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Horsepeople craft plan to correct fatal flaw in Ontario racing

by *Dave Briggs*

Owner Mark Beaven said there's a fatal flaw in the three-tiered harness racing system enacted in Ontario in 2014 - it's virtually impossible to turn a profit racing in the middle or lower tiers with the purse structure fixed at \$65,000 and \$35,000 per card, respectively.



A proposal by a group of Ontario horsepeople calls for major changes to the purse structure and race dates at smaller tracks such as Clinton Raceway.

"How can I in good faith go to colleagues of mine and say, 'Why don't you think about investing \$20,000 or \$30,000 into a racehorse this year. Oh yeah, by the way, if you win everything or you finish in the top three in every race, you're still going to lose money?'" Beaven asked Thursday.

"The industry is in really dire straits because of this."

Beaven said he and his trainer, Heather Toll, have been concerned about the new purse and race date allocation system ever since it was put in place a year after the province killed the lucrative Slots at Racetracks Program (SARP) and replaced it with a five-year, \$500 million direct funding model. So the pair, along with trainers Mark Horner and Scott McNiven, quickly accepted a challenge from one of the chief architects of the purse system to put an alternate plan down on paper: ([the full proposal is available here](#)).

"It is a silly notion that three old politicians drew the line on purses and race dates and whatnot and hit exactly the perfect spot."

- John Snobelen

"They not only took me up on my challenge, they did better than I thought they would," John Snobelen said Thursday. Snobelen was a member of the bi-partisan, three-person Horse Racing Industry Transition Panel consisting of former provincial cabinet ministers that crafted the purse plan, among numerous other restructuring ideas.

"It is a silly notion that three old politicians drew the line on purses and race dates and whatnot and hit exactly the perfect spot," said Snobelen, who is now the interim executive director of a new body just starting to take shape called the Ontario Racing Association. "That we were close to the dart board is pretty remarkable. It just makes sense that the industry will come up with something different than we've currently got. I've got a lot of sympathy for people who have told me over the years that we really do need to make this middle part of our program more appealing commercially to owners. I get that."

The 12-page 2016 Standardbred Racing Proposal that Beaven, Toll, Horner and McNiven crafted calls for radical changes to the purse levels in what's known as the province's signature and grassroots tiers of racing. The group felt the purse structure in the premier tier reserved for the two Woodbine Entertainment Group tracks was about right at \$185,000 per card. Among the



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Wakizashi Hanover
winner of the 2015 Pepsi North America Cup. Photo by New Image Media.

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Two-year-old open trot.
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Three Diamonds

Two-year-old filly pace.
Purse \$425,000 E (\$50,000 A).

Goldsmith Maid

Two-year-old filly trot.
Purse \$465,000 E (\$50,000 A).

Battle of Waterloo

Ontario Sired Two-year-old open pace.
Purse \$200,000 E Final (\$90,000 A).

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recommendations at the lower two levels, the proposal calls for closing three grassroots tracks in southwestern Ontario - Hiawatha Horse Park in Sarnia, Dresden Raceway and Leamington Raceway - cutting the race dates at grassroots tracks in Clinton and Hanover from 15 to eight at each, dropping Georgian Downs down from a signature track down to the grassroots level, increasing the number of race dates at signature track The Raceway at The Western Fair District and increasing purses to \$40,000 and \$82,000 per card at the grassroots and signature tracks, respectively.

"We've accepted the fact that there is no more money coming. We got the \$100 million (per year), and that's what we get. We're not getting a cent more. So, given those parameters, it's a case of 'How do we do this? How do we get those purse levels up?' There's really only one way to look at it then and that's to redistribute those numbers a little bit differently than what we have now," Beaven said.

"We just started playing with numbers and, at the same time, we realized tracks are going to have to close. That's not an easy decision to make, but we based it on, 'Okay, which tracks are doing the best? Which ones have the best handles? Which ones had the best infrastructure?' That kind of thing... Leamington, Dresden and Sarnia... are the three tracks with the three worst handles.

"It's just a re-jigging of the numbers, a redistribution of the numbers. The other thing we felt is we wanted to have signature racing six days a week, 52 weeks of the year."

Jamie Martin, the executive vice-president of racing at

the Woodbine Entertainment Group, is one of the principal directors of the Standardbred Alliance that includes eight Ontario tracks - Woodbine, Mohawk, Western Fair, Grand River, Flamboro, Georgian, Clinton and Hanover. He said Beaven and company did approach him last year with some of their ideas, but the Alliance hasn't met to offer an official opinion on the proposal.

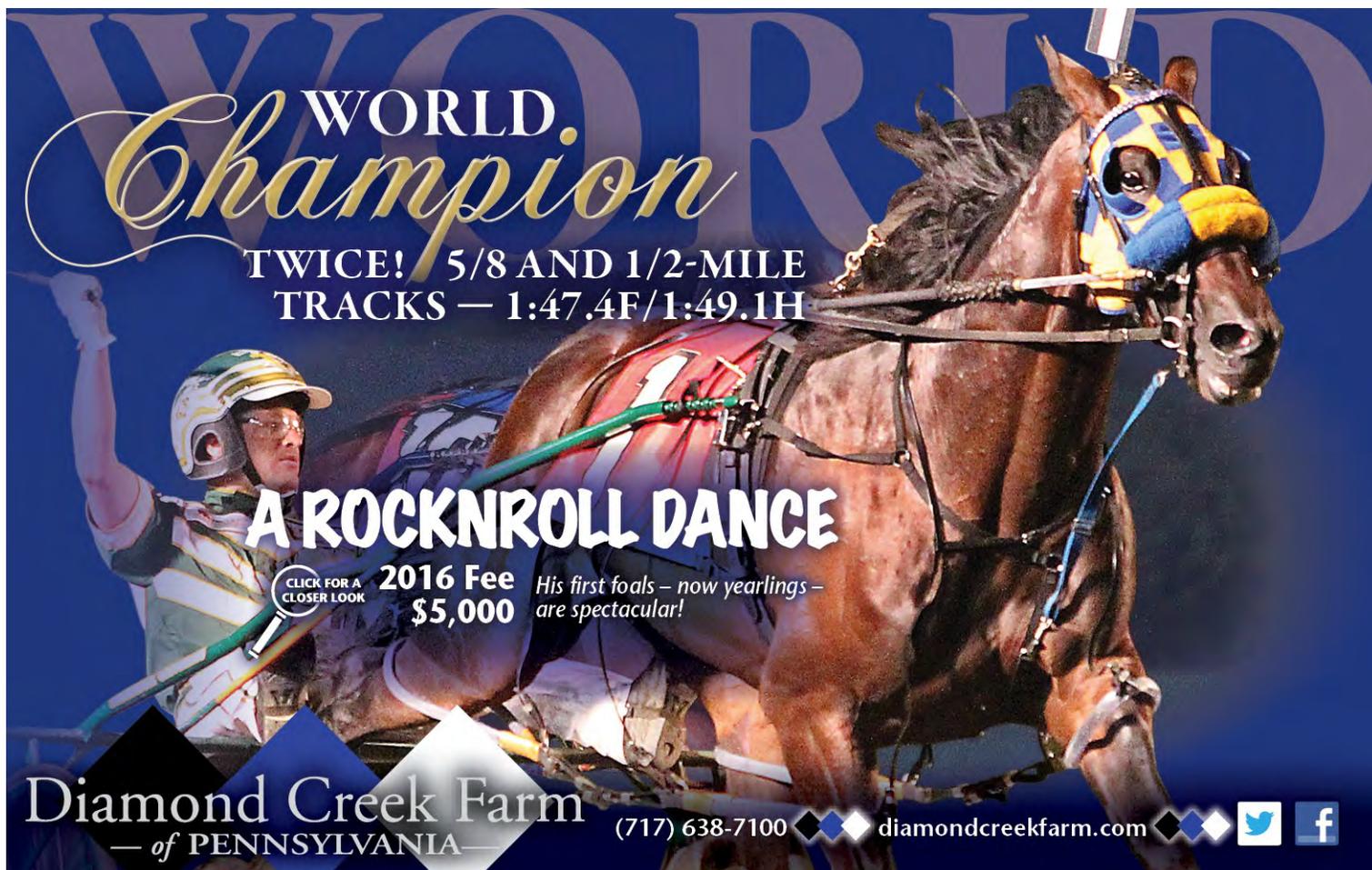
"We haven't discussed it as a group because really the biggest impact is on the regional tracks and, really, I don't think any track is closing any time soon because there's no political interest in having that happen," Martin said Thursday.

Snobelen said two public consultation meetings to discuss the proposal are tentatively scheduled for the second week of February - likely the 9th at Western Fair in London and the 10th at Mohawk Racetrack in Campbellville.

Though he said a final plan to make changes to the purse structure and race dates allocation likely won't look exactly like the proposal, he said it was a "100 per cent certainty" that changes to the current system are coming, just likely not for 2016 as the group pushed hard to achieve.

"We don't want to waste any more time. The industry is in really dire straits because of this. We pushed it. We said, 'We want this for 2016.' We knew that was probably going to be a hell of a challenge," Beaven said.

Snobelen said he was sympathetic, but added, "Frankly, I think it's very ambitious to do something on the scale of this change for 2016. I think we're more looking at what does



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our 2017 plan look like and are there steps we can take in '16 to get us there. We're working inside a pretty short period of time. We're also working at a time when the ORC (Ontario Racing Commission) is going to be wrapping up their operations and moving into the AGCO (Alcohol and Gaming Commission of Ontario)."

Still, Snobelen applauded the work of the group. "They put together a very coherent document. I'm not suggesting it can be implemented in its current form, but they've done a really good job of making a presentation that I think will get everybody's attention. They should be proud of their work," he said.

Beaven said part of the point of the document was to get the debate started.

"We openly ask others out there, 'If you don't like this, that's fine. We respect that. Come up with your own plan,'" Beaven said. "If it makes sense, I'll gladly support it. But right now, this is what we think is the way forward."

Snobelen said what he likes most about the proposal is there are some tough choices in the document indicating the horsepeople have, "taken ownership of the issue. They're not waiting for someone else to solve the questions of: What is the right purse level and what is the right number of race dates? They're proactively looking at, 'What do we as professionals in this industry think is the right mix?' If there's a message I'm trying to drive home it's we as an industry now have the opportunity, the power, to start to make those kinds of decisions. This is the first step in that direction.

"I think this is real progress and credit to them. There's a debate in other circles about whether the industry is mature enough to make these kinds of decisions. I think it is, but this is pretty good evidence that we can reach that level of maturity."

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An advertisement for Diamond Creek Farm featuring a harness racing horse and driver. The background is a dark blue gradient with the word "CLASSICS" in large, light blue, serif letters. The text "MULTIPLE Classics Winner" is written in a mix of white serif and gold cursive fonts. Below this, "AT 2, 3 & 4 — INCLUDING THE MEADOWLANDS PACE" is written in white serif font. The text "A ROCKNROLL DANCE" is written in a large, white, bold, sans-serif font. A circular button with a magnifying glass icon says "CLICK FOR A CLOSER LOOK". Below the button, "2016 Fee \$5,000" is written in white, and "His first foals — now yearlings — are spectacular!" is written in a smaller white font. At the bottom, "Diamond Creek Farm — of PENNSYLVANIA —" is written in white, followed by the phone number "(717) 638-7100" and the website "diamondcreekfarm.com". Social media icons for Twitter and Facebook are also present.

90-year-old Carl Dobkowski and 14-year-old Sakra Fella made for each other

by Tom Pedulla

YONKERS, N.Y. - Trainer Carl Dobkowski and his pacer, Sakra Fella, refuse to act their age.

Dobkowski, who turns 91 in February, admits he lost much of his vigor following intense radiation treatments that cured him of cancer of the nose. His mind, though, is as keen as ever when it comes to preparing Sakra Fella, the one horse remaining in his stable.



On Tuesday, Scott Zeron drove 14-year-old Sakra Fella to victory at Yonkers for 90-year-old trainer Carl Dobkowski (Tom Berg)

Sakra Fella, who is 14 and faces mandatory retirement at the end of this year, appears to be rejuvenated after going

winless as injuries limited him to 10 starts the previous two seasons. He already owns two victories in three tries this year, at Monticello on Jan. 6 and, more recently, in a \$6,500 pace at Yonkers Raceway on Tuesday (Jan. 19).

"He's the ideal horse to train," Dobkowski said.

The gelded son of Pacific Fella is every bit as fortunate to have Carl and his wife of 45 years, Dolores, overseeing him. They purchased him as a \$6,000 bargain in a sale at Meadowlands Racetrack late in his three-year-old season.

"I liked his conformation and his size," Dobkowski said.

Sakra Fella is, in many respects, the child, grandchild and great grandchild the Dobkowski's never had.

He lacks neither toys nor treats. Three rows of plastic milk bottles line the webbing of his stall in Barn B. He runs his nose along them the way the fingers of a concert pianist dance across the keys. At an age when many geldings would have been turned out to pasture, he still possesses the energy and enthusiasm of an adolescent.

"He doesn't show his age at all," Dobkowski said. "He acts like a young one."

That surely reflects the affection and care he receives. He eagerly awaits the arrival of his elderly caretakers each morning. "He can sense us as we walk in," said Dolores, who declined to reveal her age.

In addition to his morning feed, Sakra Fella can count on apples, carrots and - his favorite - bananas. Happy horses typically perform well, and Sakra Fella was the picture of contentment as he took chunks of banana from Dolores' hand. He celebrated with a riff on the milk bottles.

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His most recent success, highly unexpected as he went off at 32-1, represented his 20th victory to go with 25 runner-up finishes and 26 third-place showings for earnings of \$298,902. He rallied from fourth to win by three-quarters of a length in 1:58.

Scott Zeron drove him for the first time in that race and soon found he was sitting behind a veteran with a good mind and a big heart. "He let me do whatever I wanted with him," Zeron said. "He relaxed in the early portions and finished when I asked him to."

The telling moment occurred when Zeron and Sakra Fella launched a three-wide bid. "He dropped his head," Zeron said, "and had his mind set on winning the race."

Dobkowski was diagnosed with cancer of the nose approximately five years ago. Treatment eradicated the potentially deadly cells, but also robbed him of so much of vitality that his shuffling steps did not allow him to reach the winner's circle in time for the photograph. In one of his longer answers during an interview, the soft-spoken Dobkowski said, "The cancer is gone, but I'm like a cripple."

Nothing kept him from receiving a stream of well-wishers after a popular victory in the stable area. Arthur Webb, a groom who works near Sakra Fella's stall, said of Dobkowski's handiwork, "He knows what the horse needs, and he can supervise having it done."

Webb believes Dobkowski remains as sharp as they come. "I assume once you have a feel for a horse, you are never going to lose that," he said. "Those types of things you can do forever."

Dobkowski left dairy farming to become a full-time trainer in 1960. He always wanted a hands-on operation; he never worked with more than five horses at one time. He will finally retire once Sakra Fella races for him for the last time.

"That's enough," he said simply.

Meanwhile, the nonagenarian looks forward to arriving at the barn every morning. The milk bottles will rattle as he bonds once more with his aged pacer.

Snobelen said many changes afoot in Ontario in 2016

by Dave Briggs

As Ontario breeders, in particular, continue to worry about industry funding after the province's five-year, \$500 million deal expires on April 1, 2019, John Snobelen wants to reassure them and others that the province will fund horse racing beyond that date.

"The government fully intends to fund this industry, to invest in this industry, on a long-term basis, beyond 2018-19," said Snobelen, the interim executive director of a new body just starting to take shape called the Ontario Racing Association. "They have asked OLG (the Ontario Lottery and Gaming Corporation) to give some thought to how we might do that and how quickly we can announce to the industry that there will be funding beyond '19. So, I would look for some sort of announcement on long-term funding late this spring or early this summer."

Breeders are particularly concerned because the results of 2016 matings will be hitting the track as two-year-olds in 2019 after the current funding deal runs out. The five-year

investment was put in place a year after the province pulled the plug on the lucrative Slots at Racetracks Program (SARP).

Snobelen, who was a member of the bi-partisan, three-person Horse Racing Industry Transition Panel consisting of former provincial cabinet ministers that helped restructure the industry post-SARP, said Thursday there is a long list of changes coming to the province's horse racing industry in 2016.

Key among those changes is the Ontario Racing Commission (ORC) being dissolved and the sport's regulatory responsibility moving to the Alcohol and Gaming Commission of Ontario (AGCO) whose chief executive officer is former ORC CEO Jean Major.

"AGCO is eager to get on about the business of having a look at the regulations and trying to make them more effective and efficient. Jean Major is a breath of fresh air on the file, even if he is an old breath of fresh air. I'm pretty pumped about where we can get," Snobelen said.

Snobelen said the Ontario Horse Racing Industry Association (OHRIA) which represent different industry factions to the government, will morph into the new Ontario Racing Association group, likely before the end of the year, and take on more responsibilities - from managing the province's Horse Improvement Program (HIP) that includes the Ontario Sires Stakes, to making decisions on race dates and purse structure.

"OHRIA as a board had a resolution last year to become a new industry association. I think it's very farsighted on their part. They did that proactively. That will have a different governance model than we currently have. Not radically different, because governing an industry association is not rocket science. But it will mean there will be a much stronger executive and management team... There's a new role for the industry association and kind of a new model for it and a lot more responsibility," Snobelen said.

He said he expects to unveil more details about the Ontario Racing Association in early February.

"They're actually out in the field this week with focus groups looking at the usual stuff you look at when you brand - logos, ID, name, taglines and all that," Snobelen said. "But it's really cool that we're getting the help, from a professional agency and the OLG for the first time."

MacDonald giving away share in a racehorse

Trainer Anthony MacDonald is giving away a share of a racehorse as part of his Jan. 30 information session at Woodbine Racetrack about his fractional ownership operation called TheStable.ca.

Anyone who sends MacDonald a question via email (anthony@thestable.ca), Twitter ([@horseracingamac](https://twitter.com/horseracingamac)) or Facebook ([The Stable Canada](https://www.facebook.com/TheStableCanada)), will be put into a draw where one person will win a \$300 credit to be used to buy a piece of a horse at TheStable.ca. MacDonald will answer questions on the Woodbine simulcast show.

The information session will focus on the benefits of The Stable for new horse owners - people who would find comfort in the decreased risk and diversity of fractional

ownership.

The cost to purchase a horse, and also the flat-rate monthly training fee of \$2,000 are shared by the fractional ownership group, where someone could purchase as little as one per cent, and as much as 100 per cent.

Since its inception just a few months ago, TheStable.ca has attracted 34 investors from across two continents.

MacDonald's presentation will take place from 5:30 p.m. to 6:30p.m. Admission is free, but an RSVP is required by Jan. 28 by contacting MacDonald at (519) 400-4263 or anthony@thestable.ca.

Meadowlands wagering up

As live racing enters its fourth weekend of 2016, the Meadowlands Racetrack has announced that it has experienced impressive gains in live handle over the comparable weekends in 2015.

Average nightly handle through the first five programs of 2016 is \$3,094,154 - a gain of more than 13 per cent over the corresponding cards in 2015. While the Meadowlands has been carding 14-race programs this year compared to 13-race cards last season, the average handle per race is also up nearly four per cent.

"We are obviously very pleased with the strong start to 2016 so far in terms of handle," said Jason Settlemoir, Meadowlands CEO and general manager. "Our team has worked very hard to maximize field size, create competitive and attractive betting races, and coordinate post times with other tracks. We are always trying to improve the wagering experience for our customers both on and off track. We have continued with our out-of-competition testing program and sending samples to Hong Kong's world-renowned testing lab to ensure a level playing field."

Whom Shall I Fear to Victory Hill

Whom Shall I Fear (3,1:52.4), the Cantab Hall full brother to two- and three-year-old world champion Father Patrick and to two-year-old champion Pastor Stephen, has been retired from racing and will stand the 2016 breeding season at Victory Hill Farm in Indiana.

His stud fee has been set at \$2,500.

He was the top-priced yearling of 2013 when he was purchased for \$475,000 by Hall of Fame trainer Jimmy Takter. Takter's wife Christina owned the colt, along with a partnership that consisted of John Fielding, Brixton Medical, Marvin Katz, Al Libfeld, Sam Goldband and the colt's breeder, Brittany Farms.

"He's simply a gorgeous horse," said Brittany manager Art Zubrod. "His dam, Gala Dream, has produced four \$100,000 yearlings and pair of sale-toppers. And I think he's definitely one of her best. He's nearly the spitting image, in terms of both looks and conformation, to Father Patrick."

Whom Shall I Fear was stakes-placed in Grand Circuit action at two and began his three-year-old season with tremendous promise. He won his first four starts in stakes action and took a mark of 1:52.4, then went on to compete in major events like the Dancer Memorial, Earl Beal, Colonial, Zweig, Bluegrass and Matron against top colts

like "Trotter of the Year" Pinkman, Crazy Wow, and Habitat.

"When it comes to Whom Shall I Fear, I don't think I've ever been more disappointed by a horse," Takter said.

"At the beginning of the year I knew he was the one, but he got sick on us three times. I never could get him back to where he was at the start of the season. It's a shame... he's such a magnificent-looking animal. He'll make a top sire, I just know it."

Those interested in additional information or a booking application should contact Victory Hill Farm by calling (260) 463-2442 or emailing info@victoryhillfarm.com.

Goshen Sale set for Sept. 18

The Goshen Yearling Sale will hold its second annual auction on Sunday, Sept. 18, at the Mark Ford Training Center in Middletown, NY, near historic Goshen.

The popularity of the rich New York Sires Stakes program, and the lack of a New York sale close to many who participate in the program, prompted the creation of the Goshen Yearling Sale in 2015. It was supported by the sport's major breeders, including Winbak Farm and Blue Chip Farm, who both operate in New York.

Last year, 113 yearlings were sold at the inaugural edition. The sale generated gross sales of \$1.4 million.

DOVERREPORT

Monday's Results:

10, DD, \$27,500, P, DELAWARE Special Handicap Post Positions Assigned, 26.3, 54.2, 1:22.2, 1:51.1, FT
1-Bad Boy Matt (g, 6, Badlands Hanover--Mattercycle, by Matt's Scooter), \$22,000 2011 CAN-YS O-Legacy Racing Of De Inc & Reginald A Hazzard II. B-Craig I Turner, CA & Mhairi Kersel, CA. T-Wayne Givens. D-Allan Davis, \$13,750, Lifetime Record: 86-17-16-15, \$251,307

Tuesday's Results:

10, DD, \$20,000, P, FILLIES/MARES Winners Over \$12,000 in Last 6 Starts or \$50,000 Lifetime / Open Handicap Post Positions 1 thru 3 & 4 thru 7 Drawn Post Position No. 8 Assigned, 26.4, 56.1, 1:24.2, 1:52.2, FT
1-Springforth (m, 6, Artiscap--Spring Morning, by Western Ideal), \$1,400 2011 BHS O-Jeffery B Clark. B-Brittany Farms & Val D'Or Farms. T-Jeffery Clark. D-George Dennis, \$10,000, Lifetime Record: 75-17-19-7, \$331,554

Wednesday's Results:

10, DD, \$20,000, T, Winners over \$12,000 in Last 6 Starts or \$50,000 Lifetime / Open Handicap Post Positions 1 thru 5 Drawn Post Positions 6 thru 8 Assigned, 27.1, 55.3, 1:24.3, 1:54.2, FT
1-Tough Mac (g, 7, Lockkeeper--Traditional Lady, by Self Possessed) O-Michael Casalino Jr. B-David W & Carol L Vanderhyde. T-Dylan Davis. D-Tim Tetrick, \$10,000, Lifetime Record: 96-22-16-8, \$272,449

THE MEADOWS REPORT

Monday's Results:

8, Mea, \$20,000, P, F&M NL PREFERRED HANDICAP (P.P. 1-2 DRAWN, 3-6 DRAWN), 28.2, 57.1, 1:25.0, 1:54.0, GD
1-Set Me Up (m, 7, Shark Gesture--Moccasin Flight, by Run The Table) O-Burke Racing Stable LLC & Weaver Brusceci LLC. B-Gregory G Drew, CA. T-Ron Burke. D-Dave Palone, \$10,000, Lifetime Record: 94-26-15-11, \$364,380

Tuesday's Results:

8, Mea, \$22,500, T, F&M WINNERS` OVER / PREFERRED HANDICAP (P.P. 1-2 DRAWN, 3-4 DRAWN, & 5-7 DRAWN), 27.4, 57.3, 1:26.4, 1:56.0, GD
1-Boo's Party Girl (m, 6, Yankee Glide--Chowda, by SJ's Caviar) O-Dunn Stable. B-Dunn Stable. T-Brian Zendt. D-Brian Zendt, \$11,250, Lifetime Record: 75-13-25-11, \$157,305

Wednesday's Results:

1, Mea, \$20,000, T, *W/O \$10,000 LIFE/PREFERRED HANDICAP* (P.P. 1-5 DRAWN, 6 ASSIGNED), 28.2, 58.1, 1:26.3, 1:55.0, FT
1-Tamarind (h, 8, Angus Hall--Spicegirl Kosmos, by S J's Photo), \$50,000 2009 LEX-SEL O-William T Bercury. B-Christopher F Beaver & David S Lang. T-William Bercury. D-Aaron Merriman, \$10,000, Lifetime Record: 164-46-21-19, \$748,249

YONKERS REPORT

Sunday's Results:

1, YR, \$21,200, T, NON-WINNERS OF \$18,000 IN LAST 5 STARTS, I, 29.1, 1:27.1, 1:57.2, 2:28.0, FT
1-Money Maven (g, 7, Revenue S--The Raven, by Sierra Kosmos), \$2,200 2010 NJ-CL O-Kapildeo Singh. B-Perretti Farms. T-Julie Miller. D-Brian Sears, \$10,600, Lifetime Record: 124-17-24-13, \$223,067

8, YR, \$32,000, T, OPEN HANDICAP POST POSITIONS 1-6 ASSIGNED, 28.4, 59.0, 1:27.3, 1:55.4, FT

1-Not Afraid (g, 7, SJ's Caviar--Beverly Crusher, by Balanced Image) O-Christina Takter & John D Fielding, CA & Goran N Anderberg, SD. B-Steve D Organ, CA. T-Jimmy Takter. D-Daniel Dube, \$16,000, Lifetime Record: 105-30-21-17, \$730,314

2-Red Hot Herbie (g, 6, Here Comes Herbie--Six Red, by S J's Photo), \$25,000 2011 IN-PREM O-Allard Racing Inc, CA & Albert P Abdala III & Bruce A Soulsby & Michael Wm Reppucci. B-John A Schmucker. T-Rene Allard. D-Brian Sears, \$8,000

3-Tweet Me (m, 5, Andover Hall--Wishful Me, by Yankee Glide), \$60,000 2012 SHS-HBG O-Bridget T Mcneese. B-Hanover Shoe Farms Inc. T-Nicholas Devita. D-Pat Lachance, \$3,840

Calls: 1H, 1H, 1Q, 1T, H - Finish Order: Dot Dot Dot Dash, Zooming, Therapeutic

9, YR, \$20,000, T, NON-WINNERS OF \$25,000 IN LAST 5 STARTS, 28.3, 58.1, 1:27.1, 1:56.2, FT

1-Clementine Dream (m, 6, Infinitif--Catch Fortuna, by Speedy Crown), \$27,000 2011 LEX-SEL O-Racing Team Of America. B-Reve Avec Moi Dreamwithme, CA. T-Mark Harder. D-Jason Bartlett, \$10,000, Lifetime Record: 67-14-10-11, \$189,900



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