

A special bond between horse and trainer

by Kimberly French, USTA Web Newsroom Senior Correspondent

Louisville, KY --- His name may not ring a bell when it comes to the heavy hitters on a national or international stage, but to Howard Okusko, J A T O's presence on this earth is one of the reasons it continues to rotate on its axis.

"You will have to talk to Howard about this horse," said his co-owner Margaret Butler. "I can tell you why I bought him, why I changed his name and what I think of him, but Howard is the one that adores this horse. He has a very special connection with him."

Butler purchased the son of Big Apple Deli and the [Credit Winner](#) mare Highwaytoheaven at the 2013 SUNY Morrisville Sale for \$6,000 on behalf of herself and her sister Amy. J A T O, previously named Steuben Cornelius, is the third foal out of his unraced dam and is a half-sibling to Darron Hall ([Cash Hall](#), \$128,811), Highway Cash ([Cash Hall](#), \$36,019) and I Ninety ([Cash Hall](#)) who is a newly turned 2-year-old. The Butlers own all of the family except Darron Hall.

J A T O, however, could prove to be the best of the bunch. The 4-year-old trotting gelding's record stands at a phenomenal 28-26-1-0. He has earned \$60,313 while competing primarily on the New York Fair Circuit for the majority of his career.



Melissa Simser-Iovino photo

J A T O extended his winning streak to 16 when he won his seasonal debut on March 6 at Saratoga.

The gelding has picked up right where he left off after a brief winter vacation. In his seasonal bow on March 6 at Saratoga, J A T O got away a bit slow, but came home with a rush to extend his winning skein to 16 consecutive races. His last loss was on July 7, 2015, at the Owego Fair, where he was second.

"You just cannot say enough about how nice this horse is," Okusko said. "I know he raced at the fairs, but look what he has accomplished since then. In his last race he wasn't warming up like himself and I wondered when he was so far back in the beginning how he would race. Especially since there was a lot of wind he had to battle against that day, but he did it. I thought he was impressive and it was a huge mile for him."

"We have never really asked him for anything, so we don't have any idea what we have on our hands."

"I just love this horse, not because of his record or ability, because ones with all the things he has don't come around often. How he is in the barn, how well-mannered and professional

Conditioned by Howard Okusko, J A T O annexed the \$10,000 New York County Fair final on Sept. 2, 2015, then stepped up to open company. On Sept. 18, he handled that transition seamlessly with a triumph in a \$4,000 non-winners contest at Vernon Downs. In his next five starts, he continually worked his way up in class over the same oval with victory after victory and ended the year's campaign with another in an \$8,000 Open II Handicap on Oct. 30.

he is on the track and how intelligent of a horse he is. I don't care where you race when you have all the wins he does, that is a special horse."

The Butlers, however, may have some kind of top secret information when it comes to acquiring horses at Morrisville. The duo also purchased Dayson at the same sale in 2014 for \$18,000. The now 3-year-old son of [Conway Hall](#)-Nervey's Taurus amassed \$182,612 last year in New York Sire Stakes company. His only loss in eight trips to the post was in the \$225,000 Sire Stakes final, when he broke behind the gate. The gelding, however, was sold and will be continuing his career from the barn of Ron Burke.

"I had that horse too before he was sold," Okusko said. "That horse is very, very fast. I sat behind him and feel that kind of speed was quite shocking.

"You can't say enough about the job Margaret is doing. Who gets two horses like this in the same year? She does all the work herself getting them ready and takes a lot of time deciding who she will pick out. It's not just luck, it's all her doing."

Although Okusko is not exactly certain what the season will entail for J A T O, he is thrilled the horse has started off 2016 so well, which only bolsters the hopes he has for him.

"You might see him at Saratoga again," he said. "But I'm taking a shot with him and putting him in a series down at Yonkers later this month. Maybe he can't beat all those horses down there, but I think he has enough go to him to keep right on up.

"Honestly, we really don't know what he is capable of, but we do know he has talent and heart. He has earned the opportunity to compete in these types of races and we have to provide him with a good shot."

Whether the gelding continues to dominate his opposition or finds the task a bit too tall matters not to Okusko for his bond with him permeates far more deeply than your average trainer/pupil relationship. This emotion is not lost on the Butlers.

"I really think Margaret only kept this horse so I could spend time with him," he said. "I know she had very nice offers for him and Dayson. With Dayson she did the right thing and took the money, but she knew if this horse left it would leave a hole in my barn I might never replace. I've been in the horse business for years and I'm not a young man, but I plan my whole day around him. All you have to do is look at him and how he carries himself and you fall in love. I can never thank Margaret enough for not only allowing me to have any of her horses, but to be nice enough to realize this horse is one of the reasons I still get up in the morning."