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## INDUSTRY VIEW

# Spring is coming for The Meadowlands

By Jay Bergman

On Game Of Thrones, Winter Is Coming.

At the Meadowlands, Spring is Coming.

March may have come in like a lion, with Chicago shuttered and the Meadowlands still offering 13-race programs on weekends that bettors with big and small pockets can enjoy, but it has serious potential to go out like a lamb. Despite losing a race on each night of the opening weekend in March, the handles on both nights held up extraordinarily well.

Saturday's numbers caught Jeff Gural off guard.

"I was surprised we went over \$3 million last night with 13 races and no drivers," said Gural on Sunday.

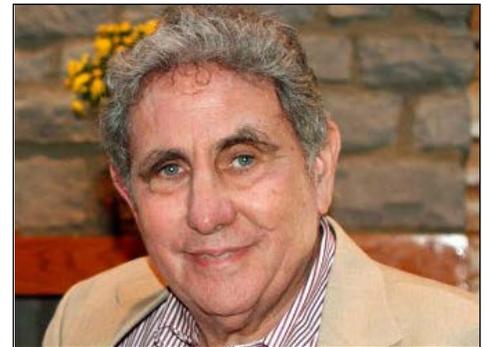
At the same time, Gural knows that despite raging handle numbers in February and early March, the number of horses that will remain or ship to East Rutherford in the near future is going to continue to shrink.

"I have no idea what will happen when Pa. opens but it won't be good for us," Gural said.

The opening this past weekend of Saratoga Harness for its 75th season of standardbred racing took significant horseflesh out of the Meadowlands entry box. Saratoga locals must have relished the chance of returning to action without the long ship and with purses at a most attractive level.

When The Downs at Mohegan Sun Pocono opens in less than two weeks and Harrah's Philadelphia follows a few weeks later, the struggles will get even greater for Meadowlands Racing Secretary Peter Koch.

"I asked the USTA to form a committee to address the coming horse shortage over the next 10 years and come up with a plan to get



LISA PHOTO

**Meadowlands Operator Jeff Gural.**

the four tracks that compete with each other to work together so we don't look foolish and start cancelling race days for lack of horses, which will send the wrong message to politicians on decoupling issue," said Gural with a wide look at the current and future impact.

Gural is well aware of the problem that he considers a horse shortage but one has to wonder whether it's more about date conflicts as opposed to actual shortages.

While Game Of Thrones characters may fear what winter may bring, there's no reason that Gural should have the same worries about the coldest season. The Meadowlands handle numbers have been most impressive and the fact that no late closers accompanied the races should buoy Gural and company to offer even more winter dates next year.

"One thing I have learned is that our customers don't care who drives and we are

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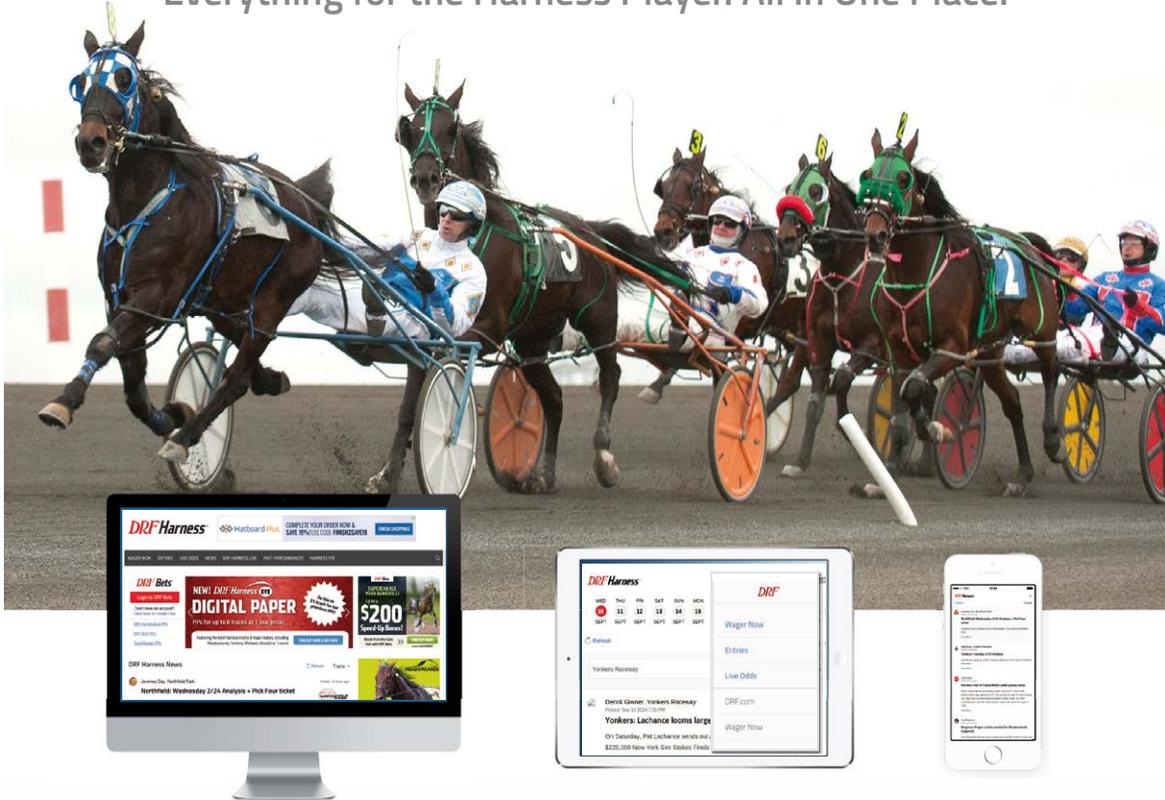
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# Track openings will put strain on Meadowlands horse population

much better off without the late closers. If you watched the races last night, there were some of the closest finishes ever. I did not anticipate that, but I knew the late closers caused short fields and odds-on favorites plus saved \$300,000," said Gural, remarking on the most recent success story.

The problem with the saved \$300,000 is really a matter of how best to spend the savings and whether said money couldn't have been better spent in an attempt to produce additional revenue during the months of January and February?

Short fields and odds-on favorites may in fact be coming to East Rutherford in the very near future and Gural and company will be powerless to stop it. Therein lies the rub in the schedule. What the Meadowlands has proven over this winter is that during a very quiet period in both harness and thoroughbred racing it has the unquestioned attention of many horseplayers. As more racetracks open and the focus turns to added standardbred meets and significant thoroughbred

meets, it's hard to see a path where the Meadowlands can maintain its natural advantage.

As far as decoupling and the message lack of racing will have, that's a tough argument to swallow whole.

There's a great chance that the Meadowlands will be the lone track hit by the horse shortages as horsemen flock to tracks where the money is strong and the condition sheet is broad enough to allow horses from all different classes the assurance of regular racing opportunities.

The filled programs of January and February were produced by a significant number of lower-level trotters with no place to race. Now that the doors are opening elsewhere, trainers will have choices and thus will enter where they can make the most money.

"With the casino issue likely to be on the ballot and very little promised for horse racing subsidy it won't look good if we get no support, which is what I expect, to be honest," said Gural.

That's a troubling statement to be made by Gural or anyone in the horse racing business. The Meadowlands has had incredible support from trainers, owners and drivers who sacri-

ficed the lack of big paydays all winter long to compete at the track. For those who work on five percent commission, the lowered purse structure and two-night a week format was nothing but total sacrifice to many.

If Gural wants more support from the horsemen, he really doesn't need a USTA study to find the true answer. Afford all the horsemen added racing opportunities in January, February and early March before competition sets in. For someone to ask others to sacrifice, to be unwilling to accept Thursday programs during the winter because they are not as attractive as Friday cards in September, is rather one-sided.

The fact that \$300,000 was saved and business didn't suffer, at least handle-wise, should give Gural and the Meadowlands the chance to put their racing dates in better order next year. Politicians won't mind it a bit if a greater part of the Meadowlands racing dates occur during the winter. At least that way we'll be able to show them our house is in order.

When winter comes again, let it be with more racing and voters backing expanded gaming.

# The Ides of March is coming for standardbred owners

By Derick Giwner

The Ides of March are coming in harness racing. While March 15 marked the death of Julius Caesar, the famous date also brings hope and agonizing decisions for all owners in the sport as they make final decisions on stakes payments.

Prominent owner David McDuffee, he a co-owner of former Horse of the Year Bee A Magician among others, has 11 yearlings to assess in 2016 and is just as excited as he is guarded about getting too high.

"I'm always excited on the 15th of March because they are all going good in March. Ask me how I feel on the 1st of July and I'll probably have a different level of enthusiasm," joked McDuffee as he viewed one of his horses at Sunshine Meadows Equine Center last week.

"I've been at it for so many years that I don't get too excited about anything," he continued. "When I talk to my trainers I ask them what the worst one is, because at this time of the year almost every horse can do what they are asking them to do. It is just a matter of putting a lot of miles on them and building their endurance; the speed today seems to be in all of them. When you finally get to the races and the first qualifier you realize that maybe you don't have what you thought you had. So I try to control my emotions this time of the year."

The horse getting most of McDuffee's attention on this beautiful Saturday afternoon was Signal Hill, who he co-owns with Brittany Farms, Marvin Katz and Adriano Sorella. The son of Muscle Hill out of the mare Special Appeal brought \$250,000 at the Lexington Selected Yearling Sale last October. He was working in company with Moun-



DERICK GIWNER

**Signal Hill and trainer Tony Alagna leading Seven Stars and Mountain Of Love at Sunshine Meadows Equestrian Village on March 6.**

tain Of Love, a \$280,000 purchase, and Seven Stars, himself purchased for \$225,000. Over \$750,000 worth of horseflesh assigned to the capable hands and watchful eyes of trainer Tony Alagna.

Every owner is different when it comes time to stake their horses. Some may throw caution to the wind and heavily stake while others pick their spots. It is not for the faint of heart.

"We go over it pretty carefully," said McDuffee on the process of staking. "First of all, it is such a huge expense for someone like myself with 15 horses. It can get into the hundreds of thousands of dollars for staking. You have to be a little bit aware of what you are doing and

where you are spending your money.

"I'm not in it to make money; I'm in it not to lose money. I've had some great horses and I've put everything back into the business. I keep adding some to it every year as well. I enjoy it so much, to me it is just like owning a major league baseball team. You can still be hands-on even when you are 75 years old. I do as much as I want with them. I used to jog and train them a little, but I think now we'll let the younger guys do that."

Like every owner with a yearling and a dream, McDuffee will make some hard decisions and hope luck brings him the next champion.

# Dovuto Hanover goes for Meadowlands Saturday Open; Update on Bee A Magician

By Jay Bergman

There was a point in time a few years back that Dovuto Hanover was among the elite pacing aged set. The son of Dragon Again routinely competed at the top level with a great amount of success. With 28 first and second-place finishes in but 56 career starts, the gelding earned more than \$400K before his fifth birthday.

Now a 6-year-old, Dovuto Hanover is making just his ninth start since 2014 while looking to regain some of that old luster. The \$25,000 featured 11th race at the Meadowlands on Saturday is the place and the Richard "Nifty" Norman-trainee starts from post five.

"I'm happy with the way he has come back," said Norman about the veteran.

"The last run he had was solid."

After nine months away from competitive racing, Dovuto Hanover showed some of that old closing kick that made him a stretch-racing threat throughout his career. Against similar stock, he flashed a 26 final quarter and was chewing up ground with tenacity missing, just a half-length in arrears of odds-on favorite Rockeyed Optimist.

Norman likes the direction the horse is going in and certainly likes his chances against the foes he will face on Saturday night. At the same time, he's more than cautious about projections that Dovuto Hanover will again reach the top of the mountain in this division.

"No, I don't think he's a top ten horse anymore," said Norman. "I just don't think he's sound enough to compete at that level. We've staked him to a few races here (at the Meadowlands), but we're more about making him into a solid racehorse."

Only seven drew in to the Open Handicap on Saturday and Dovuto Hanover seems to be the most logical horse with the potential to defeat Rockeyed Optimist (post seven). After a stellar 4-year-old campaign, the Steve Elliott-trained Rockeyed Optimist has won two of three starts this year and has Tim Tetrick returning to the bike on Saturday. The \$1.7 million winner Bettor's Edge makes his season's debut from post six in the handicap event.

Norman has had Bettor Memories for less

than two months, but he thinks there is a future for the son of Bettor's Delight. "I'm happy with the progress he has made. He's getting better and better each time," said Norman. Though winless in nine career starts, the sophomore gelding (post three in the second race on the card) flashed some speed last week while finishing second in the same class.

"I'm hoping he continues to improve," said Norman. "We're pointing him towards the Ontario Sire Stakes."

One horse in Norman's care that doesn't need to improve at all is Bee A Magician. The 2013 Horse of the Year trained on Wednesday. "She was fantastic," said Norman of the now 6-year-old daughter of Kadabra. "She went a mile in (2):15. She's about a month away."

Last year around this time Norman was optimistic about the season for Bee A Magician and she hardly disappointed, with a campaign that perhaps went on one or two races more than it should have.

"The last two starts she had issues," said Norman. "She tied up in one and had a temperature after the other." Those minor problems are enough to derail even the best of horses.

Norman is pointing Bee A Magician for the Elitlopp Playoff race on May 8 at the Meadowlands.

When asked about shipping Bee A Magician to race in Europe, the trainer was straight away in how he feels. "She's not great with shipping. I think if you sent her over there she would have to stay there," said Norman.

The trainer was concerned with how the mare responds to shipping and how much better she responds when fully acclimated to her surroundings on a regular basis. As was the case a year ago, Norman hopes to keep her as close to home for as long as he can.

Is winning the International in the cards this year for Bee A Magician having come up short in the revival last year at Yonkers?

"I think if she draws the rail in that race she'll have a chance," said Norman, perhaps in response to last year's event in which Bee A Magician spent too much of the mile and a quarter distance too far from the action.

## Passing Lane installed at Hoosier Park

Handicappers are in for a change when Hoosier Park opens for live racing on April 1. New track superintendent Gary Wolff has confirmed that the Indiana track has added a passing lane.

"We just finished a couple of days ago," said Wolff, who said the job was actually quite easy since there was plenty of available room in the stretch. "We had 22 feet of room inside the pylons and made the passing lane 7 1/2 feet."

The entire process took just a day and a half and was done with a milling machine (think highway maintenance) and filled in with existing track material.

While Wolff just came on the job about a month ago after a stint at the Meadowlands, the change wasn't his idea. "Ownership has wanted to do this for quite a while," he said.

Training at the seven-eighths oval begins on Monday (March 14) and the first qualifying session is set for March 16.

--Derick Givner

## BURNING QUESTION

How did 2015 Older Trotter of the Year, JL Cruze, race on Friday morning in a qualifier at The Meadowlands?

Driver John Campbell was able to ease JL Cruze into a comfortable pocket and sat patiently behind a keyed-up Waiting On A Woman.

With fractions of 29, 56 4/5 and 1:25 2/5, Campbell asked JL Cruze midway down the stretch with a few taps of the whip and he slowly accelerated to get his nose up at the wire in 1:54 2/5.

Other notable horses winning qualifiers were Bettor N Better (1:53 3/5) and Odds On Equuleus (1:51 2/5).



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