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Chocolatier Exits Jersey For Pennsylvania

By Lucas Marquardt

World Champion Chocolatier will be moving to Marion Farms in New Hope, Pa. beginning with the 2011 breeding season, it was announced Monday by syndicate manager Geoff Stein. The son of Credit Winner had been at Southwind Farms in New Jersey since he first went to stud in 2007.

Stein noted that the uncertainty surrounding harness racing in New Jersey and the lucrative Pennsylvania Sire Stakes program were behind the decision.

"It's clearly what's best for the horse's future," Stein said in a statement. "With the racing situation in New Jersey still not settled, we think Pennsylvania offers a terrific option, and the greatest long-term potential for him to succeed in the marketplace."



Chocolatier is Pa. bound

Chocolatier's first crop ranked him among the sport's leading sires in yearling average and median at the 2009 sales. Chocolatier stands for a fee of \$12,000, with limited bookings available. All inquiries should still be directed to Preferred Equine Marketing at (914) 773-7777 (email: lizanorcross@preferredequine.com).

Southwind Farms will continue to handle the breeding of mares.

Chocolatier joins a growing list of sires who have either left New Jersey, will leave New Jersey or saw plans to stand at stud in the Garden State abandoned. The group includes Tell All, Lucky Chucky and Rock N Roll Heaven.

George Bellino Passes Away At Age 49

George Bellino, son of Rock N Roll Heaven's owner Frank Bellino, and an integral part of the Bellino family's racing operation, died Sunday. The cause of death has not yet been determined. He was 49.

George Bellino was found by his parents and his wife at his home in Bronxville, NY. Efforts to revive him were unsuccessful.

"The day before we were celebrating my dad's 76th birthday," Bellino's brother, Joe said in an e-mail. "George was a diabetic, but we are not sure that was the cause. George was my hero in life and also my best friend. He was 10 years older than me and my only sibling. He was a big part of the racing business. George was an animal lover. People used to say he liked animals more than people. I would give back the success of this year for one more day with my brother."

He is survived by his wife, Marie, and children Danielle (8) and Christopher (5).



FIRST OVER
Andrew Cohen

Now Comes The Hard Part

It was the perfect time for a holiday miracle. And it evidently took less time than either the twelve days of Christmas or the eight days of Hanukkah. With time running out on harness racing at the Meadowlands, and perhaps on New Jersey's Standardbred industry as well, owner-breeder-track owner Jeff Gural stepped up to help. As all of you know by now, there is an agreement between New Jersey Gov. Chris Christie, the horsemen, and state legislators to keep the track operating for at least three more months while Gural figures out whether he and his group can make things work.

Friday's hopeful news is not just a reprieve from the sport's death row in New Jersey. It's also a window of an opportunity to finally set the industry on the right path in the Garden State. But it is going to require a new level of cooperation and coordination within harness racing that we likely haven't seen in a long time. As Gural himself said Friday in the wake of the deal: "It's going to require an industry effort. The industry is very splintered. But this is an opportunity to bring the industry together. We need to come up with a model that is going to create customers for harness racing. If not, where are we going?"

Where, indeed? The first stop naturally is to seek help from a broad cross-section of the industry. In the next few days and weeks, I'm told, harness leaders from all over the world will be getting phone calls or emails soliciting their involvement, their investments, in the project to save the Meadowlands. George Segal at Brittany Farms is already on board—a huge boost. So, too, is Mike Gulotta at Deo Volente Farms. And I'm sure over the next few days we'll be hearing about more owners and breeders joining in to help. It takes a village, remember, and if ever an industry needed help from its friends and neighbors it's this one.

A healthy Meadowlands—a viable Meadowlands that could survive until a casino finally comes to East Rutherford-- would be an enormous benefit to all harness racing everywhere—and especially in North America. The racing "model" that Gural talks about—the one in which the sport figures out how to broadly attract and keep new fans-- ultimately would benefit every other racing jurisdiction. Indeed, there is a time for competition and there is a time when competitors have to come together for a greater good.

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It's time to come together to put the Big M back on its feet. I have already offered to help—and I hope you will, too, no matter where you stable your horses or place your bets.

The survival and future success of the Meadowlands can only help New Jersey's horsemen, in both the short term and the long term, which is why the continuing cooperation of the Standardbred Breeders and Owners Association of New Jersey is particularly necessary going forward. I was therefore pleased to read Tom Luchento's statement in the wake of the agreement last week. He said: "While the deal with the governor to save Standardbred racing at the Meadowlands is not 100 percent perfect, it will provide our industry a temporary lifeline, giving us time to implement innovative changes that will foster self-sufficiency."

Based upon what Gural and Jason Settlemoir have accomplished at Tioga Downs, it's hard not to get excited about the idea of the Meadowlands being run privately, without the constraints imposed upon operations by the New Jersey Sports and Exposition Authority. After all, the track still has two vital things going for it. First, it has location-- the finest in the world, when you think about it. It's still just a few miles from mid-town Manhattan's millions. And, second, it has live horse racing! There is a model to make the place profitable and grow the sport. It exists. And maybe now it can be implemented.

And if it does, and if we indeed are on the cusp of securing a stable future for the Meadowlands Racetrack and New Jersey's harness industry, we'll all be able every December 17th to raise our glasses and toast to the miracle—the Miracle at the Meadowlands. Right now, we can thank Jeff Gural for even just the dream of that.

Gural: For Meadowlands To Make It, Industry Must Come Together

By Bill Finley

Through a statement he issued Monday and with comments he made on the Down the Stretch program Saturday on Sirius XM radio, prospective Meadowlands owner Jeff Gural let it be known that he cannot save the famed New Jersey track alone. Gural called on the industry to work in unison and put aside its self interests, the only way he believes the sport and its flagship track in the U.S. can prosper.

"...if the Meadowlands is to survive, it will take all of us in the industry working together to make it happen," he said. "Obviously, down the road, it is possible a casino will be built, but we can't count on it and even if it did happen, who knows if Governor Christie would allow money to go to supplement purses as other states currently allow."

"I think if we all pull together, we can make this happen, but if we don't, I think it is a virtual certainty the Meadowlands will close for good in April 2011.," he added.

Gural called on the Meadowlands' drivers, widely recog-



Gural: "This is going to require the industry's support."

nized as the most talented group in the world, not to abandon New Jersey racing.

"I intend to meet with the drivers to determine if I have a commitment from the leading drivers," he said. "I don't have to do this. This is structured in such a way that I can walk away March 31. If the leading drivers are not going to be supportive, and I would be surprised if they were not, then we'll have to go from there. But I expect a commitment from the top drivers to drive at the Meadowlands. Period. When they have stakes engagements out of town, that's one thing. But I would be very disappointed if they opted to drive at another track where the purses might be higher and make it harder for us to compete. I need them.

"This is going to require the industry's support. If the drivers are just going to go where the purse money is the highest, then April 1st, the drivers won't have to worry about whether they're going to drive in New Jersey anymore."

Gural touched on several other subjects, among them: The 2011 Racing Schedule: He plans to race January through March at the Meadowlands before taking a brief break. The track will re-open on Kentucky Derby Day and then run a high-quality summer meet focusing on weekends.

"We'll have a championship meet similar to what they did at Monmouth," he said. "It would be a meet that would last through the Hambletonian. We will try to emphasize quality. By having quality racing, hopefully, we'll be able to attract customers. The focus will be on racing on the weekends."

He hopes to work with racing officials at Chester so that the two tracks compete as little as possible.

"Will reach out to Chester on scheduling," he said. "If we close in April for four or five weeks, they can pick up the slack. We'd like to have March to ourselves. There's nothing to be gained by us trying to compete against each other."

His Feelings On Chris Christie: Gural said he doesn't blame the New Jersey Governor for demanding that harness racing find a way to become self-sustaining. He called the governor smart and likable.

"I think he's correct, you can't ask government to subsidize harness racing if communities are laying off policemen, firemen and teachers," Gural said. "You just can't make that argument. We've made that argument elsewhere, but we made it in a different era when times weren't so tough."

On Slots at The Meadowlands: Gural has said repeatedly that he sees no chance of slots coming to the Meadowlands in the short-term, but said he still hopes to convince Christie or his successors that racetrack slots would benefit everyone.

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(Gural, continued)

"I think I'll be able to persuade Governor Christie that the reality is on the days we race (at Tioga and Vernon) the handle in the casino goes up," Gural said. "So our racing customers are going to the casino. Once he understands that he will recognize we bring something to the casino business in that casino revenues increase on the day we race. That's the argument I'm going to have to make, that racing can contribute to the revenue a casino would generate for the state and that racing should get a share of that to allow us to compete with other states."

Stars Retiring When Three: Gural has been among those advocating that horses who are by stallions that were 4 at the time the foals were conceived should be ineligible to compete in major races. He will continue to push this plan.

"I'll make one more try to convince people we need to pass a rule that stallion has to be 5 in order for the horse to race in stakes races," he said. "If I am putting my money up and we're going to try to get people to come here with no slot money and no subsidy from Atlantic City, I need Muscle Hill to race. The next Muscle Hill that comes along, I need him to race at my track at four. I need him to race six or eight times and I need the purse money to be there for it to make some sense for him to race."

Racing's Popularity: Gural believes harness racing can make it and make it without slots, but only if it is presented right. He drew on examples of tracks that are doing well in the thoroughbred business.

"I don't see why horse racing can't be popular," he said. "It's popular in Saratoga Springs. It's popular in Lexington, Kentucky. It's just not popular when you race 52 weeks a year, five days a week. We know that isn't popular. Horse racing can be popular if it's done right and there's a season to it. If we become a Saratoga-type experience, where people know this is a fun place to go, they're open on the weekends in the summer and when I go there I'll have a good time, then it can work."

Wishing Stone Preparing For Start in France

By Bill Finley

Kentucky Futurity winner Wishing Stone (Conway Hall) will likely make his 4-year-old debut some time in April, kicking off a campaign that will take him to many of the major races held in Europe in 2011, his U.S.-based trainer DeWayne Minor reports.



Wishing Stone,
Dean Hoffman photo

Wishing Stone is currently in France under the care of trainer Fabrice Souloy. Minor said the owner, Denmark's Knud Erik Ravn, decided to campaign the horse this year in Europe because there are better opportunities there for a 4-year-old trotter than there are in North America.

"They'll be able to get a little more racing into him over there," Minor said. "And Europe is where they think they're going to try to stand him. They race 4-year-olds against

4-year-olds over there, as opposed to having to race aged horses here. He probably wouldn't have had a problem with that, but it's better to stay in the class you're supposed to be in."

Minor said Wishing Stone will be pointed for several of the top races in Europe, among them the Elitlopp in Sweden. A European driver will be used in most of the horse's 4-year-old races, but George Brennan may be making some trips overseas in 2011.

The plans call for Wishing Stone to return to the U.S. later in the year and point for the Breeders Crown. He will return to Minor's stable upon his return. Still, the trainer knows he's going to miss not having his star in his barn for most of the year.

"It's hard to give up something that's been so good to you," he said. "These kind of horses are few and far between. You'd love to be able to stay with him, but I can see the benefits of him racing over there as a 4-year-old as opposed to racing here. It's business. You have to do what's best."

Chester Announces 2011 Dates

Harrah's Chester Casino and Racetrack has announced its 2011 schedule, with 150 dates spanning two meets. The 105-day spring-summer meet will commence with a special 6:30 p.m., eastern, program on Friday, Mar. 18, and continue through Friday, Sept. 9. Post time has been bumped ahead five minutes, to 12:40 p.m., for the spring-summer meet, with a few 5:00 p.m. twilight cards scattered throughout.

A Wednesday, Thursday, Friday, and Sunday schedule, which proved popular among fans on- and off-track, will remain the norm.

The 45-day fall meet will begin on Friday, Oct. 7, with another 6:30 p.m. start time before a Sunday-through-Wednesday schedule takes over, continuing through Wednesday, Dec. 21. Post time for the fall meet will also be 12:40 p.m., with the exception of most Sundays, on which post time will be 5:00 p.m.

The 2011 stakes schedule boasts more than \$8.1 million in purses over 12 events, headlined once again by Super Stakes Sunday. The richest day in Pennsylvania harness racing will mark its fourth renewal on Sunday, Aug. 21, on which more than \$2.3 million will be at stake in a trio of 3-year-old events -- the Colonial Trot, the Battle of the Brandywine for sophomore pacers, and the Valley Forge for pacing fillies.

Two events held as Invitationals in 2010 are scheduled as late-closers in 2011, those being the Betsy Ross distaff pace and the Maxie Lee Memorial for Free For All trotters. Both will maintain a \$100,000 purse in their respective finals, slated for Sunday, May 29 (Betsy Ross) and Sunday, June 12 (Maxie Lee Memorial).

The Ben Franklin for Free For All pacers will mark its fifth renewal on Sunday, July 3, with \$500,000 on the line. The spring-summer meet stakes schedule culminates with the Pennsylvania Sire Stakes Finals for 3-year-olds of each sex and gait, with \$800,000 in total purses on the line on Monday, Sept. 5.