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## INDUSTRY PROFILE

# One on one with driver Walter Case Jr.

By Bob Pandolfo

It's always fun to talk to a legend and I recently had such a pleasure. They call him Casey.

With 11,038 career wins, Walter Case, Jr. is 8th on the all-time list of dash-winning harness drivers. He led North America in wins three times—1998, 2001 and 2002.

Walter Case, Jr. was one of the few harness drivers I've ever known who seemed to be born to drive horses. To some guys, it's a job. To Case, it was a passion. I met him for the first time at Monticello years ago. I could sense his energy and enthusiasm. I remember thinking to myself, I wonder if the horses sense that.

That was one of the questions I asked him.

Pandy: You'd get a drive on a horse that had been racing dull and wind up winning for fun. When you drive a horse for the first time, do you think the horse knows, even before the race starts, that something is different?

Casey: They know. It's something in the hands. It's hard to explain.

Pandy: I've written that, in my opinion, drivers who excel on the front end have soft hands, which helps them rate a horse without wasting the horse's energy. I've seen horses set the pace with one guy and get tired, then get a better driver, go the same fractions, but this time they have something left in the tank. Am I right about that or is it hyperbole?

Casey: You're definitely right about that. It's in the hands, and it's God given. You can't teach it. I learned to drive from my dad. He was a good horseman, but he had heavy hands. Horses would pull and fight him, and of course that takes away their energy.

Pandy: You're not a big guy. Do you think a driver's weight makes any difference?

Casey: To me, any driver who is between 150 to 175 pounds, that's fine. The year I won over 1,000 races, I was 148 pounds. I won over 843



Walter Case Jr has won 11,038 career races in his career.

races in 1992 and I was 155 pounds. But once you get up around 200 pounds, that's going to slow the horse down, in my opinion.

Pandy: What else was unique about your driving style?

Casey: I was one of the first drivers to lean back in the bike. That seemed to work for me.



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# There were many good moments throughout Case's career

I also think I was the first driver to buy his own bike. Back then everyone used the trainer's bikes. But I wanted my own bike because sometimes the stirrups would be too long and I was uncomfortable. I bought the latest bikes that came out. I had a single hitch. I had the Cheetah bike, which I liked. The way the Cheetah was hooked up to the horse, your feet were right behind the horse's tail.

I remember showing the great Cat Manzi one of my bikes. Cat was one of the taller drivers and I could see that the stirrups weren't fitting him. I said, "Cat, you can buy one of these and get it custom made for your size." He did and he loved it.

Pandy: Let's talk about your best year, 1998, when you set a record for dash wins.

Casey: I won 1076 races that year, in only 2993 races. That's the accomplishment I'm most proud of. I was the first driver to ever win 1,000 races in one year. Tim Tetrick and Tony Morgan are the only two other drivers to win 1,000. And I did it driving mainly at one track. I won 978 races at Yonkers in one year. That's a record for wins in a year at one track. Tetrick and Morgan both drove in over 4,000 races when they went over 1,000.

Pandy: Yes, Tetrick and Morgan had win percentages of 25% when they broke 1,000 wins in one season. Which is outstanding. But your win percentage was 35%, which is amazing. And you won most of the races at a major track. Did you prepare for the card each night? What was your routine?

Casey: Oh yes, I prepared. I'd buy the Sports Eye early and study it for hours. I'd read the handicapper's analysis and I did my own handicapping. I also watched a lot of replays. On the replays, you could often pick up things that a horse did that didn't show up in the program. I liked to know as much as I could about the horses in the race. Of course, like Peyton Manning, I often had to call an audible. Once the gate opens everything could change. On paper it looks like no one's leaving, then five horses leave. You have to be able to adjust quickly.

Pandy: Even though you were a very aggressive driver, you won plenty of races from off the pace. Is there a knack to it?

Casey: I liked to keep the horse calm before the race. I scored them down quiet. I tried to reserve a horse's energy as much as possible. I also wanted to have the horse's nose on the gate well before the start. I don't believe in trying to time the gate. I see drivers do it, but to me, if you have the horse tugging or pulling before the race, you're using too much energy before the race starts.

During the race, I like to keep the horse relaxed. I think I was good at that. Driving on half mile tracks, like Northfield or Yonkers, I actually won a lot of races from third over. When I had bad cover, I'd often gun the horse three wide and try to get the lead into the turn. When I took a horse back, if I thought the lead driver was slowing the pace too much, I'd try to surprise him, take control of the race.



LUANNIE CASE PHOTO

**Walter Case Jr warming up a horse for his wife Luanne at Goshen Historic Racetrack on July 1.**

Pandy: Was there any turning point in your career?

Casey: I was driving in Maine. In 1983 I got a call from John Manzi, the publicity man at Monticello. He told me that some drivers had gotten suspended and he urged me to come down to Monticello. It turned out to be a good move. I was the leading driver there. The following year I went to the Meadowlands, driving against top talent like John Campbell and Billy O'Donnell. I was 23 years old and still learning but I did pretty well there. But when I started driving at Yonkers in 1990, that's when my career really took off.

Pandy: What were your best nights?

Casey: In terms of wins, I was the first to win 10 races on one card. It did it at Northfield in Ohio, in 1999. I also won 10 races at Pocono once. But then years later I saw they listed it as 9. I called the USTA. They told me that one of the horses had tested positive so they took one win off. I was surprised, I thought they only penalized the horse and owners by taking away the purse money. The most races I won at Yonkers was 8 races. It was an 11-race card. I won 8 and finished second in the other three races.

Pandy: What was the best horse you ever drove?

Casey: Without a doubt, Cambest, who was sired by the great Cam Fella. I won the Haughton Final with Cambest at Yonkers. I also won the Presidential Final with Cambest in 1993. That was my last drive ever at the Meadowlands. Cambest was a great horse,

one of the fastest horses of all time. His time trial of 1:46 1/5 is still the fastest ever. And he went on to become a great sire. He passed away last June, at 27 years old.

I had to be careful when driving Cambest. He was a very fast horse, but if fired him off the gate he'd grab on and he was tough to slow down. When I won the Presidential, we got away tenth. I could have easily left and looped the field if I wanted, but it was better to let him relax into his stride early, otherwise he'd be hard to control. Bill O'Donnell drove him in the world record time trial and I remember reading that O'Donnell said that Cambest could go a quarter as fast as any horse he ever drove.

Pandy: What other top horses did you get to drive?

Casey: The biggest purse I ever won was the Peter Haughton with Westgate Crown. I think that was 1986 and the purse was \$375,000. My best night for earnings though was at Yonkers in 1994. I was in five New York sire stakes races and won three Finals and finished second twice.

The highest purse I ever competed for was in the 1984 Woodrow Wilson. The purse was \$2.1 million, at the time the richest race in history for either thoroughbreds or harness. It was exciting just being in the race. I didn't have a chance, though. There was no way anyone was going to beat Nihilator that night.

Another race that sticks out to me is when

# Case's future plans still remain cloudy

I drove a horse named Captain Pantastic and beat the great Life Sign in the Dancer Memorial at Freehold in 1993. It was a huge upset. Captain Pantastic paid \$182.00 to win, which I believe was the highest priced winner I ever drove. Life Sign was a great horse. He was by Abercrombie out of the champion filly Three Diamonds. He won the Little Brown Jug and a bunch of other big stakes races that year.

Pandy: What were some big races you won in Ohio?

Casey: I got to drive a great horse named Gallo Blue Chip, a tough horse who won the Meadowlands Pace with Dan Dube. Gallo Blue Chip was Horse of the Year in 2000. That same year, I won the Cleveland Classic at Northfield Park with him. The next year, 2001, I won the Battle Of Lake Erie, also at Northfield, with Gallo Blue Chip. He went in 1:51, which was an all-age track record at the time.

Speaking of Gallo Blue Chip, I upset him in the Hempt Memorial at Pocono in 2000. Teddy Wing was driving Gallo Blue Chip and I won the race with a colt named Sam Francisco, trained by Virgil Morgan, Jr.

Pandy: Are there any other favorite horses you recall?

Casey: You may remember a horse named Seatrain.

Pandy: Seatrain was one of my favorite horses of all time. He was the first gelding to win the Little Brown Jug, which he won in 1975 with Ben Webster driving. It was a quality group of horses in the Jug that year which included Nero, Whata Baron, and Osborne's

Bret, three very fast horses.

Casey: I was actually the trainer of Seatrain for a short while. I had him in my barn towards the end of his career. We retired him at Garden State when he was 14 years old. I found a home for him and, you know something, that game son of a gun lived until he was 31 years old.

Pandy: Your wife Luanne Case is a trainer. I know you help her. What are your days like now?

Casey: I work hard, I can tell you that. I get up at 4:30 a.m. I clean the stalls and do whatever needs to be done, then I'm usually on the track jogging horses at 5:30. We train our horses at Pine Bush Training Facility in Pine Bush, New York. Great place.

Pandy: Do you like working with horses?

Casey: Oh yeah. Some mornings it's just me and a horse going around the track with the Catskill Mountains in the background. It's beautiful.

Pandy: Can you tell by driving a horse in training if a horse has talent? Or do you have to drive it in a race?

Casey: I can tell if a horse is going to be a decent racehorse during training.

Pandy: Obviously you've been unable to get back to driving horses. I know you miss it. Are you still trying to get back in the bike?

Casey: Yes, I'm still trying. I'd love to drive again, not full time, but I'd like to drive a few for Luanne. My son Ryan passed away in April. He was only 28. He always urged me to keep trying to get back to driving horses. He knew how much I loved it. I know he's looking over me and urging me to continue to try to do what I love.

## BURNING QUESTION

We asked some industry participants the burning question below pertaining to Walter Case Jr and recieved some interesting and mixed responses.

### DO YOU THINK WALTER CASE JR SHOULD BE ALLOWED TO RACE AGAIN?

#### JIMMY TAKTER

"Yes I do. You see guys every day racing that did more and do more harm than he ever did."

#### MOIRA FANNING

"For his own sake, no. He seems happy in his life now and driving seemed to add unbearable stress to it."

#### JEFF GURAL

"I would not have a problem if he were able to get licensed, but I don't know all the facts."

#### KEITH GISSER

"He was one of the greatest I ever saw and I believe everyone deserves a second chance. However, Walter got third, fourth and even tenth chances in some cases, which makes it hard for me to support his return. Having said that, I would sure as hell watch him."

#### MYRON BELL

"Yes. He served his time. But that assumes he has defeated his demons that got him into trouble in the first place."

#### JAY BERGMAN

"I think during his entire racing career he lacked character and respect for the rules and those he worked for. I believe those who think everyone should get a second chance probably don't know that he had 10 second chances and those were the ones just in New York.

While the sport has had a history of looking the other way I don't believe there is a reason to do so in this case. There are 1,000s of great athletes that wasted their talent due to substance abuse. It's sad but large groups can't always prevent personal destruction."

#### JOE FARALDO

"Walter should not be denied the chance to present his case to participate in racing. A complete review of his history will determine the result - nothing less, nothing more."

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# Teague vocal about Graduate finalist Wiggle It Jiggleit

By Jay Bergman

George Teague Jr. has won a lot of races as a trainer and owner in this sport. He's also lost a lot more of those races. Yet the owner of Wiggle It Jiggleit has managed to put all of this in perspective in the aftermath of last week's Ben Franklin final. Teague is looking forward to a sort of rematch in Saturday's \$250,000 Graduate Series final at The Meadowlands.

"He came out of the race in good shape," said Teague of Wiggle It Jiggleit, third in the Franklin after a rugged first-over trip.

Teague hardly had a chance to catch his breath following the 1:47 effort of Always B Miki in the Franklin before social media began its offensive against Wiggle It Jiggleit's driver and George's son Montrell.

"He's the quarterback," said Teague. "He's done an outstanding job driving this horse and he will continue to drive this horse."

The elder Teague has managed to keep the criticism in perspective as he reflects on the past races and looks forward to the next one.

"Everyone was looking for a 1:46 mile. There was no way he was going to go out of there in 25 (seconds) and keep going," said Teague.

Obviously both owner and driver were well aware of last year's Cane Pace, a race where Teague was forced to park a rival through insane fractions with Wiggle It Jiggleit and paid the price in more ways than one considering the connections supplemented to that event.

"I don't think the horse was at his best that day," said Teague reflecting on the Cane. "If he was I don't think those fractions would have bothered him."

Those who have questioned the elder Teague's management or the younger Teague's driving have not been paying full attention to the scoreboard. The son of Mr Wiggles finished worse than second for just the second time in his brilliant 39 race career in the Franklin. That he was beaten just two lengths after taking air through a 1:19 2/5 three quarters should alone be enough to silence the critics.

Though the Franklin was still on his mind, Teague was miffed to hear comments made on Friday night by a well-known analyst.

"I can't believe that someone is saying that we ducked Freaky Feet Pete in last year's Breeders Crown because we were afraid to



DERICK GIWNER PHOTOS

Freaky Feet Pete (left) and Wiggle It Jiggleit face off for the sixth time on Saturday.

race against him," said Teague.

"The facts are that it was a \$62,500 supplemental payment. If the horse finished third in the Crown we would have lost money. That just doesn't make any business sense at all."

The implication, especially in the light that Wiggle It Jiggleit had been racing since the previous January and had extensively travelled North America to win 22 of his 26 starts, was too much for the elder Teague to listen to.

"People can say anything they want and I understand that," Teague said. "But for a public figure to throw around his opinion as if it is fact is wrong."

The war of words is likely to die down somewhat as both Wiggle It Jiggleit and Freaky Feet Pete renew their rivalry in Saturday's tenth race. As in the Franklin, Wiggle It Jiggleit landed inside (post three) with Freaky Feet Pete starting from post eight in the field of 10.

Freaky Feet Pete had the pocket trip while Always B Miki and Wiggle It Jiggleit battled but that wasn't enough for the son of Rockin Image to win the race. With 29 wins in his 34 career starts, Freaky Feet Pete will get every chance to prove who the best horse from this class is regardless of the post position. Trace

Tetrick again has the assignment behind the Larry Rheinheimer-trained 4-year-old.

Though there are eight others in the contest, none are likely to get serious wagering support though many may have something they need to prove. In The Arsenal battled with Wiggle It Jiggleit to his demise in last year's Cane at The Meadowlands. This year he drew the pole position, but unlike his rival is still looking for his first win in 2016. Brett Miller has been red-hot in stakes action and could be on the offensive here.

Artistic Major (post 2) won a Graduate leg here in May in 1:48 1/5, but on that night Wiggle It Jiggleit and Freaky Feet Pete squared off in the Battle of Lake Erie at Northfield. Tim Tetrick guides Artistic Major for trainer Steve Elliott.

Rockin Ron handed Wiggle It Jiggleit one of his losses this year in the Confederation Cup at Flamboro. One of three Indiana-breds in the field, Rockin Ron hopes to regain his winning ways from post five with Yannick Gingras in the bike.

There will be 13 races on the Meadowlands card on Saturday including a single Meadowlands Pace elimination. First post is 7:15 p.m.

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# Elimination races continue to do more harm than good

By Darin Zoccali

Elimination races and the procedures in place to determine the final fields of stakes events has become one of the most debated topics in harness racing. Last week, the Ben Franklin Final at Pocono Downs effectively portrayed the benefit of elimination races.

The Ben Franklin was split into three eliminations. The “big three” drew into separate eliminations and each of their performances set the stage for an epic confrontation in the final the following week. It drove a social media firestorm, seemingly endless debates on not only who would win, but how the race would be contested, who would make the lead, who would be the favorite, etc. It also gave Pocono Downs a week to market the event, get the races broadcast on TVG and reap the benefits of how the previous week’s elimination races set up this spectacle.

Of course, everything broke right for Pocono Downs. The three best horses all drew into separate eliminations. They all performed to a level that not only allowed them to each win their elimination, but to do so in a fashion that created an abundance of anticipation for the matchup in the final, and of course, the final lived up to all the hype. Therefore, regardless of the fact that the eliminations were “bad betting races” won by overwhelming favorites, the end product far outweighed that negative.

However, what happened at Pocono is not always the way an elimination-final format for a stakes event plays out. Case in point, this year’s Meadowlands Pace.

Contrary to the Free For All Pacers in 2016, whose combined talent is on a level we haven’t seen since the days of Jenna’s Beach Boy and Riyadh, the 3-year-old pacers can best be described as a lackluster group. The North America Cup and Max Hempt Memorial have consolidated the contenders of this group down to a precious few. The end result, 11 horses entered the Meadowlands Pace, which is no fault of The Meadowlands, but it is simply not a great group of 3-year old pacers. Unfortunately, being third in line of the major 3-year old races has left The Big M without any of the fringe horses that entered the North America Cup or the Max Hempt Memorial.

Since the draw came out for the Meadowlands Pace, the internet, social media specifically, has blown up, questioning the format of giving one horse (Racing Hill) a bye and having a 10 horse elimination to eliminate one horse. The Meadowlands has successfully altered its stakes for older horses to a format that excludes eliminations and allows the top 12 highest money earners of the past two racing seasons to contest the final. The conditions also allow for a consolation if it can be filled with sufficient wagering interests. The Meadowlands Pace, being a 3-year old event, still maintains its elimination/final format allowing only 10 to contest the Final, so when 11 horses enter, a bye/elimination scenario takes place.

Racetracks do feel pressure from owners,

trainers and drivers who exclaim, “If I am paid into a race that goes for \$700,000, my horse’s nose should be on the gate.” That is a perfectly valid opinion, but I have to ask, wouldn’t you rather be guaranteed a spot in the Final for over \$700,000 rather than have to contest an elimination where you could be denied that spot? Interestingly enough, the Hambletonian follows a format where if fewer than 14 horses enter, the field goes straight to a final, which allows up to three horses that could be lined up in the second tier. I don’t see anybody boycotting the Hambletonian though.

Now we have to address the elephant in the room. When you have an elimination race for \$50,000 in which you only have to beat one horse to qualify for the \$700,000 Final, at what cost to your horse do you try to win the race? I know we can’t say that and it is taboo, but it’s a perfectly legitimate question. Racetracks try to incentivize the connections to win the elimination by guaranteeing they pick their post position in the final, but the fact that they have to offer an incentive confirms that the issue exists. The results of eliminations and how much the incentive really does work are certainly mixed.

In the Meadowlands Pace Elimination, the two likely favorites, Boston Red Rocks and Control The Moment have both raced each of the last four weeks. Control The Moment specifically has gone three very tough miles in a row and starts from post position number nine. Given that Control The Moment, Boston Red Rocks or any of the other eight horses in this elimination only have to beat one horse to qualify for the Final, at what cost to their horse’s chances in the final will they try to win this race just for the opportunity to draw a post from slots one to six? Make no mistake, I am not condoning the notion that it is “okay not to try,” but merely pointing out this a topic that needs to be addressed to avoid the appearance of impropriety.

Some gamblers scream bloody murder when their horse is given a “no chance” trip in an elimination. I find that to be a bit over the top. This is gambling after all. I do understand that when you put your money down you should expect a maximum effort from your horse, driver and trainer. After all, that sounds good on paper. But a part of gambling is identifying certain intangibles and weighing the risk involved with betting on a particular horse, especially at a short price.

By the way, this happens in thoroughbred racing all the time. Not only does it happen, but trainers use million-dollar grade one races as “preps” and have no problem saying that. In 2001, Monarchos won the Florida Derby and was a strong favorite in the Grade I Wood Memorial, where he was taken far off the pace, allowing Congaree to set his own pace, and despite closing well, never threatened Congaree, finishing second, beaten over three lengths. After the race, his trainer John Ward called it the “perfect prep coming off a big win in Florida. We didn’t want him to peak today, we want him to peak in Kentucky,” which is exactly what Monarchos did, when

he won The Kentucky Derby at 16-1. Nobody had a problem with that. In fact, many bettors used this as a handicapping tool to successfully bet Monarchos in the Kentucky Derby. Had Monarchos won The Wood Memorial he would have been 5-1 in the Derby, not 16-1. But if a harness trainer says it, many in the industry are up in arms. If a driver says it, they get suspended. Talk about a double-standard between the two breeds.

A track operator has a different point of view. They believe that every horse should be given every opportunity to win every race, regardless of the level of that race, in order to protect its customers, the gambling public. After all, if every horse is not given every chance to win, you lose the trust of your customers. The track operator isn’t wrong either. But this scenario gives every track operator the opportunity to use this example as a reason for change. Simply put, the racetrack can say, “we understand and respect your opinion that if you are putting up money to race in a major stakes race, your horses’ nose should be on the gate, however we cannot jeopardize the integrity of our product in order to make that happen. Therefore, since it has become apparent that at times winning is not necessarily the top priority in an elimination race, there will be no more elimination races. The top 10 money-earners will race for the lion’s share of the purse in the Final, while the next 10 will compete in a consolation format.”

The ironic thing is this problem doesn’t just exist in elimination races. After winning the New Jersey Sire Stakes Final and stamping himself a leading Hambletonian contender in 2010, Muscle Massive was entered in a condition trotting event two weeks later. He was sent off at 2-1 and from post position eight, was 16 lengths back at the quarter and 14 lengths back at the half while never in contention to win the race. He rallied to finish third, beaten five lengths. Many people were unhappy as the horse was “never given a chance to win.” But many gamblers knew this horse was being pointed for the Hambletonian and a non-winners of \$10,000 condition event at the end of June was not the major goal, and they bet accordingly. As a gambler, I don’t have a problem with that, if I were the operator of a racetrack, I would have a big problem with that, so I do understand why many people take issue with this mentality, especially track operators.

Therefore, if everyone cannot get on the same page and work out a solution that can include elimination races, they need to be disbanded all-together. After all, elimination races were implemented at a time when there would be 10 eliminations for the Woodrow Wilson and you had to win the elimination to make the final, they certainly weren’t meant to eliminate one horse. In my opinion, the harness racing industry has to minimize the potential for these types of scenarios to exist and being rid of elimination races seems like the most logical conclusion in achieving that goal.