

DOWN THE STRETCH

CANADA'S MOST INFORMATIVE AND ENTERTAINING HORSE RACING NEWSPAPER

The Top 50 Stories of 2024

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Age is no barrier
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It's a Wrap at Woodbine

The very long (and at times, problematic) Woodbine Thoroughbred meet concluded on Saturday,



Mark Casse

Michael Burns Photo

December 15 with a 13-race card constituting the 127th day of racing. Several of the more prominent performers on the year improved their numbers.

Jockey Eswan Flores continued to impress. He captured 3 races on closing day, taking down the first race with



Sahin Civaci

Michael Burns Photo

Magic Power (\$11.60) a 2-year-old colt trained by John Mattine, winning the 4th aboard Doadster (\$5.80 and also

trained by Mattine) and completing his hattrick with the 7-year-old, Old Chestnut (12.70) for Martin Drexler. This year was Flores' best year at Woodbine since he came to Canada in 2022. He finished with 48 wins and over \$2 million in purse earnings.

Rafael Hernandez also had a 3-win afternoon. He connected with Hank Ollie (\$13.90) in the 6th, giving Sid Attard a training win. The 11th race was the \$100,500 Steady Growth Stakes and Hernandez won it with Ron Sadler's Ron's Gizmo (\$4.50). Hernandez also won the 12th with Soulmate (\$5.60) for Drexler. Hernandez completed his Woodbine season with 140 wins and more than \$6.2 million in purses.

Fraser Aebly topped off an excellent year with 2 winners. He scored the 3rd race with Madame Obey (\$11.90), a 2-year-old filly trained by Josie Carroll. Then he won the 13th and final heat of the year with 31-1 bomber, Stop the Humbug, trained by Richard Morden. That outcome assured some fortunate fans would enter the off-season with early Christmas or Hannukah treats. Stop the Humbug topped a \$1 exactor for \$537.45 and the 20-cent Super High-5 was worth \$33,668.12. Aebly's 2nd full



Civaci and Casse

Michael Burns Photo

season of riding produced 73 wins, which put him 3rd in the standings, and he amassed almost \$3 million in purse earnings, good for 5th at the Rexdale track.

Also with a 2-win day was Ryan Munger. His victories came with Restoring Order (\$10) in the 3rd for trainer Brad Dunslow and with Its Time to Shine (\$14.20) in the 8th for John Ross. Munger was 7th in the Woodbine jockeys'

standings with 52 wins.

Very few Woodbine racing days went by without Sahin Civaci finding the winner's circle. Civaci won a pair on the last day: Jamiesta (\$12.90) prevailed in the 5th for Willie Armata and Civaci grabbed the 10th with Giant Teddy (\$6.30) for Drexler. Civaci was never in doubt for the Woodbine riding crown, emphasizing his year-long consistency by winning 18 times over the last 60 races during the final 9 days in December. His total of 170 gives him the riding title and his meet-leading 16 Stakes wins assure he will win the Sovereign Award as Canada's Outstanding Jockey for 2024.

Strangely, neither Mark Casse nor Kevin Attard secured a win on the final day. Casse easily clinched his 16th Woodbine training title with 108 winners, of which a record 33 came in Stakes races. In 2023, Casse captured 24 Stakes events at Woodbine and based on that, was voted Outstanding Trainer in Canada for the 16th time. It would



appear a 17th St. Simon trophy is in Casse's future. That, despite another great year from Kevin Attard. All Attard did was send out 80 winners from 406 starters for a strike rate of 20%. Attard won his second King's Plate with the filly, Caitlinhergrtness and he sent out the wonderful mare, Moira to win the \$2 Million Breeders' Cup Fillies and Mares Turf. Despite that, Attard may find himself the bridesmaid once again when the envelope is opened.

For the 10th consecutive season, Bruno Schickedanz topped the owners' list, and it wasn't even close. Schickedanz was in the winner's circle 65 times and the second place owner, Gary Barber, had 26 winners. Schickedanz owns Old Chestnut and Giant Teddy, both winners on the final day of racing. Horses owned by Schickedanz earned over \$1.9 million (USD).

This sensational photograph by Clive Cohen (New Image Media) has already won a Hervey Award in the U.S. and has been installed at 1-9 to score an O'Brien Award next month.



WOODBINE HORSE RACING

THE EDITOR WEIGHS IN



We pushed this first issue of 2025 out a few days before the Eclipse Awards in Palm Beach on January 25, which gives me the opportunity to look foolish. That's because I am declaring the great Canadian-bred Moira the winner in her class, Female Turf. Moira is a finalist with She Feels Pretty and Cinderella's Dream, both very deserving racehorses. But let's look at four critical criteria that will consume the voters' attention.

- 1) **Wins:** Cinderella's Dream won 4 times in 2024. She Feels Pretty had 3 wins. Moira won twice and finished 2nd in her other 2 races. Moira does not get the check mark here.
- 2) **Money won:** Over \$1.6 million for Moira, just about a million for Cinderella's Dream, and \$700,000 for She Feels Pretty – a big point for Moira.
- 3) **Head-to-head:** Cinderella's Dream defeated She

Feels Pretty the only time they raced. Moira beat Cinderella's Dream in their only meeting – an obvious advantage for Moira.

- 4) **Most important race won:** Moira captured the Breeders' Cup Filly and Mare Turf. Game, set and match, Moira.

Not to give anything away, but we feature Moira high up in our annual Top 50 Stories feature (pages 4-9). I can say this – according to us, the 3 biggest events of 2024 all had a female component. You can argue amongst yourselves (or send me an angry e-mail) if you disagree with our rankings.

It's interesting that Moira was not eligible for the Sovereign Awards, as she raced just once in Canada in 2024. She would have been a cinch in the Female Turf category. I cast my vote for her stablemate, Full Count Felicia who pulled off that remarkable front-running upset in the E.P. Taylor

Stakes, relegating Moira to second.

Another thoroughbred season came to an end at Woodbine. On page 2, we capture closing day and salute those who finished on top in their respective categories.

The newly elected U.S. President, Donald Trump has been stupidly declaring that the U.S. "subsidizes" Canada. Hopefully he doesn't find out how much money Canadians have been scooping at tracks south of the "imaginary border". On page 13, we present snowbirds taking down the U.S. dollar – Sahin Civaci, Marty Drexler and Bruno Schickedanz for example.

The harness guys continue to work week in and week out all through the winter at Mohawk. On page 11 we muse on James MacDonald's great 2024 and just how long it took him to produce a 6-win night at Mohawk. And on page 21, we find out why it took Billy Davis so long to compete against the big boys at Mohawk Park.

Earlier in December, we were amazed when 84-year-old Don McKirgan drove a horse to victory in a harness race at Northfield Park. We were even more amazed when Bill Megens steered Willy Strike to victory on December 20 at Western Fair. Megens is 91. The copy on both these amazing senior citizens can be found on page 10.

On November 22, jockey Justin Stein suffered very serious injuries in a horrific spill at Woodbine. Now 44, Stein has announced his retirement, but there is good news – he has been accepted by the Alcohol and Gaming Commission of Ontario (AGCO) as a racing steward (page 17). There are few individuals who can understand as much as Stein about what goes on in a horse race.

This issue also includes the story of War Envoy, who ran in the Breeders' Cup and the Pegasus World Cup. War Envoy earned almost \$500,000 for his humans, but some two-footed morons allowed the horse to fester in mud, emaciated and starving. On page 14, we tell you how the Kentucky Humane Society rescued him. On the same page, we have the other side of the equation – how Katie Larsen's Southern Belle Thoroughbreds assures that horses transition to a dignified and safe home after their racing careers end.

Two terrific harness horses have come to the end of their competitive careers – Prohibition Legal and Silver Label, both owned by Millar Farms. Both are mares; both earned well over \$1million; both are featured on page 11.

Our Thoroughbred Owner of the Month, Ron Sadler (page 18), sent out his 10-year-old mare, Northern Ruby for the last time on December 7 and saw her win.

Our Standardbred Owner of the Month, Mario Villani (page 19) had his horse, Frownies Miracle win the very last race of the year at Mohawk.

And in every issue since we started in 2008, we have had our Oddities & Entities (page 22), to remind us that horse racing is not like other sports. This month we have an image of the Flemington racecourse in Australia, a sensational finish line shot of Kazushi Kimura winning a Stakes race at Santa Anita aboard a Canadian-bred, and a potential award-winning snowy photograph from Will Wong.

And, of course, we have our cartoon (page 9). This issue, we published the Chronic Horseplayers' New Year's Resolutions – not that we intend to follow any of them.

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The Top 50 Stories of 2024

50 Taylor Swift:



Ok – this is a stretch. Taylor Swift was never at Woodbine or Mohawk or Ajax Downs and there is no active horse named Taylor Swift. However, Swift's boyfriend, **Travis Kelce** of the Kansas City Chiefs,

bought into a share of a horse, appropriately named Swift Delivery, who ran in the Toronto Cup Stakes at Woodbine on August 31. Trained by **Mark Casse**, Swift Delivery went off as the even-money favourite but had to settle for 2nd place as Piper's Factor (**Sofia Vives**) pulled off the 7-1 upset for trainer **Katerina Vassilieva**. Swift Delivery didn't exactly have an Era's Tour impact in 2024, winning 2 of 6 starts and earning \$92,278.

49

St. Patrick's Day Tip:

Tips don't get more obvious than this. On March 17, the 12th race at Northfield Park in Ohio offered \$19,595 to a field of pacers, and Shamrock, a 5-year-old gelding wore the #4 green saddle cloth. With driver Hunter Myers steering, Shamrock went right to the front and dominated all the way to the wire, best by a length.

"Of course he wins on St. Patty's Day!" bellowed announcer Ken Livengood. This was Shamrock's 97th race and his 20th win. He paid \$8.20.

48

Perry Ouzts:



Considering how dangerous race riding can be, Perry Ouzts is remarkable. He turned 70 on July 7. Three days later he rode 3-year-old Opie's Girl to a win at Belterra Park in Cincinnati. As he posed in the winner's circle, Ouzts became the oldest person ever to ride a thoroughbred winner at a recognized track in North America. Opie's Girl paid \$10.60 and gave Ouzts his 7,449th riding win in a career that goes back to the mid-70s.

47

When a Colt is a Philly:

There was unnecessary controversy after Dornoch won the 156th Belmont at Saratoga on June 4. Thousands of racing fans watching on TV or their computers heard an announcer claim, "A filly won the Belmont." Dornoch is a colt, and hearing the colt described as a filly prompted a tsunami of

social media outrage. However, careful analysis solved the problem. Dornoch is owned by West Paces Racing Stable and one-time Blue Jays outfielder, **Jayson Werth** is part of West Paces. Werth also played over 500 games with the Philadelphia Phillies. The reference to Dornoch was a bright play on words from commentator, **Curt Menefee**.

"A Philly in the Belmont as co-owner Jason Werth knocks it out of the park," quipped Menefee.

Move along. Nothing to see here.

46

Had to Be Ivory:

The 9-year-old, two-time Canadian Quarter Horse of the Year returned to the track after a 7-month layoff and did not demonstrate any rust, romping to victory in the \$30,915 Norman Picov Maturity on May 15 at Ajax Downs. Bet down to 4-5, Had to Be Ivory, ridden by **Josh Scott**, took the lead in a matter of stride out of the gate and was never seriously challenged, hitting the wire a length the best after 300 yards. The time for the race was a brisk 15.266, good for a 103 speed rating. Had to Be Ivory is trained by **Bryn Robertson** and owned by his wife Carol and their daughter-in-law Jaime. This was Had to Be Ivory's 26th win from 34 races and, incredibly, the 5th time he has won the Picov Maturity. With his share of the purse, Had to Be Ivory increased his Canadian record for earnings to more than \$430,000. All the successful bettors got was \$3.60. In his subsequent 5 races in 2024, Had to Be Ivory won twice and added a 2nd and a 3rd.

45

Pegasus Stakes:

The first major thoroughbred Stakes race of the year in North America doesn't quite have the shine it did when it was first run for \$6 million in 2017. Still, at \$3 million, it's not a bad one to win, and National Treasure, the 2023 Preakness Champ won this year. Under **Flavien Prat**, National Treasure tracked the early leader Hoist The Gold (**John Velazquez**) who set manageable fractions of :23.18, :46.32 and 1:11.21. National Treasure moved at the leader through the last turn, came into the stretch with the lead and repelled a late move from Senor Buscador (**Junior Alvarado**) to prevail by a neck in 1:50.51 for the 9 furlongs – not even close to the record for the distance set at 1:46.84 when Arrogate won the first installment of this race. Trained by everyone's favourite, **Bob Baffert**, National Treasure won for the 3rd time in his 11th race and paid \$7.20 to win.

44

Ken Middleton:



Ken Middleton returned to the Mohawk race caller's booth on January 15. This marked his 25th year of describing the standardbreds in Campbellville, but he came back after his longest period of absence. On June 28, Middleton was seriously injured when a horse he was training uncharacteristically panicked.

"I think he got scared of something," said Middleton. "I got flipped basically right out of the jog cart, and when I hit the ground is when I suffered the injuries."

Middleton suffered extensive damage to his back. He required 43 staples running from the back of his head through his shoulder blades and surgeons removed a piece of bone that was pressing against his spinal cord.

The good news is he sounds like he never missed a day.



Sofia Vives

43

Sovereign Awards:

It was another **Mark Casse** night at the annual celebration of Canadian Thoroughbred accomplishments. Casse scored his 16th trophy as Trainer of the Year and 6 horses trained by him were also winners. The 3 finalists for Horse of the Year – Elysian Field, Paramount Prince and Fev Rover were all trained by Casse and it was Fev Rover who won the big prize. **Kazushi Kimura** was named Jockey of the Year and **Sofia Vives** ran away with the Sovereign as Outstanding Apprentice.

42

Clare MacDonald:

On July 21 at Truro Raceway in P.E.I., the first Atlantic Women's Driver Challenge spanned 5 races, and Clare MacDonald took advantage of competing on her home track to eke out a narrow victory over 6 rivals. Five different women won races as **Julie Walker**, **Monica Sutherland**, **Amyr Campbell**, MacDonald, and **Natasha Day** each grabbed a leg, but because of the points system, MacDonald was declared the champion – she earned 27 points, Day got 25 and Campbell finished with 23. MacDonald came into this contest with 1,531 driving victories, the most of any woman in Canada.

41

Harold Ladouceur:



No one began the new year better than Harold Ladouceur. His wife, Jessie had been sitting on a secret that she revealed shortly after midnight as 2024 broke out of the gate – *Ladouceur was going to be inducted into the North American Indigenous Athletic Hall of Fame*. In fact, the NAIAHF made the announcement official on January 2.

"I was born and raised in a Kikino Metis settlement," he says. "But I registered on the Moosomin First Nations from Saskatchewan." As a thoroughbred horse trainer, Ladouceur has sent out 1,222 horses with 97 wins and more than \$4 million in purse winnings. His best student was a mare named Paladin Bay who won 4 of 18, including the Princess Elizabeth, Ontario Lassie, and Selene Stakes, earning \$607,316.

40

Tyler Borth



On April 23 at the Raceway at Western Fair, Tyler Borth won 2 of the 8 races that comprised the 2024 Ontario Regional Driving Championship. Thanks to 3 other in-the-money finishes, Borth earned 71 points to top all drivers. **James MacDonald** came second with 59. Both men advanced to the 2024 National Driving Championship at Hippodrome 3R in Trois-Rivieres, Quebec on Friday, July 5.

39

James Macdonald:



On July 5 at Hippodrome 3R, James MacDonald dominated by winning 3 of the 8 races in the 2024 National Driving Championship. MacDonald scored with Rec Time (\$2.10), American Zestar (\$2.70) and Bonfire Bash (\$3.30) to finish the competition with 66 Points. **Tyler Borth** was second with 53. This was MacDonald's third win in this event, and he will represent Canada at the Worlds in New Zealand in 2025.

38

Brian Bell

Although he didn't win the most races at Ajax Downs in 2024, veteran Brian Bell will win the Award as top jockey thanks to his QROOI high points totals. Bell won 18 of 115 races this year, finishing second in wins to **Diego Benitez** who won 23. But Bell placed 34 times and 3rd 21 times, for an excellent in-the-money rate of 64%. The horses ridden by Bell this year won \$262,281, the most for any rider.

37

O'Brien Awards:

This year the Joe O'Briens were held in Charlottetown, P.E.I. and it was a good night to be part of the **Tattoo Artist** gang. The 7-year-old parlayed his 9 for 14 season into an O'Brien as the Outstanding Older Pacing Male. His trainer, **Dr. Ian Moore** won as Outstanding Trainer and Tara Hills Stud, which bred Tattoo Artist took away the Armstrong Breeder of the Year Award. **James MacDonald** got the Keith Waples bling as Canada's Outstanding driver. It's the 3rd year in a row he has done this. **Sylvia Hanover**, who won 10 of 13 was named both 3-Year-Old Filly Pacer as well as Horse of the Year, for which she got the Somebeachsomewhere trophy. Hudson Standardbred Stable owns the filly who is trained by **Mark Steacy**. **Bob McClure** has driven her in all 22 races, of which she has won 18.

36

Frankie Dettori:

It was at Santa Anita on April 6 when 53-year-old Frankie Dettori won 6 races in a row. The epic streak began in race 2 when Dettori won the Maiden Special Weight with Ball Don't Lie (\$6.60). Then he captured the 3rd with Recinto Rompere (\$18.20), the 4th aboard Roberta's Love (\$21.60), the 5th with Kathynmarissa (\$15.00), the 6th with Nothing Like You (\$16.40) and the 7th with Royal Charter (\$10.80). Note that not one of Dettori's winners was a favourite.

35

Jamieson's 5-Win Night:

On May 6, Jody Jamieson found the winner's circle 5 times at Mohawk Park. He won the 2nd race with Logan Park for Robert Fellows, took down the 3rd with Mach Impact for trainer **Gerard Demers**, then won the 5th, 6th and 7th races with Full Disclosure (**Ondrej Gois**), Mrmayor Hanover (**Anthony Montini**) and Sir A (**Leonard Lalonde**).

34

Sofia Vives on Opening Day:

The first card of thoroughbred racing at Woodbine was on April 27, just days after the Sovereign Awards, and jockey Sofia Vives went to work immediately proving that her win as Canada's top apprentice was no fluke. Her first ride of



the year came in the 2nd race, and she scored with Summer Snow (\$3.60) for trainer **Tony Gattellaro**. Vives then won the 3rd with Birthday Munnings (\$4.20) trained by **Josie Carroll**, the 4th with Rock to Fame (\$4.80) for **Mark Casse** and the 6th aboard Lady Onyx (\$7.30) who was also sent out by Casse. The Opening Day feature was the \$150,000 Star Shoot Stakes for 4-year-old fillies, and Vives won this race as well, giving Sabatini an efficient ride, winning by almost 3 lengths in 1:10.02 for the 6 furlongs. Sabatini is trained by Carroll and owned by NK Racing and LNJ Foxwoods and she paid \$28.70.

33

Hernandez Had a 5-Pack:

It was Father's Day, June 16 and as a tribute to male parents everywhere, Rafael Hernandez fathered 5 winners at Woodbine. He delivered Gem Quality (\$22.50) in the 3rd with Stonks (\$3.90) – both of those trained by **Katerina Vassilieva**. Then Hernandez pounced with Quite Ready (\$17.40) in the 4th for **Donald McRae**, ladled the 7th with Souped Up (\$39.20) for **Ron Sadler** and completely filled his tank with Gas Me Up (\$7.20) for **Kevin Attard**.

32

When a Legend Called a Legend:

June 30 at Clinton Raceway was Legends Day and a field of the greatest Canadian harness racing drivers competed in the Hall of Fame race. You want legends? This race included **Doug Brown, Chris Christoforou, Steve Condren, Sylvain Fillion, Wally Hennessey, Carl Jamieson, Paul MacDonell** and **Randy Waples**. It was Waples who delivered the winner, Heavy Dude E. The 6-year-old gelding went right to the lead and cut out comfortable fractions of :28.4, 1:00.3 and 1:30.3 before finishing in 2:01.1 to win by a neck over the closing Cool Clifford and Steve Condren. Making this race even more "legendary" is that it was announced by **Frank Salive**, a legend in the race caller's booth if there ever was one. Heavy Dude E is trained by **Natalie Elliott** and with his 25th career win, he paid \$5.30. It was Waple's only parimutuel drive of 2024 and his 6,646th lifetime victory.

31

Bill Tharrenos Wins the Same Race Twice:

The 2nd race at Woodbine on Friday, July 5 was at 7 furlongs for maidens who could be claimed for \$7,500. Trainer Bill Tharrenos and owner Tara Horse Farm entered 2 horses – the 4-year-old Manetka and the 3-year-old Haahee. In the stretch, Haahee and **Pietro Moran** were passing others, and **Leo Salles** had Manetka seeking the wire. The two horses hit the finish line together and the stewards could not separate the noses, declaring a dead heat between the stablemates. Both Haahee and Manetka were trained by Tharrenos and sired by Hyper, who must have been very proud. Haahee paid \$7.60 and Manetka returned \$3.60.

30

Waskesiu

She raced just twice in 2024, but Cheifswood Stables' Waskesiu's lone win was impressive. On March 9, she was one of eleven in the Grade 3 \$200,000 Florida Oaks at a mile and a 16th at Tampa Bay. Under **Junior Alvarado**, Waskesiu was always in contention, 4th after 6 furlongs when asked to quicken. She did, came 3-wide into the stretch and hit the wire the best by a length in 1:42.04. Waskesiu is Cree for elk or red deer, and the filly may be a shoutout to Waskesiu, a small community in Saskatchewan. Her win in the Florida Oaks produced a \$7.80 win ticket.

29

Ready for Shirl:

Racing debuts don't come any more sensational than this.

Roger Attfield sent out the 3-year-old filly, Ready for Shirl in a \$100,000 Maiden Special Weight at a mile and a 16th at Churchill Downs on April 13. Most horses would need a race like to this just to learn what's going on, but jockey Florent Geroux rallied Ready for Shirl from 11th at least 12 lengths out and had the filly flying late, passing rivals in the stretch and winning by an expanding 3 ½ lengths in 1:43.39. The bettors were surprised as Ready for Shirl paid \$17.86. The filly finished the year with 2 wins from 6 starts.

28

Bison City Stakes:



Stormcast

The 2nd leg of the Triple Tiara for 3-year-old fillies had a purse of \$250,500 and required a field of 9 to go a mile and a 16th on August 10. This was just another in a long line of examples of **Patrick Husbands** and **Mark Casse** ringing up a nice-paying Stakes winner. Husbands had Stormcast on the front end after a quarter mile and he was able to milk benign fractions of :47.17 and 1:11.00. That left enough in the tank for Stormcast to crush 8 rivals, winning by almost 8 lengths in 1:43.25. Stormcast is owned by K E M Racing Stable, and this win generated a \$15.50 win price. Stormcast will certainly attract Sovereign votes as Outstanding 3-Year-Old Filly. She raced 8 times in 2024, won twice, and hit the board in every race.

27

Wonder Where Stakes:



Hurricane Clair

The 3rd leg of the Triple Tiara was on September 8 at a mile and a quarter on the turf. Based on her impressive Bison City win, Stormcast went off at .35, but was upset by Hurricane Clair ridden by **Sahin Civaci**. Stormcast attempted another front-running decision, but Hurricane Clair tracked the leader for the first mile, moved alongside and inched away to win by half a length in 2:01.14. **Marty Drexler** trains for **David Rowbotham, Rodney Carpenter** and **Tony Boogmans**. It was Hurricane Clair's 3rd win from 12 starts and she paid \$10.50.

26

Julie Walker:



On Friday, March 8, the International Women's Day trot was contested at Mohawk, and it was Julie Walker prevailing with Prince of Sussex. All ten trotters in the field had lady drivers, and Walker was able to carve out a beneficial 2-hole trip. Prince of Sussex was getting nice cover from the favourite, Meadowbranch Noble (**Jessica Turenne**), but when that one broke stride in mid-stretch, Prince of Sussex seized the opportunity, cruised up the inside and won by 3 ¾ lengths in 1:55.4.

“I was quite happy sitting in the two-hole,” said Walker post-race. “Prince Of Sussex was down in class, so I think that was the confidence that I had. He had been racing pretty tough.”

Gerard Demers trains and shares this horse with **Zacharie Lemay**. Prince of Sussex paid \$5.20 to win.

25

Yannick Gingras:

All Yannick Gingras did on August 16 at Harrah’s Philly was win 10 races. His amazing day started when he swept the first 7 races with Go West Go Fast, Gap Kronos, Donegal Spirit, Going Away, Conversano, Captain Fancy and Stonecrestreachery. Gingras’ career appeared in tatters when he staggered in 2nd in both the 8th and 9th races, but then he won the 10th with Always B Naughty, the 11th with Twin B Fighter and the 12th with Real Lucky N. Those 10 wins tied a record for most wins on a Philly card, set twice previously by George Napolitano.

24

More James MacDonald:

Twin B Archie got a perfect two-hole trip from James MacDonald in the 4th race at Mohawk on December 9, came out at the head of the stretch and trotted easily to the win as the 6-5 favourite. Trained by Gabriella Sasso, the 5-year-old gelding won for the 2nd time in 12 tries. More importantly, his owners, Scott McEneny, Martwest Racing Stable and Cantucky Farm shared the winning cheque for \$8,000. That elevated MacDonald’s 2024 purse earnings to \$11,984,468, the most ever earned in a single year by a Mohawk-based driver. For the 3rd straight year, MacDonald posted more than 400 wins and secured his 4th straight Mohawk driving title.

23

Kentucky Derby:



It was, arguably, the most amazing finish in the history of the Kentucky Derby as Mystik Dan, under **Brian Hernandez Jr.** led all the way down the stretch and somehow prevailed by a nose over a troubled Sierra Leone (**Tyler Gaffalione**), who in turn, was just an inch or so better than the Japanese entry, Forever Young (**Ryusei Sakai**). There was no inquiry before the race was declared official, though Sierra Leone did appear to bump Forever Young in deep stretch and those who backed the 3rd-place horse might have had an argument that he was prevented from a better finish. There was speculation that Japanese honour prevented the connections from objecting. Mystik Dan, trained by **Ken McPeck** paid \$39.22 and went on to finish 2nd in the Preakness and 8th in the Belmont.

22

Bill Megens, 91, Wins a Harness Race:

Friday, December 20 at The Raceway at Western Fair, the 6th race was a trot for a purse of \$6,000. Willy Strike, a 3-year-old gelding was being driven by his owner and trainer, Bill Megens. Megens gave the horse an ideal trip, sitting in second for most of the race behind the even-money favourite, Ha Code Red. As the field turned for home, Megens took Willy Strike to the outside and the horse confidently took the lead and hit the finish line about a half length the best in 2:06. It was Willy Strikes’ 2nd win in his 24th race and he paid \$10.60. Much more significantly, the winning driver, Bill Megens was born in October 1933. Do the math – that means he won a race at the age of 91, which to our knowledge, makes him the oldest person to win a parimutuel harness race. This was his first win in over 3 years and the 1,190th of his career.

21

Belmont Stakes:

The 146th running of the Belmont Stakes was a very different animal. Because the Belmont track is undergoing renovations, the 3rd leg of the Triple Crown was part of a special 4-day meet at Saratoga and because of the Saratoga configuration, the race went at a mile and a quarter instead of the traditional mile and a half. Sierra Leone (**Flavien Prat**) was bet down to 8-5 by bettors who felt the horse had a troubled trip in



the Kentucky Derby. Unfortunately, Sierra Leone had a stumbling start, fell back to 9th in the 10-horse field, and a late surge was good enough for just a 3rd place finish. The winner was Dornoch (**Luis Saez**) who stalked the early leader, Seize the Grey (**Jaime Torres**) for the first mile, then battled with Mindframe (**Irado Ortiz**) down the stretch to win by half a length in 2:01.64. Trained by **Danny Gargan**, Dornoch won for the 4th time in 8 races and paid \$37.40.

20

Turf Champions Day:

September 14 at Woodbine featured 6 Stakes races, all on the grass. Even though the E.P. Taylor Stakes offered \$900,000, only 5 horses contested the mile and a quarter. Welcomed back from Del Mar, jockey Kazushi Kimura tried to execute a diabolical strategy with Full Count Felicia, gunning the 5-year-old mare right to the lead and opening up as many as 18 lengths on the others, who fully expected Full Count



Felicia to expire from her efforts. She didn’t and was still 3 lengths better than stablemate Moira (**Rafael Hernandez**) at the wire in the excellent time of 1:59.29. Kevin Attard is the trainer, and the mare is owned by Gold Square LLC. As the longest shot in the short field, Full Count Felicia paid \$17.60. The Woodbine Mile was worth \$1,200,000 and this was yet another case of **Mark Casse** and **Patrick Husbands** not only teaming up to win a Stakes but paying well to do so. Husbands gave Win for the Money a master class ride, bidding time in the back of the field early, then scooting up the inside all the way down the stretch to surge to the lead and win by 1 ½ lengths in 1:32.11, just .38 off the track record. This was another win for Live Oak Plantation and the \$29.30 win ticket was remarkable for a horse that is now 5 for 16, not to mention its rider/trainer connections. This was Casse’s 24th Stakes win this year at Woodbine, and it was Husbands’ 13th Stakes winning ride.

19

Sofia Vives:

The reigning Sovereign Award winning apprentice jockey made some more history in the Woodbine Oaks on July 20. The hard facts suggest that historically, trainers don’t put apprentices on horses in Stakes races, but **Josie Carroll** was confident Vives was the best rider for Kin’s Concerto. Carroll was right – Vives rated the filly in 4th, keeping a keen eye on the leader, Lookin to Conquer (**Jose Campos**) for the first 6 furlongs then asking for power as the field arched into the far turn. The 3-1 favourite, Caitlinhergrtness opened up by almost

Kin’s Concerto



2 lengths as they turned for home, but Kin’s Concerto was very brave and took the lead with less than 70 yards to go and won by a neck in 1:51.18. This was the filly’s 2nd win in her 5th race for Chiefswood Stables and she paid \$11.50. Sofie Vives became the first apprentice jockey ever to win the Woodbine Oaks.

18

David and Pietro Moran:

This does not happen very often in this sport – a father and son winning races on the same day. May 23 at Woodbine, David Moran rode Crumlin Beast to victory in the 4th race, a 5 ½ furlong dash for fillies and mares. Crumlin Beast, trained by **Michael Doyle** rallied from 7th early and got up by a neck to pay \$16.70. Four races later, ten 3-year-old fillies went 6 furlongs and David’s son, Pietro parlayed a front-running effort with Sinclairity into a decisive 2 ¼ length victory in 1:1.24. Sinclairity is trained by Kevin Attard and paid \$15.20.

17

Patrick Husbands:

On May 16, Woodbine paid tribute to Patrick Husbands, who then proceeded to demonstrate that in his 30 years of riding, he was still elite. Husbands was gifted with engraved photographs, a bottle of Johnny Walker and a Barbados-themed jacket. Husbands had just 3 mounts on the afternoon, but he won with 2 of them. In the 7th race, he rallied Lady

Aspiring apprentice flanked by Patrick Husbands and agent Leroy Trotman



Lantana from 10th to first for an 11-1 payoff. Then, in race 9, the \$120,000 Ruling Angel Stakes, he delivered the filly, Witwatersrand (\$4.60) for trainer **Mark Casse**.

16

James MacDonald, Legendary Hanover Win the Meadowlands Pace:

On July 13, the \$890,411 Meadowlands Pace was taken by Legendary Hanover who was driven by Mohawk champion, James MacDonald. Macdonald gunned Legendary Hanover to the front early, passed the half in :53.2 and with a final intimidating quarter of :26.1, Legendary Hanover crushed by over 5 lengths in 1:46.3, paying \$7 to win for trainer **Anthony**



Beaton. Three weeks later, Legendary Hanover would go a tick faster, winning the Cane Pace in 1:48.2. After a 5th place result in the Tattersall at Lexington in October, Legendary Hanover was retired. He won 12 of 23 and amassed \$1,480,635.

15

Emma-Jayne Wilson Injured:

She’s been hurt before, but the spill on October 25 was the most damaging to Emma-Jayne Wilson. Down the backstretch of a \$25,000 claim race, Wilson’s horse, Ready Shakespeare suffered a possible cardiac issue. The gelding

dropped back dramatically along the inside before going down, throwing Wilson inward.



"It sent me flying into the underside of the rail," she says. "I hit the upright of the fence with my back."

Wilson required surgery to repair a fractured pelvis, and she also suffered a broken bone in her neck, though fortunately there was no paralysis because of that.

Typically, Wilson, 43, is thinking only of returning to the sport she loves.

"The focus is full recovery and full capabilities," she declares. "I plan to return to being Emma-Jayne Wilson, top jock."

14

Bad Times at Woodbine High:

As the racing season entered the last few weeks, tragedy and injuries plagued the track. During the 2nd race on Saturday, November 9, Social Dancer, a 3-year-old filly ridden by David Moran suffered distress, was pulled up and subsequently euthanized. The 9th race that day was the Bessarabian Stakes and at the quarter pole, Owen's Tour Guide took a bad step, fell and he, too was humanely put down. Jockey **Jose Campos** was not injured, but Woodbine consulted the jockeys and the HBPA and elected to cancel the last two races that day and the entire card on Sunday. It turns out a 3rd horse had perished in training earlier that Saturday. Flawless Ruler, a 5-year-old gelding in a race on November 16, had to be eased by jockey **Keveh Nicholls** and needed to be put down. In the 3rd race on November 24, Tunechi, under **Skye Chernetz**, stumbled at the start, was eased out of the race down the backstretch and was humanely dispatched. On November 28, the 2-year-old Speight Rasees, in just her 2nd race, went down at the head of the stretch and did not survive. Rider **Jason Hoyte** was ok.

The next day, Mad Chatter, a 2-year-old gelding suffered a fatal fall. Chernetz was not badly hurt. As if that wasn't dreadful enough, there was a horrible 5-horse spill in the first race on November 22. No Layups clipped heels around the far turn and went down tossing **Edgar Zenteno**. That caused a chain reaction as Magnetize, Another Pinky, Mrs. Benjamin and Claramente all fell, losing their respective jockeys, **Juan Crawford, Da Sean Jackson, Justin Stein** and **Fraser Aebly**. None of the 5 horses were seriously injured. Aebly and Crawford escaped unharmed, and both rode the next day, but Crawford, Zenteno and Stein were all taken to the hospital. Stein suffered the worst damage – a broken shoulder blade and fractures in his lower back, and in the first week of December announced his retirement from the sport. Woodbine did not attribute this particular accident to any problem with the Tapeta surface.

13

Sahin Civaci:



Although he was born in Vancouver, Sahin Civaci attended jockey school in Turkey and began his career at some of the tracks in that European country. Suffice it to

say, not many could have predicted in April that by the end of the thoroughbred season, he would be Woodbine's leading rider. Those who were not convinced got an abundance of proof On November 23 that Civaci was the best rider when he won 6 of 10 races on the Woodbine card. Civaci started his awesome day in the 1st, scoring with Souper Success (\$2.60) for trainer **Marty Drexler**. Then he won the 4th aboard Little Red Domi, and this is a race you need to find, as it defied

logic. Little Red Domi trailed by 10 lengths as the field hit the far turn in this 5 ½ furlong dash. But as they came into the stretch, Civaci asked and Little Red Domi responded, surging past rivals, and winning by 2 lengths paying \$7.30 for trainer **Kevin Attard**. Civaci's 3rd winner came in race 6 with McGill (\$6.60) for Attard. He won the 7th aboard She Loves (\$3.70), trained by **John LeBlanc Jr.**, and then he won the 8th, which was the \$150,000 Shady Well Stakes with Pop Idol (\$12.90) for **Katerina Vassilieva**. Civaci completed his 6-win day in the 10th with Mizzen Ash (\$3.00) for **Michael Mattine**. *Down The Stretch* is predicting there is a Sovereign Award in Sahin Civaci's future.

12

Patches O'Houlihan:

Robert Tiller trained the fantastic sprinter, **Pink Lloyd** who won 29 of his 38 races, 26 of which were Stakes. Pink Lloyd won 8 Sovereign Awards during his 6 years on the track. Now Tiller has Patches O'Houlihan, who so far, is doing his best impression of Pink Lloyd. In 2024, Patches won 4 of his 5 races, all sprints, with a 2nd place finish in the Kennedy Road. Owner Frank Di Giulio references cultural entertainment when he names his horses – Pink Lloyd is a nod to the psychedelic rock group, **Pink Floyd** and Patches O'Houlihan was an eccentric character, played by **Rip Torn** in the silly film "Dodgeball". There's nothing silly about Patches O'Houlihan's chances of being named Outstanding Sprinter in Canada at the next Sovereign Awards.

11

Josie Carroll:



On August 11, Josie Carroll sent out Spinzar in the 4th at Woodbine. Under jockey **Luis Contreras**, the 4-year-old gelding led all the way and prevailed by ¾ of a length in 2:05.20 for the mile and a quarter on the turf. This was the 1,000th training win for Carroll who was inducted into the Canadian Horse Racing Hall of Fame in 2019. Carroll was the first lady trainer to produce a Queen's Plate winner – Mighty Heart in 2020. Spinzar is owned by LNJ Foxwoods, and he paid \$12.30.

10

Scott Zeron:

August 31 was a wonderful night for Scott Zeron who popped into Mohawk and took down the 2 big races of the night. The Canadian Pacing Derby was worth \$540,000 and Zeron had to carve out a creative trip for Its My Show. From post 3, Its My Show was 2nd early, but as the field turned for home, he was seriously trapped along the inside in 5th. In deep stretch, Zeron managed to escape the rail and stick handled Its My Show through a seam to nail Abuckabett Hanover at the wire, a nose the best in 1:48.1. **Linda Toscano** is the winning trainer for Richard and Joanne Young. Its My Show snapped off a 9-race losing streak and paid \$16.30. Then, Zeron was in the bike for the heavy favourite, Periculum in the \$600,000 Maple Leaf trot and his timing was perfect as Periculum came flying through the stretch to win by over 2 lengths in 1:50.4. **Marcus Melander** is the trainer for Holly Lane Stud and Brixton Medical. Periculum paid just \$3.30.

9

Dexter Dunn:

It's generally acknowledged that Dexter Dunn is the greatest harness driver on the planet, and he provided abundant

proof of that in 2024. On September 21 at Mohawk, there were 5 lucrative Stakes races and Dunn won 3 of them. He steered French Champagne home in the \$347,000 Elegant Image Stakes for **Åke Svanstedt**, scored with Amazing Catch in the \$713,000 Maple Leaf Trot, also for Svanstedt, then capped his night by winning the Mohawk Million with Maryland for **Marcus Melander**. Then, on Breeders Crown weekend (October 25-26), Dunn delivered the winners in 6 of the 12 categories. In the past 6 years alone, Dunn has won over 2,200 races for more than \$75,000,000 in purses. His UDRS, which measures a driver's success rate is .312 through almost 12,000 drives, roughly equivalent to a major league batter hitting over .350 for 9 seasons.

8

North America Cup:



On June 15, 10 of the best 3-year-old pacers lined up for the \$1,000,000 North America Cup. **Jody Jamieson** had Captains Quarters on top by 1 ½ lengths through a half in :54.1, at which point, Nijinsky and **Louis-Philippe Roy** were 5th and getting very live cover from a first over Legendary Hanover. In the stretch, Roy brought Nijinsky off the rail and the pair surged from 4th to the lead with an 8th of a mile to go, hitting the finish line almost 2 lengths the best in 1:48.1, the fastest mile of Nijinsky's career. **Anthony Beaton** is the trainer for West Wins Stable, **John Fielding** and **Mark Dumain**. This was Nijinsky's 5th straight win, and he paid \$7.90.

7

Mohawk Million:



The rules were changed this year. The 10 owners had to put up \$50,000, half of what was required previously for this huge race for 2-year-old trotters at Mohawk. The \$50,000 ponied up by the connections of Maryland was a great investment. Driven by **Dexter Dunn**, Maryland took the overland route, rallying from 7th down the backstretch to unleash a powerful kick in the stretch, passing rivals aggressively to win by 3 lengths in 1:52.3. Maryland is owned by Holly Lane Stud East, Courant Inc, PCW Racing and S. Stewart R. Thorn Stable. Maryland paid \$3.90 to win.

6

History Made in the Prince of Wales:



On September 10, Queen's Plate winner Caitlinhergrtness passed on this race, assuring there would be no Triple Crown sweep. There was, however, a historic moment, as Vitality under **Jose Campos** parlayed a 6-wide move on the final turn into victory by 4 lengths in 1:55.72 for the mile and $\frac{3}{16}$ ths. The importance of Vitality's win is that the gelding's trainer, **Harold Ladouceur**, a member of the Moosomin and Kikino Métis settlement, became the first indigenous person to train a winner of a Canadian Triple Crown race. Vitality is owned by **Stronach Stables** and **Joel B. Hunsburger**, and with his 2nd win from 9 races, paid \$20.10.

5

Breeders' Stakes Sweep for Chiefswood:

The Breeders' Stakes (the 3rd leg of the Canadian Triple Crown) was held at Woodbine on September 29, and it produced a remarkable finish for Chiefswood Stables. **Justin Stein** delivered Roscar to victory after stalking the early leader, Thor's Cause (**Jeffrey Alderson**) for the better part of a mile. At the end of 1 ½ miles, Roscar was alone at



the wire by a length and a half in 2:34.72, not even close to the course record of 2:25.14. The 2nd place horse was Saccharine (Rafael Hernandez) followed by Side Street (Sofia Vives) in 3rd. All of the first 3 finishers are owned by Chiefswood Stables. **Rachel Halden** is the trainer of Roscar and Saccharine and **Layne Gilforte** trained Side Street. Roscar won for the 2nd time in 6 races and paid \$8.50.

4

King's Plate Washed Out:

In 1860, the first Queen's Plate was run at the Carleton Race Course located at Dundas and Keele in Toronto's west end. It was won by Don Juan. In the ensuing 163 years, not a single running was cancelled because of weather, politics,

union strikes or malfunctioning starting gates. But the 165th running, now the King's Plate, did not go. Rain began pelting Woodbine shortly after the 1st race and that soon morphed into a torrential monsoon. After the 5th race, Woodbine made the very difficult decision to cancel the remaining 8 races, which included the King's Plate. "Safety is always number 1," said Woodbine CEO **Michael Copeland**. "Despite this being such an important day, we really have to make the decision that is best for the horses and the jockeys."

3

A Filly Wins the 165th King's Plate:



Fate and the confluence of events dictated that the top 3 stories for 2024 would all be about females. The only question was the order. The 165th King's Plate was run on Friday, August 28. Trainers **Mark Casse** and **Kevin Attard** each sent out 3 runners in the 12-horse field. Casse's Essex Serpent (**Patrick Husbands**) led for the first 6 furlongs, and though the pace was not excessively quick (1:11.60), Essex Serpent was all done before the far turn as another Casse horse, My Boy Prince (**Sahin Civaci**) asserted himself on the front end. Into the stretch, My Boy Prince had a lead of at least 2 lengths, but **Rafael Hernandez** had the filly, Caitlinhergrtness in full gallop. In mid-stretch, the race was clearly between My Boy Prince and Caitlinhergrtness with no other threats. As the pair neared the wire, the filly started to pull away and Caitlinhergrtness won by $\frac{3}{4}$ of a length in 2:03.45. Midnight Mascot (**Luis Contreras**) also trained by Casse finished 3rd and Attard trained both the 4th place horse, Pierre (**Pietro Moran**) and the 5th place horse, Jokestar (**Emma-Jayne Wilson**).

Caitlinhergrtness, named after the basketball star, **Caitlin**

Clark, became the 36th filly to win Canada's most prestigious race. This was the filly's 3rd win in her 7th race, and she paid \$20.70. Rafael Hernandez now has a King's Plate win to go with his two Queen's Plate victories. He also teamed with Attard aboard Moira in 2022, and he scored aboard Shaman Ghost in 2016.

2

Moira's Breeders' Cup Win:



It was Moira's 3rd try in the \$2 Million Breeders' Cup Filly and Mare Turf. In 2022, some 9 weeks after winning the Queen's Plate, Moira finished 5th at Keeneland. The next year she was 3rd, a length behind Inspiral at Santa Anita. On November 2nd, she gave Canadian racing fans the ultimate thrill at Del Mar. This time the race was at a mile and $\frac{3}{8}$ ths. Moira's jockey, **Flavien Prat** had her in mid-pack, perhaps 7th halfway through the race as stablemate Full Count Felicia (**Irado Ortiz**) led for just over the first mile. As the field of 12 turned for home, Moira powered up to challenge a tiring Full Count Felicia. With less than $\frac{1}{16}$ th to go, Moira forged to a clear lead as Full Count Felicia was tiring, and at the wire, Moira won it by $\frac{1}{2}$ length over a closing Cinderella's Dream (**William Buick**). The race was timed in 2:14.95.

Almost as sensational as Moira winning, was the camera work on trainer, **Kevin Attard** as he watched his filly win. Attard held nothing back, shouting and gesturing in sheer ecstasy as Moira sealed the deal. It was assumed that this would be Moira's last race as two days later, she was sold for \$4.3 Million at the Fasig-Tipton November Sale, but the buyer, Bayles subsequently seemed to be considering racing the mare in Australia.

and the #1 story of the year



Emma-Jayne Wilson:

On Thursday, July 11 at Woodbine, Emma-Jayne Wilson was the rider on Perfect Lady Bee in the 4th at Woodbine. It was a \$111,300 Maiden Special Weight and Wilson needed just a 5th place finish to squeak past the legendary **Julie Krone** as the female jockey with the highest total purse earnings. Wilson grabbed the record in style, rallying Perfect Lady Bee from off the pace and making up at least 3 lengths in the stretch to win by about $\frac{1}{2}$ a length. Trained by **Roger Attfield** and owned by **Charles Fipke**, Perfect Lady Bee won first time out and paid \$8.60. More importantly, the \$43,080 first place prize sent Wilson about \$40,000 past Krone's record of \$90,126,584.

This is a tribute to Wilson's great physical talent and her longevity. This year was her 21st season of riding at Woodbine. Before her accident, she had won 1,930 times from 14,565 rides. In 2008, she became the first (and still the only) female rider to win the Queen's Plate when she urged Mike Fox to victory. Wilson won Sovereign Awards in 2005 and 2006 as Canada's Outstanding Apprentice. She was also an Eclipse Award winner in the U.S. in 2005 as a bug. In 2018, she was awarded the Avelino Gomez Memorial Award, presented to the individual who contributes significantly to the sport of horse racing.



RACETRACK HUMOUR



Perry & Mooch

Horseplayers' New Years Resolutions.

- + I will not bet on a favourite (unless it can't lose)
- + I will not put a large amount to show on a 'sure' thing
- + After making HPI deposits through my checking, savings and U.S. accounts and from 2 credit cards, I will not apply for a pay-day loan
- + I have never bet on Mike Luzzi, but I *will* bet on Lane Luzzi
- + I will bet Mohawk's new 20-cent Pick-6 wager and double down when there's a carryover
- + I will not wager on Doomben, just because it's post time
- + I will not bet on Jacqueline Davis, but I do think she's pretty
- + Losing 20 races in a row will not stop me from the 21st
- + I will play Churchill Downs because I like the extra pennies
- + I will restrict to 4 the number of friends from which I will borrow money
- + I will not bet into pools with 25% takeout
- + I will not jump into pools with 25% water

The Ageless Wonders

Don McKirgan Still Winning at 84



What's the oldest you can be and still perform at an elite level in a professional sport? Gordie Howe scored 15 goals for the Hartford Whalers in the 1979-90 season. Howe was 52 when he retired. George Blanda completed a pass and did some

kicking for the 1975 Oakland Raiders when he was 48. Satchel Paige pitched 3 innings for the Kansas City Athletics in 1965. He was 59.

All those take a back seat to Don McKirgan. McKirgan turned 84 in October, and he is still driving harness horses into the winner's circle. On December 10, he gave the 10-year-old Sweet Honey an aggressive drive to win the 7th race at Northfield Park in Ohio. McKirgan was forced to go 3-wide through the entire first quarter, but after Sweet Honey finally got the lead, he had plenty left to win by a length in 2:00.1.

That was McKirgan's 12th win of 2024, and he did it in his 82nd drive, so the guy is still producing a strike rate of 14%. McKirgan obviously knew what Sweet Honey could do. He has been the gelding's trainer in every one of his 286 starts and he has driven the horse 258 times.

McKirgan's stats go back long before computers calculated drivers' production. He is credited on Standardbred Canada with 3,730 wins of which 762 occurred before 1977. He has been driving almost exclusively at Northfield Park since 1958. In 1977 and 1981, he was the leading driver at Northfield, and on 4 occasions had the best UDRS of all the drivers at that track. UDRS is a mathematical evaluation of a driver's success rate. McKirgan's career UDRS is .296. Anything over .300 is elite. Dexter Dunn, the world's best harness driver has a lifetime .312 average. James MacDonald, the best we have in Canada, clocks in at over .340 over the past 4 years.

That McKirgan is still producing well into his 9th decade is amazing. In 2003 he was struck with Gullain-Barre syndrome, which left him mostly paralyzed for 18 months. Appropriately, McKirgan rehabilitated himself by getting back in the sulky and working pacers and trotters in the mornings. He returned to professional driving in 2005 and was back in the winner's circle with the 2nd horse he steered.

In His 10th Decade, William Megens Wins a Race



It was the 6th race at London's Western Fair on December 20, a trot with a purse of \$6,000. William Megens was the pilot for the 3-year-old Willy Strike, who went off

as the 3rd choice at 4-1. Megens gave the horse an ideal trip, sitting 2nd for the first $\frac{3}{4}$, then moving outside the longtime leader, My Sweet MVP as the field turned for home. In the stretch, Willy Strike was the best, getting up to win by half a length. It was a routine horse race, except for the fact that the driver, Megens, had turned 91 years old a few weeks earlier. According to Standardbred Canada, Megens is the only drive older than 90 to win a pari-mutuel race in Canada and, until someone notifies us otherwise, we're saying he's the oldest person ever to win a horse race in North America.

"Everyone thinks I'm too old. I'm 91, but the horse does the running," says Megens, "as long as you've got a clear head and you're strong enough to hold onto the horse."

Willy Strike, also owned, trained, and bred by Megens, paid \$10.60. This was Megens' first win in 3 years as a driver, but the 1,160th of a career that dates back to the mid-1960s. He still raises horses on his farm in Guelph. Apparently, the rigors of a horse race don't affect him as much as the drive from his farm to Western Fair.

"That drive, especially if you're by yourself, it makes it kind of tough," he says. "I'm not 40 years old anymore, but I'm lucky. I can still do it. I still really enjoy it. It's a little tougher now, especially going all the way down to London if the roads are not okay."

Two For One Retirement

A pair of award-winning 5-year-old mares, both owned by Millar Farms, were celebrated at Mohawk Park on Saturday, December 21 as both concluded their careers. Silver Label and Prohibition Legal both raced for the last time, and as they had done multiple times before, they competed in the same race. This time it was a



Silver Label and Prohibition Legal raced for the last time

New Image Media Photo

\$36,000 Mares Preferred. Prohibition Legal was driven by Louis-Philippe Roy and was bet down to 1-2. James MacDonald handled Silver Label, who was the 2nd choice at 9-5. And Silver Label paced off into the sunset with another fine piece of work. MacDonald had her 4th at the half as Prohibition Legal surged to the lead in :56.1. MacDonald pulled Silver Label off the rail as the field went around the far turn and Silver Label, without cover and in the final 8th, cleared and paced with power to the finish line, as Prohibition Legal faded to 4th. The time for the mile was 1:51.2.

This was Silver Label's 26th career win from 61 starts as she earned \$1,678,857 with a lifetime best score of 1:47.3 at the Meadowlands. She was the 2022 O'Brien Award winner as 3-Year-Old Filly Pacer of the Year, winning the 2022 OSS Super Final, 2023 Lady Liberty, 2023 Perfect Sting and 2021 Champlain Stakes.

Prohibition Legal's racing career concluded with 13 wins from 40 starts and \$1.1



James MacDonald and Millar Farms are the champs

New Image Media Photo

million earned and a mark of 1:50. She won the 2021 O'Brien Award as 2-Year-Old Filly Pacer of the Year. Along the way, she captured the 2021 OSS Super Final and the 2021 Eternal Camnaton Stakes.

"There were so many highlights with these two mares," said owner George Millar. "To be as fortunate as I was to have two such great mares in the same year, and it was hard to watch them race against each other. I was a little bit emotional watching them go to the post, and when they both turned for home, I was ready to cry."

The win by Silver Label, who paid \$5.80, was the 51st of the year for Millar Farms, and even though there were still a few cards of racing remaining on the 2024 Mohawk Calendar, Millar Farms had already assured itself of a 2nd straight Leading Owner Award.

Likewise, driver James MacDonald was honoured as the leading driver at Mohawk for the 4th straight year.

Silver Label will be bred to Always B Miki, while Prohibition Legal is lined up for a date with Sweet Lou.

James MacDonald

Just how good was 2024 for harness driver James MacDonald? Well, early in the year, he married his girlfriend, Paige Austin. In July, he won the Canadian Driving Championship at Hippodrome 3R, which means he will represent Canada at the worlds in New Zealand this year. In October, MacDonald did something he had never previously accomplished – he won a Breeders Crown race. In fact, he won 2 of them. He steered Lady Landia to a 12-1 upset in the 2-Year-Old Filly Pace, then delivered Coach Stefanos with a spine-tingling last-to-first charge in the Open Pace at odds of 5-1. At Mohawk, MacDonald didn't just win the drivers' title, he pulverized it with 407 wins – 133 more than Louis-Philippe Roy in 2nd place. That assures him of a 4th straight Joe O'Brien Award as Canada's Outstanding Driver.

So, you'd think the guy might relax, take his foot off the pedal and give the rest of the drivers a break. Not so much. After winning twice on the first night of racing on January 2 at Mohawk, MacDonald crushed it in Campbellville, winning 6 of 11 heats on the 2nd card on January 3rd.

MacDonald's night of domination began in the 2nd when he steered home the 4-year-old pacing mare, Nikki



Another belt for James MacDonald

Six (\$2.70) for trainer Rick McNair. Then he swept 4 in a row – the 4th with Neverlose Felix (\$4.80) for D Gladu, the 5th with Topville Checkmein (\$2.50), trained by W Hie, then the 6th behind Western Wish (\$2.80) for Carmen Auciello, and the 7th with So Much More for trainer D Beatson.

The bettors did not prosper nearly as much as the owners of those horses. The first all-MacDonald pick-3 (races 4,5&6) paid just \$6.90. The ensuing one was worth \$9.60.

So, MacDonald entered the 11th and final race of the night, needing a win with the 5-year-old mare, Lyons Bettorday in an \$18,000 pace to post a 6-win night. Mission accomplished – MacDonald moved Lyons Bettorday off cover as the field turned for home and Lyons Bettorday ripped through the stretch with a :28.1 final quarter to win by 3 lengths in 1:55.2. The winning trainer is Tony Beaton, and Lyons Bettorday won for the 10th time in her 57th race for Three Lyons Racing. The win price was \$7.80.

Lyons Bettorday gave MacDonald a better night than all his rivals. By winning 8 of his first 20 drives, he was once again leading the drivers' standings.

Woodbine Stakes

November 30, \$241,500 Princess Elizabeth Stakes:

At a mile and $\frac{1}{16}$ th for 2-year-old fillies, this one had

In the final 8th, Aebly had a ton of horse underneath as Notorious Gangster was passing rivals in deep stretch to get up for a tidy 2-length win in 1:52.79. **Josie Carroll** trains for **Mark Dodson**. Notorious Gangster committed a winning crime for the 2nd time in 4 races and paid \$22.30.



a field of 11. Shifty (**Sahin Civaci**) went off at 4-5 but had traffic issues and finished 4th. **Patrick Husbands** had Aristella last after a quarter mile, but comfortable down the backstretch, and as the field navigated the far turn, Aristella was making a confident 4-wide move. By the 16th pole, she was slightly in front and managed to maintain an advantage to the wire, winning by half a length in 1:48.78. The 2-year-old filly is trained by **Rachel Halden** and owned by Flying Zee Racing Stables. With her 2nd win from 5 starts, she paid \$21.30.

December 7, \$135,000 Valedictory Stakes:



By this time, it was old news that **Sahin Civaci** will win the Sovereign Award as Canada's Outstanding Jockey. The voters will see that Civaci not only notched the most wins at Woodbine, but he also won the most Stakes races. Aboard Get Smokin, Civaci took the 7-year-old gelding straight to the front in this mile and half marathon and the pair stayed there throughout, benefitting from easy splits of 1:16.24 and 1:41.61 for the mile. Get Smokin entered the stretch ahead by 2 $\frac{1}{2}$ lengths and was alone at the wire by almost 4 lengths. The time for the race was 2:31.64, a little more than a second off the record for the rarely run distance. Trainer **Mark Casse** recorded his 29th Stakes win, and it was Civaci's meet leading 16th. Owned by Iron Horse Racing Stable, Blackridge Stables, TNT Equine Holdings and Saratoga Seven Racing Partners, Get Smokin added an 8th win to his 32-race career. And get this – the combination of the leading rider, leading trainer, and the horse that had won the most money in its career produced a \$12.10 win ticket.

December 14, \$100,000 La Prevoyante Stakes:

La Prevoyante in English means roughly "seeing into the



future," and by installing Fashionably Fab as the odds-on favourite of 6 fillies and mares going a mile and a 16th, the bettors accurately foretold the result. With David Moran aboard, the 4-year-old filly was rated kindly in 5th down the backstretch and came into the stretch with a 3-wide move. Long-time leader, Fortyfiveseventy (Daisuke Fukumoto) was a stubborn one and refused to yield, making the picture at the finish line very close. Upon the judges' scrutiny, Fashionably Fab was determined to have her nose in front. Kevin Attard trains for Terra Racing Stable. Fashionably Fab won 3 Stakes races in 2024 – this one, the Belle Mahone and the Ontario Matron. She has won 10 of her 17 starts. Attard had another fine year at Woodbine. This was his 10th Stakes victory. Fashionably Fab paid \$2.70.

December 15, \$100,500 Steady Growth Stakes:



This was the last shot at glory in the Woodbine season and 9 lined up to go a mile and a 16th. Ron's Gizmo went off at 6-5 and Rafael Hernandez rode accordingly, waiting confidently towards the rear of the field for the first 6 furlongs and with a 6-wide move around the turn, rocketed the 7-year-old gelding past rivals. It took Ron's Gizmo until the final 16th to find the lead and he hit the wire a half-length the best in 1:43.45. Trained by Ron Sadler and owned by Linda Theil and Harri Hosein, Ron's Gizmo was racing for the 31st time, registering his 8th win and paying \$4.50.

\$251,000 Coronation Futurity:



It was the 2-year-old boys going a mile and $\frac{1}{8}$ th and this one produced another upset. **Fraser Aebly** demonstrated perfect timing with Notorious Gangster, keeping the colt in 5th about 3 lengths off the lead down the backstretch.

Canada Out of Town:

A flock of Woodbine jockeys and trainers migrated quickly out of Ontario, and within days of the final card of thoroughbred racing in Canada, were busy at U.S. tracks. On December 27, Sahin Civaci, Woodbine's leading rider and a cinch Sovereign Award winner, rode the Ilkay Kantarmaci-trained filly, Golden Rocket to a 4th place finish in the \$100,000 Bay Ridges Stakes at Aqueduct. Reigning apprentice jockey of the year, Sofia Vives was also working Aqueduct, and on December 15, she delivered the 3-year-old filly, Panthea (\$11) to the winner's circle for trainer David Duggan. Kazushi Kimura, the 2023 Woodbine champion has been riding in California since the start of November. On Boxing Day, he lit up the tote board, shocking the bettors aboard the 3-year-old filly Kopion in the \$300,000 La Brea Stakes at 7 furlongs. Trained by Richard Mandella, Kopion was the longest shot in the 8-horse field and paid \$77.40.

Luis Contreras is picking up mounts at Turfway Park in Kentucky. Trainer Martin Drexler had an 82-win season at Woodbine and was back in his comfort zone, sending out horses at Gulfstream, as was Kevin Attard. Roger Attfield, Bill Tharrenos, Norm McKnight, Nick Gonzalez, and Josie Carroll had horses at Turfway and Gulfstream. Steven Chircop had a modest 20 wins in 2024 at Woodbine and he has horses at Laurel and Penn National this winter.

December 26, Santa Anita:



Kopion

Behoit Photo

The 3-year-old filly, Kopion, went off at 37-1 in the Grade 1, \$300,150 La Brea Stakes at 7 furlongs. But even though it was her first race since April, Kopion brought her "A" game. Under Kazushi Kimura, she tracked the early leader, Sandy Bottom (Luis Saez) from 2nd, moved to the lead before the head of the stretch, and was powerful to the wire, winning by almost 4 lengths in 1:22.08. This was the filly's 3rd win in 5 races. Kopion was bred by Ivan Dalos' Tall Oaks Farm out of their dam, Galloping Ami, who was the 2016 Canadian Broodmare of the Year. Kopion paid \$77.40.

December 29, Aqueduct:



Gun It

Adam Coglianese Photo

The 7th race had a field of 9 in allowance company, going 7 furlongs for \$95,000. Perhaps Sahin Civaci's reputation hasn't made it completely out of Ontario. He was riding Gun It, who went off at 16-1. Despite the punters' lack of interest, Gun It tracked the early speed from 2nd, had the lead before the field turned for home, and galloped to the wire the best by 3 lengths in 1:23.56. Gun It, an 8-year-old for just 2 more days, won for the 6th time in his 46th race for owner/trainer Ilkay Kantarmaci. He paid \$34.80.

January 2, Aqueduct:

They'll figure out soon that Sahin Civaci is an elite rider, but the bettors missed it again in the 4th race, a mile for



Causin' Mayhem

Adam Coglianese Photo

allowance company. Civaci rode Gone and Forgotten and the pair rallied from 5th at the half to win by a neck in 1:38.31. The winning trainer, again, was Ilkay Kantarmaci who also owns the 7-year-old mare. Gone and Forgotten won for the 13th time from 46 starts and paid \$20 to win in a 5-horse race.

January 3, Gulfstream:

The 3rd race offered \$43,000 to a field of 7, all of whom could be claimed for \$50,000. The distance was 7 ½ furlongs on the grass. Tyler Gaffalione did some excellent work with Causin' Mayhem, rating the 6-year-old Ontario-bred gelding in mid-pack early, then asking as the field raced for home. By closing between rivals late in the stretch, Causin' Mayhem got to the wire just in time, winning by a neck in 1:28.08. Marty Drexler trains for Randy Exelby, and this was Drexler's first win of 2025 with the 2nd horse he sent out. Causin' Mayhem had lost 14 straight at Woodbine. By breaking through in Hallandale, he paid \$6.60.

January 5, Gulfstream:

The 5th race had a field of 7 in an optional claim at a mile and a 16th on the all-weather track. Joel Rosario plotted this one perfectly with Tiz Romantic, keeping the 7-year-old Ontario-bred in 2nd, close to the leader, American Speed until challenging with a 5-wide move into the stretch. The battle went right down to the wire, with Tiz Romantic prevailing by a neck in 1:41.08. This was Marty Drexler's 2nd training win from just 3 starters in 2025. He is also the owner of Tiz Romantic, who was winless in 16 career races at Woodbine, but won for the 6th time in 30 tries at Gulfstream. The win price was \$9.80.

January 10, Gulfstream:

There were just 5 in the 6th, a \$41,000 race for \$35,000 claimers at 6 ½ furlongs, and Tyler Gaffalione gave Air Combat a nicely timed ride. Air Combat was 2nd until the stretch, took over the lead, and expanded his advantage to the wire, winning by 3 lengths in the good time of 1:15.71. The trainer is Marty Drexler for A. Bianco Holding. Air



Adam Coglianese Photo

Combat won a ground battle for the 8th time in his 25th race and paid \$7.20.

January 11, Aqueduct:

The 5th race was a maiden special weight at 6 furlongs with a purse of \$80,000. T Kraft saved all the ground for Sahin Civaci, shooting up the inside in late stretch and getting to the wire the best by just a nose in 1:11.94. Bill Mott trains and LRE Racing owns. The 3-year-old T Kraft broke through on his 6th try and paid \$8.10.

January 11, Gulfstream:

It was another win for Marty Drexler as Spider Belle and Luis Saez prevailed in a field of 12 fillies and mares in the 8th race, a \$10,000 claimer at a mile and a 16th. Spider Belle, an Ontario-bred, moved from 5th down the backstretch, saved ground along the inside and got up just before the wire to win by ¾ of a length in 1:43.82. This was Marty Drexler's 3rd win from just 5 sent out. He produced this one for his main guy, Bruno Schickedanz, and this was a nice pickup. Drexler and Schickedanz claimed Spider Belle on December 7 for \$15,000



Trainer Marty Drexler (all in black, left side of winning horse Spider Belle)

and this was her 1st race for the new owner. With her 8th win in her 39th start, she paid \$10.40.

January 12, Gulfstream:



Ready for a Fight

Adam Coglianese Photo

Marty Drexler continues to roll. He sent out Ready for a Fight in the 7th against 10 others in a \$10,000 claim race at 5 ½ furlongs. Tyler Gaffalione rated the 8-year-old gelding perfectly; they were 8th early, but passed rivals between the far turn and the head of the stretch. At the wire, Ready for a Fight was a nose the best in 1:03.63. Drexler trains this one for Bruno Schickedanz and with his 9th win from 35 starts, Ready for a Fight paid \$12.40.

Some People Do Very Bad Things to Racehorses...

Those of us who care for racehorses have to wonder, how did War Envoy, now a 13-year-old horse and a winner of almost \$500,000, end up in such a horrible circumstance? Why did the Kentucky Humane Society have to step in to save his life?

Olivia Dixon is the Equine Manager at the Kentucky Humane Society in Simpsonville, Kentucky.

"We take in horses that are in need of a home, or between homes," she tells *Down The Stretch*. "Animal control officers might call us about a case. We don't seize horses from people, and we don't investigate cruelty. We're just here for a place for them to go if they need a little bit of rehabilitation or if they need some training, just a place to hang out for awhile until they find a new home."

How did they find out about War Envoy?

"We were called one morning by the state livestock investigator who was in Frankfurt at a farm and asked if they had permission to remove 13 horses that were living

in a state of neglect," she says. "We got 2 trailers out there, and we were able to catch them and bring them to our farm."

One of the 13 horses was War Envoy. As a grandson of Danzig, he has Northern Dancer bloodlines. He won a couple races in Europe and ran in the Breeders' Cup Dirt Mile in Keeneland in 2015, finishing last of 11 to Liam's Map.

"War Envoy is definitely the most famous horse of the group," adds Dixon. "We also found Handsome Todd, Mischief Humor, Specific Vow, and a grey mare, Primela. I believe she was bred in France."

These were racehorses who performed for us, and they were found in despicable conditions.

"The thoroughbreds were in 10 by 10 corral panel pens outside with no shelter," says Dixon. "There was no food anywhere in sight. They were just standing in deep mud and appeared to be starving."

One wonders how this can happen. Dixon can only speculate.

"I believe that there wasn't much of a formal plan for their after-care or retirement," she says. "They were given away to somebody who said he would give them a good home, but it turns out that they did not. And so, they landed in the hands of somebody that just didn't take care of them."

Dixon has a message for anyone who is unable to care properly for a retired racehorse.

"It's really important for folks in the thoroughbred industry if they need to rehome a horse, they should contact some of the reputable rehoming organizations that make sure that the horses end up somewhere safe."

The Kentucky Humane Society is definitely not against horse racing.

"We don't take any sort of activist stance against racing," says Dixon. "In fact, we've received donations from Churchill Downs. I do know that there's plenty of great people in the industry who take great care of their horses."

...but Katie Cares

It was another terrific year for Southern Belle Thoroughbreds, which found new homes for 2,000 former racehorses in 2024. It was not as good a year for Katie Larsen, the founder of Southern Belle.

"Southern Belle Thoroughbreds is an organization that I started back in 2017," says Larsen. "My work is focused on finding second careers and basically find soft landings for horses who are retiring from racing. I'm at the track all the time. I have great relationships with a lot of the owners and the trainers and the connections of the horses. So, they'll let me know if there's a horse that they're not going to continue with for whatever reason. I'll see the horse at the racetrack, do my pictures, do my videos, discuss with them the circumstances of the horse, and then write an ad, and I showcase the horse on one of my social media platforms and get them out to the public for people who are looking for project horses off the track, riding horses or anything non-racing"

Wherever you are, Larsen can get a horse to you.

"I sell horses to people all over Canada," she says. "Heading east, especially out Quebec, Montreal, there aren't any racetracks for thoroughbreds, and people want former racehorses. I have a lot of shipping connections that I've made, so I send horses all the way out to Nova Scotia and Vancouver."

Down The Stretch asked Larsen to name some horses that we might have seen racing.

"I recently rehomed one for David Cody who was named Buttered Toast," she says. "I think she ran a number of times."

Buttered Toast is now an 8-year-old mare. She did run "a number of times," 48 to be exact, with 4 wins and 19 times on the board. She needed 25 tries to break her maiden, which she did July 16, 2022, scoring for Skye Chernetz at a mile $\frac{1}{16}$ th. To her credit, in her first

24 starts, she earned in-the-money cheques 9 times. Buttered Toast piled up \$226,211 in her 6-year racing career.

Larsen cites another horse that was most deserving of a soft landing after a long competitive career.

"I rehomed Aim for the Sky for Steve Chircop," she says. "He's now an 8-year-old and was a really nice war horse. A lot of people would have known him."

A lot of people would have cashed in on Aim for the Sky. In 44 races, he won 5 times and finished second 15 times. He never won a Stakes, but on May 14, 2023,

under jockey Rico Walcott, Aim for the Sky was best in a \$111,000 allowance race. At 5 $\frac{1}{2}$ furlongs and at odds of 8-1, Aim for the Sky parlayed a front-running effort into a $\frac{1}{2}$ -length win in 1:04.49. The gelding earned \$377,758.

Finding homes for racehorses is very satisfying work for Larsen. Not so pleasant is the injury she suffered earlier in 2024. Larsen is an exercise rider for Kevin Attard.

"It was early in the season," she says. "It was just a freak accident. I was just sitting on a horse that I've ridden a couple of times. We were out on the main track at Woodbine, and I was just standing with her at the wire, looking for a clearing, waiting to start galloping. And as soon as I pushed her forward, something spooked her, and she went up and over and flipped over and landed on top of me. She broke my femur in three places and also fractured my pelvis."

That was back in May, and, understandably, Larsen's recovery has been slow.

"I still feel it every step that I take," she says. "But I'm doing the necessary rehab to hopefully be able to get back on the horses soon. It has allowed me to really focus, put 100% on my rehoming work. So, I was back at Woodbine on my crutches, walking around taking pictures of horses all year."

As for the name, Southern Belle, *Down The Stretch* commented to Larsen that it conjured up images of Savannah, Georgia. That makes her laugh.

"So, the first horse I took off the track back in 2017, her name was Mia Bella Amore," she says. "She ran only 3 times. I just called her Belle. She had such an attitude, so I called her my little Southern Belle and the name just stuck. I am technically in Southern Ontario. It's just a catchy name."

Since its inception in 2017, Southern Belle has found new homes for over 1,000 thoroughbred horses.



2024 O'Brien Award Finalists Announced by Jeff Porchak

Standardbred Canada announced the finalists for the 36th O'Brien Awards, honouring Canada's best in harness racing over the past season.

The winners will be announced at the O'Brien Awards Gala on Saturday, Feb. 8, 2025, which will take place at the Hilton Mississauga/Meadowdale.

Chantilly and Wickedpace are finalists in the **Two-Year-Old Pacing Filly** category. Canada's fastest two-year-old filly this past season, Chantilly went 9 for 9 for conditioner Nick Gallucci. She bankrolled \$761,000, collecting the Shes A Great Lady and Eternal Camnation Stakes at Mohawk, along with 6 Ontario Sires Stakes (OSS) victories. Wickedpace will have to settle for 2nd place in this category, despite the 2 wins and 3 seconds she posted in 5 starts.

The finalists for the **Two-Year-Old Pacing Colt** category are Crack Shot and Stonebridge Wizard. Crack Shot earned \$238,825 from 8 starts, posting 5 victories including 2 OSS Grassroots and the OSS Super Final at Mohawk. Stonebridge Wizard picked up 2 OSS Gold events and collected \$284,100 from 9 starts, including a 1:51.2 lifetime mark in the Battle of Waterloo at Grand River Raceway.

Its A Love Thing and Odds On Platinum are the finalists in the **Three-Year-Old Pacing Filly** division. Its A Love Thing won half of her 14 starts, scoring victories in the Fan Hanover Stakes and the Jerry Silverman Memorial while amassing \$843,884 for trainer David Menary. Odds On Platinum, trained by Dr. Ian Moore, collected \$751,389 in 19 starts, that included wins in the Courageous Lady at Northfield Park, James M. Lynch Memorial at Pocono Downs, and OSS Super Final at Mohawk.

Legendary Hanover and Nijinsky, both trained by Anthony Beaton, headline the **Three-Year-Old Pacing Colt** division. Legendary Hanover took the O'Brien as a 2-year-old and won 9 of 14 in 2024, earning \$1,075,535. He won the Meadowlands Pace and Cane Pace, both at The Meadowlands, as well as the Empire Breeders Classic at Tioga Downs. Nijinsky will make this a tough decision for the voters. He won the \$1 million North America Cup and bankrolled \$1,665,887 with 11 wins from 17 starts.

Sylvia Hanover and Twin B Joe Fresh are finalists in the **Older Pacing Mare** division. Reigning Somebeachsomewhere Horse of the Year, Sylvia Hanover captured the Clara Barton Distaff Pace at Plainridge Park and the Allerge Mares Pace at The Red Mile. She posted 12 top three finishes and accrued \$492,700 in purses. Twin B Joe Fresh's 11 wins from 13 starts will attract the votes. She posted victories in the Breeders Crown, Dayton Distaff Derby and FanDuel Open Mare Pace, as well as the Roses Are Red Stakes and Milton Stakes to sweep the "Canadian Older Mares" double.

Abuckabett Hanover and Taurasi are the **Older Pacing Horse** finalists. As a 6-year-old, Abuckabett Hanover crushed in 2024. Totalling \$1,144,111 in seasonal earnings, he posted Stakes victories in the William R. Haughton Memorial and FanDuel Open Pace at The Meadowlands along with two Preferreds at Mohawk. Taurasi prospered in the Preferred ranks in 2024 at Mohawk. He won the Preferred Pace 11 times, including one streak of 9 straight, which contributed greatly to his bankroll of \$304,963.

The **Two-Year-Old Trotting Filly** division is between Lasting Dream and Monalishi. Lasting Dream won 2 of her 9 starts, including the Pure Ivory final at Mohawk, finishing the season with \$393,615 in earnings. Monalishi made the OSS program her own personal playground, scoring wins in 4 of 5 starts. She also took down the Peaceful Way final at Mohawk and earned \$562,811 from 10 starts.

Maryland and You Got It Kemp are the finalists for the **Two-Year-Old Trotting Colt** division. Maryland dominated the division with 6 wins and amassed \$1,675,697 in purses

from 9 starts. He collected the William Wellwood Memorial and Mohawk Million in Canada, as well as the Breeders Crown and Peter Haughton Memorial in the U.S.. You Got It Kemp won 5 of his 6 starts; all those victories came at the OSS Gold level. An impressive score in the OSS Super Final at Mohawk pushed purse earnings to \$378,167.

The **Three-Year-Old Trotting Filly** division finalists are Drawn Impression and Willys Home Run. Defeated last year in this category, Drawn Impression won the Casual Breeze and Simcoe Stakes and earned \$373,615. Last year's winner as Canada's Two-Year-Old Trotting Filly, Willys Home Run won 4 of 13 in 2024, picking up \$431,311. She won 2 OSS Golds and repeated as the OSS Super Final champion for trainer Kyle Fellows.

The finalists in the **Three-Year-Old Trotting Colt** division are Highland Kismet and Paquet. Highland Kismet won 8 of 17 in his first competitive year. He won the Goodtimes Trot and the Simcoe at Mohawk as well as the Bluegrass Stakes at The Red Mile, piling up \$727,850 in earnings. Paquet raced only 8 times. He was a perfect 3 for 3 in the OSS program, including an impressive multi-length score in the Ontario Sires Stakes Super Final. Paquet finished his season with a bankroll of \$344,432.

2024 O'BRIEN AWARD FINALISTS PACERS

Two-Year-Old Pacing Filly CHANTILLY

Owners: Millar Farms, Stouffville, ON
Breeder: Millar Farms, Stouffville, ON
WICKEDPACE

Owners: Paul & Jayme Cameron, Guelph, ON
Arnolds Horse Shack, Mississauga, ON
Breeder: Winbak Farm, Chesapeake City, MD

Two-Year-Old Pacing Colt CRACK SHOT

Owners: Gregg McNair, Guelph, ON
Dale Hunter, London, ON
Frank Brundle, East Garafraxa, ON
George Kerr, Gowanstown, ON
Breeder: James Avritt, KY
STONEBRIDGE WIZARD
Owner: David Kryway, Amherstburg, ON
Breeder: Angie Stillier, London, ON

Three-Year-Old Pacing Filly ITS A LOVE THING

Owners: Eric Good, Davidsonville, MD
Thomas Biederman, Lexington, KY
Josh Green, Midway, KY
Breeders: Marvin Katz & Lynn Katz, Toronto, ON
Al Libfeld, Pickering, ON
ODDS ON PLATINUM

Owners: Let It Ride Stables Inc., Boca Raton, FL
Odds On Racing, Boca Raton, FL
Breeder: Hanover Shoe Farms Inc, Hanover, PA

Three-Year-Old Pacing Colt LEGENDARY HANOVER

Owners: Eric Good, Davidsonville, MD
West Wins Stable, Wellington, FL
Mark Dumain, Pine Bush, NY
Breeder: Hanover Shoe Farms Inc., Hanover, PA
NIJINSKY

Owners: West Wins Stable, Wellington, FL
John Fielding, Scarborough, ON
Mark Dumain, Pine Bush, NY
Breeder: Jeffrey Snyder, New York, NY

Older Pacing Mare SYLVIA HANOVER

Owner: Hudson Standardbred Stb Inc., Hudson, QC
Breeder: Hanover Shoe Farms Inc., Hanover, PA
TWIN B JOE FRESH

Owners: Chris Ryder, Allentown, NJ
Dexter Dunn, Millstone, NJ
Peter Trebotica, Bordentown, NJ
Barry Spak, Thornton, PA

Breeder: Brittany Farms LLC, Versailles, KY

Older Pacing Horse ABUCKABETT HANOVER

Owners: William Pollock, Freehold, NJ
Bruce Areman, Freehold, NJ
Andrew Harris, Allentown, NJ

Breeder: Hanover Shoe Farms Inc, Hanover, PA
TAURASI

Owners: Brad Grant, Milton, ON
Alagna Racing LLC, Jackson, NJ

Breeders: M T Pockets Stables, Pompano Beach, FL
Victoria Howard, Delray Beach, FL

TROTTERS

Two-Year-Old Trotting Filly LASTING DREAM

Owner: Determination, Montreal, QC
Breeder: Determination, Montreal, QC
MONALISHI

Owners: Tim Klemencic, Trenton, ON
Blake MacIntosh, St. George, ON
Breeder: Shmuel Farhi, London, ON

Two-Year-Old Trotting Colt MARYLAND

Owners: Courant Inc., Delray Beach, FL
PCW Racing LLC, Delray Beach, FL
Holly Lane Stud East Ltd., Vero Beach, FL
SStewartRThorn Stable, Paris, KY
Breeder: Hanover Shoe Farms Inc., Hanover, PA
YOU GOT IT KEMP

Owners: Brady & Brooke & Dan Lagace, Cambridge, ON
Suojalampi Stable Inc., Delray Beach, FL

Breeders: Kemppi Stables Oy Inc., Delray Beach, FL
Suojalampi Stable Inc., Delray Beach, FL

Three-Year-Old Trotting Filly DRAWN IMPRESSION

Owner: Determination, Montreal, QC
Breeder: Determination, Montreal, QC
WILLYS HOME RUN

Owners: Dr. Sara Gatchell, Strathroy, ON
Jake Higgs, Strathroy, ON
Reg Higgs, Ilderton, ON

Yolanda Fellows, Rockwood, ON
Breeder: Reg Higgs, Strathroy, ON

Three-Year-Old Trotting Colt HIGHLAND KISMET

Owner: Highland Thoroughbred Farm, Inglewood, ON
Breeder: Highland Thoroughbred Farm, Inglewood, ON
PAQUET

Owners: Carl Jamieson, Puslinch, ON
Estate of Brian Paquet, Quebec, QC
1140545 Ontario Ltd, Guelph, ON
Douglas Good, Chatham, ON

Breeder: Seelster Farms Inc., Lucan, ON

Older Trotting Mare CALL ME GOO

Owners: Graham Grace Stables LLC, Clifton, VA
Åke Svanstedt Inc., Wrightstown, NJ
Breeder: William Roberts, Brandywine, MD
M-M'S DREAM

Owners: Eleven Star Stables, Monroe, IN
Frank Baldachino, Harvey Cedars, NJ
Hillside Stables, Dundee, OH

Breeder: Mervin Miller, Topeka, IN

Older Trotting Horse AMIGO VOLO

Owners: Pinske Stables, Plato, MN
David J. Miller, Lake Mary, FL
Breeders: Kentuckiana Farms LLC, Lexington, KY
Jørgen Jahre, Sandefjord, Norway
LOGAN PARK

Owners: Outofthepark Stable, Rockwood, ON
Reg Higgs, Ilderton, ON
Arpad Szabo, Bradford, ON

Breeders: Reg Higgs, Denfield, ON
Donna Higgs, Denfield, ON

PEOPLE AWARDS

O'Brien Award of Horsemanship Guy Gagnon, Gatineau, QC Carl Jamieson, Puslinch, ON

Armstrong Breeder of the Year Determination, Montreal, QC Millar Farms, Stouffville, ON

Keith Waples Driver of the Year James MacDonald, Guelph, ON Louis-Philippe Roy, Campbellville, ON

Trainer of the Year

Nick Gallucci, Stouffville, ON
David Menary, Cambridge, ON

Future Star Award

Todd Ratchford, Caledonia, ON
Brady Sweet, Springfield West, PEI



2 YEAR OLD **COLT TROT**

\$50,000E TOMPKINS GEERS

\$80,000E MILLARD FARMS FINAL
TWO \$20,000 LEGS

**\$575,000E WILLIAM WELLWOOD
MEMORIAL FINAL G1**
\$30,000 ELIMINATIONS

\$180,000E CHAMPLAIN STAKES G3

7 RACES \$955,000
IN TOTAL PURSES

2 YEAR OLD **FILLY TROT**

\$50,000E TOMPKINS GEERS

\$80,000E PURE IVORY FINAL
TWO \$20,000 LEGS

\$390,000E PEACEFUL WAY FINAL G1
\$30,000 ELIMINATIONS

\$180,000E CHAMPLAIN STAKES G3

7 RACES \$770,000
IN TOTAL PURSES

2 YEAR OLD **COLT PACE**

\$50,000E TOMPKINS GEERS

\$80,000E DREAM MAKER FINAL
TWO \$20,000 LEGS

\$230,000E NASSAGAWEYA STAKES G3

\$180,000E CHAMPLAIN STAKES G3

\$1,000,000G METRO PACE FINAL G1
\$40,000 ELIMINATIONS

8 RACES \$1,620,000
IN TOTAL PURSES

2 YEAR OLD **FILLY PACE**

\$50,000E TOMPKINS GEERS

\$70,000E WHENUWISHUPONASTAR FINAL
TWO \$20,000 LEGS

**\$220,000E ETERNAL CAMNATION
STAKES G3**

\$180,000E CHAMPLAIN STAKES G3

\$532,000E SHE'S A GREAT LADY FINAL G1
\$35,000 ELIMINATIONS

8 RACES \$1,127,000
IN TOTAL PURSES

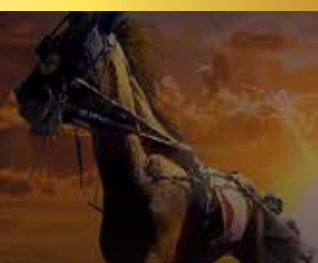
\$1,000,000 MOHAWK MILLION GR. 1

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End of the Line for Stein



At the age of 44 and still recovering from the worst spill of his career, jockey Justin Stein has announced his retirement, while at the same time, revealing that he has accepted an offer from the Alcohol and Gaming Commission of Ontario to be a steward.

This is Stein's second retirement. He left Woodbine in 2016, but the urge to ride never left him. Stein returned to professional race riding in 2019.

On November 22 of this year, he was one of 5 jockeys who were tossed from their horses in a frightening 5-horse spill down the backstretch of the first race. None of the horses was seriously hurt, but Stein went to hospital to be repaired with 3 fractures in his back, a broken rib and damaged shoulder.

We may never know if the physical harm hastened his decision to retire, but Stein had already been working on an insurance policy. As far back as September, he applied for a

steward's position, and shortly after returning home from surgery, was advised by the AGCO that he had been accepted.

It's a benefit for the sport to have a former jockey helping to make decisions. Only a rider knows what's really happening at track level.

Stein's career produced impressive numbers and multiple historic moments. He rode 10,792 horses and won 1,440 times, amassing purse earnings of \$64,594,881 (8 of his wins were in Stakes races).

In 2020, two years after coming back to the track after his initial retirement, Stein carved out his best season, winning 127 times and earning \$5,549,456 for the owners of the horses he rode. His biggest win that year came with the great mare, Starship Jubilee in the \$1,000,000 Woodbine Mile. Trained by Kevin Attard, Starship Jubilee won for the 19th and last time in her career and paid \$13.50.

Stein is in rare company among jockeys who have won each leg of the Canadian Triple Crown. He rode Straight of Dover (\$9.60) to a Queen's Plate win in 2012 for trainer Danny Vella. He won the Prince of Wales Stakes twice – in 2022 with Duke of Love (\$7.10) for Josie Carroll and in 2023 with Velocitor (\$17.70) for Kevin Attard.

And just to put a cherry on top of his excellent career, Stein won the 2024 Breeders Stakes with Chiefswood Stables' Roscar (\$8.50), trained by Rachel Holden.

"The Plate is the crowning achievement in any Canadian-born jockey's career," Stein says. "The fact I was able to win all three Triple Crown races before I retired – those are huge for me. When I think about many of the trainers I've worked with over the years, right from my first racing season at Woodbine up until now, that gives me warm and fuzzy feelings inside. I think the biggest thing is thinking about the horses I've ridden and some of the good ones, and how they'll always have a special place in my heart."

As for leaving the riding behind and morphing into a new and much safer environment, Stein's unsinkable positive attitude kicks in.

"The steward's position is a great job. I'm feeling like a young guy again going into a new industry."

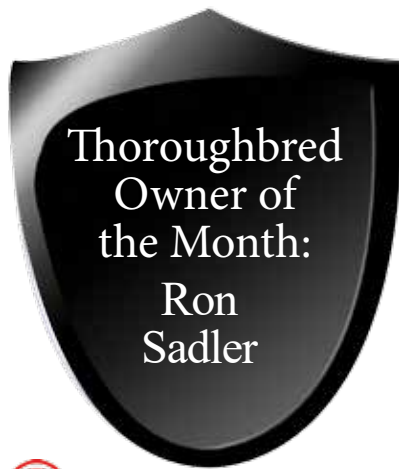
Kent Oakes Voted Cam Fella Award Winner

by Jeff Porchak



On January 2, Standardbred Canada revealed that the late former Standardbred Canada Chair, longtime Director and prominent harness racing industry participant, Kent Oakes has been posthumously chosen as the distinguished recipient of the 2024 Cam Fella Award. The Cam Fella Award, named in tribute to the legendary Standardbred horse Cam Fella, is presented to individuals who exhibit exceptional and recent contributions to the Canadian harness racing sector. This honour reflects Oakes' profound impact on Standardbred horse racing and unwavering commitment to the sport's values and traditions. Kent Oakes of North Wiltshire, P.E.I., dedicated his entire career and livelihood to harnessing the racing industry. As an employee of the Province of Prince Edward Island, Oakes partnered with the provincial, regional, and national harness racing industries for more than 30 years, cementing his legacy in the P.E.I. harness racing industry. Over that time, Oakes served on the Board of the Atlantic Harness Racing Development Council, Atlantic Breeders Crown Host Committee, Council of Atlantic Premiers Task Force on Harness Racing, P.E.I. Harness Racing

Industry Association, Atlantic Classic Sale, Harness Racing P.E.I., P.E.I. Matinee Tracks Association, and the Canadian Horse Racing Hall of Fame Nominating and Election Committees. Oakes also served as the Chief Executive Officer of the Prince Edward Island Lotteries Commission while acting on an interim basis as the Director of Racing at the Maritime Provinces Harness Racing Commission and Racing Manager at Red Shores Racetrack and Casino at Charlottetown Driving Park and Red Shores Summerside Raceway. Oakes was also the provincial government representative on the Planning and Construction Committee, responsible for redeveloping Charlottetown Driving Park. Beyond his official engagements, Oakes was a successful breeder in the Maritimes and had bred a number of stakes-winning horses with his brother Wayne, most notably 2004 Governor's Plate winner Igoddago. Kent Oakes passed away on June 28, 2024, at the age of 64. The Cam Fella Award will be presented during the 36th O'Brien Awards Black Tie Gala on Saturday, Feb. 8, 2025, at the Hilton Mississauga/Meadowdale in Mississauga, Ont.



WOODBINE

presented by WEG

This issue of *Down The Stretch* includes the top 50 Stories of 2024, in which, among other things, we relive the great exploits of valuable horses in 6 and 7-figure Stakes races. But thanks to our Owner of the Month, Ron Sadler, we appreciate that less expensive animals in more modest events can also make great stories.

Sadler owns, trains, and bred the 10-year-old Northern Ruby, who competed for the last time on December 7. She had been running in \$10,000 claim races, but realizing this would be her last race, Sadler dropped her to \$7,000, increasing her chances at success.

Under Rafael Hernandez, Northern Ruby was 6th early in this 6-furlong dash. But Hernandez looped her 4-wide into the stretch and she was the best, passing the leader about a 16th of a mile from the finish line and persevering for victory by half a length in 1:11.61. This was Northern Ruby's 10th win in her 35th race. Sadler explains that there were two narratives dictating the end of the mare's racing career.

"We're not allowed to run past 10," says Sadler, citing a recent regulation designed to protect older horses. "But I would have retired her no matter what to be a broodmare. If she was a gelding, I would continue. She is sound and strong and happy. I just think it's time for her to be a mother."

It's pointed out to Sadler that very few female horses are still running at 10 years old.

"She was doing well," he responds "She's not a black type mare. She had to earn her credentials, which she did by winning 10 races, winning close to 30% of her starts. She would go into the hard knocking mare category and is now very well worth breeding."

Even though most of Northern Ruby's efforts were in claiming races, Sadler chose her opportunities strategically, hoping not to lose her. He was reasonably confident no one would claim a 10-year-old from a race in December with nowhere to go with her in Canada.

"She had 3 mediocre races going into this race and a vet scratch," he explains. "So, I felt fairly certain nobody else would take her."

As for her future as a broodmare, as a daughter of Giant Gizmo, she should be attractive.

"She's a big, elegant mare," says Sadler. "She has all the class in the world with correct confirmation. She's absolutely stunning to look at. I think that should carry her well into her breeding career."

Sadler is 69 and his adventure with racehorses goes back almost 5 decades.

"In about 1976, I worked as a kid at Gardiner Farms with Michael Byrne," he says. "Then life took me in a different



direction. I went with the show horses, and I enjoyed that very much. But when I got tired of the show horses in about 1982, I decided to become an exercise boy. The first horse I owned was a filly called Patti Rock. She didn't do very well. She ran as a 3-year-old at Woodbine and didn't show anything. So, we sold her."

Other horses performed better for Sadler.

"I had a little mare at Fort Erie called Bizarre Twist," he says. "She was one of my very favourites. She won 9 races all at Fort Erie. She was a bad bleeder before we had Lasix, so she might have improved. I had a horse called Tempt Fate about the same time in the mid 1980s. He won 6 races as a 3-year-old at Woodbine and Greenwood and paid huge every time he won. And Arden Belle was an absolute standout."

The Equibase stats confirm that Arden Belle was a good one. From 2006 through 2009, she ran 35 times, with 7 wins, 19 in-the-money finishes, and over \$615,000 earned. In 2007, Arden Belle won the Sweet Briar Too Stakes, the Belle Mahone, and the Algoma Stakes, all for jockey Matt Moore. Arden Belle repeated in the 2008 Algoma, this time with Jono Jones in the saddle. Then there was Queen Dot, a very similar mare to Northern Ruby in that she raced a lot and won her share, mostly in claim races and starters allowances.

"She had a marvelous career," says Sadler. "She won 12 of 56 and hit the board 29 times."

Another of Sadler's best horses is Handy Harold, who provokes nice memories from his owner.

"Handy Harold was named for my father," he says. "He was a router, and we won 9 races with him. My favourite memory of him is when they used to run a mile and $\frac{7}{8}$ ^{ths} race at the end of the year, and after 1 $\frac{3}{4}$ miles, Handy Harold and Stolonboy, who was Joe Walls' horse – the two of them came down to the wire, noses apart and I came out on the losing end of it. But it was a sensational race. These two horses, after running that far were still ding donging it right to the wire. They actually put the picture in the Toronto Star the next day. It was wonderful."

Just to be fair, Sadler also had a horse named after his mother. Loula raced from 2004-2008, won 6 times and earned \$184,200.

As an owner, Sadler had a modest 2024 – 4 wins from 12 starters. Three of the wins came with Northern Ruby, the other was Hip to Your Tricks who scored under Rafael Hernandez on June 8 in a \$15,000 allowance. Hip to Your Tricks, an 8-year-old gelding bred by Sadler, came late in the stretch to win by half a length at the end of 6 furlongs. When it's possible, Hernandez is Sadler's top pick to ride his horses.

"I'm more able to get the top jockeys this year," he says. "I think Raffy is the best right now. Sahin Civaci, of course, is very good. Fraser Aebly is still learning, but he's got a lot of talent, a big future. And then I've got my standbys – Jason Hoyt and Keveh Nicholls have ridden for me a lot and they're both very good riders. Keveh Nicholls might be the most underrated rider at Woodbine."

And while we're talking about riding, Sadler reveals that at 69, he still gets aboard the odd thoroughbred in the mornings.

"I'm fine. I can gallop quite well," he says. "It's just that I can't risk too many injuries. I've got bad shoulders. I've had concussions. It's not the galloping. It's the falling."

We asked Sadler to recall his best moment in horse racing.

"One of my favourite races was winning the Turf Endurance with Mambointheforest," he says. "It was the race before the Queen's Plate in 2021. Civaci rode him to perfection. We had post 12 going a mile and $\frac{3}{8}$ ^{ths}. Before they got to the first turn, Civaci crossed over 11 horses and got the lead. Several horses came up and tried him. He repelled every one of them, and he went on to win by maybe a half a length over Pleasecallmeback, which was Roger Attfield's horse. It was thrilling because I was with a friend of mine and we actually walked down the red carpet with all the security telling us to don't do it, but we did it anyway and marched out and proudly stood for our picture."

Sadler adds a huge punchline to this story.

"Mambointheforest was the longest shot in the field," he says. "He paid \$161.10."

So, the final question – did he have a bet on the horse?

"Not a dime!" says Sadler. "At that distance, with that post against those horses? No way!"



presented by WEG

The last race of 2024 at Mohawk on December 30 was the 11th, a \$12,000 claim race with a purse of \$12,000. The 7-year-old pacer, Frownies Miracle won it easily for James MacDonald. Frownies Miracle is owned by Mario Villani. We thought that would be a great angle for making Villani our Owner of the Month.

Villani, 70, told *Down The Stretch* he claims horses “every few weeks”, but at the end of 2024, Frownies Miracle was the only one he had in competition. He does have a couple of babies.

Villani, through his trainer, Brett Lester claimed Frownies Miracle on October 7 for \$22,000. He employed a little horse owner logic to grab this one. For a brief time, Villani owned a pacer called B Stoney.

“I saw potential in Frownies Miracle because I had B Stoney,” says Villani.

B Stoney was claimed for Villani on September 17 for \$12,000. On that night, with Louis-Philippe Roy driving, B Stoney won by over 2 lengths in 1:50.4. Frownies Miracle finished 2nd in that race, but the next time these two met, the outcome was reversed.

“He beat me by a lot,” says Villani about Frownies Miracle. “And they actually went 1:50.2. Because of that, I liked the horse and a few weeks later, I claimed him.”

There was an element of necessity to this claim. It turns out, Villani owned B Stoney for just one race. After finishing 2nd to Frownies Miracle, B Stoney was claimed, and that temporarily left Villani without a racehorse.

It seemed that Frownies Miracle, like many horses, had a few minor issues. In his next 8 races, he failed to hit the board, but Lester continued to work with the horse and thanks to that, the horse was clearly fit and more competitive than he’d ever been.

“You have to understand that the horses will have some little problem like this one,” says Villani. “Once you fix the problem, they’re going to start to do well. This one was racing good before and it appears that the problem is fixed, for now, anyway.”

Frownies Miracle won for \$12,000 on December 12, then repeated that effort with a 4-length score on December 16. Those 2 wins impressed the bettors, who crushed the horse down to 1-9 on December 30. Roy was not available to drive, but James MacDonald was a pretty good replacement. This might have been the easiest of MacDonald’s 407 wins in 2024 as Frownies Miracle cruised home by over 4 lengths in 1:55. This



was the 108th race for the horse, and the first time he had won 3 in a row. It was also the first time that MacDonald had been in the bike.

Villani estimated he had won 10 races in 2024. Taking the last heat of the year was special.

“Yeah, I kind of liked it,” he says succinctly.

Villani got interested in standardbred ownership about 25 years ago.

“We started when they used to have the standardbreds at Woodbine,” he says. “There were 3 or 4 guys, and we started taking an interest in it. Our trainer was Rick Zeron. Ultimately, we separated with each other, and we start buying our own horses.”

Villani recalls the first horse he owned that did well for him. “We separated with each other, and we start buying our own horses. I had a filly by the name of Pleasure Girl,” he says. “She was a trotter, and she won the Grassroots and went to the final and she won the final. Unfortunately, she had a chip in her knee, but she actually won a race with the chip in the knee.”

According to Villani, it was Pleasure Girl that provided his biggest thrill in the game.

“We went to a \$40,000 race in Ottawa, and she won,” he says. “And what happens is that they called me back to go back to go in a race for \$120,000 and I came second. I think that must have been the best moment.”

Asked to chat about other horses he enjoyed, Villani mentions a war horse with the tasty name of Veal Marsala. This one went postward 352 times with 65 wins and over \$633,000 earned.

As you might imagine, after nearly 3 decades in the game, Villani has worked with a lot of trainers.

“I told you about Rick Zeron,” he says. “I also had Richard Moreau and Duane Marfisi, and way back I was

with Leonard Lalonde. I had so many trainers.”

Expenses can be substantial in the standardbred horse game, and Villani became comfortable in a career in which he was a technical manager in a big industry. He ran the maintenance department, overseeing a lot of machinery. As we do with most of our Owners of the Month, we asked Villani what keeps him in the sport.

“Of course, the race is exciting, right?” he says. “It’s about doing some homework, trying to pick and choose the best horse. We’ve claimed horses at times that don’t last because they could be broken down, right? Some of them have injuries and they can’t come back anymore. Basically, this is a challenge – you want good breeding, a good mother and father. But, more importantly, when you do your research for a horse, you want to make sure that he can win races, and he’s not hurt. The challenge is to get a good horse, which is a horse that’s healthy and can win races. That’s about it.”

Frownies Miracle looked superior in that year-ending race at Mohawk. That was with \$12,000 claiming company. Villani entered the horse back on January 6, this time for a \$30,000 claim price.

“He’s going up in class,” says Villani. “We won 3 in row. I cannot put him back in the same class.”

Frownies Miracle went another excellent mile. MacDonald was able to get a pocket trip from post 5 behind the pace setter Self Made (Tyler Borth) who gunned for the early lead from post 9. It was not until deep in the stretch that Frownies Miracle was able to come off the rail and, though he reduced Self Made’s lead with each step, it was not enough as Self Made held on by a neck in 1:54.1. Still, it was a 2nd place cheque for \$5,000, and with that, Frownies Miracle had earned \$28,000 in the span of just 4 weeks.



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Billy Comes to Town



For several years, Billy Davis, 38, was saddled with a unique, if unofficial title – with over 4,000 driving wins, he was the most accomplished Canadian harness driver to have never worked full-time at Mohawk Park.

Davis's career started at Fraser Downs in British Columbia. He still remembers his first win in 2007 with a \$6,999 claimer named Spartacus Dee J.

"It was a pretty special moment," says Davis. "My mom and my sister owned the horse at the time. He was also sired by the horse that I first jogged when I was a kid."

Through 2008, Davis drove exclusively at Fraser Downs, but the next year saw him in Ontario, doing the tour of Flamboro, Georgian Downs, Western Fair, Kawartha Downs and the occasional drop-in to Woodbine.

"The racing in B.C. is just not as booming as it is in Ontario," says Davis explaining the lure to come east. "There's only the one track and the purses aren't that great. I really thought I could try and make a living racing in Ontario."

Davis piled up the wins at the "B" tracks. From 2011 through 2017, he found the winner's circle over 1,900 times. Then, according to the stats on Standardbred Canada, he started driving at Buffalo Raceway and Batavia Downs.

"At the time, I just had my first child, and I was racing at the smaller tracks, but I was racing every single night," he says. "I wasn't spending a lot of time at home and I kind of got the opportunity where I could go race at Buffalo and Batavia. They only raced 3 days a week. The purses were

decent and bringing that American dollar back across the border was pretty nice, too. This allowed me to make a living and still spend enough time at home."

That scenario was shattered when COVID hit Ontario in 2021. Circumstances took Davis to Northfield Park.

"When COVID happened, with all the lockdowns, the management at Buffalo didn't want me to be traveling across the border," he says. "I had to keep racing and make money or just stay in Canada during the lockdown. Another opportunity came up. A good friend of mine, Jason McGinnis had a big barn, and he was looking for someone just to train in the mornings and I ended up picking up drives at Northfield."

Davis really picked up drives at Northfield. From 2021 to the end of November 2024 he had over 6,000 driving assignments with over 1,000 wins. He also put some astronomical numbers on his odometer. It was about a 940-kilometre return trip from his home to Northfield, one he made just about every week.

"Northfield raced Saturday, Sunday and Mondays most weeks," he says. "I'd be gone during the weekend and then back home for 3 or 4 days a week. Depending on traffic, it was roughly a 4 ½ hour drive each way."

Asked to name his favourite horse to drive, Davis responds immediately with the consistent and persistent Southwind Amazon. Now 15, Southwind Amazon cannot race anywhere pari-mutually, but his 9 wins in his last season raised his total to 139 victories from 399 starts, the most wins in modern history by any horse in North America. Davis drove Southwind Amazon 35 times and was a winner with the horse 10 times.

"He's a game old horse," says Davis. "He pins his ears down when a horse comes near him, and he digs in hard. He's pretty tough and the fact that he could race and win as many times as he has at an old age and at a competitive level is just amazing."

So, in late fall of 2024, there was Billy Davis at Mohawk Park. For the first time in his 19-year career, he elected to

drive at Canada's most important racetrack fulltime. This was kind of a "nature deplores a vacuum" strategy.

"A lot of the drivers were taking time off," says Davis. "Doug McNair was gone for about a month. James MacDonald is going on vacation. Philippe Louis-Roy is back home in Quebec and Sylvain Filion retired, so it opened up some doors. Also, this allows me to stay home more regularly."

Davis scored with his first driving assignment at Mohawk. On November 28, he won a \$12,000 pace with the 9-year-old, Hervy Hanover for trainer Carmen Auciello. Hervy Hanover dead-headed for the win with Happy Neighs (Jody Jamieson) and that initial moment of glory would be severely modified by the reality of professional racing. During a brutal two-week period from December 9-December 23, Davis was in 49 consecutive races in which he failed to produce a win.

"When I was younger, something like that would have really bothered me," he admits. "I would have been pouting pretty good. But I'm kind of getting a little more experienced, and I realize it's not going to keep going that way and that doesn't really affect my moods anymore. This business is all peaks and valleys you just got to go with the motion."

After that "valley" in mid-December, Davis started producing wins at a higher rate. As of the day that we interviewed him (January 8), Davis had 5 wins, which had him 2nd in the 2025 drivers' standings, well behind the dominator, James MacDonald who had already posted 13 victories.

"I'm good friends with James," says Davis. "I've known him for years and he's deserved all the success that he's having right now. He's a great person and a great driver,"

That respect is reciprocated.

"Billy Davis is a guy I grew up with," says MacDonald. "We started our careers together. We travelled together to Kawartha and Flamboro. We are really good friends, and it's great to have Billy here. It's great to see him doing well right off the bat. I have raced with him a lot and I know he is a fantastic driver."



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ODDITIES & ENTITIES



Stunning photo of the Ontario-bred Kopion winning the La Brea Stakes at Santa Anita under Kazushi Kimura

Alex Evers Photo



Photographer Will Wong took this shot on a snowy December afternoon at Woodbine



Racing fan Mary Jane Sibbitt posted this image of Flemington Racecourse in Australia

Social media post by jockey Katie Davis



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Another example of the drawing skill of Jessica Hallett

DOWN THE STRETCH PODCAST

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Episode 253, December 1:

The Princess Elizabeth Stakes and Coronation Futurity at Woodbine were each worth \$250,000. We talk with **Jennifer Stein** who brings us up to speed on her husband Justin, who was badly injured in a 5-horse spill. There was an amazing debut win by a horse named **Little Red Domi**. **Mark Romeo** of Terra Racing Stable tells us no one was as surprised as he was with this 2-year-old's first race. Driver **Doug McNair** was hoping for a better outcome at an International Drivers' competition in France on Friday. Eleven years ago, it all went south, and this year...it wasn't much better. Why would Highfield Stock Farm in Alberta purchase a high-quality stallion named Tapiture? We find out from **Jennifer Buck**. Harness driver **Austin Sorrie** had a huge night at Western Fair that included his 1000th win. And we ask the question - what happens more...a natural hattrick in hockey or in horse racing? And that will bring us to **Fraser Aebly**, who had a sensational week.

Episode 254, December 8:

The Valedictory Stakes at 1 ½ miles was the feature at Woodbine; what kind of a price could you get on a horse ridden by the leading jockey and sent out by the leading trainer? From Paris to New Jersey in a matter of hours – **Doug McNair** talks about 2 dramatically different harness racing experiences. **Jonathan Drury** and **Tyler Borth** broke through the same plateau this week, and Western Fair Raceway's **Amy O'Toole** helps promote the Toys for Tots drive. And how much grief did jockey **Paco Lopez** heap on himself for hitting a horse in the face – after he had won the race? **Jonathan Stettin** and **Ken McPeck** elaborate.

Episode 255, December 15:

From the final day of racing at Woodbine, we check out the Steady Growth Stakes and the individuals who dazzled in 2024. On Saturday, the La Prevoyante Stakes came down to a very close photo between a heavy favourite and the longest shot. We celebrate the career of **Justin Stein**, who has quit riding to become a steward. **Ron Sadler's** Northern Ruby, a 10-year-old, ran for the last time and finished her career in the winners' circle. Another extraordinary milestone for driver **James MacDonald**, but he's got a long way to go to match what 84-yearold **Don McKirgan** did last week. Western Fair's Drivers Challenge means a lot of children will get toys this year. We've got a race from England in which brothers **James and Sean Bowen** dead-heated and perhaps the most important horse race of the year took place in Charlottetown when **The Grinch** went up against **Santa Claus**.

Episode 256, December 23:

In this very special episode, we have edited together the funniest, weirdest, wackiest and most wonderful moments in horse racing from 2024. Sit back and enjoy:

- + The bad beats - A sulky explodes in deep stretch; a leading horse jumps the fence just before the wire
- + Shamrock wins on March 17, Count Dracula wins on Halloween and Saturday wins on Thursday
- + How mature are we that we loved it when Nobals won?
- + Appearances by **Belichick, Lucille Ball, Rosa Parks, Nyquist, Koufax** and a happy horse named **Ha Ha Ha**
- + **Frank Mirahmadi** on the Price is Right
- + A sample of the wonderful race calls of **Larry Lederman**
- + When a deer tried to beat the thoroughbreds
- + **Darryl Ezra** on cheeky horse names - Horizontal Helen, Tiny Tinker, Abolish It and Toilet Paper
- + **James MacDonald** proving he is much better as a harness driver than a race caller
- + The horse players' anthem performed at Mohawk
- + **Santa Claus** defeating **The Grinch** in Charlottetown.

Episode 257, December 30:

In this special year ender, we look at the great and not so great moments in horse racing in 2024. Along the way, we enjoy the great work of **Moira, Caitlinhergrtness, Velocitor, Roscar, Mystik Dan, Seize the Grey, Dornoch, Julie Walker, Sofia Vives, Rafael Hernandez, Patrick Husbands, Doug McNair, Jody Jamieson, James MacDonald, Pietro and David Moran, Nijinsky, Emma-Jayne Wilson, Justin Stein, Josie Carroll, Mark Casse, Kevin Attard, Scott Zeron, and Bill Megens**.

Episode 258, January 6:

Familiar faces from Woodbine were winning in the U.S. - **Kazushi Kimura** rode a Tall Oaks Farm-bred filly to a huge upset in a Stakes race at huge odds at Santa Anita. We've got wins at Aqueduct from **Sofia Vives** and **Sahin Civaci**. **Marty Drexler** and **Bruno Schickedanz** scored at Gulfstream. We don't know the creeps who let **War Envoy**, a Breeders' Cup horse end up starving, emaciated and knee high in mud, but we do have **Olivia Dixon** of the Kentucky Humane Society to tell us how the horse was rescued. **Katie Larsen** runs **Southern Belle Thoroughbreds**. In 2024, she found homes for 200 retired thoroughbreds, but suffered a terrible accident that has her on crutches. We go to Mohawk Park for the last race of 2024 and the first of this year, and we have another one of those amazing nights at the track from **James MacDonald**. **Bern Tobin** tells us about the incredible **Get Around Town**, now retired after racing 459 times and how did we manage to get the **Beach Boys** in this one?

Episode 259, January 13:

Something for **Donald Trump** to address – Canadians taking U.S. money: a pair of wins for **Marty Drexler** at Gulfstream and a winners circle pic for **Sahin Civaci** at Aqueduct. Harness driver, **Billy Davis** explains why it took 17 years for him to decide to drive full-time at Mohawk. **James MacDonald** looks back at his spectacular year and looks forward to his honeymoon in Hawaii. We 'sample' **Free Rein**, Woodbine's documentary on the people and horses in thoroughbred racing. Producer **Alanna Nolan** describes what they're trying to do. Will **Moira** win the Eclipse Award as Outstanding Lady on the Turf? Host **Peter Gross** and Moira's exercise rider, **Korina McLean** assess her chances. And when a 60-1 bomb won at Gulfstream, announcer **Pete Aiello** nailed it, which is why we're running his stretch call.

ON AIR

DOWN THE STRETCH



A Podcast with Peter Gross