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Picking up the pieces



Horsemen discuss the closure of Freehold and what's next

BARBARA LIVINGSTON PHOTO



EDITOR'S EYE

By Derick Giwner

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After the last race was contested and the tears from the thousands that showed up for closing day at Freehold Raceway had dried, reality started to set in for those that competed over the historic oval.

While fans were sad to see the track close its doors after over 170 years of existence and many came out on December 28 to get one last glimpse, you have to at least consider that their lack of pari-mutuel support and on-track presence over the years played at least a small role in the shuttering of the facility.

"I was out there warming up and you could count the number of people with one or two hands," said trainer Brandon Mongiello on the normal daily turnout at the central New Jersey track.

"It was amazing," continued the trainer on the December 28 crowd. "I've been going there 15 plus years and I've never seen it like that."

Trainer John Urbanski, whose father got into the Standardbred game in 1971 and his brother in 1977, has been earning a living at Freehold Raceway for 31 years. His son John (22) and daughter Alex (24) also participate as owners, drivers and trainers. For Urbanski, it was neglect and lack of

imagination that spelled the ultimate demise of the track.

"They could've done a lot of things. You see what The Meadowlands does with the food trucks. You have to give people a reason to want to go there. Down in Maryland they do so many events to get people there; the aprons are full. There was no reason why Freehold Raceway couldn't do those things to draw people," said Urbanski, who continued with a story of his daily view at the track. "There was a guy over the summer for the last few years who used to bring his own lawn chair, take his shirt off and have a cooler of drinks alongside him. That is what we've been looking at. Security never told him to leave or put his clothes back on. That is what we had instead of food trucks or something to draw people in. We had that guy."

While bettors and fans will always have their memories as they either invest at simulcast tracks or concentrate on other entertainment outlets in their daily lives, those on the backstretch like Mongiello and Urbanski must seek new tracks to race at while incurring time and monetary costs.

Mongiello, who led all Freehold trainers in 2024 with 216 starts over the central New Jersey track, said he lightened his horse supply knowing that opportunities would decrease with Freehold closing. The time around the New Year can be a difficult one for trainers as the racing options are few and far between on the East coast. Dover Downs, Monticello and The Meadowlands are the

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A large crowd showed up on the track apron for the final race ever at Freehold Raceway on December 28.

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only real options within a three-hour drive of Freehold. Yonkers doesn't resume racing until January 20 and other tracks like Saratoga and Pocono don't open their doors until February.

"Once Freehold closed I didn't really want to be on the road, so I sent some up to friends [at Monticello] and I sold some," said Mongiello, who has 10 horses remaining in his barn.

As a trainer who made 77.6% of his 278 starts in 2024 at Freehold, Mongiello's options are further limited by the class of the horses he has in his barn. There are a few opportunities at The Meadowlands but that's about it right now.

"I'm going to try to get the rest of my horses in at Monticello on one or two days a week," said the trainer, hoping to limit his trips to the Catskill region of New York. "The Meadowlands isn't writing cheaper classes and the races go fast. They had a Trackmaster 69 on the condition sheet last week and they didn't go with it. There were like 500 horses in the [entry] box and only 250 got in."

Mongiello added that The Meadowlands is planning to card races on Sundays in February and March which could help and Harrah's Philadelphia opening its doors in April will provide more opportunities as well.

"Travel, tolls, gas," said Mongiello on the clear downside of Freehold closing. "Freehold was five minutes from my house. It was less expensive. I'm stabled in Colts Neck and that is only 15 to 20 minutes from Freehold."

Urbanski, who built his own farm two years ago in Allentown just 20 minutes from Freehold, has an even higher percentage of starters at the now defunct raceway, 89.4% of his 228 starts. The 53-year-old isn't quite sure what to expect now. His closest option is The Meadowlands if they offer classes for his horses, but he worries that it will be tough for him to get his horses raced consistently since the track has an open door policy without restrictions like surrounding states.

"Anywhere else we would go with the kind of stock we raced [at Freehold] would be three hours away, whether it is Monticello or Rosecroft or Ocean Downs in the summer or Virginia," said Urbanski. "The Meadowlands is going to try to write Freehold classes on Sundays but that is going to invite anyone who fits those classes whether they are coming out of New York or wherever. It is going to be tough. It will be 10-horse fields instead of eight horses. At Freehold we had the half-mile track and it is a great equalizer where you could beat a good horse based on post position and the way a race develops."

"I don't know because of the expense of travelling," continued Urbanski on where he'll be racing in the immediate future. "For me to go to Rosecroft

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COURTESY JOHN URBANSKI

The Urbanski's - (left to right) Alex, John James, John Joseph and Alisa - used to make their living at Freehold Raceway.

it is a \$250 expense. It is \$100 in gas each way plus tolls. Plus if you have to eat food along the way because it is a long day; three hours there and three hours home. And it could easily be seven or eight hours driving with Baltimore traffic. When you come home from Monticello it can be the same thing. Yeah, the races wrap up early but you can sit in traffic and a two and a half hour drive can easily become a five hour drive."

While Mongiello and Urbanski started the most horses at Freehold in 2024, trainer Izzy Estrada by far won the most races with 61 victories, more than double Urbanski who tied for second with 26. Estrada sounded dejected about the Freehold situation despite speaking from outside the U.S. while on his yearly holiday vacation.



JAMES LISA/LISA PHOTO

Tyler Miller was the second leading driver at Freehold in 2024.

"It affects me big time. I can't buy cheap horses anymore with Freehold gone. I used to buy a lot of horses from Canada. I can't believe that it closed," said Estrada, who mentioned Monticello as a short-term possibility for his stable of 15 horses. "I will race every place I can."

A sad reality for New Jersey is the economic effect that Freehold's closure could have on the state. While the 32-year-old Garden State-born Mongiello is reluctant to leave his home unless the perfect scenario pops up, both Estrada and Urbanski mentioned that Freehold's closure may force their hands.

"When I get back next week I'll see what I'm going to do because I may have to move to a different state," said Estrada.

"This past month at Freehold Raceway I brought \$30,000 into my household. The month before I took \$22,000 out of there. That is what I'm used to living on. For us it costs \$12,000 a month just to break even; pay the bills, feed the animals and take care of what we need," said Urbanski. "I do have an escape plan and that is to move to Maryland. They have a 40% bonus just for being a resident. If I race for \$8,000 and I win, I get \$4,000 plus \$1,600."

"My daughter now has four horses and my son has two. Their plan is to do this. This is their future. If I have to move to Maryland to preserve that for them then that is what I'll do."

Although Urbanski said he already has a potential buyer for his 12 acre farm if he decides to make the move, he wants to "experience" what it will be like racing off his farm in New Jersey in the post-Freehold era before making any final decisions.

"We'll give The Meadowlands thing a shot," said Urbanski. "I'm going to fight for it and do my darndest to give it a go."

Urbanski said his brother is also going to do what he can to stay in the sport, but the Freehold closure may ultimately lead him into an unwanted retirement.

"My brother Ned may have to retire because of this," said Urbanski. "He's 65 years old and he's not going to go to Monticello. He'll be at The Meadowlands a little bit and will give it a shot. With the owner that he has

I don't know if the quality of horses will compete at The Meadowlands. If that doesn't work out he'll probably retire, and that is unfortunate because he would like to stay in it."

Mongiello also said he's going to do his best to stick it out but admitted that he may end up with just a few horses racing at Yonkers.

"I'm going to try my best and if not I'll sell most of them. It isn't cheap between gas and tolls. Before you even start with Lasix you are already \$200 to \$300 into your pocket," said Mongiello. "I drove to Monticello last Thursday. I was up at four in the morning; didn't even have time to jog my horses. It's terrible."

The issue of how to move forward and earn a livelihood aren't limited to Urbanski, Mongiello and Estrada. A total of 26 trainers started at least 70 horses at Freehold in 2024 and another dozen sent 50-plus horses from the paddock and over Route 9 to the track.

Fifteen drivers went behind the gate at least 100 times at Freehold last year and many of them are young men still looking to make a name for themselves in the sport. Tyler Miller, second in the standings with 116 wins, is just 26. Mark Herschberger (29) finished fifth with 76 victories, Johnathan Ahle (27) was one spot behind with 61 wins, and every driver in the top 10 at the track from 2024 is under 40 years old except two. How will they continue to learn and earn with one less track?

"It is a real shame that it had to end the way it did because it was such an opportunity for us young guys to get opportunities that are hard to come by at 'A' tracks like The Meadowlands," said Tyler Miller, who mapped out his plan for the coming year. "I'm going to race at The Meadowlands right now because it is the only place it town and that is my favorite place to race. I've been going to Tioga the past two years so I'll head up there when they open. I'll also go to Chester [Harrah's Philadelphia] and the surrounding areas trying to pick up the opportunities I lost elsewhere."

"From the drivers to the trainers and everyone involved, it is really hard to find the positive of Freehold closing."

The closure of Freehold Raceway is undoubtedly sad if not unexpected. In the end it will force some people to leave New Jersey and some to leave the sport, but Standardbred horse people are nothing if not resilient and no doubt will find a way to survive.

"Horsemen are like cockroaches. We don't disappear, we find another way," concluded Urbanski.

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