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INDUSTRY OPINION

The Harness Racing Kentucky Derby

By **Darin Zoccali**

Right around this time every year, I usually read at least one article that outlines all of the things harness racing can learn from the Kentucky Derby. The article ultimately poses the question, why can't harness racing have an event like the Kentucky Derby? To be fair, this is like the Arena Football League asking why they can't have an event like the Super Bowl.

In other words, one of the major issues I have found within harness racing is a lack of consensus as to what the sport is and what the sport should or could be. The Kentucky Derby, like the Super Bowl, is a brand, built up over decades of growth. While the Kentucky Derby has always been a part of "Americana" and an extremely popular event, what it has grown into in the 21st Century is an event that appears on people's "bucket lists." In other words, a person wants to say, "I have been to a Kentucky Derby," regardless of their involvement or passion for horse racing.

But the Kentucky Derby is much more than a race. It's a near week-long event. In addition to almost 20 hours of television coverage throughout the course of the week (people in harness racing argue over funding a broadcast for one race), there are galas and banquets that not only attract racing enthusiasts from around the world but "A-List" celebrities as well. This is because Churchill Downs has successfully identified the fact that there are two ways to market the Kentucky Derby, both as a horse race for gamblers and as a posh and trendy event for those who just want the experience of being at the Kentucky Derby. Ironically, being at the Kentucky Derby is

not exactly a gambler's dream. Unless you are fortunate enough to be rubbing elbows with Tom Brady in The Mansion high atop the Churchill Downs clubhouse, you are likely rubbing elbows repeatedly with 170,000 fans and any attempt at real handicapping is a near impossibility.

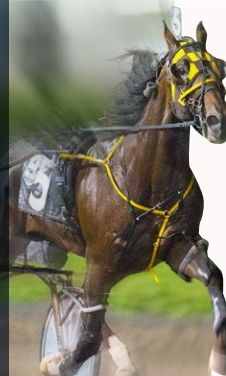
Despite the challenges presented to the gambler on Derby Day, Churchill Downs has developed the Kentucky Derby brand in such a way that the biggest of celebrities want to attend, not just the race, but the dinners, the parties, etc. These different events in the days and nights leading up to the Derby have a list of corporate sponsors longer than the Yellow Pages.

The development of this brand has taken nearly a generation and while harness racing has the foundation and potential in certain events like the Little Brown Jug and The Hambletonian, it is not something that can be developed overnight. Considering "The Jug" takes place at an Ohio county fair, any "Derby aspirations," are better served on an event with more commercial and metropolitan appeal, like The Hambletonian.

Obviously, even in the original Meadowlands grandstand, squeezing over 50,000 people in that facility was difficult, let alone 170,000. But before focusing on attendance, in order to create an event that can develop into a brand, a major investment needs to be made into the event itself. Two separate marketing teams should be formed, one to focus on promoting the racing and the other to focus on promoting the event, and these teams should exist in the harness racing industry and not

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Can the Hambletonian be transformed into a Derby-type event?

left to just the racetrack hosting the event. I won't begin to pretend to know how best to promote the event, but I know it needs to be something that is posh and trendy and reaches well outside the boundaries of horse racing.

The irony lies in the fact that people within harness racing are looking to grow one of its races into a Derby-type event, but simultaneously voice opposition to contesting the Breeders Crown over two nights when it is held in the New York City metropolitan area.

Therefore, in harness racing, you have those who want to see a race like the Hambletonian turned into an event like the Kentucky Derby, and you have those who don't want to spend any money on nationally-televised races, social media or developing events like the Breeders Crown into a multi-day event.

My advice to harness racing is that every-

one within the industry needs to agree on what they want harness racing to be. Do they want it to be able to play host to massive events that go well beyond racing or are they content with the current level of national and international exposure?

There aren't many states where both thoroughbred and standardbred racing are equal in popularity. In Europe, while France has the Prix d'Amerique, thoroughbred racing is still king. In Sweden, while thoroughbred racing exists, standardbred racing is far more popular.

Using the Hambletonian as an example, and make no mistake, I love The Hambletonian, I've loved it since I was five years old. It is a great day and I will be there again this year. But if there is a consensus within the industry that The Hambletonian needs to become a national brand and become a near week-long event, The Hambletonian Society and The Meadowlands need industry support

to do just that.

On the racing side, The Hambletonian is in a very difficult spot in that it is up against Saratoga on Whitney Day, which is the second biggest day of the Saratoga meet. This really hurts on an export level, because Hambletonian Day at The Meadowlands has crossover appeal to thoroughbred players. Furthermore, The Hambletonian tends to be contested right at the apex of the Saratoga program, which is also shown on a national broadcast.

On the event side, the industry needs to support The Hambletonian financially in turning it from a great day into four or five great days. Again, I rely on the experts in brand marketing to determine just what that entails, but I do know that there needs to be an industry consensus in what events like The Hambletonian and The Breeders Crown should be, because nobody in thoroughbred racing is debating what the Kentucky Derby should be.

Dime A Dance headlines Lismore six-pack for Ron Burke

By Jay Bergman

For a stable that generally monopolizes the entry box, it's almost strange to see trainer Ron Burke with but one horse entered in the two sophomore pacing stakes at Yonkers on Saturday night. New York Sire Stakes champion Dime A Dance will go it solo in the \$100,000 Lismore for 3-year-old pacing fillies.

"I kind of wish they had an elimination last week," said Burke of the Lismore. "She could have used the race but we trained her back good."

Dime A Dance has won her last two starts at Yonkers but both came during her 2-year-old campaign. The daughter of Roll With Joe captured the \$225,000 New York Sire Stakes final at Yonkers last September, winning from post seven in a 1:54 1/5 clocking. She's shown ability on all sized tracks while winning in the New York Sire Stakes events, but Burke likes her just fine on the half-mile tracks.

On Saturday Dime A Dance will face a field of six with two rivals coming from trainer Linda Toscano's solid group of pacing fillies.

Soft Idea managed to get a New York Sire Stakes victory in on Monday at Monticello with her connections taking advantage of eliminations being unnecessary last week for the Lismore. A daughter of American Ideal, Soft Idea won half of her starts as a freshman but finished third in the New York Sire Stakes final with the big money on the line.

Soft Idea scored in 1:55 2/5 from the rail at Monticello but may encounter a little more road trouble starting from post six in the Lismore.

Toscano's other filly is Cut And Paste, a daughter of Well Said. Cut And Paste attempted to advance in the Miss Pennsylvania but failed to reach the final at Pocono on April 30. She did come back with a solid placing in an overnight event setting her up for the Lismore. Cut And Paste drew the pole



JELENA GERGA

Dime A Dance won both of her starts at Yonkers Raceway in 2015 as a 2-year-old.

position.

Trainer Nik Drennan sends out a filly with the most victories in 2016 but with limited stakes experience. The \$24,000 yearling purchase Kryptos has won seven of eight starts this season. Included in those victories were scores in a division of the Petticoat at Yonkers as well as the Petticoat consolation on March 28. More recently the daughter of Somebeachsomewhere has been honing her skills at Harrah's Philadelphia with back-to-back scores including a 1:52 4/5 career best mile posted on April 22. Kryptos has not raced in three weeks but drew post two for the Lismore with Jordan Stratton in the bike for the first time.

Rock Me Baby showed high class potential as a 2-year-old and makes her season's debut in the Lismore. The New York-bred daughter of Rock N Roll Heaven drew post five with Hall of Famer John Campbell coming to Westchester County for the driving assignment. Last fall Rock Me Baby captured a division of the International Stallion Stakes at The Red Mile in 1:53, a career best. Staffan Lind has quali-

fied Rock Me Baby twice for her sophomore debut, the last a third-place finish behind divisional leader Pure Country.

Apple Bottom Jeans rounds out the field from post three with Montrell Teague guiding the homebred filly for trainer Kevin Switzer. Apple Bottom Jeans, a Delaware-bred, has prepped with a qualifier over the half-mile track at Harrington.

While Dime A Dance is listed as the morning line choice on Saturday, Burke appeared a bit reserved about what to expect from her this week.

"I think these are the kind she can go with," said Burke, referring to a field that may have more half-mile track firepower than Grand Circuit potential.

The feature on Saturday's Yonkers program is the \$300,000 Art Rooney final carded as race six. Elimination winner Missile J landed post eight and will be favored as part of an entry that includes Artmagic.

The Lismore is race four of 12 on the Saturday evening Yonkers program with a first post time of 7:10 p.m.

Warm weather handicapping tips for harness racing wagering

By Bob Pandolfo

With the warmer weather settling in, you have to make some adjustments in your handicapping. Here are some tips on things to watch for during the long warm-weather meets, which can last from spring until fall.

Stakes season is upon us at **The Meadowlands**, which is great. Soon we'll be handicapping the top 3-year-olds in major stakes events. But this is also a time of year to plant seeds for the future. Many of the most talented 2-year-olds will make their debut at the Meadowlands. I watch all of the baby races and make notes on young horses that I think may develop into something special.

In terms of the track bias, in the past couple of weeks, I've already noticed that some of the drivers are not driving aggressively enough. Although the Meadowlands is not as speed favoring as most harness tracks, it can become more speed favoring in warmer weather. The Meadowlands winter meet, which features 9 or 10 horse fields of cheaper horses competing on cold, windy nights, produces wide open races.

But between the warmer weather and classier horses, it's not that easy to come from behind. The past two weeks I've noticed several horses that were stuck behind weak cover on the final turn but the driver didn't move three wide at the three quarters. This strategy is not unusual on one mile tracks because the driver is waiting for the long stretch to make his move. However, while that strategy works well on cold nights, it's not that effective on warm nights. When George Brennan was the leading driver at the Meadowlands, he often gunned his horse three wide on the final turn and he won a lot of races that way. When drivers wait behind struggling cover this time of the year and then rally strongly in the stretch to finish second or third, it almost looks like they're not that concerned with winning the race. But I doubt that's the case. I think they're just using a strategy that works better during

the winter. Of course, if they went three wide, it may not have made any difference. But it looks better to the bettors. One serious bettor I know complained to me about this. I agreed with him.

This brings up the question, should you bet any closers in the summer? Let's put it this way, if you bet on horses that leave the gate or are in a position to go first over, you're going to cash more tickets.

That is unless you're betting **Hawthorne**. The Chicago area one mile track with the long stretch is racing again and I think I can safely say that Hawthorne is the least speed favoring harness track in the country. At Hawthorne, you can handicap for ability. Find the fastest and fittest horses.

This is pretty much true for **Hoosier Park**, a 7/8's track, as well. Hoosier is a bit more speed friendly than Hawthorne, but compared to most harness tracks, Hoosier is a closer's track. At both Hoosier and Hawthorne, you have to make sure that you're betting on horses that can pass horses in the final quarter. You can bet closers because third over is not a bad trip at these tracks.

Harrah's Philadelphia is a 5/8's track with first-rate horses and drivers. It's a track that favors horses that leave the gate, quarter move or go first over. Although they have the slanted starting gate, posts 8 and 9 are tough spots. Like most three and four turn tracks, posts 1 through 5 are the best here. If you're thinking of betting a horse from posts 6, 7, 8, or 9, here is my recommendation: Only bet the horse if you think it's very likely to leave. And make sure you have an aggressive driver that leaves a lot. You don't want to be third over at any of these speed favoring tracks, especially when the weather heats up.

The Downs at Mohegan Sun Pocono isn't quite as speed favoring as some of the 5/8's tracks, but leavers have an advantage. I really like the track and the casino at Pocono. They have an outdoor patio with table seating, nice atmosphere, good horses

and drivers. Personally, of all of the three or four turn tracks that race this time of the year, I feel that there is more movement in the Pocono races. The drivers are aggressive and that makes for some exciting races.

Another point I want to make regarding closers, or outside posts. Let's use Pocono as an example. So far this year, posts 1 to 5 are winning at similar rates, about 15% for each. Posts 6 and 7 are at 9%. Post 8 is winning at 5% and post 9 at 6%.

Obviously, if you bet posts 6 through 9, you're chances of cashing a ticket go down. And if you bet a horse from those posts that is unlikely to leave the gate, your chances of cashing are even lower.

The way to leverage this is through the odds board. Posts 6 and 7 win 6% less often than posts 1 through 5. The way I look at this mathematically, I would want about 60% higher odds on the same horse. For instance, say that a horse had post 4 and was 3-1 odds, and you felt that 3-1 was a good bet for that horse. If the same horse had post 7, I would want 50 to 60% more. Using dollar amount, if 3-1 paid \$8.00, 50% more would be \$12.00. If the horse has speed and an aggressive driver, I might be tempted to take the \$12.00, but \$13.00 or more would be a better bet. And, even at the higher odds, I still wouldn't bet the horse unless I felt that there was a good chance the horse would leave the gate.

With posts 8 and 9, they're winning about 10% less than posts 1 through 5. I would want at least 100% higher odds. And, from those two posts, I would have to strongly feel that the horse is leaving. Also, from the low percentage posts, I need a top driver to bet from those posts. On a 5/8s track, from post 9, I'd consider betting a horse if the driver was someone like a Tim Tetrick, Yannick Gingras, George Napolitano Jr., or Jason Barlett. I think you get my point. Enjoy the great harness racing during the prime time of the year!

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Kelley's Obrigado seeks Maxie Lee upset at Philadelphia

By Jay Bergman

Trainer Paul Kelley had reason to be excited for his top trotter Obrigado, who is entered Sunday in the Maxie Lee Invitational at Harrah's Philadelphia.

"I can't believe he drew the rail," said Kelley.

While trainers always appreciate when the post odds tilt in their favor, it was easy to understand the relief in Kelley's voice when speaking of Obrigado.

Since the beginning of 2014, Obrigado has raced 42 times and during that same time frame he has landed either posts one or two on exactly five occasions. The law of averages had to kick in at some point and apparently it did for the \$200,000 event.

Kelley knows full well that post position is just one issue in a long season and that his main job is to get Obrigado to be at his best. Though the Lee is the first of what will be many stakes appearances, Kelley would like to find his 6-year-old in a specific event come October.

"I'd really like to see him in the International," said Kelley. "It's the perfect race for him at one and one quarter miles. He's a lazy kind of horse but he keeps on going and doesn't know the end of a mile."

The key to any top trotter is to keep them sound and happy. Kelley said that over the winter while bringing his horse back that everything was on schedule. A key issue has been the shoeing and he's made an attempt to lighten up his front shoes.

"Last year he got a little funky gaited at times. His feet were stinging him," said Kelley.

"He won at Vernon with flip flops but we needed to get him something a little lighter than that up front," said Kelley, who confirmed that Obrigado will be shod with what he termed a "razor" shoe which is thinner than the flip flops.

Much of the shoeing change was a result of Obrigado's difficulties last August at The Meadowlands where he got a bit fumbly going into the first turn of the Cashman, perhaps costing him a victory in that prestigious stakes. Kelley went back to the drawing board and at years end he felt comfortable that Obrigado was on the right path to excel.

After closing out the season with a solid second in the TVG final at The Meadowlands, Obrigado has returned this year with three solid performances. His debut in the Mack Lobell Elitlopp Playoff had him placed third after coming from way off the pace. A trip the following week to Yonkers was more in keeping with the horse's noted style as he marched up without cover and then wore down his rivals in a 1:54 2/5 clocking, defeating the best in class over the half-mile track.

Kelley was very happy with his last race, a second-place finish trotting home in 26 2/5 while individually timed in 1:51, which would have been a career best for him.

In the Lee on Sunday Obrigado will have



DERICK GWINNER

Obrigado will start from post 1 in the \$200,000 Maxie Lee at 5-1 on the morning line.

regular pilot Mark MacDonald in tow and the two have grown together to an elite level. The field is a solid one with JL Cruze (post 4), Bee A Magician (post 7) and last week's Graduate upset winner Maestro Blue Chip (post 8) in the group.

Kelley feels his horse can go with all of the top ones but at the same time respects the competition.

"I think Resolve and Bee A Magician are a little better than he is but I think he can go with any of them," said Kelley.

Resolve elected to race in the Elitlopp on Sunday in Sweden while Bee A Magician remained stateside.

"They invited me to race in an Invitational at Solvalla on Elitlopp Day which is an honor," said Kelley. "I just want to do right by the horse and I think the shipping may have cost him."

Sunday's contest will be tough enough for Obrigado despite the post advantage. JL Cruze has already won four of his five starts this season including a 1:53 victory at Harrah's Philadelphia on May 19.

Shake It Cerry is winless in her three starts as a 5-year-old but has to be given respect especially following her 1:52 4/5 qualifying victory at The Meadowlands last Saturday. David Miller will try to help her gain winning form from post six.

Bee A Magician has looked every bit as imposing this year as she did as a 3-year-old back in 2013, her Horse of the Year and undefeated campaign. Second but placed first in the Mack Lobell at The Meadowlands, the Nifty Norman trainee has the capacity to rough it and still get the job done.

With 10 wins in 10 starts this year, even Maestro Blue Chip can't be counted out of the Lee Invitational despite landing post eight.

Il Sogno Dream, a 1:50 2/5 winner at The Red Mile last year, can't be dismissed despite making just his first start in 2016. Trainer Chris Beaver has been known for

having his horses sharp at first asking and this son of Cantab Hall will need to be in this elite group.

According to Kelley, Obrigado is staked to everything this year as would be expected.

The trainer is currently finishing off the final preparations for the upcoming 2-year-old stakes season. He trains over a small track just a few miles from Saratoga but when it comes to getting his freshman ready he journeys to Vernon Downs.

"I'm taking eight of them to Vernon tomorrow (Wednesday) for a training session," said Kelley. While it's certainly a bit premature to speculate just how well some of these youngsters will turn out, Kelley did have glowing praise for a pair of colts he's currently training, one eligible in New York and the other in New Jersey.

"I think they'll be ready to baby race in a couple of weeks," said Kelley.

The trotting season is just getting underway and Paul Kelley's horses are primed to have a major impact.

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