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INDUSTRY VIEW

Harness Racing still has plenty of potential

By **Darin Zoccali**

“Too bad, you missed the heyday of racing.”

If I had a nickel for every time I have heard that in the last 10 years or so. I can never tell if the person expressing that sentiment is genuine in what they are saying or if they are boasting that they did experience some of the best years of racing, and I didn't, according to them.

But like anything else, “the best years of racing,” is a relative concept. For certain, the massive crowds that used to be seen at tracks like Roosevelt Raceway or the early years of The Meadowlands are now just a distant memory. But, if you think about it, aside from the fact that we aren't seeing nearly as many people at the racetracks as we used to, what else about the modern racing product is so much worse-off than that of 50, 60 or 70 years ago?

For the first several generations of racing fans, if you wanted to bet on a horse race, you had to go to the racetrack. Many people will argue, this is when racing was at its finest as a spectator sport. If you view racing as a spectator sport, then you cannot argue with this notion. After all, in the early days of The Meadowlands, the Meadowlands Pace was contested during the week, the first edition was held on a Tuesday night and the next two editions on Thursday night. The thinking was that the crowd on a Saturday night already fills the grandstand to the rafters, so why not increase attendance and handle on a night that normally wouldn't see that type of crowd. In fact, many people forget that the Meadowlands Pace was not contested on a Saturday night until 1993. But I contend that racing is not a spectator sport, it is a sport centered on gambling, since it is the gambling dollars that drive the direction of the industry.

If you believe in my thinking, that horse racing is a gambling sport first and a spectator sport second, then you can argue that the best years of racing were not generations ago. If you are an avid horseplayer, only for the past 25-30 years or so could a person bet on a horse racing at a racetrack other than the one you were sitting in. Only for the past 15 years or so could a person wager on a horse race from the comfort of their own home. In the past five years, the decrepit facilities known as New York City OTB (who took more than five-percent of every winning ticket you had), have been shuttered and now many Off-Track Wagering facilities are first-class establishments with high-quality food and deluxe accommodations.

Sure, it was nice to see 50,000 packed into The Meadowlands or Roosevelt Raceway on a Wednesday night, but sports evolve and have to adapt to modern times. Now, I will be the first person to state that racing does not operate in the best interest of the horseplayer. The simulcast system is backwards and takeout rates are too high, but the foundation for potential exists.

I can now download the past performances (albeit at a cost) for any racetrack on any day in which entries have been drawn. I'm not limited to betting Pocono Downs if I am at Pocono Downs, unlike 50 years ago. I can peruse as many racetracks as I want and select whichever races I want to bet based on my opinion of which horses I like the most. This is an astute horseplayer's dream. Furthermore, I can wager on my PC, Laptop, iPad, Tablet, iPhone, etc. on any race I want. If it's pouring rain outside, I don't have to go anywhere to bet the amazing Grand Circuit card at The Red Mile, where it is 80 degrees and sunny.



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Missing the "heyday" of racing?

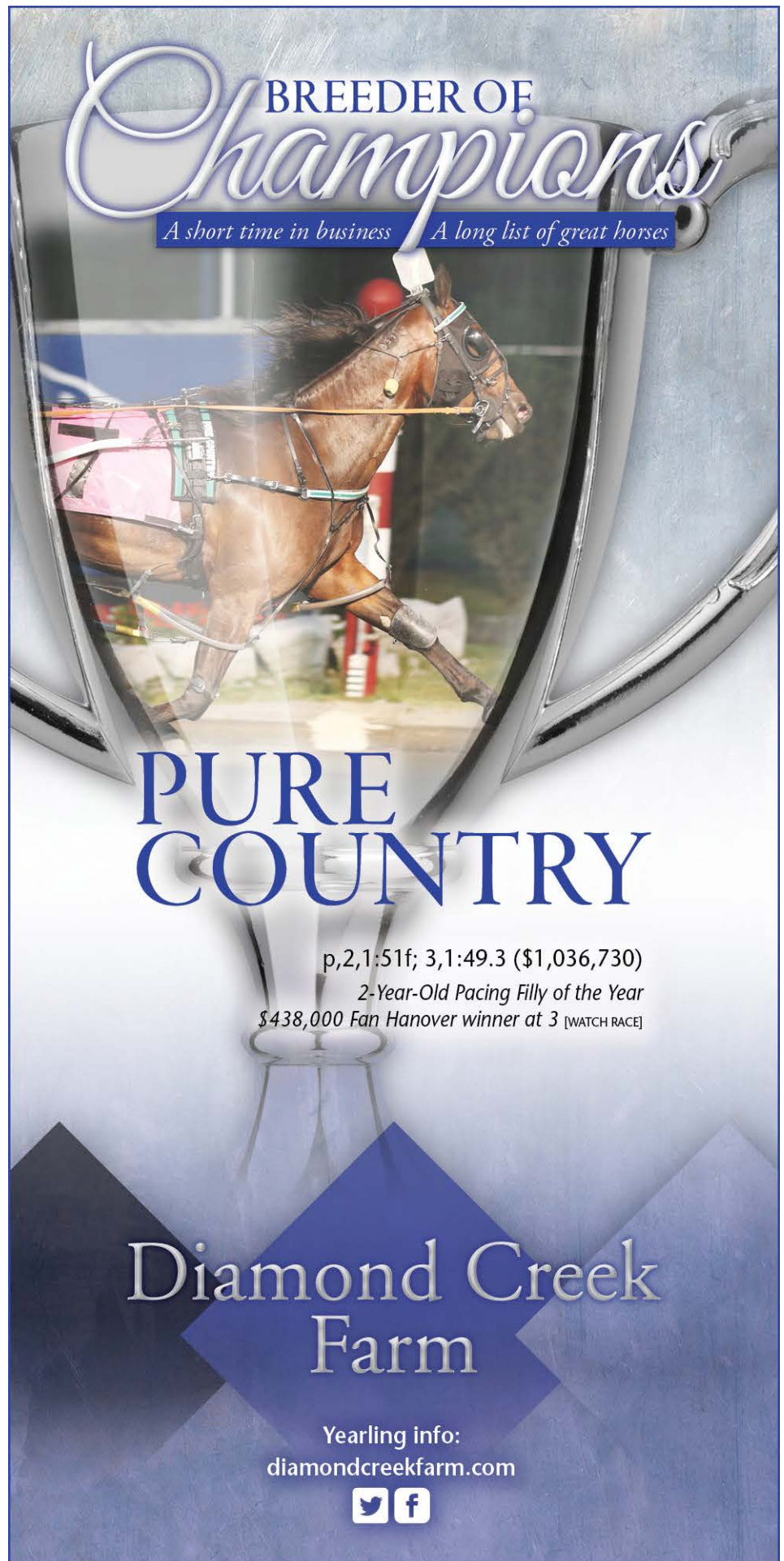
So, when a person who has been in this industry says to me, "it's a shame you missed the good days of racing," I want to slam my head against the wall. When someone asks me "why did you pick a dying industry for a career?" I ask, dying according to whom and based on what premise? Racing is an industry full of potential, much like fantasy football was 20 years ago. I raise that example, because there a lot of people in racing who view fantasy football as a "gold standard" in terms of a template for an industry revolved around gambling dollars (whether you believe it is a skill or not, it is still gambling).

Twenty years ago, if you played fantasy football like I did, you had to conduct a live draft at a venue (sound familiar, having to be at a venue), after purchasing a magazine filled with statistics (getting information came at a cost, like racing still does), with nothing to keep track of the draft picks but paper and pen. From there, every week, you had to phone in your starting lineup to your commissioner and then wait until the next day's box scores to transfer statistics into points and see how you fared. Forget the process of trying to pick up free-agent players, that was a whole other headache. Then the internet came about, and in its infancy while you still had to have a live draft, at least you could e-mail your starting lineup to the commissioner and you could get statistics right after a game was over.

Fast forward to today . . . If you are in a league, you can draft your team from anywhere in the world and the other people in your league can do the same, thanks to the internet and wireless capabilities. Starting lineups are set on websites by each team owner; the same for free agent additions. On game-day, you can track not only statistics, but your team's updated score in real time. You can do all of this without ever seeing any of the people in your league.

Even more advanced now is daily fantasy football. You can have an entirely different team week to week. You can play as much or as little as you want. Here is where fantasy football has a massive leg-up, takeout rates on these games are in the single digits and the information is all free! A fantasy player can pull up a wide receiver's stats for his entire career, box scores for any game, how a quarterback fares on the road in cold weather in December, and it's all free! Does anyone believe fantasy football would be as popular as it is if you had to pay for every player's statistics and were charged a 20-percent fee on each game you played? Of course not, and those involved in running fantasy football sites understood that and adjusted, providing free content and low fees on their games. That is called reaching your potential and nobody questions whether or not these are the "good days" for fantasy football and fantasy sports in general.

All racing has to do is maximize its potential and if they do, the best days of racing still lie ahead.





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BURNING QUESTION

By Derick Giwner

This week we have a two-part question. Did regular driver Scott Zeron deserve to be fired from American Passport? How good is the 3-year-old pacer?

First the backstory. American Passport, who has been driven by Zeron in all but one of his 14 career starts, entered the eliminations of the North America Cup off a solid second-place effort in the Somebeachsomewhere behind Betting Line. Some (including me) would argue he could have won if driven more aggressively in the late stages.

In the North America Cup elimination, Zeron left hard and eventually secured the front after the 26 4/5 opening quarter. The driver then backed down the second quarter in 28 1/5 and elected to give up the lead to a brushing 15-1 shot Nocturnal Bluechip.

Now sitting the pocket, in most cases American Passport would have been in a prime position to strike in the stretch. Quite frequently the driver who brushes to the front will drift to the right in the stretch in order to allow the horse that let him brush get clearance. We'll call this an unwritten "driver courtesy" rule.

In this case, driver Paul Macdonell behind Nocturnal Blue Chip elected to protect his position. He never moved over and American Passport was carried backwards in the stretch with no room. He wound up sixth, one spot from making the \$1,000,000 final the following week.

Fast forward to this Saturday's Max Hempt eliminations at Pocono Downs and we find American Passport in race three with Brian Sears in the bike.

"My partners and myself could not race for \$1,000,000," said co-owner Myron Bell about the missed opportunity. "Did we want to fire him (Zeron), no, but sometimes you have to make tough decisions. Drivers pick off horses all the time and we get over it."

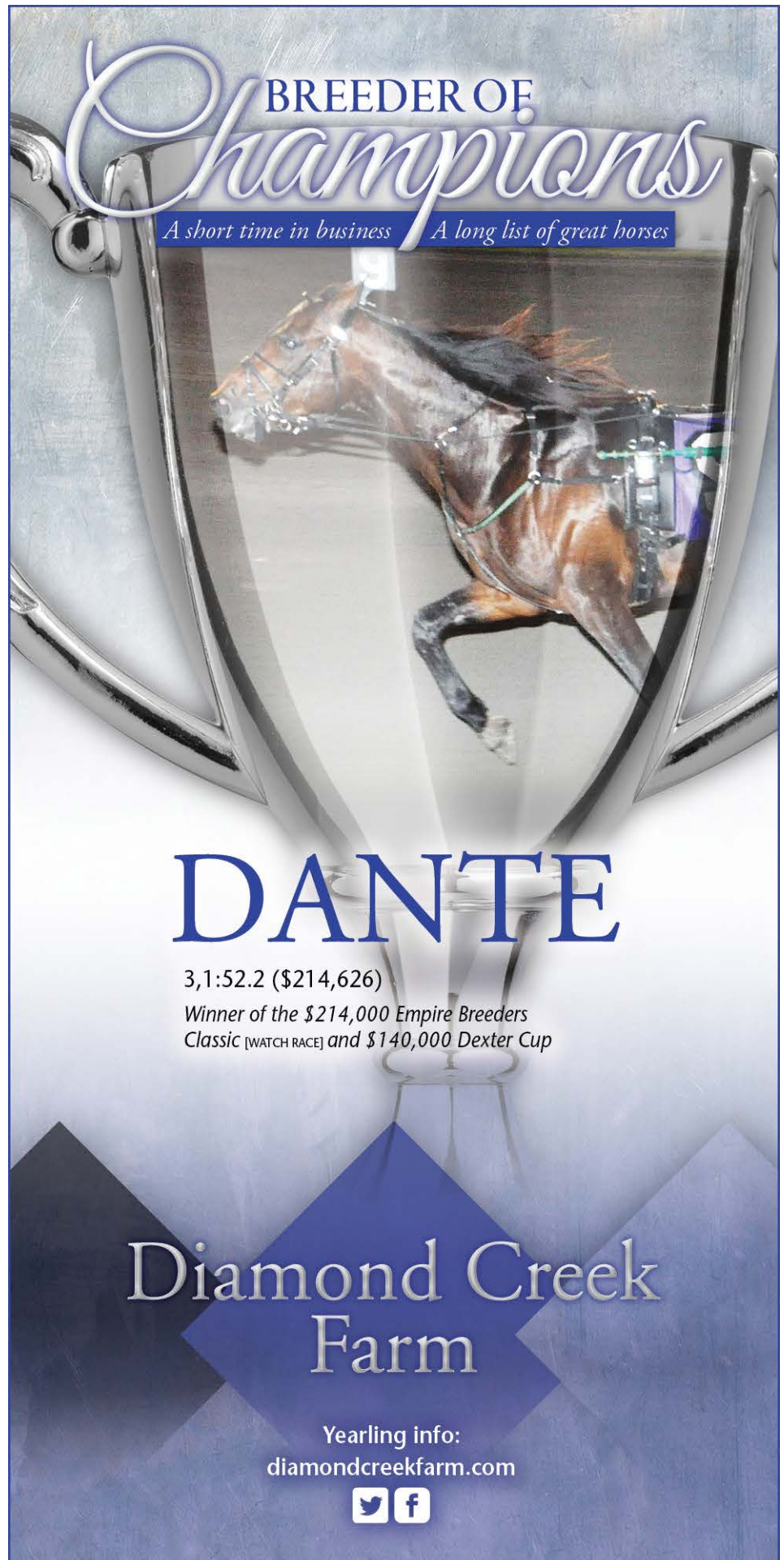
Despite his winless record in three starts this year, Bell remains ultra-confident in American Passport, and that is one of the reasons the driver change was made along with fellow owners George Segal (Brittany Farms), Tony Alagna and Jodi Siamis.

"I have the best horse and I think I need one of the best drivers, too," said Bell. "Hopefully Brian (Sears) will fit him well. If not, I made the wrong choice."

For the record, I didn't feel Zeron did anything overly wrong in the Cup elims. He was an unfortunate victim of circumstance. But this is a results driven sport and Zeron has yet to produce with the horse this year.

Sometimes you just need a new set of hands at the controls. Maybe Sears makes a huge difference. Maybe Zeron would have won with the horse in the Hempt. Ultimately the owners pay the bills and get to make the decisions.

Speaking of owners and Bell, he'll make his first appearance of 2016 at The Meadows on Friday night. His self-imposed ban will come to an end. Welcome back!




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Obrigado seeks victory in Cutler Memorial at The Meadowlands

By Jay Bergman

Driver Mark MacDonald doesn't leave Yonkers very often. The Canadian transplant won six of the 11 races at Yonkers this past Saturday night and is in high demand. On Friday night his services will be required out of town as Obrigado seeks his third straight major stakes triumph in the \$200,000 Arthur J. Cutler Memorial at The Meadowlands.

"He's been extremely good over the last few races," MacDonald said after completing a Tuesday afternoon card at Yonkers.

"After his winter in Florida I don't think he was race ready in his first few starts," said MacDonald, looking back primarily at the Mack Lobell Elitlopp at The Meadowlands on May 8. In that race Obrigado finished well behind race winner Resolve but improved his placement after Resolve was disqualified.

The two have not met since, but MacDonald thinks perhaps they will be much closer on the wire this Friday.

"Obrigado has matured a lot this year," said MacDonald. "He always battles when trying to pass horses or holding other horses at bay."

As for Resolve, the driver hopes his recent exploits may leave him less than at the top of his game.

"Resolve raced in Europe and sometimes the travel can take something out of these horses. But Ake (trainer Svandstedt) does a great job and usually has his horses ready for big races," said MacDonald.

Obrigado landed post four in the select field of seven. The aged trotting ranks has thinned out somewhat this year, but this field of seven includes some high powered performers including last year's top aged trotter JL Cruze as well as the \$1 million winning 3-year-old from 2015, Crazy Wow.

MacDonald though is probably more focused on the trip as opposed to the competition when it comes to Obrigado. While the horse has done most of his best work over the smaller sized ovals, MacDonald has helped him acclimate to the big track while mindful of where to place his horse.

"He's not at his best on the front end," said MacDonald. "He did win at The Meadowlands last year on the front so he can do it."

The driver has guided Obrigado to victories in the Charlie Hill Memorial and Maxie Lee in consecutive starts but in neither case was he drawing away from the competition. A pocket-trip in the Hill saw him take the lead



KEN WEINGARTNER/USTA

Obrigado has won \$248,530 in 2016 and is just \$3,771 from \$1 million in career earnings.

in mid-stretch but appear to wait on other horses. So too was the trip in the Lee, where JL Cruze made a break opening the door for Obrigado, but once in front the 6-year-old waited until Il Sogno Dream was in his sights to finish off the mile.

"When he sees another horse he'll fight back," said MacDonald.

Though Resolve landed post seven in the Cutler, he is clearly the one to beat. The 5-year-old son of Muscle Hill went two brilliant miles in the Elitlopp and lost to two champions in successive heats, with Timoko scoring in the elimination and Nuncio getting the job done in the final. Still, Resolve appears to be even better now than he was at the tail end of last year when he captured the TVG Final at The Meadowlands by three lengths over Obrigado.

Trainer Ron Burke sends out Crazy Wow (post 1) and Gural Hanover (post 2) in the

Cutler. The former has broken stride in two of his three starts this year. The latter has also been plagued by a breaking problem.

JL Cruze, a 16-race winner in 2015, has been hit or miss this year, with four wins in seven tries. He too has had trouble finishing out his races, failing while on the lead in both the Mack Lobell and the Maxie Lee. John Campbell will guide JL Cruze from post 3.

Flanagan Memory scored a major upset in last year's Cashman at The Meadowlands on Hambo Day. The son of Kadabra appears to be rounding into form and is certainly a viable threat in the field. Flanagan Memory drew post five for trainer Rene Dion.

Wind Of The North completes the Cutler field from post six.

The Cutler is listed as race seven on the Friday night Meadowlands program with a first post at 7:15 p.m.

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Sun Stakes eliminations should provide thrills at Pocono

By Jay Bergman

It's been a year that's been tempting for many a standardbred follower. Those who have witnessed horses with exceptional talent have been waiting for roads to collide. Well, given the draw for this Saturday's Sun Stakes eliminations at The Downs at Mohegan Sun Pocono, the wait is definitively over.

It's time to get down and dirty with divisions that offer potential superstars. Pocono will begin to sort things out and perhaps truly define greatness in the next two weeks.

The matchups that we've been waiting for have finally come in to play, with the aged pacers likely to take center stage as they battle for the \$500,000 Ben Franklin top prize.

Horse of the Year Wiggle It Jiggleit hasn't avoided competition thus far and remains Numero Uno in the sport. His presence at Pocono could have kept entries to a minimum but that is not the case, as three eliminations have been set.

The big confrontation this week will come in the form of an elimination, something that Wiggle It Jiggleit has avoided. Supplemental entry Mel Mara (\$30,000) landed the pole position in his elimination and the recent 1:47 victor has more than his share of company. Joining Mel Mara will be last year's Breeders Crown champion and most recent Mohawk Gold Cup winner Always B Miki. The two battled on the big track at the Meadowlands with less on the line, but Saturday's race should be epic.

Adding to this division are more than a few horses with definitive upset chances. Rockin Ron showed his smaller track prowess in capturing the Confederation Cup at Flamboro over Wiggle It Jiggleit. Trainer Ron Burke suggested that he wasn't 100 percent in the Graduate leg at Tioga on June 12, a fourth-place finish. Prior to that, all Rockin Ron did was win races for the Burkes.

Team Burke will also have the rugged and reliable All Bets Off in this assemblage, and the pair will start directly outside of Always B Miki, something that may propel them at the start.

Joining the other elimination field will be Freaky Feet Pete. Last year's sophomore Breeders Crown winner has been superb this year, losing just once in five tries and that was by no means an embarrassment. The pride of Indiana (as if Always B Miki and Wiggle It Jiggleit aren't enough), Freaky Feet Pete appears to have landed into the weakest of the three divisions and has drawn the rail to boot.

The James Lynch for 3-year-old pacing fillies landed two elimination divisions, but most eyes will be focused on the second elimination. That's because recent Fan Hanover winner Pure Country will have to deal with her Pa.-sired rival Darlinonthebeach as well as New Jersey champion Blue Moon Stride. This is the first meeting of cross-state rivals on the grand stage and it will be a legitimate test for all three.

If the Fan Hanover final proved anything,



DERICK GIMNER

Southwind Frank will look to stay unbeaten Saturday on his road to the Hambletonian.

it probably showed that races don't always go as well as planned. Driver Brett Miller had a momentary lapse past the first quarter while sitting behind Pure Country and nearly got locked in to a horrible spot. Fortunately Miller was able to work his way off the pylons without severely hampering any rivals in the process. The mile track tends to offer some forgiveness for minor errors. Miller or any other drivers in the Lynch won't have that luxury over the speedy five-eighths oval.

Pure Country has only won twice in five starts this year after going unbeaten as a 2-year-old. That said, her victories came with impressive closing efforts in the two richest events.

Darlinonthebeach probably lacked the momentum that Pure Country had in the Fan Hanover final and had to settle for second. The gifted daughter of Somebeachsome where gets another crack at her on Saturday, but there will be a post position reversal. Perhaps driver David Miller may elect to race the filly from off the pace and see what she can do in crunch time.

Of course Blue Moon Stride has looked powerful in New Jersey and that once stood for something. Saturday will be the first time to find out if the Mark Harder-trained filly is indeed among the elite in this division. Andrew McCarthy has proven in just a short time on these shores that he can handle himself under pressure. Blue Moon Stride drew between the two stars of the division and will get her chance on Saturday.

While last Saturday's North America Cup answered many questions about this year's 3-year-old crop of male pacers, it opened up a few more queries about some of the also-rans.

Most notably, why did Brett Miller behind Racing Hill back up to allow the previously parked Lyons Snyder to get in front of him before the three quarters?

And why did the connections of Control The Moment wait until the North America Cup to finally put some speed into the horse? The son of Well Said entered the final off a pair of final quarter sprints and perhaps that is why he lacked the measure of both Betting Line and Racing Hill in the late stages.

Fortunately in this sport there is always next week and retribution is never that far away.

One horse that may use the Max Hempt Memorial as an opportunity to gain some recognition is American Passport. Denied a spot in the North America Cup final after getting locked in during his elimination, American Passport moves to the five-eighths for trainer Tony Alagna with new driver Brian Sears listed. It's a shocking change considering Scott Zeron's loyalty in ceding the sulky seat on Lyons Snyder for this colt.

Southwind Frank has been most impressive tuning up in New Jersey for trainer Ron Burke and still looks to be on a direct path towards Hambletonian favoritism. However, the son of Muscle Hill landed post eight in one of two eliminations for the Earl Beal Jr. Memorial and he will have three colts from the Jimmy Takter stable inside of him, at least at the start.

While all too often horsemen save their stock in eliminations looking to go all out in finals, this week's Pocono races are likely to force their hands and produce the type of racing we can all be proud of.

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Remembering the past, looking ahead with Barry Lefkowitz

By Bob Pandolfo

Barry Lefkowitz, treasurer for the United States Harness Writers Association, has spent a lifetime in the standardbred world.

Lefkowitz began his harness adventure working in publicity positions at harness tracks like Jackson Raceway and Northville Downs in Michigan. He then moved on to similar jobs at Scioto Downs and Windsor Raceway, before serving as General Manager of Batavia Raceway in upstate New York for 5 years. In 1984 he took a job as the publicity director at Roosevelt Raceway.

Barry has seen his share of great people at work and took the time to remember a few in a recent phone conversation. His thoughts focused on some of the top publicity men from the past.

"I worked with Lew Barasch at Roosevelt," Lefkowitz said. "He stayed on as the Director of Special Events, such as the International Trot. Lew was a P.R. Man's P.R. Man. He had contacts. He got the job done with very little fanfare, he stayed in the background. What helped his career was that he was an exceptional human being.

"There were a lot of great P.R. guys back then. Phil Pikelný, who was the publicity director for the USTA, co-wrote the book, *The Horse That God Loved* with Don Evans. Pikelný managed to get himself and Rambling Willie on TV. They were interviewed by Merv Griffin on his talk show." (Note: You can view the segment on youtube.com).

"I also worked with Allen Finkelson," Lefkowitz said. "I loved harness racing and wanted to get involved. I used to write him letters and Allen helped me get my first job. We became close friends; he was like a second father to me. Allen wasn't a traditional P.R. guy. He wasn't a writer. But he had charm and humor. He was a sensitive and caring person. He had a compassion for people, especially those with disabilities, such as disabled veterans. He did a lot of charitable fund raising.

"It's funny," Lefkowitz said. "People always remember Allen Finkelson as this larger than life guy but when you were one on one with him, he was actually shy and insecure. But in a group, that's when his outgoing personality kicked in."

"Another guy was Dave Herman, who was the P.R. man at Brandywine. He wore loud sports jackets and sunglasses. Hall of Famer Marv Bachrad, the current P.R. man at Dover Downs, worked with Herman and then became the P.R. man at Brandywine.

"Of course everyone knows my close friend John Manzi, another legendary P.R. Man. But what people may not remember, when Manzi started at Monticello Raceway,



Barry Lefkowitz has worked in the Harness Racing industry since the 1970s.

the P.R. man was Andy "Satch" Furman. Furman had all sorts of contacts and Manzi himself called Furman a 'P.R. Dynamo'. Furman currently co-hosts a popular radio show with Mike North, Fox Sports Daybreak.

"Of course it was a lot different years ago," Lefkowitz said. "You had at least seven daily newspapers and each paper had a beat writer who covered harness racing. By the time I got into the business, you really had to be creative. You had to come up with oddball ideas.

"I got to know the great sportscaster Marv Albert. Albert liked harness racing and was a big fan of Bret Hanover. I did a 'Dunk the Drivers' promotion at Roosevelt and Marv covered it on his sports recap show that night.

"I also contacted Len Berman, who covered sports for CBS TV. Berman, who you may remember for his popular 'Spanning The World' feature, also had a feature called 'Sports Fantasies'. We had a contest to find someone whose fantasy was to be a harness racing announcer and Berman covered it.

"Something that I thought was a key to promotion was scheduling key harness events a day after big sporting events like the MLB All Star game. It's easier to get coverage for Harness Racing on a slow sports day."

While Lefkowitz had plenty of memories of the past, he also has some thoughts

for how the sport can be promoted going forward.

"Years ago it seemed like most people had a general knowledge about harness racing. I'd carry the program, Tomorrow's Trots, with me and people knew what it was. If harness racing is going to survive, you have to get young people involved. To do that, you have to find out what young people want. So you want to hire twenty-something's in the publicity and marketing positions. You have to get young people interested in harness racing.

"In the corporate world, they do research with focus groups and customer surveys," Lefkowitz said. "That's a good way to find out what people want. But I don't think most racetracks are connecting with the public in that way.

"I'm in my fifties and my generation is probably the last generation that had a lot of racing fans. These fans aren't going to be around forever. You have to concentrate on young people.

"In modern times, we see that something can get hot overnight. Just because something is down, doesn't mean it can't come back. Branson Missouri was just another old town that no one thought about, but now it's the music capital of the world.

"Another thing that's important, if a track tries something new, they have to give it a fair chance. You can't find out if something is going to work in a few weeks. In the corporate world these days, there's enormous pressure to make money immediately. Everyone is looking at the stock price. No one wants to give anything a chance. It wasn't always like that. You see TV shows canceled after a few episodes now. I remember reading that *Seinfeld*, an enormously successful sitcom that ran for nine years, almost got canceled after the pilot aired, and didn't actually start to generate good ratings until late in its second season.

"People always remember UCLA basketball coach John Wooden because his teams won 10 NCAA national championships in 12 seasons from 1964 through 1975. But Wooden started coaching the Bruins in 1948, so it took him time to build a championship team. Nowadays he may have been fired after a season or two.

"If you're trying something bold, like substantially lowering takeout rates, you have to give it time. And you have to reach out to young people. Find out what they like and what they want. I do believe that the sport can get a new generation interested. But you may have to make some changes to modernize the races, or the betting, to tailor it to a new generation."



HAVE SOMETHING TO SAY? CONTACT EDITOR DERICK GIWNER: EMAIL DGiwner@drf.com