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## RACING COMMENTARY

# Dig deeper before reaching conclusions

By Jay Bergman

To anyone that has played this game long enough it's no secret that history plays a major part in success. Past performances are exactly that- a capsulated history of a horse's recent and somewhat past races.

As the saying goes, those that do not learn from history are doomed to repeat it.

Thus it wasn't a major surprise this past Saturday to see bettors fall over themselves to some degree in the Miss Pennsylvania at The Downs at Mohegan Sun Pocono. There was no other way to explain the off-time odds.

Past performances being what they are, a majority of those wagers that came in pointed towards Darlinonthebeach, an elimination winner a week earlier and the first conqueror of Pure Country. Without question, Darlinonthebeach did defeat Pure Country fair and square in her prelim and came out of the pocket to do so.

How much weight should bettors have put on that effort?

Herein lies the major history lesson to fans and bettors alike. Was it plausible to believe that everything we needed to know about the two fillies could have been answered in just the one race that they both competed in? Is it realistic to draw all conclusions from one line with less than two minutes worth of data?

This is where past history, something older than seven days, is important to reflect upon. Not just past history of these two horses but history of the sport and the entire landscape of horses moving from their 2 to 3-year-old seasons.

Incredibly lost in at least this instance was the fact that Pure Country did not lose as a 2-year-old and her rival Darlinonthebeach lost



DERICK GIVNER

Pure Country proved in the Miss Pennsylvania that you shouldn't count her out.

eight of her 10 starts.

Should the slate of an entire racing season be washed away because Darlinonthebeach was now one-for-one and Pure Country winless in 2016?

That one race had made Darlinonthebeach a 4-5 favorite and Pure Country 2-1, essentially says that at least some bettors put extensive weight on that one performance.

This column isn't set forth to diminish either of the two fillies nor to suggest that Pure Country's victory on Saturday and Darlinonthebeach's seventh-place finish are accurate depictions of the nature of their divide. The reality is that Saturday's finish is likely more of an aberration than a fitting account of the two.

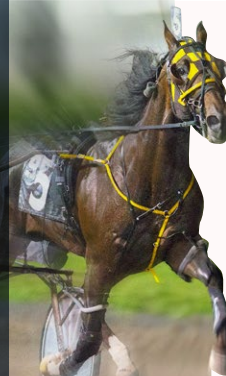
The Miss Pennsylvania final is what I consider a breakout mile. Actually it would be

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# Pure Country proved one losing effort is meaningless

more accurate to consider it a breakout quarter mile. That's because a 25 2/5 first quarter is pretty much the maximum speed any of these fillies can travel for that distance. Expelling that energy in the first quarter is more than enough to change the ability to go an entire mile. More often than not, with any horse not named Niatross or Somebeach-somewhere, a first quarter of that nature spells disaster.

There's no way to fault any driver of a favorite for looking for the front end and David Miller didn't reach \$200 million in his horses' career earnings by not putting horses where they belonged. Yet in this instance, Miller was not alone in his quest for control. Both Scott Zeron (Call Me Queen Be) and Tim Tetrick (Newborn Sassy) also had ideas of getting the perfect trip. Those two had preceded Miller to fight for control. Darlinon-thebeach may have been reserved a touch as they battled, but she worked nearly as hard to keep third on the outside and then had to continue her move parked nearly three-eighths of the mile for the front.

From that point in the mile the fractions were relatively normal, but that wouldn't help the favorite as she could only go to the head of the stretch before calling it a night.

Pure Country's mile was extremely powerful and was an indication that she has in fact grown up nicely from her 2-year-old season. While the Brett Miller-driven filly did have a

chance to settle early and off the hot pace, the fact that she was without cover and advancing over this track for five-eighths of a mile is astonishing. She proved that it was no accident that she won all of her races in 2015, completing the effort in 1:50 3/5, the identical clocking of the Pennsylvania Classic for the boys in the very next race.

In as much as we learned from one race, the Pennsylvania Classic was a lesson in how not to challenge the big boys when they dominate the field. Whether racing commissions choose to separate horses for the wagering or not, it was impossible not to detect the impact a quartet from one stable can have on opposing drivers. Despite the 4-1 odds against Lyons Snyder as the outsider against the Burke contingent, the bettors made him the 2-1 choice.

On paper Lyons Snyder looked every bit as good as his rivals, but driver Scott Zeron had to correctly realize that with three of the four Burke horses to his inside, no matter how hard he pushed his horse early, the likelihood would not be the lead or the pocket but probably a 3-hole behind two Burke horses. With that in front of him, Zeron chose not to kill his horse and the public watched as the entry dominated the pace and the race. Check Six was at the quarter in 27 2/5 and got the lead from his entymate Big Top Hanover with no resistance. That's a full two seconds slower than the fillies, a clear result of the competition taken out of a race when horses and drivers are working with each other as

opposed to against.

There is no takeaway from the Pennsylvania Classic. Maybe some of the also-rans will show up later in the year. At the same time, it's impossible to gauge the quality of the top horses since the slow pace neutralized the testing canvas.

Anyone that watched Wiggle It Jiggleit's performance on Saturday had to question his gait more than the actual loss. Again, let's look at history. Here's a horse that at times during his 3-year-old campaign looked every bit that bad on the racetrack yet in most cases still dominated. A major difference this year could be the horses he faces. That said, it's rather premature to suggest he will not bounce back.

Finally, those who have watched Ake Svanstedt in his short stint on these shores should recognize how talented he is at sending out horses in peak condition in their initial starts. In 2014 Svanstedt sent out Your So Vain in his first start as a 4-year-old to victory in the rich Hambletonian Maturity at The Meadowlands. This past Sunday, Resolve put in a spectacular mile in the Mack Lobell Elitlopp Playoff at the same track. In both cases the Svanstedt trainee would defeat Bee A Magician, who finished second twice. This past Sunday, though the mare was elevated to top prize, Resolve was clearly the best horse on the track.

Again, let us not be doomed to repeat history. Resolve may have been the best horse on Sunday but the season is long.

One race will always be just a small part of history.

# Peter Iovino is helping Saratoga Harness carve a niche

By Bob Pandolfo

Peter Iovino has been the racing secretary at Saratoga Casino and Raceway since 2014. The former *Harness Eye* chart caller and editor got his first racetrack job working as the assistant racing secretary at Freehold in 2008.

Like most half mile tracks, Saratoga is speed favoring. Iovino carded some 1-1/16 mile races last year, but the experiment was not met with open arms by the horsemen.

"The trainers up here are a tough group," Iovino said. "I know that the industry as a whole is resistant to change, but these guys are really set in their ways."

Despite the pushback, Iovino brought back the added-distance events this year for the higher class races, particularly the handicap races.

"Using the Open Handicap Trot as an example, the purse is \$15,000. That's better than many tracks, so it's not like we're in a bad spot," said Iovino. "But, with the half-mile track and post position bias, you're not going to get quality horses if you put the best horses in posts 7 and 8 going a mile. It's too much of a disadvantage. I went with the mile and a sixteenth distance for these handicaps because it gives the outside posts a much



Saratoga Raceway Racing Secretary Peter Iovino.

better chance, they can leave the gate."

For those of you who may not be familiar with handicap races, the idea of the handicap is to create a more competitive and exciting race. In thoroughbred racing, the better horses have to carry more weight. Legend-

ary horses like Kelso and Forego established themselves as racing icons with their heroic victories carrying more than 130 pounds.

In harness racing, the better horses are given the disadvantage of the outside posts. Years ago, it was fine to run these races at a mile. Now outside posts win at a much lower percentage, so the handicap is too severe at the one mile distance. At a mile and a sixteenth, the outside horses have a longer run to the first turn. Racing the handicap races at the longer distance is a smart move by Iovino and something that all half mile tracks should implement.

So far in 2016, the handle at Saratoga Harness is up over the prior two years.

"I think we've found a niche," Iovino said. "When you race is very important. For instance, on Thursday, we moved the first post from early afternoon to 4 p.m. We were doing less than \$200,000. Now Thursday's handle is usually over \$300,000 and that's with 12 races. And Sunday afternoon has been good for us, with handle often over \$500,000. It's a good spot for us because not that many harness tracks were racing on Sunday."

Another factor that helps fill the fields is

# Wiggle It Jiggleit ready to forge ahead in Confederation Cup



MIKE LIZZI

Wiggle It Jiggleit picked up a couple of wins at Yonkers Raceway this year and looks to continue his half-mile success at Flamboro.

## By Jay Bergman

"Anytime he loses people always want to know what's wrong," said George Teague about 2015 Horse of the Year Wiggle It Jiggleit. The 4-year-old, fresh off his second loss in six starts this year, moves to Flamboro Downs on Sunday night to face his own age group in the C\$244,000 Confederation Cup.

"He had some shoeing problems going into that race (May 7 at Mohawk) and he was dancing out there like Fred Astaire," said Teague. "When he didn't go right by at the head of the stretch I knew he wasn't himself. We scoped him afterwards and he was definitely a bit sick."

For Teague, sickness was something that had to at some point catch up with Wiggle It Jiggleit. The horse has been pretty much trouble free during his sophomore campaign and this season. "Anytime you travel a lot there's a chance for a horse to get sick," Teague said. "He's been very fortunate."

While Teague could explain Wiggle It Jiggleit's second-place finish last Saturday, the reality is he shouldn't have to. The altered son of Mr Wiggles has had to endure some brutal trips this year and has for the most part come out smelling like a rose.

Two overland trips at Yonkers netted Wiggle It Jiggleit a second and a win dead-heat with eventual champion Bit Of A Legend

N in the Levy series.

Asked about his horse on a half-mile track, the owner didn't seem to think it mattered. "I think he's good on any size track. We just have to hope that he's recovered and Clyde (trainer Francis) says he's been better since Saturday," Teague said.

Wiggle It Jiggle It drew post nine in the 11th race of 12 on Sunday night at Flamboro. The card gets underway at 6:00 p.m.

The nine-hole means he will start from the second tier, always a concern to any post time favorite. "You have to hope the rail horse can leave a bit so you have room," said Teague. Wiggle It Jiggleit, with Montrell Teague in tow, will follow Rodeo Romeo at the start.

The Confederation Cup could be an interesting affair with trainer Ron Burke sending out three including Rockin Ron, a gelding that campaigned against Wiggle It Jiggleit and Freaky Feet Pete on the Indiana Circuit as a 3-year-old. Since being purchased by the Burke connections, the son of Real Desire has clicked off 10 consecutive victories including nine this year. He drew post 4 in the half-mile track contest and will have Yannick Gingras at the controls for the very first time. Rockin Ron has dominated action at The Meadows and then most recently at Miami Valley for the Burke stable.

My Hero Ron (post 2) and Rock N Roll World (post 8) give Burke a few more cards to

play with in the nine-horse field.

Trainer Ian Moore's State Treasurer finished third behind Wiggle It Jiggleit in last week's Mohawk feature. His stablemate, Rockin In Heaven, will try to pull off the upset from post seven in the Confederation Cup. With nearly \$400K in career earnings, the son of Rock N Roll Heaven captured the \$290,000 Empire Breeders Classic last year at Tioga Downs. Trevor Henry will be in the bike on Sunday.

Rodeo Romeo and National Seelster will represent the Chris Ryder stable and both have shown a propensity to handle the half-mile track well. Earlier this year Rodeo Romeo captured the Sagamore Hill final at Yonkers. Brett Miller will drive him.

National Seelster, another Ryder trained 4-year-old, faced Wiggle It Jiggleit at the outset of his racing career early in 2015. Now he returns after a pair of solid tighteners at The Meadowlands. Sylvain Filion has the assignment from post six.

Americanprimetime (post 3) and Drachan Hanover (post 5) round out the field.

Teague was hoping that all systems would be go for this Sunday and was weighing his options for the following start.

"He can go in the Graduate at The Meadowlands or the Battle of Lake Erie at Northfield," said Teague. "We'll take it one race at a time."

# New hotel coming to Saratoga Raceway

the races for all New York bred horses.

“We card about six of these all state-bred races a week,” Iovino said. “There are generally three classes. Maidens race for \$7,500, non-winners of two race for \$8,000, and winners over two but not four races has a purse of \$9,300. This gives a lot of horses a chance to race that might otherwise be prematurely retired. It’s great for owners of New York bred horses that didn’t turn out to be superstars.”

Last year Saratoga hired a new track maintenance manager, Adam Barger. He’s kept the surface consistent and safe.

“The track layout is a lot like the Little Brown Jug, wide, sweeping turns and short straightaways. And like the Delaware, Ohio oval, this is a very fast half mile track.”

Unlike some tracks, at Saratoga Harness, the drivers are aggressive.

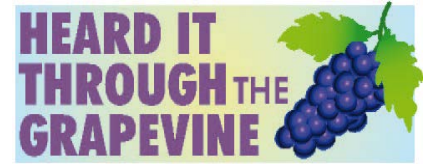
“I think our driver’s colony is underrated,” Iovino said. “At some tracks, the drivers aren’t racing their horses aggressively. You don’t want to see them sitting single file until the five-eighths with a slow pace. At Saratoga, the drivers are here to race, the pace is usually quick. We have several drivers who

are experts on half-mile ovals and a strong overall group of drivers. Stephane Bouchard, who was the top driver at Yonkers many times, is the leading driver right now. Billy Dobson and Frank Coppola, Jr. are second and third in the standings, but both have won the dash-winning title here.”

This summer Saratoga Casino and Raceway will unveil a brand new 117 room hotel. Scheduled to open on July 11, the new facility will have modern amenities like an indoor pool and spa, but old-time architecture that fits into the history of Saratoga Springs. Book a room now if you want to get a room this summer. Iovino told me that they expect to be at full capacity during the Saratoga thoroughbred meet.

While things are looking good right now at Saratoga, Iovino didn’t mince any words when asked about the overall future of harness racing.

“With fewer horses being bred, I think all harness tracks have to wake up to the fact that there will come a time where there won’t be enough horses,” said Iovino. “There will be consolidation and some of the bottom level tracks won’t be around. The industry needs to get together and do a much better job of scheduling racing dates and post times.”



The hot topic on Facebook and Twitter this week in the harness universe is whether owner Sydney Weaver should be permitted to name her new foal Only God Knows Why.

Of course, by now everyone knows that Standardbred Canada rejected the name because they frown on naming horses with the word “God” included.

While we live in a world of political correctness where you have to watch every last syllable that is uttered, I think perhaps intent should be considered when reviewing names rather than simply words.

Only God Knows Why is a commonly used phrase. I’m certain people of many backgrounds and religious beliefs utter the term. In fact, people with no religious affiliation use it as well. It is no different than “For God’s sake” or “What in God’s name are you doing?” or “Oh my God”.

The above terms are not the same as naming the horse “Believe In God” or “Follow God’s Message”, which could be argued as offensive to some who don’t hold the same beliefs.

Ultimately the decision on allowing a name probably should be more of a grey area as opposed to black and white.

--Derick Givner



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