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INDUSTRY VIEW

Breaking down a takeout reduction plan

By **Darin Zoccali**

Granted, at 32 years old, I am still one of the younger people working within the racing industry. But I have been a gambler, a fan, an oddsmaker/handicapper and a racing executive, so I have been around.

As we have seen in several states, and as I have discussed in the past, there is a legitimate threat to racetracks in that they could eventually lose the revenue they receive from the casino affiliated with the track.

In other words, racetracks need to optimize handle, revenue and return to players.

Many people are shouting at the top of their lungs that takeout rates need to be lowered while others are shouting equally as loud that it should not. But very few have ever put forth a specific plan while outlining what has to happen for a lower-takeout plan to work in harness racing.

First, let us assume, for purposes of keeping things simple, that a standardbred race-track handles \$100 million over the course of the year. Furthermore, let's assume that \$90 million is handled through export signals while \$10 million is bet on-track.

If the blended takeout rate for the track is 20-percent and the blended export rate is 4-percent, that would mean that the track is receiving \$2 million in revenue for the on-track wagers (\$10 Million at 20%) and \$3.6 Million in revenue for export wagering (\$90 Million at 4%), for a total revenue of \$5.6 Million. These figures are before taxes and regulatory fees.

Simultaneously, assuming a 20-percent blended takeout rate, of the \$100 Million wagered, \$80 Million is paid back out to the players in the form of winning wagers.

If takeout was cut in half, so that the blended

rate became 10-percent, the racetrack would have to reduce its signal fee to those sites importing the signal to help sell the idea of lowering takeout. Let's assume that the export rate now blends at 2.5% instead of 4%.

Applying the same 90/10 split on export and live handle, the live handle at \$10 Million, a 10-percent takeout rate, would produce \$1 Million in revenue and the export handle of \$90 Million at 2.5% would produce \$2.25 Million in revenue. Therefore, total revenue, if handle remained the same, would become \$3.25 Million instead of \$5.6 Million.

So what has to happen to make up that difference? Handle has to go up, substantially in fact.

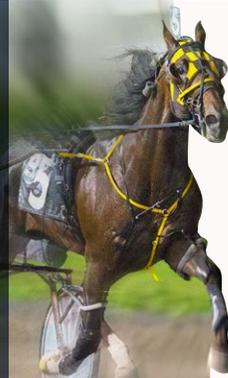
First and foremost, by lowering takeout to 10-percent and paying out \$90 Million instead of \$80 Million, there is an extra \$10 Million for players to churn and for the most part, all of that \$10 Million is going to go back through the windows. Here is where the opponents of lowering takeout fail to understand how this cycle of increased handle continues. Of that additional \$10 Million, \$9 Million is paid out and put back through the windows and of that \$9 Million that is re-invested, \$8.1 Million is paid out and of that \$8.1 Million that is re-invested, \$7.3 Million is bet back through the windows and on and on.

Now, in order to offset the initial revenue loss by lowering takeout, assuming the \$100 Million scenario above, handle would have to go from \$100 Million to \$175 Million per year, an increase of \$75 Million. (Live Handle of \$17.5 Million producing \$1.75 Million in revenue and Export Handle of \$157.5 Million producing \$3.94 Million in revenue, a total of

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The numbers supporting a takeout reduction are indisputable

\$5.7 Million in revenue). But if you continue the churn cycle listed above, you reach \$40 Million in the first five churn cycles. Obviously the number of race dates and actual races determines how long that takes, but \$75 Million as shown above is far from unattainable.

Even in the scenario where there is a slight revenue shortfall in the first year of operation, the churn cycles will continue year-in and year-out and over the next two, five, 10 or 20 years, revenue will continuously grow.

On the thoroughbred side of the aisle, tracks are beginning to take the approach of lowering takeout. Kentucky Downs was the first and the results were excellent, including a 69-percent increase in all-sources handle according to an article on Brisnet.com.

This year, Canterbury Park has taken a proactive approach in lowering takeout and the early returns are strong as well (see <http://www.brisnet.com/cgi-bin/editorial/article.cgi?id=39917>).

Tioga Downs lowered takeout a few years ago, but their takeout rates are only permitted to be lowered so much due to regulatory reasons in New York, which stunts the growth potential of such a concept.

With all of this information, what is stopping a standardbred racetrack from taking a bold stand, particularly a racetrack that has casino revenue subsidizing its purse account, where any perceived risk is minimized? The fact that tracks like Harrah's Philadelphia and Pocono Downs are charging takeout rates in the mid-20 percent range and some rates approaching and hitting 30 percent is simply outrageous. The bottom line is that a

horseplayer cannot win over a long period of time betting into those types of takeout rates.

The first standardbred racetrack to lower its takeout rate to 10% across the board and market the fact that they are doing so, will see handle grow through churn, will capture handle from other racetracks that refuse to do so and will have thoroughbred crossover appeal with the players who understand margins, rebates and the impact of a lower effective takeout.

We can argue back and forth about whether or not horse racing has any new money coming in, but these numbers above are indisputable and are just simple math. The more money you put into a bettor's pocket, the more they bet, especially when they don't even realize that they have more money than they would have if takeout were higher.

That's my plan and I'm sticking to it.

Muscle Up The Goal looks to extend 2016 unbeaten streak in Charlie Hill

By Ken Weingartner

Trainer Chris Beaver had high hopes for Muscle Up The Goal when the trotter was a 2-year-old, but a tendon injury limited the horse to only three starts.

Now at age 4, Muscle Up The Goal is putting together the kind of performances that Beaver envisioned all along. Maybe even better.

Muscle Up The Goal, who will have Aaron Merriman in the sulky, is the 5-2 morning line favorite in Saturday's \$210,000 Charlie Hill Memorial for older trotters at Scioto Downs. The stallion has won all three of his starts this season and heads to the Hill off a track-record 1:52 performance at The Meadows on June 1. He also trotted the fastest mile ever for a 4-year-old male trotter on a half-mile oval, winning in 1:52 3/5 on May 21 at Northfield Park.

For his career, Muscle Up The Goal has won eight of 22 races and earned \$234,616 for owner Synerco Ventures.

"I think he was getting good toward the end of last year," Beaver said. "We put him on Lasix and he was getting sounder. We sent him down to Florida and he grew up and looked real good when he came back. He's just been awesome since he started back. He's just come into real good form."

Muscle Up The Goal is a son of Muscle Mass out of the mare Tags Goal. The horse sold for \$30,000 at the 2013 Standardbred Horse Sale. As a 2-year-old, Muscle Up The Goal won twice on the Ontario Sire Stakes circuit before being sidelined by his injury.

"He was a spectacular 2-year-old," Beaver said. "He was hit or miss most of last year, but he's gotten good now. He's really fast. I'm a little surprised at what he's done this year, but I'd be surprised by any horse that's been able to do the kinds of things he's done so far.

"They tried to out-leave him at Northfield and he cleared them before he was out of the turn, from the (seven) hole. He's had the



CHRIS GOODEN PHOTO

Muscle Up The Goal has won his three 2016 starts by a combined 15-1/4 lengths.

outside every time he's raced and he's just gone to the front like it's no problem at all. And at the end of the mile he's gone a pretty good quarter too. It looks like he should have a good year."

Muscle Up The Goal was eligible to the Hill Memorial, but his connections paid a \$10,000 supplement fee to ensure the horse was part of the 10-horse field, which was assembled based on career earnings.

Beaver also will send out Il Sogno Dream in the Hill Memorial. The 5-year-old stallion is a multiple stakes winner and heads to the event off a second-place finish in the Maxie Lee Memorial on May 29 in his seasonal

debut. Il Sogno Dream, who has won 17 of 52 career races and earned \$789,577, is 5-1 on the morning line. Ronnie Wrenn Jr. is the driver.

The Hill field also includes Maxie Lee winner Obrigado, 2015 John Cashman Memorial winner Flanagan Memory, and 2014 International Trot Preview champ Natural Herbie. The remainder of the group is Southwind Pepino, Homicide Hunter, Gural Hanover, DW's NY Yank, and Opening Night.

Post time for the 15-race Saturday program at Scioto is 6:30 p.m.

-Courtesy of Harness Racing Communications, a division of the U.S. Trotting Association. For more information, please visit www.ustrotting.com

Mel Mara is finally making his mark as an older pacer

By Jay Bergman

Wouldn't it be great if we could tell every owner of a racehorse that suffered a broken bone that all you need to do is give it time to heal?

Certainly after last Saturday's 1:47 victory by Mel Mara at The Meadowslands, there would be living proof that horses can recover from broken coffin bones and return to their former selves.

Justification for time to heal is at the core of the issue and economic reality is why so few horses have the opportunity to come back. In the case of Mel Mara, a now 7-year-old son of Lis Mara, you have a horse that was gifted enough to perhaps race in the greatest crop of 3-year-olds this sport has known. The depth and talent of that group made it difficult even for a horse of this incredible talent to stand out.

In 2012, Mel Mara did beat Sweet Lou on the Red Mile surface fair and square. He showed incredibly high speed, but perhaps due to the competition or other issues, was generally a one-run type horse when it came to elite competition.

His return to the races this January had to be marked with trepidation. Missing 15 months is a long time and often time away doesn't lead to impressive results. In fact, Mel Mara's early returns when in the hands of his long-time trainer Tony Alagna were not of the same caliber one might have expected during his 2 and 3-year-old campaigns. Facing lower level conditioned horses, Mel Mara was in the group but not above the group.

Inevitably a transaction needed to take place and the outcome was that Robert Cooper and Jerry and Theresa Silva would buy the aged horse and hand him over to new trainer Dylan Davis.

"The owners bought the horse and gave him to me," said Davis of the transaction. "An owner of mine, Howard Taylor, recommended me." Davis had trained just one horse for the owners by the name of Go Collect N and Mel Mara was the second.

"I have a stable based at Hoosier Park," said Davis. "When they gave me the horse I suggested that he might be a good fit to race out there. They race an Invitational, an Open and an Open II."

The bar may have been set low, but after a few starts Davis is looking at the bigger picture.

"I thought he could pace in (1) :48," said Davis. "I was surprised the other night when he paced 26 3/5 third quarter and 25 4/5 coming home."

The 1:47 clocking was just a fifth off the world record, but perhaps more impressive was the higher level of competition the horse has now beaten. On May 14 he came within a neck of defeating Always B Miki, last year's Aged Breeders Crown champion. On that night driver Corey Callahan raced him from off the pace while Always B Miki cut a rated pace and appeared to have the champion at



NIGELSOULTPHOTO.COM

Mel Mara beating Sweet Lou in 2012 at The Red Mile.

his mercy. In the deep stretch Always B Miki fought back to prevail.

Ironically the tables were turned this past Saturday when Mel Mara hit the front end and Always B Miki was taken back to trail in the field of just six. Always B Miki was forced to come without cover and never got close to Mel Mara, perhaps feeling the sting of the 52 2/5 final half.

"We're going to have to look for some Invitationals," said Davis. "We've talked about perhaps supplementing him as well."

Davis believes much of the work in returning Mel Mara to this level was done before he arrived in his stable.

"He had seven starts before we got him," said Davis. "Tony (Alagna) did a great job in bringing him back."

The trainer believes that any horse returning from such a long absence needs more than a couple of starts to come close to regaining their former self.

"I've put him on my program, which is a lot of jogging and a lot of swimming," said Davis, with a mindset to keep the horse fit and happy.

"He's a spectacular looking horse. He's big and strong," said Davis.

In a year where we've already seen an abundance of exceptional talent in the aged pacing rankings, Mel Mara has risen to the elite level. He was previously fourth to Wiggle It Jiggle it in the Dorothy Mullin at Harrah's Philadelphia, where he essentially had no chance of gaining ground into a wicked last half mile.

For Davis, who also operates a success-

ful stable in Delaware and totals the horses under his care at 45, Mel Mara is the kind of horse that gets you noticed. That's surprising considering how well another horse in his stable has done over the last 15 months.

Fearless Diablo, an 8-year-old son of Art Major, has been with Davis since March of 2012. He was a horse with wicked speed but obviously lacking in soundness.

After starting just 17 times in 2013-14 combined, Fearless Diablo had a career year in 2015, racing 31 times with 12 wins and 7 seconds. He managed to rack up earnings in excess of \$144,000 in the process.

This year Fearless Diablo has returned again to race with Invitational performers at Hoosier Park and has already earned \$45,000 in just seven starts.

Davis came up through the ranks like many in this industry and that is through family. His step-brother is Kevin Lare and step-father is John "Tink" Lare.

Racing has a way of giving horses a second and third chance to achieve stardom. Maybe new surroundings for Mel Mara have been the difference. At the same time, it's also possible that he was racing as well as a horse could as a 3-year-old and just had the disadvantage of being born in the wrong year.

A Rocknroll Dance, Pet Rock, Sweet Lou, Bolt The Duer, Thinking Out Loud, Warrawee Needy and an also-ran named State Treasurer are names that can overshadow a horse with the talent of Mel Mara.

In 2016 he'll have to deal with a few new great ones, but a sound Mel Mara should be heard from.

Wings Of Royalty seeks rebound in leg 3 of Graduate at Tioga

By Jay Bergman

The Graduate series moves into its third and final preliminary leg this Sunday afternoon at Tioga Downs and trainer George Ducharme is hoping that his 4-year-old Wings Of Royalty will bounce back from a less than solid effort last Saturday at Mohawk.

"He didn't grab the track," said Ducharme. "I should have changed his shoes before going to Mohawk. He was great at The Meadowlands."

Wings Of Royalty drew post two in the \$75,000 Graduate leg and will return to Corey Callahan in the sulky. It's an extraordinary field that includes second leg winner Musical Rhythm and first round 30-1 upsetter Maestro Blue Chip.

"He has definitely matured this year. He's bigger and stronger and his attitude is a lot better," said Ducharme. "It's been a pleasant surprise."

Wings Of Royalty has won two of his four starts, including a career best 1:51 4/5 mile in an overnight at The Meadowlands. On that occasion, the son of R C Royalty drove by last year's Hambletonian winner Pinkman in the final strides after racing on the inside throughout the mile.

"We staked him to mostly the 4-year-old races," said Ducharme, with an understanding that it might be too soon to pit the former New York Sire Stakes star against the best in North America.

While Wings Of Royalty does have a good post, Ducharme knows what he's up against.

"Musical Rhythm and Maestro Blue Chip have been very impressive this year," Ducharme said, "And Pinkman just won a race in Sweden."

Musical Rhythm regained his winning form, putting his rivals to sleep in last week's Mohawk leg. The Benoit Baillargeon-trained son of Cantab Hall has won 10 of 11 starts this year with the lone defeat coming in the Meadowlands Graduate leg.

Maestro Blue Chip landed the eight-hole, but that may not be enough to stop him. A son of Credit Winner, Maestro Blue Chip surprised a solid group with a 1:51 3/5 career best effort in capturing the opening round of the Graduate on May 21 at The Meadowlands. Trained by Jo Ann Looney-King, Maestro Blue Chip arrives at Tioga after a third-place finish against older foes in the Maxie Lee at Harrah's Philadelphia.

Pinkman managed to miss just one leg of the Graduate while winning an invitational at Solvalla on Elitlopp day. Driver Yannick Gingras will make a shorter trip to follow last year's champion this time around. Pinkman landed post six in the field of eight.

Crazshana has had his moments since joining the Jeff Bamond Jr. stable this year. The son of Crazy was sharp in a 1:51 3/5 effort in the first gathering of the Graduate and then showed solid trot finishing fourth in last week's leg after starting from post 10. David

Miller will guide Crazshana from post three.

Rounding out the field of eight will be Whataworkout (post 4) with Scott Zeron, Centurion ATM (post 5) with Ake Svanstedt, and Fashion Creditor (post 7) with Brett Miller listed to drive.

Preceding the Graduate Trot leg on Tioga's 15-race Sunday spectacular will be the \$75,000 Graduate for 4-year-old pacers. That division drew a solid field of 11 4-year-old pacers, with Wiggle It Jiggleit renewing his rivalry with Rockin Ron. The 2015 Horse of the Year landed post 4 with Montrell Teague in the bike in search of his 30th career victory. Rockin Ron and Yannick Gingras landed post two in the large field. The two recently met in the Dorothy Mullin Invitational at Harrah's Philadelphia, with Wiggle It Jiggleit pacing to victory in 1:47 3/5 over the five-eighths mile track.

This leg of the Graduate also attracted first leg upset winner Artistic Major. The son of Art Major will start from post 11 in the second tier for trainer Steve Elliott.

Dr. Ian Moore brings Rockin In Heaven back to the scene of his greatest triumph. Last year Rockin In Heaven captured the \$290,000 Empire Breeders Championship with a 1:50 mile over the Tioga strip. The New York-bred not only faces open company on Sunday, but drew the outside post nine with David Miller in the bike.

The Sunday card also features divisions of the New York Sire Stakes for 3-year-old filly pacers. First post is 1:30 p.m.

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LONG LIVE 'WIGGLE IT'

"Your column about Wiggle it (June 3) is exactly what I hoped would happen and shows 4yos that are good can compete. I hope he stays sound and glad he took a week off."

--Jeff Gural on Jay Bergman's article about the need to promote Wiggle It Jiggleit

GREAT OHIO RACING ARTICLE

"Nicely done, thanks to you and the DRF for the positive, upbeat article!"

--Renée Mancino on Keith Gisser's June 3 piece about the resurgence of Ohio racing

YOU'RE WELCOME, ANTHONY

"Thank you so much. That was an amazing article and couldn't have explained my feelings any better. Thank you. That brings tears to my eyes."

--Anthony Napolitano on the May 13 Bob Pandolfo piece about him and his brother, George

Have something to say? Contact Derick Givner at dgivner@drf.com