardbred Legend Finalists - Retta Harrington, Fred Hill, Georgette Plouffe, William Henry Riddell, Wayne Smith.

• Thoroughbred Legend Finalists - Alfred Tarn, Kathleen Taylor, Kemo Inamasu, Osborn Morton, Eva Ring

The individual receiving the most votes in each of the above categories

will be named a 2026 Inductee. The fourteen individuals, people and horses, to be included in the Canadian Horse Racing Hall of Fame, 50th Anniversary Class, will be announced April 8.

-release (CHRHOF)

## WEISS SERIES PROSPECTS PREP AT POCONO

One sign of spring at Pocono Downs at Mohegan Pennsylvania is the appearance of promising three-year-olds preparing for Bobby Weiss Series action, an annual event for all divisions of sophomores that begins this year on Saturday, April 4. Another sign of a change in the fortunes with weather was the upswing of fourteen degrees (from 36 to 50) that the mercury took during a marathon morning session at Pocono on Wednesday.

Each of the four sex and gait possibilities contest their own Weiss Series action, and here we focus on the Wednesday winners who were fastest in their divisions.

**TROTting FEMALES** – Nightcap Mearas S. a daughter of Walner, was ready for her first charted line of the year, coming from third in the stretch to win in 1:58 1/5 for driver Andrew McCarthy and Snog-rps Gard Inc. Her trainer is Nicklas Oestergaard-Andersen, a 30-year-old native of Denmark, and he was victorious in his first race as a trainer, at least on these shores.

**TROTting MALES** – The Devious Man gelding Acoustic Blue Chip, who has had some gait issues during his brief career, was on best behavior Wednesday and made every pole a winning in 1:57 for multiple Pocono driving champion Matt Kakaley; his stablemate for trainer Jared Bako and owners Blue Chip Bloodstock Inc., the filly Aviatrix Blue Chip, was second.

**PACING FEMALES** – The Huntsville filly Grazia was in fashionable form for her owners, Vincent Ferriero Jr., Pint Size Racing LLC, Donald Kayser, and Dominic Pavia, sitting the two-hole until the far turn, then going on to a 1:55 2/5 triumph. Jason Bartlett was in the sulky for trainer Joe Pavia Jr.

**PACING MALES** – The Always B Miki colt Twin B Thriller, four of six at two and a winner in a qualifier last week, repeated here, proving a pocket rocket in 1:55 - 55 4/5 - 27 3/5. George Napolitano Jr. drove the winner for trainer Dennis A. Laterza and the partnership of Ginko Stable Inc. and Latz A Luck Stable.

This division also generated the day's fastest qualifier, although the accomplishments of Hunt Off The Press at two kept him out of the Weiss Series. A four-time NYSS winner who was second in the Empire State's Sires Championship, Hunt Off The Press showed he may be ready for bigger game right now, with the Huntsville gelding sprung out of the pocket and posted back numbers of 55 - 26 2/5 to win by himself in 1:52 1/5 for Tyler Buter and Team Bako / Blue Chip.

In the seven qualifiers won by Weiss eligibles, Team Orange Crush (driver Andy and trainer Julie Miller), driver Jason Bartlett, and trainer Jared Bako had doubles. For the overall sixteen-race qualifying session, Bartlett guided five winners, with the Millers and Bako authoring four success stories.

Replays of the Wednesday Pocono qualifiers can be found at [www.phha.org](http://www.phha.org). Pocono is next in pari-mutuel motion on Saturday at 1 p.m.

-edited release (PHHA/Pocono)

## OSRC WEBSITE OFFERS LIST OF OHIO STALLIONS WITH 2027 FOALS

The Ohio State Racing Commission has updated its list of Ohio stallions with registered foals for 2027.

The complete list is available on the Ohio State Racing Commission [website](http://www.ohsr.com).

The updated list includes five stallions that were not listed in the 2026 Ohio Standardbred Stallion Directory. Those stallions are Bit Of A Legend N, Devious Man, Expressive Action, Mission Accepted, and Racing Rebel.

The 2026 Ohio Standardbred Stallion Directory is available on the Ohio Harness Horsemen's Association [website](http://www.ohha.com).

-release (OHHA)