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## OHIO RACING

# Now is the perfect time to be a Buckeye

By Keith Gisser

I have always done a lot of traveling for business – as a standup comic, as a herpetology educator, as an entertainment agent, as a Harness Horse Youth Foundation Project Manager – and I have often been let down by other supposedly great cities and states which actually pale in comparison to my home town of Cleveland, and my native State of Ohio. As a racing fan, I am proud of all the great horses and horsemen that have come out of Ohio over the years.

I also got a chance to work for many years at Northfield Park when it was, arguably, in the top echelon of tracks for horsemen and handicappers. But as other states moved into the world of alternative funding for purses, my home state got left behind. Handles went down and the tracks seemed like morgues on most weeknights. Ohio was late getting into slots, or video lottery terminals, but the results have proven that the race is not always won by the swiftest.

A couple weeks back I witnessed Wiggle It Jiggleit's easy win in Northfield Park's \$200,000 Battle of Lake Erie. Just as I detailed last year, the track was full of excitement and the atmosphere was electric. The Battle has become a mirror of Ohio racing. It started out in the 1980s with a \$50,000 purse and drew some of the best horses and horsemen in the sport. It expanded to a \$100,000 event and then to a \$150,000 race, still drawing top horses from across the continent. The purse was dropped to \$100,000 for several years and then the race was turned into a late-closer, rather than a Free For All. But now, it is again in that top tier of Invitational races with a purse to



OHHA PHOTO

Ohio Harness Horsemen's Association Executive Director Renée Mancino.

match

Unfortunately, I have not had much of a chance to check out the rest of Ohio's tracks lately. I have been to Scioto Downs a couple times but have not yet seen races at Miami Valley or Dayton Raceway, although I have been to both facilities. So I called on the person in the best position to update me on the health of Ohio's harness racing, Ohio Harness Horsemen's Association Executive Director Renée Mancino, who has been on the job in Columbus for almost 18 months.

She started by pointing out some remarkable stats.

"OHHA membership is up 45%," said Mancino. "Ohio is again the #1 state in the country in mares bred. So it is not just the racing that continues an upward trend."

Mancino has been very pleased with the

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# Still work to do with Ohio racing but things are progressing well

cooperation of the three Southern Ohio tracks, although with the racing boom, she would be okay with a bit more overlap.

"All three tracks are really committed to their racing product and they work well together," said Mancino. "Mark Lowe at Penn National (Dayton Raceway) is a racing guy. But right now Scioto Downs is getting 250 horses in the box. They are doing a great job writing 15 races a night, but we could do so much more to get these horses raced."

While I personally don't understand the logic of having two brand new facilities 30 miles apart (or the logic of not putting addresses or phone numbers on their website homepages), both facilities are clearly doing well.

The renaissance of Ohio racing doesn't just affect the raceways. Ohio has always been a haven for county fair racing and the OHHA and Mancino have been instrumental in making sure that that grassroots scene is revived. Ohio had lost some fair racing, but now, according to Mancino, funding is up.

"Each fair receives \$11,000 to do with as they please," she said. "The minimum purses

are now \$7,000 per division, and we support that, too. We are up to 141 fair dates this year from 119 last year. Many fairs are adding or restoring a second race day and I have meetings with several others about bringing back harness racing. We currently have five fair circuits, one of which OHHA administers, and I am hopeful that we can bring everyone under one umbrella, although it may not happen in the near future."

The OHHA has become much more nimble in its promotions and outreach due to a \$4,000,000 VLT discretionary fund. Whereas past initiatives and expenditures had to be approved in a process that could take as long as eight months, this fund has made it easier and less ponderous to add an equine emergency program, to solicit potential new owners, and to begin work on a benevolent program to make sure that horsemen who are down on their luck don't fall through the cracks. These are just a couple of new Ohio programs that the OHHA's expanded staff has worked on. The addition of a project coordinator, who does charity outreach and looks for new avenues of support, in addition to acting as a fair liaison, is another example

of the OHHA extended commitment to the future of racing in the Buckeye State.

"The amount of work our staff gets done is amazing," Mancino said. "We have a lot to do, on the racetrack, in the breeding farms, but the staff (and the addition of a full-time Certified Public Accountant) really help. I can't put in 90 hours every week."

As to the health of racing in Ohio, "I think it continues on an upward trend," she said. "Last year we donated \$180,000 in purse support to the Little Brown Jug and this year it will be more. We have added the Sires Stakes Consolation Finals; and the Finals are up to \$250,000. We are working on adding a second-tier stakes program, and we are now basing qualification for older horses on Ohio starts and earnings, which also helps our racing product. We still have work to do, but things are going well."

Mancino strongly believes that Ohio's commitment to its on-track product is critical to the continued resurgence and that is a lesson it has learned from other states.

And that makes this lifetime Buckeye and long-term harness fan very happy. Now go cash. See you next month.

## Elitlopp simulcast feed is a real winner

By Derick Giwner

The Elitlopp is undoubtedly one of the greatest spectacles in harness racing. Last Sunday's (May 29) festivities saw Nuncio overcome a brutal journey to earn his place in a packed winner's circle.

The grass typically appears greener on the other side and when it comes to comparing the Swedish broadcast of the Elitlopp to how some of the top events in North America are presented, you are left with the feeling that we can do better.

It's not that our tracks do a poor job. The Meadowlands has a great team in place to present races like the Hambletonian, WEG does a fine job with the North America Cup, and the Little Brown Jug broadcast is always entertaining and top notch. However, there were a few key details during the Elitlopp simulcast that caught my eye.

It was extremely cool to listen to the drivers of each Elitlopp horse being interviewed as they made their way to the track prior to the race (if only I understood Swedish). Certainly for a race like the Hambletonian that could be incorporated? If that is not possible because the race is broadcast live on cable, maybe for the Meadowlands Pace or other big races across the country?

Each race during the Elitlopp card had a countdown clock that started with six minutes to post and showed the minutes and seconds prior to post time. This is very helpful to bettors who are playing multiple tracks and can't keep track of the "drag"



PEEO PLOFF PHOTO

**Nuncio winning the 2016 Elitlopp in record time.**

time when tracks sit on zero minutes to post for anywhere from two to 15 minutes.

During the races, simulcast viewers were treated to a countdown graphic showing exactly how much of the race was remaining in terms of meters. While an experienced player knows at the quarter pole that the race still has three-quarters of a mile remaining, what about newbies? Every new customer I have seen at a half-mile track always seems befuddled when I tell them the horses have to go around a second time before the race is over. Even if the screen just displayed each eighth as it was completed, that would be nice.

In a day and age when most players wager remotely, Sovalla did a great job showing horses warming up between races. Not only was I able to make a determination on fitness by watching the warm-ups, the simulcast feed also identified the horses on-screen so I

didn't have to fumble through my program to see which saddle pad represented which race for warm-up colors.

Other little details which made the viewing experience more enjoyable where:

- Arrows pointing out the names of key contenders during the race
- Slow-motion video with close-ups of the horses during post parades and during replays
- Extensive commentary and interviews
- Accurate numbers on the screen showing the positions of all the horses during the races

While I didn't understand most that was spoken during the few hours I watched the races from Sovalla, I have to give the officials credit for doing a spectacular job. Now if only I had one of those United Nations type headsets to translate for me.

# Snyder sends out two contenders in Somebeachsomewhere



CURTIS SALONICK

Lyons Snyder splashed home a winner in 1:49 4/5 at the Downs at Mohegan Sun Pocono on May 22.

## By Derick Gwerner

New York owner Jeffrey Snyder has seen plenty of success in Canadian stakes races through the years. On Saturday at Mohawk Racetrack, he sends out Michaels Victory and Lyons Snyder in split divisions of the C\$75,000 Somebeachsomewhere with hopes of vying for his fifth career North America Cup on June 18.

Fresh off a New Jersey Sire Stakes upset of reigning 2-year-old U.S. champion Boston Red Rocks, Michaels Victory heads north of the border for Snyder rather than race in the \$100,000 state-bred final at The Meadowlands the same night. The decision to skip the final for the engagement at Mohawk came down to multiple factors.

"I wanted to get him acclimated to Canada and I thought they would go for more money. The listed purse was \$225,000 but they are only going for \$75,000. Also, in New Jersey I knew I had to face three really good horses in Boston Red Rocks, Katies Rocker and Ideal Rocky," said Snyder.

The 32-1 Sire Stakes win by Michaels Victory may have come as a shock to the bettors but Snyder cited a conversation with driver Scott Zeron that made him a believer in his horse. "He said that he liked Michaels Victory better than Lyons Snyder," said Snyder, referring to

his other Somebeachsomewhere starter on the card.

Michaels Victory, a 3-year-old gelded son of Rocknroll Hanover out of the Snyder homebred mare Michelles Victory, is only lightly staked in 2016. He "didn't act the part" in the early going of 2015 which kept Snyder from nominating to the Meadowlands Pace, but the Mark Silva trainee is eligible for the C\$1,000,000 North America Cup and \$500,000 Max Hempt Memorial at Pocono Downs two weeks later.

Although Snyder avoided the Sire Stakes Final citing the tough competition, Michaels Victory clearly drew into the stronger division of the Somebeachsomewhere (race six). He'll face trainer Casie Coleman's Betting Line, who just won on May 21 in 1:49 4/5, and one of trainer Tony Alagna's top prospects in American Passport.

Michaels Victory drew post seven in the field of 10 sophomore pacers.

The path to victory could be a bit easier for Lyons Snyder in the second division (race eight) and Snyder is high on the son of Well Said.

"I think he has more speed and more ability," said Snyder comparing Lyons Snyder to Michaels Victory. "I think he will pick up his game on the big track."

Lyons Snyder was sent off as the betting favorite two starts back against a strong field in the \$561,500 Pennsylvania Classic Final at

Pocono. While chasing a slow pace set by race-winner Check Six, Lyons Snyder never found his best stride and finished a disappointing fifth. Snyder blamed the poor performance on the switch to racing with two headpoles instead of just one. "He just didn't feel comfortable," said Snyder.

Lyons Snyder, who Snyder co-owns with Geoffrey Lyons Mound, rebounded in a big way on May 22 with a 1:49 4/5 Pennsylvania Sire Stakes win over a sloppy track at Pocono. This week the \$130,000 Harrisburg purchase, also trained by Silva, will have to beat last year's champion Canadian 2-year-old Control The Moment.

Control The Moment has only tasted defeat once in nine career starts for trainer Bradley Maxwell. He makes his 2016 debut in the Somebeachsomewhere after two second-place finishes in qualifiers.

The Somebeachsomewhere is the typical stepping stone to the North America Cup eliminations on June 11 at Mohawk. Both Michaels Victory and Lyons Snyder are sired by former Snyder-owned Cup winners. His other NA Cup wins came with Cam's Card Shark and Red River Hanover.

Post time for the 11-race card, which also features a pair of Ontario Gold Finals for 3-year-old pacing fillies and two divisions of the Graduate series for 4-year-olds, is 7:30 p.m.

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# Wiggle It Jiggleit deserves praise, promotion

By Jay Bergman

Here comes summer!

How do I know?

It's getting very hot out there.

While the calendar has us three weeks removed from the next season, activity on the racetrack over the last weekend indicates the level of competition and excellence has already risen to a fever pitch. The races that come ahead can only get better, faster and even more interesting.

In an era where no one wins every time (Golden State Warriors lost 3 of 4 games), champions are still champions and they rise to the occasion. Such was the case this past Sunday when Wiggle It Jiggleit demonstrated to the racing world incredible quickness and determination in taking down the \$200,000 Dorothy Mullin at Harrah's Philadelphia.

The defending Horse of the Year avenged a loss on less than equal footing in the Confederation Cup just a few weeks ago to Rockin Ron with a magnificent mile, missing the world record by a fifth of a second over a track never known to bring out the fastest clockings.

The victory was the second straight for Wiggle It Jiggleit and considering just how rickety he looked at Mohawk Raceway when losing a prep for the Confederation Cup, one has to believe that Team Teague and Clyde Francis have gotten to the root of any lingering issues and returned the 4-year-old to the soundness necessary to compete in and win at the highest level.

For Rockin Ron, there was nothing to be ashamed of in defeat, as the Ron Burke trained 4-year-old lost for just the second time since joining the sport's leading stable. Rockin Ron was brilliant once again, pushing two individually wicked quarters and just being outpaced by a horse that can take

turns like no other.

What is notably encouraging for the sport and fans of it is the incredible intensity of the action with enough serious players to make for highly competitive racing. While six others hardly found a way into the Mullin, the fact that there was solid action in the first quarter and an all-out war on the backstretch the final time is enough to raise the heart rate of anyone with a mild interest.

Maybe this isn't exactly what Jeff Gural was looking for when he asked owners of 4-year-olds not to retire their horses to stud. At the same time, one has to wonder whether the public cares in the least if their champions can potentially breed or not. If this is the kind of excellence Mr. Gural and company wanted, then maybe it's time for the industry to step up and promote broader interest in the coming races involving a single horse that not only has a rich storyline, but can back it up on the racetrack while making each and every stop north and south of the border.

It's certainly well too early for us to predict how the rest of the racing season will play out and whether horses that are currently sharp can maintain such an edge through the course of a hot summer and into the fall. At the same time, Wiggle It Jiggleit, through his travels and travails, has more than earned a special place, one that should be promoted and celebrated by a unified industry.

It's one thing to ask for sacrifice with the promise of better days, but much worse to ignore the promise when a potential equine savior has arrived.

With the style and demands of racing in North America, winning every race against older competition is near impossible and certainly improbable. The table has been set remarkably well in the early stages of what promises to be a great year. That 4-year-olds are racing at such a high level before June

suggests the immediate future will bring out some of the best racing we have seen in quite some time.

Remember, Freaky Feet Pete got the better of Wiggle It Jiggleit at the end of last season and truly didn't have a shot to beat him in the Battle Of Lake Erie given how well the winner negotiated the first turn on that night at Northfield. Perhaps a five-eighths or mile track will put the two on more of an even footing.

Laying in the wings is another potential super horse in Always B Miki. The 5-year-old has taken a vastly different approach to this campaign racing exclusively at The Meadowlands in his first three starts and making a fourth "tune-up" there this Saturday night for just \$25,000. It's hard to fault Jimmy Takter for keeping a close watch on this horse considering how high the praise level has gone thus far. Due to injury Always B Miki will be making just his eighth start for Takter over an 18 month span, which has made it much more difficult for him to get the notoriety of a Wiggle It jiggleit.

In the past we used to frown on horses that appeared to duck the competition. Always B Miki has never been on a half-mile track and that trend will continue this year. It's part of the dynamic that has essentially limited the two from meeting each other to date in 2016.

The burning questions are whether something extra will have been taken out of Wiggle It Jiggleit before he finally meets up with Always B Miki or whether enough has gone into Always B Miki to prepare him for racing a sub 1:20 first three quarters?

The answer to those questions is likely at least a few weeks away as Mohegan Sun at Pocono Downs appears to be the meeting place on June 25 for eliminations of the \$500,000 Ben Franklin.

It's going to be a hot summer indeed.

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