

Friday, April 3 2020

Lights out for North American harness racing

Now that Cal Expo has been forced to cease racing, not a single North American harness track is still operating during the COVID-19 pandemic.

by Brett Sturman

BETWEEN THE LINES



with BRETT STURMAN

And then there were none.

With the indefinite shutdown of racing at Cal Expo due to the COVID-19 pandemic announced just a short time before they were set to go postward on Wednesday, there is no more live racing at any standardbred racetrack across all North America. In fact, if you wanted to bet harness racing anywhere in the world on Thursday, your only options were three different tracks from Sweden and whatever track is defined as "Australia Harness 1."

The decision to shut down wasn't made by the Cal Expo, but rather one mandated by order of the Sacramento County Health Department. Perhaps feeling pressure from outside lobbying groups, horse racing was also shut down this week in the same manner at Santa Anita Park and Golden Gate Fields, coming on orders from Los Angeles County health officials and Alameda County officials, respectively.

Up to the moment of being the last domino to fall, Cal Expo had intended to complete the remainder of its meet through the end of April. Having recently received permission from the state to continue racing despite

In today's HRU

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ALL BETS OFF

p. 2, 1:50f, 3, 1:48.3f, 1:48, BT1:46.2
(\$3,186,658)

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California's "stay at home" order, Cal Expo altered its racing schedule as to maximize exposure. Normally racing in the later evening hours on Fridays and Saturdays, the west-coast track moved its racing days to Tuesday and Wednesday, and adjusted post time to 6:30 pm Eastern time.

Of course, the amount of money bet on the Cal Expo races pales in comparison to a global pandemic, but recent handle from the Sacramento harness track proves a demand for racing of any type to exist.

In 2020, Cal Expo began racing on Jan. 3 and through racing on March 21 had never reached \$1 million in nightly handle (though, it did flirt with that number a time or two). Then, last Friday and Saturday (March 27 and 28) facing no other harness racing competition and limited thoroughbred competition, the track went over \$1 million on both cards. Handle on Friday was \$1.188 million and came in at \$1.087 million the next night on Saturday.

Racing for the first time on a Tuesday, handle on the March 31 card rocketed to over \$1.37 million. I don't know if that's an all-time record or not for the track, but if it's not it most certainly has to be right up there. Included in Tuesday's numbers was a handle of the Pick 4 of \$92,228. The only other racetrack of any type racing in North America that evening was little-known thoroughbred track, Fonner Park.

What makes the handle numbers that much more impressive is that just two weeks prior Cal Expo only handled in the \$600,000's. With the state's off-track betting system closed off due to the overall state shutdown, the increase in handle is also offsetting for the lost in-state OTB revenue.

It's too bad that the plug had to be pulled after just one day of racing in near total isolation. On one hand, it would have been interesting to see how much higher that handle could have gone, and more broadly on the other hand, it was nice to simply have some semblance of harness racing taking place in the midst of surrounding chaos.

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A cursory review of social media posts from this week showed a good deal of crossover from thoroughbred bettors. A series of comments regarding style of harness racing and post drag – things that those who follow harness racing are intimately familiar with – were common social media themes. Any type of exposure to new bettors would have been a positive.

In the short-lived experiment that lasted one day, there's a couple of takeaways. In conjunction with the USTA and TrackMaster, Cal Expo was able to offer free programs for the full card on Tuesday and were slated to do so again on Wednesday. It brings up the age-old question: If programs were offered for free – presumably to entice people newly exposed to Cal Expo to bet and drive handle – why shouldn't that same logic be applied in normal times?

This would have been far less feasible, but an intriguing experiment nonetheless would have been to drop takeout to an obscenely low rate of say 5 per cent and see what impact that would have. Would it be impossible to think that if there was a single track running across the country and airing on TVG – combined with a next-to-nothing takeout rate, that handle may have reached \$2 million?

Again, handle is a by-product and secondary to the fact that there was racing to begin with. But it seemed like a win-win for everyone while racing was still ongoing. Race participants were still able to continue to race for purse money and people like myself were able to escape from the same endless news cycle and watch harness racing.

Now, the next time we witness another live harness race in this part of the world is anyone's guess.

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Lawson on the stark realities: "As a business we've really been hit hard"

But despite dark days in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic that has forced the layoff of almost all of its 2,000 employees, the Woodbine CEO is still able to find some positives and is encouraging people to breed their mares.

by Dave Briggs

Woodbine Entertainment Group (WEG) CEO Jim Lawson said the Toronto horse racing company had little choice but to act quickly and decisively to layoff all but a very small number of its some 2,000 employees over the last two weeks when the stark realities of the COVID-19 pandemic hit Ontario.

"As a business we've really been hit hard," Lawson told HRU Thursday afternoon, explaining that its core revenue streams — racing, food and beverage and simulcasting wagering — have all stopped operating and, conversely, stopped bringing in money.

"We fall into the category of having very, very little revenue



Dave Landry

Woodbine CEO Jim Lawson said there has been a "heavy burden" associated with laying off most of the company's 2,000 employees.

Ontario



and we are also a very labor-intensive business with a (total) payroll over \$70 million," he said.

Lawson said the massive layoff notices were necessary for two main reasons: 1. To quickly and decisively comply with government social distancing and "stay at home" orders in order to do its part to try to help flatten the curve and get back to racing as soon as safe and reasonable and 2. To help preserve the company. As the largest horse racing outfit in Canada, Woodbine is an important driver of the sport in the country

"Given that Woodbine is a driver in this industry... if we didn't take immediate steps to deal with this it would have been very irresponsible for us. It would have had a lasting negative impact if Woodbine couldn't survive this period," Lawson said. "Over 90 per cent of the commerce of this industry in this province is associated with Woodbine and people have been looking for us in leadership in terms of racing and leadership in dealing with government. I think we're doing our best and stepping up and people appreciate just how important Woodbine is in trying to sustain this

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p, 3, 1:53.2z; 1:52.1 (\$168,215)

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industry.

"That's the reality and there's a heavy burden there. It's a heavy burden with respect to all these people that are employed in the industry and employed at Woodbine Entertainment... There's, conservatively, between 10,000 and 15,000 people that are directly or indirectly dependent on Woodbine Entertainment."

All WEG employees, Lawson said, "are still receiving their health benefits during this time so that's a positive. We're stressing with everyone that these layoffs are temporary. We're doing everything we can for the horsepeople and the people that are working. I can tell you that it's down to bare essentials with reduced hours. There are pay cuts across the board and we're all feeling the pain."

Lawson said no one knows how long the layoffs will last.

"We realistically know this is going to take some time to get through, but when we do get through it we're going to come out stronger on the other side," he said.

Despite extremely challenging times, Lawson said he is encouraging people to breed mares.

"I'm strongly of the view that people should be breeding their mares now," he said. "This will pass, whether this takes four months or six months or whatever it is – and I've been

very careful with dates and projections with horsepeople about when are we going to start racing again. I say 'I do not know, all I can tell you is that I'll do my best and I understand your plight. But this will pass and we will be stronger.'"

Lawson said he believes horse racing in Ontario will be in a better position in a post-COVID-19 world than it was after the Slots at Racetracks Program was cancelled.

"The long-term funding agreement is in place and we're in a very, very different position today than we were in 2012," Lawson said. "I want people to understand that we are in a stable industry. Woodbine is a company with a great brand, with great technology, with great infrastructure that will help this province and this industry in the horse racing world. With the stability from the long-term funding agreement, this industry will bounce back and we will be fine."

In the meantime, it hasn't been easy for anyone in any industry, most assuredly horse racing.

This week, WEG officially postponed the 161st running of its premier thoroughbred race, the Queen's Plate, originally scheduled for June 27. Lawson said it is the only stakes race WEG has officially postponed, so far, but others such as the Pepsi North America Cup, set for June 20, will likely follow.

HARNESS RACING UPDATE

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Editor: Dave Briggs

Production: Brian Fuller

Graphic Design, Ads & Placement: Lisa Bihuniak

Advertising Sales: Wilma Van Vaerenbergh | [contact for ad sales/questions](#)

Results & Stats Editor: Lisa Duong

Founder: Bill Finley

Contributors: Claus Andersen, Garnet Barnsdale, Tim Bojarski, Jerry Connors, Frank Coto, The Curmudgeon, Paul Delean, Bill Finley, Joe FitzGerald, Dean Gillette, Ron Gurfein, Thomas Hedlund, Bill Heller, Bob Heyden, Dean Hoffman, Victoria Howard, Melissa Keith, Dave Landry, Lauren Lee, Dave Little, Chris Lomon, David Mattia, Trey Nosrac, Tom Pedulla, Andrea Pietrzak, James Platz, Bob Roberts, Sandra Snyder, Brett Sturman, Jay Wolf

Get in touch with HRU

PO Box 230 | Millwood, NY | 10546 | Telephone: (226) 374-9999

Editor/News Stories: editor@harnessracingupdate.com

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

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The Queen's Plate announcement was made, Lawson said, because the Toronto media asked him about it in lieu of a Toronto city ban on major events through June 30. The start of the thoroughbred season at Woodbine, originally set for April 18, has also been delayed.

Lawson said the \$1 million Queen's Plate will be easier to reschedule than the Pepsi North America Cup because the former is mostly contested by local horses.

"On the standardbred side... we work very closely – much more so than on the thoroughbred side – with the other standardbred tracks in North America to make sure that our stakes schedule coordinates well for these horses. When you think of a race like the NA Cup, it just becomes harder to find a date on the calendar that works for everyone, assuming that the other racetracks are going (later in the summer).

"We haven't made an announcement on the NA Cup and we may well need to, but I'm just suggesting that it's harder, whereas our Queen's Plate series and our Triple Crown series, we know we can put them later in the year and we're going to get generally the same horse population available for those races."

Lawson said he works every day to find positives in a dire situation and, apart from still being bullish on the future after the pandemic is over, he said he hopes racing's many – often fractious – partners gain a greater understanding of each other.

"I can't tell you the number of conversations I've had with owners and trainers throughout the North American, and racetrack people... There's been such great cooperation in recognition of the challenges we face in this industry that I'm hoping and thinking that it's opened up dialogues that we haven't had before," Lawson said.

He said horsepeople he has spoken with have been understanding of decisions WEG has made and have been able to see issues from the company's perspective.

"I know that people appreciate that we're looking for ways to help... When I get a chance to talk to these people and speak to them directly, they really appreciate and understand that I get it and understand what they are going through and I'm not so sure that's ever been shared before," Lawson said.

"Coming out the other side, I think we will always have to respect each other's opinions and each other's interests. I do think this has been a really good time to come together and share views. It gives you an opportunity to speak to people on a different level, so I think it will be helpful in the long run and we'll come out of this stronger. And, maybe I'm being a little too profound here, but maybe as a society we'll come out of this stronger and kinder and more understanding."

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The way forward: some initial steps

Open letter from the president of the United States Trotting Association.

by Russell Williams

Pick your catastrophe. We face a world health crisis worse than any we've seen for over a century. Meanwhile, the Governor of Pennsylvania is engaging in some state budget buccaneering that would, if the General Assembly permits it, destroy a two-century-old, native horse racing industry that brings \$1.6 billion in economic impact and 20,000 jobs to the state. If this succeeds, what will happen in other states? And, finally, a long list of thoroughbred and standardbred industry participants face a reckoning that, looking at their conduct as alleged, you would think they never expected. This last situation is in the forefront of the minds of (the USTA's) Board of Directors as we work through our "annual meeting from home" this week and next.

We all abhor the allegations in the indictments and criminal complaints, and we roundly condemn all conduct of the kind. At the USTA, however, there is an obligation to forego the luxury of performative outrage and, instead, to concentrate on what concrete steps our mandate requires us to take. Our record in dealing as an association with cheating and horse abuse is excellent. Now I write to call for concrete action that will move us forward in the right direction. In this editorial, I offer some recommendations. Others will join in, I hope, offering additions and corrections. At last, I hope, everyone of good will in harness racing will contribute time and money to the work that must be done. We can resolve to embrace change and to bear its cost, because we know that only then can our racing sport thrive in the modern era.

The Narrative

We love horses. This is our narrative, its beginning and its end, and it consists of countless stories of courage, hope, and love for horses that totally contradict the acts of a criminal few.

Perhaps our very survival as a sport requires us now to make sure that the world learns about our true selves. When a horse puts its nose ahead of another horse's nose, evolution is at work. Taking the lead is part of a horse's social nature, so (unlike dog racing, for example) horse racing is entirely natural, and horses thrive on it. Horsepersons can tell inspiring stories of horses that found a way to win against unplanned-for adversity, just as we must overcome adversity now. Caring well for horses, and we do care well for them, involves trying to understand these beautiful creatures



Mark Hall / USTA

USTA president Russell Williams.

that cannot communicate with us in human terms. But those of us who employ their intelligence to understand and communicate in something like horse terms become better people for it. There are wonderful stories of lives that have been transformed, not merely economically, but in a deeper way, by the bond with the horse, an animal that evolved along an entirely different strand of the net of creation from humans. Horses can teach us things about courage and beauty, even love, that we would otherwise never learn.

Some people do not know that our award-winning writers and photographers have been telling the story of harness racing in *Hoof Beat* since before the USTA was founded. But today the USTA has more powerful resources for telling the story of harness racing than it has ever had: our website is the most visited in harness racing and is closely watched by other breeds, and our social media presence is a serious force on the Internet. Our communications department is unrivaled among breed associations, and our ability to put these resources to use is limited only by the cooperation of our membership. Finally, the USTA Board of Directors is meeting as I write, by means of a series of teleconferences, and advanced communications is under discussion. As the USTA and the membership find new and more effective ways to tell the true story of harness racing, we can correct the cultural narrative and propel our sport into its rightful place in the future.

"The Feds"

In the United States, the federal level provides the services that a central government should provide, while the states retain authority over every other matter. Federal prosecutions are usually the best way to address criminal activity occurring in multiple states. Although the conduct alleged

took place in several states, the indictments and criminal complaints under discussion issue from the Southern District of New York, one of the most sophisticated offices within the United States Justice Department.

We must not fall prey to the ignorant notion that there is any magical connection between the Justice Department and the Horseracing Integrity Act which, if it ever were to see passage, would be governed by the Commerce Department. As Ed Martin, president of the Association of Racing Commissioners International (representing state authority), has pointed out: nobody needed a Horseracing Integrity bill to make these prosecutions happen. The laws that make the allegations in the indictments illegal, and the federal, state, and private agencies that built these cases already exist, and we should build on the existing system to prevent cheating and horse abuse, and to incentivize best practices in our sport.

The serious problems that the Horseracing Integrity Act poses for harness racing have been explained elsewhere. Yes, we have problems of our own to solve, but instead of throwing this poorly-considered federal Hail Mary, instead of ignoring the states' established knowledge and experience in regulating horse racing, and instead of relying on some unspecifiable federal magic to solve our problems, our effort must be to support and extend the growing cooperation among state racing commissions. The state racing commissions themselves called for this over a year ago, by proposing a dedicated unit among key federal and state agencies to investigate racing matters and, where appropriate, to refer them for prosecution. This call was ignored by those proposing so-called racing integrity bills at the federal level, but individual state racing commissions are continuing nevertheless to strengthen their ties with state and federal enforcement agencies.

An even more significant development is taking place.

"Interstate compacts" provide a contractual structure that enhances cooperation among states regarding regulations and enforcement. This is not a new concept: for years an interstate licensing compact has existed, simplifying licensing for owners, trainers, drivers, jockeys, and other licensees across the country. In a similar but more important way, an interstate medication compact would bring about consistent medication regulation nationwide. (We don't use the word "uniform," because standardbred and thoroughbred medication rules can't be uniform. They must differ in a few areas because the two breeds have different performance models.) Interstate medication compacts are working their way through several state legislatures, and we may be approaching passage of a multi-breed medication compact in one of the leading racing states. If this happens, I believe that the other racing states will quickly follow suit.

Reading legislative bills (and enacted statutes) can be extremely tedious for most people. But someone has to do it. And if you read the Horseracing Integrity draft bill, you will discover something very surprising: recognition in the bill's own language of the primacy and importance of interstate compacts and, by implication, state authority. It's almost as if the federalization special interests felt compelled to acknowledge that the states have already done all the work and already have all the know-how regarding medication regulation. Section 4(e) of the draft bill says that the whole federal house of cards collapses if, "after the expiration of five years following [the effective date of the Act]," an interstate compact is established. Amazingly, the draft then goes on, in subsection 4(e)(2), to recite important steps that we should take to develop an interstate medication compact.

Let us not wait five years enduring some sort of expensive and pointless federal intermission before we do what should have been done in the first place: to fully establish the breed-specific medication compact that is presently evolving in the states.

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The Ethical Climate

We can achieve a radically new regulatory process that will render extinct the criminal activity of a few horsepersons and veterinarians, and we can do it without having to purchase any expensive federal snake oil. The type of criminal activity under discussion was, in the past, often veiled by certain legal concepts and, to some extent, aided by a certain “don’t ask don’t tell” attitude within the industry. We now have the opportunity, maybe our last, to change this permanently.

First, the days of turning a blind eye to suspicious activity are over. They never should have existed. I offer, as a good counterexample to horsepersons who failed, in the past, to report suspicious activity, the American bar. If a lawyer becomes aware of an ethical infraction and fails to report it, he or she becomes guilty in turn of another serious ethical infraction. In other words, the legal community has a self-policing system that can be expected to work much better than the “don’t ask don’t tell” system that we have tolerated in racing. In grade school, if you told on someone, you were a “rat.” Unfortunately, this way of thinking persisted into adulthood among some horsepersons. It was never valid. We must police ourselves, because our obligation is not to be a “stand-up guy.” Our obligation is to ensure the health and welfare of our horses, and to preserve the integrity of our industry.

Second, we must recalibrate our internal affairs. No longer can we be excused for leaving investigation and enforcement up to our chronically underfunded racing commissions. But rather than pouring more of our money into the state commissions, we should develop private investigative capabilities that support the regulators’ powers and we should demand the commissions’ formalized cooperation with the investigations that must be carried out.

Much of the investigative work that went into the current prosecutions was carried out not by the FBI, but rather by a private firm called “5 Stones intelligence” or “5Si.” We have contracted with investigative firms in past years, but never did we make the sort of commitment that was made to 5Si. Maybe this should be the model going forward: use the power of private investigations wherever necessary to support the work of the racing commissions. Indeed, as Ed Martin pointed out, the current prosecution demonstrates the way to protect racing. No federal Hail Mary is necessary.

Third, all licensees in racing should be required to consent to investigation by any racing authority, in any public or private place, at any time, and also to consent to all appropriate, effective corrective action pending a hearing. If you want to participate in our industry, this comes with the territory. I’m aware of a case in which a trainer was caught doing something blatantly wrong to a horse, behaved extremely guiltily when caught, and then influenced a veterinarian to lie about the matter. The USTA suspended this individual and never looked back, but the state racing commission did nothing about it, because it thought that its hands were tied. Let us untie the hands of the racing commissions and other racing authorities, including the USTA, which has always been a powerful investigative force in harness racing.

Where are the large sums of money going to come from that will be needed for all of this? This is something that we will have to figure out, and now the discussion has begun. But I can tell you this: the funding we come up with to make effective the work of the state regulators is sure to be less than what the Horseracing Integrity Act would cost us.

According to the testimony of a thoroughbred witness before the Congressional subcommittee that is presently considering the Horseracing Integrity Act, the cost to the standardbred industry would be about \$13.8 million. Even if we had to put that much into the existing system to make it work effectively, at least we would know where the money was going.

Conclusion and Invitation

Times of peril are also times of opportunity. We’re aware, we’re outraged, we’re worried. But we’re also energized as perhaps never before. Now is our chance to do things that probably could not have been done before. The USTA will act. I invite industry stakeholders to join the USTA in developing a comprehensive template that will protect real integrity, support the health and welfare of our horses, and permit the beautiful narrative of horse racing to continue uninterrupted.



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The sport's most insidious injury, thoughts on whether trainers owning horses is bad for the game and the fastest horse I ever trained

by Ron Gurfein

Tidbits: I have been asked by many friends, who will remain anonymous, to fight to overturn the policy of the Meadowlands and the Hambletonian Society on their mutual decision to maintain the April 15 stake deadline.

My immediate reaction was for sure I will do it. However, when I started to think about it I couldn't in good conscience convince myself it was the proper answer.

Please, those of you that asked don't think for one second that I am throwing you under the bus. I assure you it's not the case because I feel that you have a just cause as do those that favor the situation remain the status quo.

There are definitely two sides to this story. One favors the elite and the other favors the needy. Never before has the industry faced this kind of problem and if I had more information on how needy the needy were it would be easier to come up with an answer.

True, the situation is financially dire for many, but how

many making April payments are financially strapped by the payments?

My fear is that moving the payment up to any great extent will make the stakes more of a late closer and severely diminish the entries and therefore the purses.

If this situation doesn't bother you as a horseman then there is no reason to let the April payment be written in stone. Lower purses and non-encumbered payees would be the way to go. Moving the date forward really helps some hurts no one.

The strangest thing about this entire scenario is that the owners that asked for my backing all have enough money to buy their own track, so why would they care?

I do find it sad that the U.S. and Canada end up on opposite sides of the problem. The disfunction of this sport from country to country and state to state is one of the biggest problems we face. When something as important as this surfaces there should be no lack of communication and a dialogue should have rendered this decision unanimous.

Hopefully, the final decision is for the common good.

On the above subject, Clay Horner posted a question on Facebook asking whether stakes payments should be waived, or not. Most interesting was the lack of interest. He had only four replies and it's been up for nine hours. Of the four, three were in favor of waiving fees and one was neutral.

* * *

No matter how dark it gets it seems there is always a bright light. I have confined myself to my home for three weeks now and in the last two I have received phone calls and emails from more old friends than I have in any previous year of my life. It one of the most amazing phenomena I have ever encountered. I am talking about people I haven't been in contact with from one year to 40 years. If I was totally whacked out I would say it was Armageddon, but

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fortunately I am slightly more sane than that.

This is merely a reaction of most people that care about their well-being staying home and are looking to entertain themselves.

* * *

There is a lesson to be learned here. My friend Murray Brown posted on Facebook that he and his wife sweet Caroline were upset at seeing the groupings of his neighbors in the pool. I totally agree. For anyone at any age to leave the safety of the confines of their house for any unnecessary reason is beyond ridiculous. If you don't care about yourself don't be selfish and care about others. We can end this horror show but WE is the key word.

* * *

I have a new drama on Netflix for you with the same star that played Dexter. It is called SAFE and although I am not quite finished with the first season I am truly addicted. Another suggestion is Ozark. It is a bit far-fetched, but very entertaining. I have read 20 samples in the last few weeks on Kindle and have yet to download an entire book. This is the strangest period I have ever gone through. I read at least 25 books a year normally, and I have read maybe 10 at most in the last 365 days. It will get better. Lots of interesting novels coming in the next six months. Stay tuned.

* * *

One thing is for certain. I am truly glad I am not a gambler in these dark times. I just perused the programs that are available in the next few days and found Remington Park in Oklahoma the venue with the highest purses. That's the good news. The bad news is overwhelming. They have races for Paints and Appaloosas. There are many races for Oklahoma-bred maidens and their sires remind me of the New York Sires Stakes in 1968. No one outside of Oklahoma ever heard of them. Very surprising is there is a jockey, James Flores, who has won 27 per cent of his 90 starts and he is not listed to ride in three of the nine races. If you can't deal with Remington there is Fonner Park, the thoroughbred version of Green Mountain Park, with the smallest purse structure I have ever seen at a running horse oval. I must be bored.

Richard Bonifacio asks: In your long experience training horses what is the most insidious injury that can occur on a day to day basis such as a bowed tendon etc.?

Unfortunately, that's the easiest answer I have ever had to offer. I have lost four of my best horses, Continentalvictory, Victory Dream, Imperfection, and Mr. Vic all to torn suspensories. Continentalvictory was my own fault. I trained

her in 2:05 before the Kentucky Futurity on the Red Mile surface that was way too wet and never a good track in the mud, Victory Dream was an accident. Also at the Red Mile in the Kentucky Futurity, Ronnie Waples ran over his wheel in the first turn and he was forced to race on a flat tire the rest of the way and that strain did him in. Imperfection started to unravel after a long campaign at 4 and I can't really put my finger on one incident. Lastly, Mr. Vic took a bad step warming up a slow mile for the Hambletonian and had to be scratched.

It's easy to understand why I selected my answer. I will add that there are trainers and some veterinarians that have success repairing suspensory damage. To this writer, you have a one per cent chance to heal and return to the same level if you get lucky. I had the best vets in the world and tried for a long time to bring Continentalvictory and Imperfection back from their injuries, all for naught.

My suggestion if you run into this problem is breed or sell.

James Brady asks: Do you think that trainers owning horses is overall bad for the sport? Personally, I have been saying for 15 years that it has been the ruination of harness racing.

I am going to go in the complete opposite direction. Speaking as an owner, not a trainer, I think it would give me confidence if a trainer wanted to be involved financially. I really don't understand the downside with the exception of conspiracy theories that his horses will get preference over mine.

Some of the best trainers of all time owned horses in their own barn from Dancer and Haughton to Alagna, Takter and Burke (who owns 90 per cent of the horses in his barn).

It's time for you to rethink that narrative.

Anonymous asks: (The question comes from a friend and I don't like this type questions to have a name attached so it has purposely been omitted) Many people that I consider 100 per cent legitimate have said that Jimmy Takter's retirement should be in quotes. They say he is still working hard as ever. They ask is it a coincidence that he retired at the same time as the FBI investigation got underway? Do you think there is a connection?

Here we go again with conspiracy theories. This is such total nonsense I could scream. Jimmy is a good friend and I know more about the health situation than most of you. HE REALLY DID RETIRE. I am not guaranteeing forever, very little aside from dying is forever.

If your friends want to call living on the beach in Florida and training a few of Lindy Farms colts twice a month working just as hard as ever sign me up for the job.

Jimmy is the fourth trainer to stop at least in the United

States and be accused of wrong doing. People, there is a myriad of good reasons for someone at the top to change lifestyles. It doesn't have to entail cheating.

I heard echoes of this nonsense after Per Eriksson, Brett Pelling and Noel Daley all left for home at the height of their careers. Did anyone ever think they came here worked hard made a lot of money and wanted their kids to grow up where they were raised or they just missed their homeland? I can't stand evil negativity.

Bill Bigler asks: What is the fastest you have ever trained – a trotter or pacer?

Of course it was a trotter. The fastest pacer I ever had was Lucy's Pearl and she was timed in 1:48.4 but would have been hard pressed to train a mile in 2:02.

The trotter was Maryann K, one of the last horses owned by Ira Kristel who was an amateur driver in his younger days and just celebrated his 95th birthday.

I trained her in 1:54.2 three days before the Historic Series for 3-year-old fillies at the Meadowlands. I was jogging back to the barn and Jimmy Takter yelled to me from one of the viewing booths on the backside. She looked great I got you

in 1:54.

There is a great PS to the story. Maryann K won the Historic and paid \$50.

FYI I was never one to train fast miles. I was always a 2:25 guy, but this particular filly was a mental case and would make breaks for no reason at all. I thought she needed something to stretch her out and take the edge off. I personally do not recommend this type of training, although there are a few outfits in business today that thrive on this system.

Thanks again to all of you for the kind words. I have shared all the posted videos of horses in training on my Facebook page as I can no longer report them. If you are interested in any special horse ask me via email and I will do my best to find out for you. Please do the best you can to be safe. Have a wonderful week.

Have a question for The Guru?

Email him at GurfTrot@aol.com.

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Dave Yarock on donating GSY Amateur Club funds in aid of horsepeople in need

by Ken Weingartner / USTA media relations manager

A little more than a decade ago, Dave Yarock decided it was time to give up playing basketball. He had played throughout his life; in high school and college and was still going full court two or three times a week into his mid-50s.

After putting hoops on hold, he needed a way to satisfy his competitive nature. That is when he discovered harness racing. Yarock was introduced to the sport by a friend and was captivated by the opportunity to drive in races. He soon became a mainstay on the amateur circuits, winning 67 races over the years, and co-founded the GSY Amateur Club.

"Here was something I could do competitively and combine it with my love of the horses," Yarock said. "That's what drew me to it, and still draws me to the sport."

But his involvement in the harness racing community has extended beyond the track. Since 2008, Yarock has coordinated an educational scholarship fund to assist the children of horsemen and horsewomen pursue careers in equine fields. The fund has given out more than \$200,000 in aid since its inception, Yarock said.

Ordinarily, the GSY club uses membership dues, driver commissions, and individual donations to support the Edward Weiner & Edward Yarock Scholarship Fund, but this year the club will use its funds to assist horsemen and horsewomen in need because of the COVID-19 pandemic. Its first donation was to the Fusco family, which last month lost four family members to the virus, including trainers Carmine and Vincent.

"I'm trying to do my best, whatever I can do," Yarock said. "It's for the industry, it's for the people. Basic needs are going to be pretty profound. People are going to need to feed their horses, feed themselves. A lot of people don't really have a safety net. I'm trying to address that in my own small way.



James Lisa / Lisa Photo

Dave Yarock.

"If people have any particular needs, they should let us know and we'll try to help as best we can. We have limited resources and we want to try to stretch them out and do the best we can to help as many people as we can. I would love to be able to broaden it out, make it bigger, but everyone has their own issues right now. We're all trying to do what we can do."

Anyone wanting to make a tax-deductible donation to the "EWEY Scholarship Fund" for distribution to those in need can send contributions to Dave Yarock, 70 Sherwood Road, Tenafly, NJ 07670. Requests for assistance, with a brief explanation of the circumstances, can be emailed to daveyarock@gmail.com.

"We're here to help the horsemen," Yarock said. "We'll take whatever help we can get. We're all in this together."



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COVID-19 delays Maritime racetracks' season openers

by Melissa Keith

Until this week, there was faint optimism that maybe, just maybe, Truro Raceway would be able to adhere to its original April 10 opening date. But Monday, track management announced a tentative new date for the Bible Hill, NS half-mile's 2020 debut: Friday, May 8. It could be even later, depending on provincial COVID-19 trends; general manager Kelly MacEachen has stated that she will re-evaluate the situation on May 1.

To date, the two Cape Breton, NS racetracks have not announced changes to their scheduled seasonal debuts: Saturday, May 9 for Northside Downs and Sunday, June 7 for Inverness Raceway.

Thursday, Red Shores Charlottetown, PEI announced that it would not be opening as planned on Saturday, May 2. The region's most prominent track is now slated for a June 4 season-opener, which could obviously change depending on the Coronavirus situation. The two Atlantic Lottery Corporation Red Shores-branded tracks (at Charlottetown and Summerside) announced on March 26 that 220 full-time, part-time and temporary employees were furloughed because of COVID-19 protocols.

Brett Revington is racing director for the Atlantic Provinces Harness Racing Commission (APHRC). He told HRU that the commission has been holding conference calls every two weeks, with the next one scheduled for Wednesday, April 8. "I know we're all looking to get going again, but it doesn't look like it will be anytime soon," he said. "Hopefully June, and that's an optimistic return [date]. It just depends on when these restrictions can be lifted."

Given the new uncertainty about how the future will unfold, Revington said regional tracks were being cautious. "We're really following the direction of the chief medical officer for each of the provinces – all of the [Maritime] tracks are. We're really treating it as a fluid situation. There's a lot of questions, a lot of 'what-ifs?', really uncharted territory, that we're dealing with for the first time."

Restrictions on the size of public gatherings and on travel across provincial borders will both be significant factors in getting the 2020 racing season behind the gate. "By the time it looks like we might get going in June, we'll be into stakes season, and now that will have a major effect upon all horsepeople across the Maritimes, just not PEI or Nova Scotia," said the APHRC racing director. "You have to follow your chief medical officers, but also the horsemen's associations, the commission, CPMA, racing forensics people. It's not just the racetracks that are involved – there's a



Kyle Burton

The start of the racing season may be on hold throughout the Maritimes, but so far Charlottetown's famed Gold Cup and Saucer is still on the schedule for August.

number of moving parts to it that all have to be in agreement that you get going again.”

At press time, Red Shores Charlottetown was limiting the jogging/training of horses to four different time slots, which must be reserved in advance by phone. “They’re just trying to limit the number of people at the track and facility at one time,” said Revington. “Talking to everyone, I think everyone wants to get things moving again, as long as it’s safe for all the players involved.”

The former Pennsylvania Standardbred Bureau director and Pompano Park director of racing raised the question of whether Canadian-owned horses were being allowed to return home from the U.S., following the sudden closure of the last American racetrack to host live harness racing, Cal Expo, on April 1. “If they happened to ship up today, would they be allowed to cross the border? [...] I think we have more questions than we have answers right now, and we’re waiting to see which direction this virus will head. I don’t know if we’ve seen the top of the curve yet or not.”

APHRC staff Revington and administrative assistant Debbie Walsh are now alternating days in the two-person office, to maintain social distancing. That’s not an option for the racing director’s wife, Karen, who works in the healthcare field. “My wife is actually still working at the hospital. She’s an x-ray and breast-imaging [technician], so they’re still doing a few of those, if they need core biopsies done or something like that.”

Could the geographically-isolated Maritimes have offered live races to an online-only audience via ADW platforms, as Woodbine Mohawk Park and the Raceway at Western Fair did until March 19?

“We’re a little more spread out than Ontario might be, with Toronto and London and bigger population bases,” he said, adding that public health naturally mattered more than a rare opportunity to capitalize on the barren harness racing simulcast wagering menu. “I think that it’s important that we are following the experts who are dealing with this.”

Lee Drake is the manager of marketing and brands at Red Shores Racetrack and Casino. He told HRU via email that new restrictions were in place in order to comply with provincial COVID-19 protocols: “Barn tenants have been engaged by Red Shores personnel and requested to provide their essential workers in efforts to keep people in area to a minimum. Non-essential workers are not permitted in the barnyard area or ship in. Red Shores security have been stationed at barns and ship in/paddock, with strict enforcement guidelines in place for the essential list and directives from Department of Health.”

He added that Old Home Week and the Gold Cup and Saucer are far enough into the summer that it’s impossible to speculate on if or how they will be affected. “No, there has been no decision in regards to PEI’s largest racing week, as of

yet. Red Shores will continue to follow and monitor the COVID-19 directions provided by the PEI chief health officer and will adjust schedules accordingly.” Those same public health measures will inform decisions about when the season can begin: “Red Shores will follow the instructions outlined by PEI chief health officer about how business is to be operational, and if there is a way to conduct racing under those recommendations, Red Shores would follow those guidelines.”

Joe Kelly is Truro Raceway’s long-time announcer and race secretary. “It’s a different world. This is unprecedented, really, in my time,” he told HRU of the Coronavirus’ massive impact on the racing industry. “I guess when all the provincial governments started to announce State of Emergencies, and obviously when all the Canadian tracks that were racing shut their racing down, it’s obviously an uncertain time, with no real end in sight.”

He said he is worried about the prospect of under-employed or unemployed horsepeople and horse owners having to wait out an indefinite opening card. “I think we’d probably be lucky to get going in July. We only hope that the people who do have horses can hang in there, because our horse population is not the strongest in Nova Scotia. We can ill afford to lose one horse, let alone stables of horses.”

Kelly is also race secretary at Northside Downs, where he said more participants are hobby horsepeople, “and when you face financial restrictions, the first thing to go is hobbies.” He couldn’t speak to more particulars about the North Sydney track, which, unlike Truro Raceway, does not have a large backstretch with many horses stabled on site. He did note that closing backstretch stabling would cause irreparable harm to the industry: “It would be disastrous, especially around here, because we don’t have training centres or facilities where [racehorses] can go.”

Kelly said that it was unlikely that Truro Raceway could have opted to follow the lead of Cal Expo, which was racing with essential staff and online wagering only until the meet’s untimely end. “It’s different here; the states have more power than the provinces do, and I don’t think you’d ever get away with it in Canada.” He said he also understood why small U.S. tracks were offering live racing as long as possible under COVID-19 health restrictions. “I watched Cal Expo even prior to this, but what’s interesting is the two thoroughbred tracks, Will Roger and Fonner Park,” said Kelly. “I’m fascinated by what they’re betting on Fonner Park. They’re just a grassroots thoroughbred track; I wouldn’t even classify them as a ‘B’ thoroughbred track. They have \$2,500 claimers racing, and people are betting \$2 million.”

While fluctuating on a daily basis, Coronavirus rates in the Maritime provinces remain low compared to more densely-populated areas. Could Truro Raceway have opened

and followed the example set by Cal Expo? “We could [already] have been delayed until the end of April due to the horse population,” said the track’s race secretary. “My understanding is that Cal Expo has a lot of transient horsemen that go in there for the winter to race, from Alberta and Minnesota and different jurisdictions. My understanding is that a lot of them stay on site; they bring campers and whatnot with them, so it was more or less a self-contained unit at Cal Expo, and it was easier to put restrictions in place.”

Although bettors may usually reject the small pools and grassroots racing common at the Bible Hill oval, there is still the possibility that if Truro Raceway gets its product back online, it can pick up where Cal Expo left off. “That may come into play down the road, when we start to see the curve flatten and things start to get back to normal a bit,” said

Kelly. “Certainly, it might be to our advantage to be that way.”

At press time, Truro Raceway general manager Kelly MacEachen said that “only essential caretakers” were allowed on the backstretch and ship-in horses were not permitted on the grounds. “I don’t believe that we would have been able to race with the restrictions in place right now, with social distancing and whatnot,” she said. “We have close quarters in places like the paddock and the judges’ stand, for example. We also have drivers who live out of province and wouldn’t be allowed entrance to Nova Scotia. The health and safety of the racing community is of utmost importance at this time.”

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Illinois



Chicago racing legend Billy Johnston dead at 84

by Neil Milbert

Billy Johnston, the most prominent and influential individual in Illinois harness racing for more than a half century, died on March 27 at age 84 at his winter home in Key Largo, FL following a four-month battle with brain cancer.

A lifelong resident of Chicago’s western suburbs, he first headed the harness racing hierarchy at Sportsman’s Park and then also became co-owner and chief executive of Maywood Park and Balmoral Park. In addition, his management team oversaw the State Fair meetings at DuQuoin and Springfield for many years after they inaugurated pari-mutuel wagering.

Johnston is the second member of Chicago harness racing’s all-time VIP list to die in a span of less than four months. Preceding him in death on Dec. 17 was Tom Carey, president of Hawthorne Race Course for 25 years after assisting his father, Robert Carey, in running the track — located next door to the now-defunct Sportsman’s — for nearly 20 years.

Tom Carey, who was 87, had suffered from Alzheimer’s for two decades. He also resided in Chicago’s western suburbs and at the time of his death he was living in his winter home in Boca Raton, FL.



Billy Johnston.

Carey’s greatest accomplishment came when he was working as his father’s righthand man, finding ways and means to finance the rebuilding of Hawthorne after its clubhouse and grandstand were destroyed by fire in November, 1978.

Like Carey, Johnston followed his father into racing. William Johnston, Sr. ran the National Jockey Club thoroughbred

meeting at Sportsman's from 1947-67 and introduced harness racing in 1969, three years after pari-mutuel betting on the sport was legalized in the state.

Billy was an amateur driver and trainer before becoming involved in track management in the mid-1960s. Although the United States Trotting Association (USTA) record book has him driving the winners of his 153 starters between 1958 and 1966, he undoubtedly had more starts and winners because earlier only the statistics of those with 25 or more starts were recorded.

"I drove for about a dozen years," he once told the *Chicago Tribune*. "That was before catch-driving became a big thing. There were a lot of guys like me who drove their own horses. I won my first race at Maywood and the last one at Washington Park."

Following the retirement of William Johnston, Sr., Stormy Bidwill took over as head of the National Jockey Club thoroughbred meeting at Sportsman's, while Billy headed the Fox Valley and Chicago Downs harness meetings assisted by Race Secretary and later Director of Racing Phil Langley, son of the elder Johnston's alter ego, Pete Langley.

Both were prominent nationally. Billy Johnston served as a USTA director for 45 years and Phil Langley was the USTA president for 13 years.

"In my opinion, the success of harness racing in Illinois was due to Billy's promotional instincts and time after time coming up with new ideas," Langley said.

Chicago had its harness racing heyday in the 1970s and Sportsman's was in the forefront. The track annually showcased North America's finest horses in its American-National series and in its leg of the U.S. Pacing Championship.

The dramatic proliferation of sports telecasts, expanded seasons in other sports and introduction of the lottery and riverboat gambling in Illinois caused attendance to wane thereafter but Johnston remained committed to top quality racing. That commitment extended to DuQuoin where he inaugurated the state's richest race, the World Trotting Derby,

in 1981 when the Hambletonian moved to the Meadowlands. (The \$700,000 purse for the 1991 World Trotting Derby is an Illinois record.)

Johnston put together and headed the ownership group that secured a long-term lease at Maywood in 1977 and subsequently inaugurated the lucrative and prestigious Windy City Pace. This ownership group combined with the family of New York Yankees owner George Steinbrenner to buy Balmoral in 1987.

Maywood played host to the first Breeders Crown 2-year-old filly pace in 1984 and Sportsman's held the inaugural Breeders Crown aged trot in 1985. Balmoral in 1988 became the first North American track to hold the World Driving Championship and the multi-national event returned in 1996.

In 1988, Sportsman's put on 16 stakes races that had purses of \$100,000 or more and in 1989 it inaugurated the Super Night championship races for Illinois-breds that quickly became the state's main event.

After Sportsman's discontinued harness racing following the 1997 meeting, Super Night and the American-Nationals moved to Balmoral and continued to be magnets for state-bred standouts and for stars from the U.S. and Canada. An Illinois harness record of \$3,777,549 was bet on Super Night in 2000.

Among Johnston's other accomplishments were bringing the trifecta, superfecta and other exotic bets to the Chicago circuit and pioneering inter-track betting in 1984 and using it as a stepping stone to the legalization of off-track betting. Balmoral opened the state's first OTB parlor in 1987.

"He was a genius in this industry," said Illinois Circuit Court Judge Lorna Propes, the Illinois Racing Board chairman from 2003-06 and a board member for the 14 previous years. "Billy was always searching for ways to improve his tracks and the experience for the fans."

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GRASSROOTS PERSPECTIVE



with CHRIS LOMON

Kris Hinchcliff would love to turn his attention back to winning races

The Ohio-based trainer was on the cusp of 200 career victories when the COVID-19 pandemic shut racing down.

by Chris Lomon

Kris Hinchcliff will likely reach a personal milestone – one he wasn't aware of – sooner rather than later. But that's not where the standardbred trainer's thoughts are at the moment.

Seven wins away from 200 victories for his career,

Hinchcliff, who lives with his wife Allison in Columbus, OH, had no idea he was closing in on the mark.

Understandably, his mind, like millions of others, is on other things, specifically, the global COVID-19 pandemic.

"Right now, life, it's pretty boring," said Hinchcliff with a laugh. "The weather hasn't been great where we are in Ohio, and with all of the self-isolation and social distancing associated with the coronavirus, we haven't been able to get out much. The horses have, but me, personally, it's a pretty uneventful time with so many things closed."

Standardbred racing in Ohio went on temporary pause a little while after certain other states and jurisdictions halted live racing.

Hinchcliff, who has seven horses under his care, was grateful to have had that extra time to race.

"Racing-wise, we got the benefit of the doubt compared to some other people because it was just about two weeks ago that we shut down officially. We got to race another two to three weeks compared to people on the east coast. I didn't prepare any differently than I would in normal times, other than staying committed to thoroughly washing equipment and things like that, making sure everything was that much



Courtesy Kris Hinchcliff

Trainer Kris Hinchcliff is seven wins away from career win 200.

cleaner and tidier. The paddock, it seemed normal. Everyone was talking about the coronavirus and doing all of things that were being asked – keeping your distance, ensuring everything was properly washed and cleaned. We just went on doing what we do to make a living.”

With that now on hold, an already challenging industry to be part of has become even more difficult to navigate.

The horses have helped keep Hinchcliff’s spirits up.

“I get to see them every day, and you’re grateful to have that opportunity when so many other parts of your life have changed with everything that is happening in the world now. We can show up to the barn, my help can show up to the barn – we’ve been able to do that constantly, every day. I’m giving my horses a little bit of a break. I gave them a Tuesday, Wednesday and Thursday off not too long ago because it was nice weather here. I took them to a farm with a turnout field and left them there for three days so that they could get freshened up, get some sun and enjoy the grass. And then I brought them in and started jogging them again. I’m happy we haven’t had to stay away from the horses.”

Before live racing was cancelled, Hinchcliff fashioned a record of 4-4-4 from 34 starts in 2020.

His last start before the decision was made to put the season on hiatus happened to be a winning one.

John Mac, a 4-year-old gelded son of Ponder, notched a 2 ½-length score on March 16 at Miami Valley with Brett Miller in the bike. It was the fourth career win for the pacer bred by Robert and Al McIntosh.

“The year was going okay. The horses were racing pretty well. The lower-level claiming horses for me this year – we haven’t had as many people wanting to claim as we normally would. That’s fine. A couple of my horses were just getting ready to be qualified, so that kind of hurt. I guess we’ll just wait until they reopen and we’ll go from there once they tell us we can race again.”

And when it happens, Hinchcliff can pick up the pursuit of 200 wins.

“Really? I didn’t even know that. Hopefully, we can get that before too long.”

Perhaps he can find another star like Angelo J Fra to add to his barn.

It was the gelded son of The Panderosa, a now 30-time winner with nearly \$450,000 in career earnings, who delivered Hinchcliff his most memorable win.

“The Burkes gave me a horse to train. They had too many on the trailer that night because they had claimed a couple. So, the funny part is that they were going to leave one for me to train. And the one they left me was Angelo J Fra.”

It would be a win-win for Hinchcliff, punctuated by a 15-1 upset at Scioto Downs on March 10, 2016.

“My biggest highlight was probably the open pace they had at Scioto, which attracted some pretty nice horses. Angelo J Fra won the race. He wasn’t supposed to. He was a longshot and he ended up beating some really good horses. I was just getting started and it was a great to win to get.”

Always on the lookout for another Angelo J Fra, Hinchcliff admitted it’s tougher than ever to accomplish that goal.

Even so, it doesn’t stop him from trying.

“The biggest challenge of late is trying to find horses to buy without overpaying, horses that you really like and want to bring back to Ohio to race. We only have certain types of classes compared to Yonkers, where they have other classes and race for more money. Those people are willing to spend more money on horses, so when we go to the sales, it’s that much harder to buy the ones you want.

“It’s also a challenge to keep them sound and race-ready. They’re on their toes here. They race pretty hard here every quarter... there are no breathers.”

Hinchcliff can’t wait to feel that adrenaline rush again.

“When we restart, I just hope everyone is healthy, this has all moved on and we can return to our normal lives and our livelihoods. Not just for horse racing, but everybody. A lot more people than just the horse racing world have been affected by this. But it will be a great feeling when you finally see your horses out there again for the first time in a while.”

A time that will signal the start of a chase for a personal accomplishment Kris Hinchcliff – the one he didn’t even know he was pursuing.

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NA Cup champion Wakizashi Hanover retired to New Vocations

"At what stage, before something happens, do you retire a horse like this?" said part owner Bruce Kennedy.

by Melissa Keith

After seven straight years of racing, 2015 North America Cup champion Wakizashi Hanover (p, 5, 1:47.3m; \$1,489,550) has finally laid down the sword for good. The 8-year-old gelded son of Dragon Again—Western Gesture (by Western Hanover) finished eighth in the last race of his career, a Dover Downs NW7001L5 conditioned event on March 5. While never a threat in that mile, he was still individually timed in 1:51.3f, only fractions of a second behind winner Beach Art's 1:51f flat performance.

Trained by Jim King Jr. and wife Jo Ann Looney-King through most of his career, Wakizashi Hanover had not won a race in his six seasonal starts, but did manage two place finishes in Rosecroft Raceway's open handicap pace for catch driver Allan Davis. The popular pacer had spent the greater part of 2019 in Nova Scotia, the province where his ownership group lives. He romped to a 1:54.4h victory in his lone pari-mutuel start at Truro Raceway last June. When the track closed for the season Nov. 1, after Wakizashi's 29-length win in a qualifier, the Tri-County Stable members opted to send him back to Jim King Jr. to race at Dover. December 19 in Delaware, the gelding battled to his last win, a 1:52.2f photo-finish decision over Lyons King.

Bruce Kennedy is the lead partner of the Tri-County Stable. He told HRU that there were limited opportunities to race Wakizashi Hanover as the new year started, but it wasn't a problem at first. "We raced him a little bit because we went down there [Dover] in December, and he was getting his starts now and then. He's not racing quite with the company he did before, and that didn't bother us too much. With some of the tracks closed, we couldn't get in every week. We didn't really want to race him every week. We were happy with three times a month."

Given the costs of keeping a horse in training, the low Canadian dollar, the COVID-19 crisis, and the challenges of keeping an older horse ready to race, Kennedy said that the ownership partners (himself, Percy Bonnell, Wayne Burley, and Jennifer Weeks, all of Nova Scotia) soon faced a difficult decision. Early in 2020, they were aware that Wakizashi's "earning-power days were pretty much behind him," yet the gelding's willingness made it tough to retire him. "He's a horse that will give you what he's got," said the Bible Hill, NS



New Image Media

Wakizashi Hanover (Tim Tetrick) winning the 2015 Pepsi North America Cup.

horseman, adding that there were plenty of tears and "mixed feelings in the group" about the healthy pacer leaving the track forever.

When Wakizashi Hanover took his Truro Raceway sabbatical in 2019, his owners wanted the horse to get some time off for a persistent injury to heal to its fullest extent. "He had a tear in his tendon, and that kind of indicated to us that at 7-years old, it's a lot to put pressure on him and ask him to pace half-mile tracks in :51, :52," said Kennedy. "It's going to hurt; we didn't want to hurt him. We just thought: What's best? So I talked to Jimmy [King Jr.] on several occasions about that: At what stage, before something happens, do you retire a horse like this?"

King Jr. advised him that the choice was always up to the owners, but Wakizashi Hanover had more than earned a rest from the racing wars. "So we started to investigate, and there were a couple of options for us," said Kennedy. "After talking to the Kings, they said there's always the option to go to Tim Tetrick and his wife Ashley; they're very heavily involved in this foundation [New Vocations, the largest racehorse adoption program in the USA] and they certainly have a lot of regard for the horse." The Hall of Fame driver had similar advice when Kennedy inquired about Wakizashi Hanover's future: "[Tetrick] said, 'He's earned his retirement, so it's a matter of when you're ready. He's not going to get faster; he's not going to get richer. He'll add to his bankroll, but it's going to be spent on getting him there.'"

Tetrick had known Wakizashi Hanover from the start of the horse's career. Kennedy said the reinsman advised turning out the gelding after a few starts as a 2-year-old, because he thought the pacer was capable of sub-1:48 speed at age 3. "We turned him out, down at Olive Branch Farm [in North

Carolina] with Chris Coyle, and brought him back, trained him down, and then Jimmy [King Jr.] got him ready. Sure enough, he was going to the North America Cup and the rest, everybody knows all about it: He beat two undefeated horses, one in the elimination in Artspeak, and came back seven days later and beats Wiggle It Jiggleit.”

The Tri-County Stable didn’t realize how special their horse was at the time, leading to Kennedy’s “one regret” about Wakizashi Hanover’s racing career. “We raced him back a few too many times immediately following the Cup. He was eligible for a few more stakes, the Brandywine and a few of them in the Midwest. I think we raced six or seven weeks in a row... I think we were too hard him. Then when we got to the Breeders Crown at the end, he only missed by a little wee bit, but in my eyes, it’s because we over-raced him. I felt bad after that.”

The small-time owners didn’t know what they had, because the odds had been overwhelmingly against them landing any horse, let alone the 2015 O’Brien 3-Year-Old Male Pacer of the Year. Kennedy recalled attending the 2013 Harrisburg yearling sale with Percy Bonnell, his lifelong friend and Tri-County Stable partner; they were hoping to purchase a yearling for no more than \$20,000 US, and had another \$10,000 U.S. set aside for training bills. “Then we found out that there was a lot of people there with \$20,000, because we were losing at \$21,000, \$23,000, \$25,000... We even tried to buy from people who bought them and pay them a premium, but that didn’t work,” said Kennedy.

Friend Brent MacGrath asked Hanover Shoe Farms to help the group find a few affordable-looking prospects, but the end of the sale was approaching. Kennedy consulted with his partners, and they agreed to exceed the \$20,000. “There were 1118 yearlings in the sale I went to, and Wakizashi’s number was 1104, so everybody left him there for me,” he told HRU. Trainer Gordon Corey placed the winning bid for the Tri-County Stable’s lucky purchase: \$23,000.

Today, Wakizashi Hanover is a USTA Full Circle Program horse, meaning that if he is ever found in a situation where his welfare is at risk, there are people who can be notified to step forward and help him to safety. Kennedy said the gelding’s well-planned retirement should hopefully mean that “Waki” never requires the assistance: As of last Friday, he was headed to New Vocations’ Ohio location to be retrained

as a potential pleasure, show, or therapy horse. “When he gets broke and gets pacified with a saddle rather than a jog cart, they can find better where his liking is,” added his grateful former owner. “They seem to think that he’ll adapt to anything he does.” With his “people horse” attitude and striking good looks, the gelding is ready for a different vocation, one in which he’ll have a chance to showcase the versatility of the off-track standardbred. “They’ve already suggested down there that this won’t just be an ordinary person that will get this horse,” said Kennedy. “He’ll get placed with somebody who’s really going to appreciate a millionaire horse in their barn.”

The hands-on horseman, often seen jogging his pride and joy at Truro Raceway last year, will miss watching Wakizashi Hanover race. But the 79-year-old owner/operator of Kennedy’s Convenience in Bible Hill, NS has been keeping busy: He said his store had recently introduced precautions to protect customers and staff from COVID-19 while remaining open as an essential service. Taking social distancing seriously, he was also focusing on his 2-year-old Control the Moment—Isabella Blue Chip (by Bettors Delight) colt, named Under Control, who is training at nearby Truro Raceway. “I’d be going up the wall if I didn’t have one now,” Kennedy said with a laugh. He owns 25 per cent of the colt, sharing ownership with trainer Barry Whidden; his son, driver Mark Whidden; and Tri-County Stable member Wayne Burley.

Looking back, there is no single moment that Kennedy appreciates most about Wakizashi Hanover. “The moment is stretched out to a lot more than a moment, a day, or a week,” he explained. “It was that everybody who met the horse, everybody who was around the horse, especially the people who worked with him, thought he was the greatest horse.”

On Friday, March 27, Jo Ann Looney-King posted a short video online, showing Wakizashi Hanover exiting his stall and boarding a trailer bound for his next, transitional, home at New Vocations. Tearful emojis and one word — “bye”—accompanied her quietly-emotional video, which was widely shared on social media. Although he will be missed by all of his racing connections, the gelding is ready for the next chapter of his eventful life.

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Ohio



Racing reflections with Kurt Sugg

by Ken Weingartner / USTA media relations manager

When Kurt Sugg looks back on his childhood, some of his fondest early memories of harness racing involved climbing into the family's Ford Ranchero and accompanying his father, Ivan, on trips to the county fairs in Ohio. Sometimes, they would stop on the way to pick up driver Jeff Fout, then continue on their journey to the races.

One horse in particular at that time, a pacer named On Bret, was the center of Kurt's attention. The reason was simple. On Bret found his way to the winner's circle on a regular basis. The colt won 13 of 19 starts as a 2-year-old in 1978, just as the then 9-year-old Kurt was becoming immersed in the sport.

"I remember going to the fairs and (On Bret) would win all the time; at least it seemed that way when I was there," Kurt said, adding with a laugh, "I guess I got to thinking it was pretty easy back at that time. Being a kid, you don't realize it's not as easy as it appears. But from a child's eyes, that's the way it appeared to me."

Kurt jogged his first horse that same year.

"My toes just barely could touch the stirrups and my butt was just on the edge of the seat," he said. "This is kind of all I ever really wanted to do. After school, we were always down at the barn helping dad when we got old enough to clean stalls and harness horses and things like that. That's kind of where it started.

"And I always liked the competitiveness. That really got me into it. I like being competitive."

Eight years after On Bret's rookie season, Kurt won his first race as a driver. In the ensuing 34 years, he has added 4,319 more, plus 1,067 as a trainer. Not surprisingly, he has cited his father as the biggest influence on his career. Ivan was the 2003 Trainer of the Year after guiding No Pan Intended to the Pacing Triple Crown and was inducted into the Ohio Hall of Fame in 2006.

"I didn't work for my dad back then (when No Pan Intended raced) so it was kind of different, but I was happy to see my dad have that success in the business, which I think he deserved," Kurt said. "He did this his whole life.

"When I was a kid, we went to the horse sales and dad would buy some yearlings, but they were always on the cheaper side, and he developed them into good stakes horses. When he got some little better horses, he proved what he could do with his training ability. That was a thrill for me to watch."

Last year as a driver, Kurt won 361 races, the



Ed Keys / USTA

Kurt Sugg.

second-highest total of his career and not far from the 375 victories he posted in 2016. His \$2.78 million in purses in 2019, though, were a lifetime best. He was off to a strong start this season, with his 96 triumphs tied for seventh among all drivers in North America, before racing was halted because of the COVID-19 pandemic. He was second in the driver standings at Northfield Park, trailing only five-time national dash champ Aaron Merriman.

"This was by far the best start to a year I've ever had," Kurt said. "Everything was going along very nicely for me. I'm anxious to get back to racing, but I understand we need to do what we need to do to protect ourselves and the whole nation as far as this goes.

"We have a big farm here, so we can get out and move around. But, still, not being able to go and do anything is really tough."

Kurt has 10 horses at the Wayne County Fairgrounds in Wooster and another five horses at home.

"We can sit in the living room and look out the window and see the horses in the field, so we really enjoy that a lot," he said.

Although the sport faces an uncertain time, Kurt said people in the industry will work together to come through it.

"We're pretty competitive on the track but when it comes down to somebody needing something and the welfare of the horses, people are going to band together to help them out," Kurt said. "That's good to see."



USTA creates COVID-19 Resource Center

To assist harness horsepeople during the current circumstances created by the COVID-19 pandemic, the U.S. Trotting Association has created a resource center of valuable information for industry participants.

The USTA COVID-19 Resource Center can be accessed through the banner on the home page of www.ustrotting.com or at this [link](#).

Among the information available through the Resource Center is:

COVID-19 Information and Facts

Federal Government Information

State Government Information

Horsemen's Association Information

Included in each category are links to other websites with specific information that provide guidance and answers to many of the questions for how harness racing industry participants can obtain assistance during this time.

Information will be revised as it becomes available and updates should be sent to USTA director of marketing and communications Dan Leary at dan.leary@ustrotting.com.

—USTA communications department

Danae and Precious Beauty to the Hall of Fame

The Living Horse Hall of Fame committee of the Harness Racing Museum & Hall of Fame has announced the selections for the 2020 broodmare inductees into the Harness Racing Living Horse Hall of Fame. **Danae** 3,1:54.2 (\$529,099) and **Precious Beauty** p,2,1:53.3 (\$112,842) were elected.

Danae's offspring include 2019 Swedish Horse of the Year Propulsion 1:52.1 (\$3,572,969), 2017 Matron Stakes winner

Dream Together 1:51.3 (\$801,782) and world champion D'Orsay 1:51.4 (\$445,732).

Precious Beauty's offspring include 2009 Two-Year-Old Pacing Colt of the Year and 2010 North America Cup winner, world champion Sportswriter p,3,1:48.3 (\$1,566,460); 2013 Two-Year-Old Pacing Filly of the Year and She's A Great Lady winner, world champion Precocious Beauty p,1:50.1 (\$838,004) and 2018 Three Diamonds winner Prescient Beauty p,2,1:50.4 (\$464,250).

Danae and **Precious Beauty** will be inducted on Hall of Fame Day which is tentatively planned for Sunday, July 5, 2020. The ceremonies honoring these extraordinary standardbred broodmares will take place during the Harness Racing Museum & Hall of Fame's annual dinner. For information on the Hall of Fame weekend and other festivities surrounding this important occasion visit www.harnessmuseum.com from April 2020 onward or call or write the Museum at 240 Main Street, Goshen, NY 10924. Phone: 845-294-6330.

Standardbred broodmares are eligible for nomination to harness racing's highest accolade only if they comply with the following strict criteria:

Annually on March 1, a list of living broodmares that have produced two Dan Patch winners, OR two millionaires, OR one Dan Patch winner and one millionaire are assembled for the Living Horse Hall of Fame Committee to review. Committee members can also nominate a broodmare that does not meet those criteria. Each of the committee members votes for his or her top 5 broodmares, voting results are tabulated and the top two vote getters are elected to the Living Horse Hall of Fame.

—Harness Racing Museum and Hall of Fame

Close finishes at Olympia Palm Beach qualifiers

It was an exciting morning Wednesday (April 1) at Olympia of Palm Beach Training Center (formerly the South Florida Trotting Center) as five qualifying races were held with two race finishes decided by a head and a neck.

The first race trot saw driver Fern Paquet, Jr. cut slow fraction as the pocket-sitting Celebrity Titan (Sam Stathis) went off-stride at the half mile. Paquet then just needed to keep Hall Of Faith on-stride and they won by 20 lengths in 2:10.1.

It was only the second qualifying race for Hall Of Faith. The 3-year-old filly by Conway Hall is trained by Jennifer Sansone

for owner Reuben Graber of Sugarcreek, OH.

Paquet was greeted in the winner's circle with some rolls of toilet paper. Each winning driver will receive a 12-pack of the hard-to-get item.

Paquet, whose daughter Meghan was the outrider for the qualifying races, made a return trip to the winner's circle in the second race trot.

It was Sam Stathis going right to the lead with Celebrity Bianca with Paquet was content to sitting the two-hole trip with Celebrity Miracle, who had just won on March 16 at Pompano Park in a lifetime best clocking of 1:54.3.

Stathis widened his lead with Celebrity Bianca trying to bottom out Celebrity Miracle and Paquet, going to the first quarter in :29.2, then past the half mile in :59.3. Paquet began to gain ground with Celebrity Miracle, closing to within two lengths of Celebrity Bianca at the three-quarters in 1:30.1.

Racing neck and neck around the final turn, Paquet put a nose up over Celebrity Bianca and the pulled away in the stretch to win by two lengths in 2:01.

A 4-year-old gelded son of Celebrity Maserati, Celebrity Miracle is trained by Stathis and is owned by his Celebrity Farms of New York, NY. It would turn out that Celebrity Miracle's mile was the fastest of the day.

The third race all belonged to Stathis and his stallion, Celebrity Maserati, but it was a tough mile at the finish wire.

Stathis started off the show going right to the lead with Celebrity Maserati. Also, in the race was Celebrity Serena (Fern Paquet, Jr.), who is sired by Celebrity Maserati, so the race was father against daughter.

Celebrity Serena (who is named after the tennis star) was content with the pocket trip as Celebrity Maserati cut all the fractions. Starting around the final turn, Paquet pulled the pocket and started to come after her sire, Celebrity Maserati.

Those two horses dueled neck and neck down the stretch with Celebrity Maserati winning by a head in 2:05.

A \$198,000 career stakes winner at age two and three, Celebrity Maserati is a 10-year-old stallion by Andover Hall. Due to injuries he was unable to race for years, but still was able to service numerous mares for Celebrity Farms and will return to the races once the tracks are able to reopen.

Celebrity Maserati is trained by Stathis and owned by his Celebrity Farms.

The fourth race was for pacers with trainer/driver Dan Daley sitting a pocket trip with Sweet Deisel while Jimi Wind Ricks and driver Scott Zeron cut the mile.

Through fractions of :31.3, 1:02.2 and 1:32, Jimi Wind Ricks was strong on the lead, but Dan Daley kept Sweet Deisel right in the pocket until the final turn and then came after Jimi Wind Ricks.

It looked as if Jimi Wind Rocks and Zeron would be able to hold on, but Sweet Deisel kicked in a :28.4 last quarter mile and nipped Jimi Wind Ricks by a neck in 2:01.1. It was the second fastest mile for the day.

Daley, an inductee to the Florida Harness Racing Hall of Fame, trains Sweet Deisel, a 4-year-old gelding by Sweet Lou who is co-owned by his wife, Ann-Mari Daley and Crawford Farms. Sweet Deisel last year scored seven wins and won \$43,000.

Due to scratches, the fifth race pace featured just one starter, Roll With Angel and driver Scott Zeron. They cut fractions of :32, 1:02.1, 1:32 and won the race in 2:01.4.

Trained by John Mungillo, Roll With Angel is a three-year-old filly by Roll With Joe and is co-owned by Finish Line Investors, Thatsideofthefence, J. Papernik and L Wiler. She started 12 times last year at age 2, earned over \$43,000 in the New York Sire Stake and had never won a race until Wednesday's qualifier.

"This was just a super day," said Stathis, who owns Olympia of Palm Beach Training Center. "We tried to make this event something special for people to watch. We had some Facebook Live and the video and droning of the races will be on our Olympiapalmbeach.com website later today. I want to thank everyone that came out today and made things happen and kept proper social distances.

"We hope to do more events like this in the future. I know this virus is a terrible thing, but we will beat it and come back and be strong again."

Video of each of the five races and the droning that took place will be available to view at www.olympiapalmbeach.com.

—Steve Wolf for Olympia of Palm Beach

 **Harness Racing Update on YouTube** 
/HARNESSRACINGUPDATE