

Millionaire Habitat leads sophomore class in NYSS Night of Champions
By Tim Bojarski, for the Harness Horse Breeders of New York

When the best Empire State 3-year-olds of both sexes and gaits convene at Yonkers Raceway on Saturday (Sept. 12) for the first edition of the 2015 Night of Champions, some of the best sophomores in North American harness racing will be competing for the \$900,000 in purses.

In fact, it will include four of the top 20 colt and filly pacers and four of the top 15 colt and filly trotters currently in the sport.

That gaudy list is definitely led by Habitat 3, 1:53 (\$1,104,841) by Conway Hall-Habit's Best, whose \$570,434 in 2015 ranks him fourth in North America among trotters of all ages behind Hambletonian winner Pinkman, Open sensation JL Cruze and Hambletonian Oaks winner Wild Honey.

Habitat has been made the morning line choice in the 3-year-old trotting colt and gelding division by the track handicapper and is listed at 1-1.

After completing an outstanding freshman campaign that saw him earn in excess of \$500,000, Habitat began this year in quick fashion by winning the \$133,170 Dexter Cup at Freehold in his very first start. He then won two out of three early NYSS events before hitting the Grand Circuit.

Habitat trotted his fastest mile of the year in his Hambletonian elimination heat where he finished fourth to eventual stake winner, Pinkman, in 1:51.2. Unfortunately he drew post 10 in the final and was only able to watch his stablemate, Mission Brief, finish second from nine lengths behind.

But since that time, the Conway Hall colt has been red hot; stringing together three consecutive victories in what could only be described as dominating fashion.

He won the \$58,662 Tompkins Memorial at Tioga Downs in a lifetime best-tying time of 1:53. Then two weeks later it was wire to wire in the \$40,000 Yonkers Trot elimination. And he followed that up with a three and one-half length romp in the \$500,000 Yonkers Trot final.

The NYSS final will be the third straight start at Yonkers Raceway for Habitat, who has already shown a propensity to perform well on that surface.

The sports leading trainer, Ron Burke, will send Habitat postward with the leading NYSS driver, Jim Morrill Jr. in tow for owners Burke Racing Stable, Our Horse Cents Stables and Weaver Brusceci.

The 3-year-old distaff trotting division features Barn Doll who has been installed as the 9-5 choice.

Barn Doll 3, 1:52.1 (\$560,650) by Conway Hall-Headintheclouds, seemingly does nothing but win. She is 17 out of 21 lifetime and 10 out of 12 this year. Her lifetime mark of 1:52.1 occurred two weeks in a row at Vernon Downs in June when she won the elimination and final of the \$248,275 Empire Breeders Classic in identical times.

Barn Doll has only been beaten twice this year, finishing second both times. And as this filly likes to come at the three-eighths, it took a :56 back half at Tioga and a :57 last-lap at Yonkers to take her down. Given the convincing manner she won her most recent two starts it would appear she comes into this race razor sharp.

Barn Doll is trained by Steve Pratt, who co-owns the filly with Nancy Pratt and Wanda Polisseni's Purple Haze Stable. Jeff Gregory will once again be at the lines as he has for eight of her wins this year

Jewels In Hock 3, 1:53.3 (\$254,496) by Credit Winner-Jewels Galore, should pose the major threat to Barn Doll in this race as she comes into the contest winning three out of her last four starts. She is eight out of 16 in the winner's circle this year and that \$241,496 has accounted for the bulk of her lifetime income.

The filly likes the front end and will get the opportunity to cut the race in here for driver Jim Morrill Jr. Linda Toscano trains Jewels In Hock for Ken Jacobs' KJ Stables LLC.

In the 3-year-old pacing filly division, Mosquito Blue Chip is rated the 5-2 morning line choice but comes into the race as bit of an enigma.

Mosquito Blue Chip 3, 1:49.3 (\$477,511) by Bettor's Delight-Sandfly Hanover, had been rolling right along; winning three out of four races including a lifetime best 1:49.3 in winning the \$269,000 Empire Breeders Classic at Tioga Downs on August 23. But the very next week after a raucous spell behind the gate, going into the first turn she made the only break of her career; and it was a bad one. So how does that affect her chances 12 days later over the same track?

Aside from that line, Mosquito Blue Chip has been a model of consistency since the beginning of June. She is eight out of 12 in the money, including five wins. And she was the third leading point getter and second highest money-earner in the series for her division this year.

Jim Morrill Jr. will steer Mosquito Blue Chip for trainer Paul Jessop, who co-owns the filly with Our Three Sons Stable LLC and Donato Falcicchio.

Finally, in the 3-year-old pacing colts and geldings split, Betting Exchange is the prohibitive 7-5 choice coming off a very convincing outing his last start.

Betting Exchange 3, 1:51.2 (\$401,663) by Bettor's Delight-Cheeky Hanover, is having an outstanding year. He finished third behind Wakizashi Hanover and Wiggle It Jiggleit (who are currently first and third in North America for 2015 earnings) in the \$810,000 North America Cup at Mohawk Raceway in 1:48 flat, beaten only three lengths.

Then he finished fourth in the \$290,000 Empire Breeders Classic at Tioga Downs. Yannick Gingras took the colt to the front from post seven in 26.2 before getting a two-hole trip for the race. After shaking loose in the stretch, he finished fourth in 1:50, beaten only three lengths.

Betting Exchange followed that up with a devastating nine-length victory seven days later at Batavia Downs, going the mile in 1:51.2 and just missing the all-time track record by one fifth of a second.

Jason Bartlett was up for that win and returns to try and repeat the effort for trainer Tom Fanning. Betting Exchange is owned by his trainer along with Howard Taylor and Susan Kajfasz.