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INDUSTRY VIEW

Owners come first at Woodbine, Mohawk

By Keith Gisser

When I first saw the ad posted on social media, I was ready to pack up and move to Ontario.

PURSUE YOUR POTENTIAL & BEGIN YOUR EXCITING FUTURE WITH US TODAY! Woodbine Entertainment Group (WEG) is seeking a customer service focused, resourceful and innovative individual to join our Racing team at Woodbine Racetrack. Reporting to the Senior Manager, Racing Operations, the Standardbred Concierge & Owner Development Associate will ensure our current owners have a positive experience while visiting our racing facilities, creating a sense of comfort and recognition for our owners with a simple philosophy – “If it’s possible, consider it done”. The Associate will also investigate new ways to educate and recruit prospective Standardbred Owners with guidance from the Senior Manager.Own It!

Canada is doing a great job of bringing new owners into the sport – relaxing rules and reducing fees on fractional owners, among other things – and it appears that Woodbine also realizes the importance of keeping those new, smaller owners happy. In fact, one role of this new ownership liaison will be to “Investigate and analyze new ways to enter ownership; i.e. syndicate groups.” We hear the cliché all the time. Without owners, there is no harness racing, and while some will argue that bettors are more important, that is a different column for a different day. But Woodbine is taking that mantra seriously.

Back in my Northfield Park days, we did a lot to make sure our horse owners were treated properly. Mary Randall, the group sales director, was also the primary clubhouse hostess



MICHAEL BURNS

and was actively involved in owner relations on a day-to-day basis. Meanwhile, Dave Bianconi and I, in the publicity office, fielded inquiries from potential owners, referred them to trainers, arranged backstretch tours, and recruited both on property, with annual all-day ownership seminars, and off, with presentations to various civic groups.

But, as more and more hyphens were added to our titles (when I left I was Publicity Director-Players Club Manager – Bet Harness Coordinator- Webmaster, plus track handicapper, which just did not fit on my business card), the outreach to potential owners became less and less of an emphasis. Granted, in those last days before slots, unlike the early 2000s, we really did not have much positive to offer potential owners, but we should still have been out there hustling and looking forward to the day when business rebounded. This is the way many tracks look at owner relations. Let the hospitality people focus on hospitality and shuffle

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New position at WEG to attend to the needs, wants of owners

off recruitment to whoever can handle it. It is not a dedicated position.

Woodbine appears to be taking this charge very seriously, as their head of Standardbred Racing Operators Bill McLinchee told me. "We have always put a high priority on ensuring owners participating in Major Stake races receive top level seating and service. Now we want to extend that same high priority onto owners participating in any race. We are also hopeful we can encourage more owners to come watch their horses race live," he said.

A full-time, dedicated position, which mirrors a similar position on the Thoroughbred side at the dual-breed Ontario track, gives potential owners and horsemen a point person to contact with questions. There is no picking up the phone and being routed through multiple offices (at Northfield, some potential owners would be put through to the race office, others to the publicity office, depending on the receptionist on duty). Surprisingly, the T-bred post did not impact the decision on the Standardbred side, according to McLinchee.

"One did not influence the other. The

positions are part of WEG'S overarching owner outreach program," said McLinchee. "Owners are very important to us here at Mohawk and Woodbine, so establishing a go-to person to attend to their needs was a necessary in the development of the concept."

I have no idea what Woodbine plans to pay this individual, but I hope it is an incentive-laden compensation plan. If he or she is highly successful, reward that person. And, while Woodbine wants someone energetic and "all in," let's hope they also find someone who is knowledgeable and realistic, while still being a great ambassador for the sport and more importantly, the business of the sport. They post: "What our ideal candidate might be doing now: Supporting customer retention and development in hospitality/retail environment; Working at the coordinator level with experience providing a customized, elevated guest experience."

The individual filling this role needs to know how to read a program; needs to know a red from a rose' and needs to know a forelock from a fetlock. That was a concern for me, until McLinchee told me that Woodbine is in the process of hiring someone who has been involved in racing; someone who is very passionate about the future of the industry.

"All along my hope was to hire someone with horse experience," said McLinchee.

I am glad Woodbine is not treating this as an entry level position. This is a great idea and one, in a perfect world, that every track would adopt. I do have one concern other than the possible lack of horse background as a prerequisite. One responsibility for this person will be to greet and assist all high value/high profile owners while visiting Woodbine and Mohawk Racetracks. Hopefully, the Standardbred Concierge and Ownership Development Associate will spend just as much time greeting and assisting the new guy with one (or a fractional piece of one) minimum claimer as he or she does with that high profile owner. The high profile owner probably isn't leaving the sport any time soon, the new guy might if the experience is not a good one. I'm not saying ignore the big boys. I'm just saying not to ignore the small potatoes.

It's kind of a shame McLinchee is "in the process of hiring someone." Let's see. Canada: Legal Cuban cigars, John Labatt Extra Stock, and Rush. Maybe it's time to polish up the resume, just in case. That's all for now. Go cash and we will speak again next month.

Svanstedt hoping for a big year in 2016

By Derick Givner

Now in his third year as a North American trainer, Swedish import Ake Svanstedt finally seems to be more comfortable in his new surroundings and is hoping for a strong performance from his stable in 2016.

When I caught Svanstedt in the Meadowlands paddock last Saturday morning (May 14), he was finishing up a quick breakfast between warming up and racing in qualifiers.

The 57-year-old trainer saw his win total grow from 68 in 2014 to 102 last year, though he did send out 196 more starters. His earnings checked in at a solid \$3,511,061 in 2015, almost \$1.2 million greater than his first year on U.S. soil.

"I feel really good about this year," said Svanstedt.

Svanstedt could have a potential star in 5-year-old trotter Resolve. The son of Muscle Hill was spectacular in winning the Elitlopp Playoff in 1:51 2/5 with Svanstedt in the bike at The Meadowlands, but was disqualified for racing inside the pylons in the stretch.

Svanstedt understood the decision but didn't agree with the ultimate outcome. "The owners shouldn't have to pay for my mistake. They lost \$75,000," said Svanstedt, who added that in Sweden he wouldn't have been disqualified but would have received a fine.

Despite the disappointing ultimate result, Resolve received and accepted an invitation to the Elitlopp on May 29 at Sovalla in Sweden. Typically a trip across the Atlantic would take something out of a horse when



DERICK GIWNER

Driver/trainer Ake Svanstedt has high hopes for Resolve in 2016.

returning for the lucrative stakes season in North America, but Svanstedt said that due to new arrangements this year the horse would race May 29 and be on his way home May 30.

While he likes his chances in Sweden, Svanstedt still ranked Nuncio as the horse to beat. "I think (Stefan) Melander (owner, trainer, driver) will have him right for the race," said Svanstedt.

One signature trait of Svanstedt since he has come to America is his ability to have horses primed for a big race. Despite sometimes dull qualifiers and average racelines, horses like Resolve have come up with big miles with what seemed like little seasoning.

"We can train at home. I qualified Sebastian K in (1):56 and he trotted in (1):50," said Svanstedt, who added that it really comes down to training style and that any trainer could have a horse fired up for a big mile with just home training.

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The legacy of Rocknroll Hanover still lives on in 2016

By Bob Marks

With stakes season kicking off in the Garden State as New Jersey Sires Stakes races are set for Friday and Saturday at The Meadowlands, it's worth one last look at a subject dear to my heart—the legacy of New Jersey's Perretti Farms and in particular the deceased stallion Rocknroll Hanover, who personally accounts for all nine starters in the 3-year-old filly division and all seven starters in the 3-year-old colt division.

Perretti farms dispersed the bulk of its equine holdings in 2011 then staged its final mini dispersal in 2013. As of Tuesday, May 17, the farm still ranked third in seasonal earnings with \$3,795,159 behind giants Hanover Shoe Farms and Winbak Farms.

At present, the farm has no broodmares but remains the syndicate manager for stallions Muscles Yankee and Lucky Chucky. One might note that two of Lucky Chucky's offspring—Non Stick and Young Bride—were victorious in New York Sires Stakes action at Yonkers this past Monday.

Rocknroll Hanover, who prematurely passed on due to a severe gastric impaction in March of 2013, ranks second in stallion earnings thus far this year with \$1,879,776, behind Bettor's Delight. Significantly, Rocknroll Hanover's produce these past few years have not been aided by state Sires Stakes programs as lucrative as those in New York, Pennsylvania and Ontario.

The Rocknroll Hanover headliners thus far this year include Canada's Nickle Bag (Buckle Bunny), the most prominent open pacer on the Ontario circuit, even holding decisions over last year's aged pacing champion State Treasurer and last year's Horse Of The Year Wiggle It Jiggleit. Nickle Bag has won 10 of 17 starts in 2016 with a record of 1:49 at Woodbine.

Another spotlight horse is Rockeyed Optimist (Art Amour), who has emerged as a free-for-aller as a 5-year-old this year with seven wins in 10 starts and a mark of 1:48 3/5 taken at Dover Downs. Rockeyed Optimist overtook JK Endofanera at Harrah's Philadelphia this past Sunday in 1:49 3/5 and before that held off the onrushing Always B Miki at The Meadowlands.

This Saturday will mark the seasonal debut of last year's 2-year-old pacing colt champion Boston Red Rocks (McGibson), who finished out the season last year with wins in the Breeders Crown and Governors Cup.

Boston Red Rocks, trained by Steve Elliott, comes off a 1:51 qualifier last week and looms the likely favorite in the seven-colt New Jersey Sires Stakes leg.

Technically Boston Red Rocks was bred by Andray Farms from the former Perretti race mare McGibson (McArdle-Armbro Althea). However, he was foaled at Perretti after the mare was reacquired by Perretti at Harrisburg in 2012. Both McGibson and the then weanling Boston Red Rocks were resold in the 2013 dispersal.



NIGELSOULTPHOTO.COM

Rocknroll Hanover was the Horse of the Year in 2005.

Of the nine Rocknroll Hanovers in the filly division, Mark Harder's Blue Moon Stride will probably go off as favorite after a good tune-up versus tough older mares in which she seemed to have pace finishing between horses.

Blue Moon Stride, from Bettor's Delight and Roll With Joe's full sister Classic Stride, is an interesting story. She's by far the most modest purchase her wealthy Australian owners have made in America and thus far is the most successful. Harder bought her as a weanling for \$27,000, for Emilio and Maria Rosati from the 2013 dispersal, primarily for future broodmare purposes. The year prior, the Rosati's had purchased Well Known Stride (Well Said-Cathedra) and Rocknroll Stride (Rocknroll Hanover-Stienam's Place) in Lexington for sales-topper prices of \$380,000 and \$375,000.

At present, Rocknroll Hanover is represented by successful stallion sons in Rock N Roll Heaven, now in New Jersey at Deo Volente Farms and Rockin Image in Indiana at Victory Hill Farm. Of those, Rock N Roll Heaven has sired top fillies Sassa Hanover, Divine Caroline and Band O Angels. Rockin Image, from the brilliant Kikikatie, is best known for his Breeders Crown champion son Freaky Feet Pete. That one is expected to join the Free-For-All set starting with Saturday's

Battle Of Lake Erie at Northfield Park where he renews his rivalry with Wiggle It Jiggleit.

Normally the turning point for most great stallions is when his daughters come of age and match up with other leading stallions, in effect causing a rivalry by enhancing the books of those rival stallions.

This will not apply to Rocknroll Hanover, as his final crop numbering just 44 are now 2-year-olds and there will be no more. Thus his daughters will be not in competition with "the old man" so to speak.

So far the most prominent colt from a Rocknroll Hanover mare is Travel Playlist, the Art Major son from Village Madonna was syndicated by Blue Chip Bloodstock last year after a track record 1:49 3/5 at Vernon Downs as a 2-year-old. Travel Playlist will have qualified at Pocono by the time you read this.

Then there's Serious Filly (Seriously) and Pretty Boy Hill (Pretty Katherine), both by Somebeachsomewhere, which could be the forerunner of a budding golden cross that of "Beach" on a Rocknroll mare. Tony Alagna unveiled another of those last week in Highlandbeachycove, a "Beach" from Rockin Highland, and we'll see how he does Friday at the Meadowlands.

Rocknroll Hanover is gone but his legacy continues...

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Examining the fallacy of guaranteed pools

By Darin Zoccali

Guaranteed pools have become one of the major marketing tools within horse racing, with the intent being to attract more handle in specific pools, usually multi-race exotic wagers. But, how valuable are they and are the racetracks being hypocritical in their practice?

A guaranteed pool is presented to the betting public with two features that are keys to its selling point. First, it offers the promise of a pool with high volume handle, which in turn, can produce higher payouts. Secondly, if the pool doesn't reach its guarantee, the racetrack has to make up the difference between what was actually bet and the guarantee. This is often promoted as "free money."

By adding money to a pool to reach a guarantee, the racetrack is essentially greatly reducing the takeout rate for that pool. For example, if a pool is guaranteed at \$50,000 with a 15-percent takeout rate and only receives \$45,000, the track must put an additional \$5,000 into the pool. The pool then is made whole with \$5,000 of money that was never bet, effectively reducing the takeout from 15-percent to five-percent. Therefore, racetracks promote the potential for missing a guarantee, thus reducing the takeout rate, but they refuse to lower takeout rates on other wagers.

Another interesting question is, why promote the guarantee when the average pool will always be higher than said guarantee? If it wasn't wouldn't the guarantee be lowered?

What is a better marketing tool, advertising a pool that is guaranteed at \$50,000 or advertising a pool with an average handle of \$66,000? Call me crazy, but advertising the bigger number will be more attractive to those wagering into the pool.

The latest fad that has emerged is the "instant guarantee." This is the guaranteeing of a pool that is being fueled by a carryover. Bottom line, this is completely unnecessary. A carryover sells itself. Interestingly enough, for the same reason a missed guarantee has appeal, the effective takeout is lowered. Again, the concept of "free money" is presented. It is ironic that two of the biggest tools racetracks are using, guarantees and instant guarantees, center around the idea of selling the potential of a lower effective-takeout. Yet again, racetracks refuse to lower takeout rates out of fear that it won't fuel enough handle to offset the lower retention percentage. But no racetrack would debate the fact that a carryover creates an increase in handle.

Harness racing has definitely become "guarantee happy," and while guaranteed pools exists in thoroughbred racing, many bettors don't know how much the guarantee is on Belmont Park's late pick four, for example. They clearly don't view the guarantee the same

way that harness racing views the guarantee.

Furthermore, does the difference between a \$40,000 guarantee and a \$50,000 guarantee really generate that much difference in terms of handle? Has anyone ever done a study or analysis to this point? We spend a lot of time when it comes to guaranteed pools and discussing their benefits, but the discussion revolves around opinion, not necessarily facts.

I submit the following theory: guaranteed pools are not a proactive tool, but rather a reactive one. For the most part, racetracks do not create wagers and slap bold guarantees on their pools with only the hope the guarantee will be reached. In contrast, they do one of two things. They either create a pool without a guarantee or with a very reasonable guarantee. From there, the racetrack will track the pool's handle and/or growth and then raise the guarantee based on the numbers they see. Hence why I maintain guaranteed pools are reactionary. Can we really refer to this process as a marketing tool when the players are establishing the market and the racetracks are just reacting by telling the players what they already know?

There is really one time and one time only that a pool really thrives by itself and that is when it is truly unique. But now, every track has guaranteed pools; every track has pick fours and pick fives and jackpot super high-fives. Now, if you don't like the pick five sequence at The Meadowlands, you can handicap the pick five at Mohawk and vice versa. As a reaction to that, for the most part, guaranteed pools on these wagers decreased more than they have increased because money is being spread thin.

For purposes of full disclosure, I learned this the hard way. On Hambletonian Day 2015, I overestimated the power of that day and implemented one-too-many guaranteed pools, and thus two of the five pools did not reach their guarantee. That mistake taught me something about how significant, or insignificant guaranteed pools have become.

My suggestion to racetracks, if you have a pool that averages \$24,000, don't promote the pool as a \$10,000 guarantee, promote it as a pool that averages \$24,000. If an S.A.T. math tutor has seen his or her students produce and average S.A.T. math score of 650, should she promote the average score of 650 to gain parents interest and trust, or guarantee a 550? It's the same concept.

Furthermore, forget about these "instant guarantees." Promote the carryover because the carryover will sell itself. Maybe then racetracks will begin to understand the connection between a carryover and an effective lower-takeout and can begin to apply it to other wagers as well. When that occurs, this business can start to show some real growth.

My *thestable.ca* pacing filly is progressing nicely



EDITOR'S EYE

By Derick Gwerner

A bit more than a month ago I wrote about *thestable.ca* and my venture into fractional ownership via the pacing filly Ohello Blue Chip. May is always an exciting month when it comes to 2-year-olds and it seemed like a great time for an update.

Ohello Blue Chip trained on Wednesday (May 18) and put in a solid mile. She posted fractions of 33, 1:04, 1:34 and 2:02 1/5 during her workout. According to all reports from trainer and *thestable.ca* founder, Anthony MacDonald, she is doing great as she prepares for a likely qualifying debut on June 11.

"She is progressing better than I would have hoped," MacDonald wrote via email.

"That is huge mile," he said in reference to the training effort. "She did it quite easy, also."

While it isn't much fun during the period of time while I await her first trip to the track, I have to give credit to MacDonald for keeping me updated on Ohello Blue Chip's status.

I can't wait to see her qualify and can only hope she has some modest success on the track.

The results are in

If you are looking to get quick results as the races happen and don't want to log in to your ADW (or don't have one), be sure to check out our new racing results section.

The new results area is the latest improvement to the DRF Harness site as we continue our quest to provide the most complete one-stop experience for harness racing.

Just a few months ago we launched this newsletter and we also added free Harness Eye past performances and weekly handicapping videos. We are always looking to make tweaks and enhancements to ensure that your experience on DRF Harness is perfect.

With stakes season just kicking off, you'll want to pay close attention to DRF Harness Live as we will live stream races from many of the top races this year as well as providing real-time updates and analysis.

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