

Walner tops the Hambletonian chase.

Trainer Linda Toscano is trying to keep karma on her side as she quietly preps Walner for his all-important sophomore campaign with trainers Ron Burke and Jimmy Takter nipping at her heels.

by Dave Little

If you're looking for someone certain her horse is going to win the Hambletonian, don't bother contacting Linda Toscano.

"I will not go there," said the trainer of Walner, the top three-year-old colt trotter in training. I made the mistake of doing that with Chapter Seven. A great horse, but karma got in the way. He got sick. We tried to play catch up but did not win the Hambletonian.

Karma smiled upon Toscano a year later, as her Market Share won the 2012 edition of harness racing's trotting classic. It may smile upon her yet again with Walner, who was a dominant force during his two-year-old campaign a year ago.

He started only eight times, but won seven after starting his season late, the result of not being staked to many of the two-year-old events. He earned 83 per cent of his division-best \$484,037 by taking the Breeders Crown and Kindergarten in his last two starts.

The son of Chapter Seven - Random Destiny compiled some impressive numbers a year ago: Of his five wins on a mile track, the smallest winning margin was three lengths. He was sent off at odds of 4-5 or lower in every one of his starts. On five occasions, he was 1-5 or shorter. His lone loss came in a Kindergarten preliminary after going off stride. He came back one week later and crushed his foes by six-and-a-half lengths.

"(Driver) Timmy (Tetrick) and I had a battle of wills (before his only loss)," said Toscano. Timmy said, "He needs a dog chain, just trust me." After he broke, I told Tim, "I love you, but we are going to turn the page. I live with him 24 hours a day, seven days a week and you rent him for two minutes a week. If we are going to go down, we are going to go down with me." On Aug. 2 of last year, Walner broke stride racing in the New York Sire Stakes at Saratoga, but came back to win after spotting the field 20 lengths. "That's when I knew I had a special horse," said Toscano, who then got some help from a friend. "George Ducharme, one of my favorite people, walked over to me after the race. George has had trotters for years (he won the 2013 Hambletonian with Royalty For Life)," said Toscano. He handed me a package of Tums and said, "You're going to need these more than I am."

"He's pretty much in everything (all of the major stakes) and will make his first start in the Empire Breeders Classic in early June," said Toscano, who did admit "It's a good kind of pressure when it comes to the expectations for her horse."

Walner is clearly the division leader as the year begins, but the usual suspects have a handful of horses who could be right there.

