



- News, views and insights that matter to breeders, owners and racing industry professionals - November 2024 -

In This Issue

J J Zo Zo impressive in Smoke Glacken

Classy Jersey-bred He'spuregold rallies for head victory in \$100,000 Red Bank Stakes

Smithwick's Spice earns third stakes win of 2024 in Joey P.

Bel Pensiero wins Pinot Grigio Handicap

Gov. Murphy signs extension for purse enhancements for horse racing

Monmouth shows increase in average total and on-track handle for fourth straight year

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J J Zo Zo impressive in Smoke Glacken

by Bill Finley

With the New Jersey racing season about to come to an end, trainer Jose Sanchez is not sure yet where his star 2-year-old J J Zo Zo will run next. But after the son of Sea Wizard clobbered the competition in the Smoke Glacken Stakes Sept. 7 at Monmouth, Garcia isn't afraid to run him anywhere or against anybody. Nor should be. J J Zo Zo was that impressive, beating open company by 8½ lengths.

"He came out of the race in pretty good shape," Sanchez said. "We are looking into options somewhere else, maybe New York, maybe Kentucky. Right now we don't have a race in mind for him. We are looking into it. With him being so impressive in the (Smoke Glacken) we should be ok wherever we run him."

From the first day the 2-year-old colt came into Sanchez's barn, he knew he had a horse with speed and ability. But even he was surprised by the manner in which J J Zo Zo won the Smoke Glacken. He went straight to the front from the gate and widened his margin in the stretch in a race that was a mismatch.

"In his first race, he needed the race, so it didn't surprise me that he got a little bit tired," Sanchez said. "I was expecting him to break his maiden in his second start but he ran into some trouble. He just had some bad luck. The day he broke his maiden, he was impressive. He got passed in the stretch and came back to fight to get the win.

"But the talent was always there. Before I ran him the first time, he had a breeze where he showed a lot of speed. I breezed him with two other horses. He broke pretty fast. He went in 35 for the three-eighths and 47 flat for a half



mile. I realized then we had a horse with talent. But I didn't know that he'd be this good. I was pretty confident he could break his maiden against Jersey bred and then maybe we could try stakes races. I was impressed by the way he won. Honestly, I thought he could win the race but not that impressively."

Originally, Sanchez wasn't interested in running in the Smoke Glacken because it meant that horses had to come back in 13 days. But when he saw the list of nominations he did not see a horse he thought he couldn't beat.

"I wasn't going to run him until I saw the nominations and that there was nothing impressive among the nominees," he said. "So I was excited to run him there."

J J Zo paid \$3.60 and covered the 6 furlongs in 1:11.27. Fellow Jersey-bred Royal Performance was fourth.

continued on next page

J J Zo Zo is owned and bred by Jose Garcia. He is one of only eight horses in Sanchez's barn.

"I keep a small number," he said. "I like to get my hands on all the horses. That's the reason why I keep 10 or fewer."

Sanchez knows what it's like to be around a good horse, as he was Skip Away's groom for trainer Sonny Hine.

"I go all the way back to Sonny Hine and I was Skip Away's groom throughout

his career," he said. "Since day one, when he got to the barn, I was the only groom he ever had."

Sanchez went out on his own in 2016 and says he still uses the lessons Hine taught him.

"Sonny was great. He was one of the old-time trainers," Sanchez said. "I was young then but I learned a lot from him. I use a lot of his training methods. I'm doing a lot of what he did with this horse."

That the sire Sea Wizard has produced another stakes winner is hardly a surprise. The lightly-raced son of Uncle Mo, who calls Pegasus Stud in Colts Neck home, is clearly the best sire standing in the state. He's had three crops get to the races and already has four stakes winners who have combined to win five stakes overall. He's yet to have a graded stakes winner.

J J Zo Zo might just change that.

Classy Jersey-bred He'spuregold rallies for head victory in \$100,000 Red Bank Stakes

For everything that He'spuregold has accomplished during his career – and there's a laundry list of significant achievements – the one hole in his resume was the absence of a stakes win in open company.

No longer.

The 6-year-old Jersey-bred gelding turned in a performance that trainer Kelly Breen said might have been the best race of his 28-race career, wearing down fellow state-bred There Are No Words in deep stretch for a head victory in the \$100,000 Red Bank Stakes at Monmouth Park.

In a banner year for state-breds, the 1-2 finish in the 51st edition of the Red Bank Stakes added to those exploits.

The winning time for the mile over a turf course was 1:36.10.

"It's his first stakes win outside of Jersey-bred competition so it's a big deal," said Breen. "I think a mile (where he is six-for-12 lifetime) is his best distance. He was in the right spot in the right place today. I told Paco Lopez to try to sit the pocket. The rest was up to Paco. We don't need to tell him too much.

"We've talked about this (winning an open stakes race) for years, Mr. John Bowers (the owner and breeder) and I. I gave him a big congratulations that we finally did it."



A son of Vancouver (Aus), He'spuregold's career accomplishments include being named New Jersey's Champion Turf Horse in 2021, New Jersey's Champion Older Male in 2022 and 2023, and winning the Irish War Cry Handicap four straight years.

The Red Bank marked his sixth career stakes win and saw him improve to 7-for-12 on the Monmouth Park turf course.

Able to stay close to the pace set by Ocean City and the stalking There Are No Words, Lopez coaxed just enough out of He'spuregold to get the victory after a sustained stretch run.

Sir London was third, 1¼ lengths behind There Are No Words.

"When the grass is a little firm like it was today he runs well," said Lopez, who was on the verge of his 11th riding title

at Monmouth Park. "When he's feeling good like he was today he runs good. I let him get comfortable and I was able to stay close to the leaders and that set us up nicely for the finish.

"For sure this was one of his better races, especially looking at the horses he beat today."

Lopez would know, having ridden the horse in each of his past 17 starts.

Breen, who has won three Monmouth Park training titles, has hinted that this may be He'spuregold's last year of racing, but now it's something he may reconsider.

"I don't know what his future is," said Breen after He'spuregold increased his lifetime earnings to \$595,170 with his ninth career win. "He has surprised me with how well he is doing and he keeps on doing it. It's going to be up to Mr. Bowers and I'll see what he says.

"I wish I could tell you how much this means to Mr. Bowers (who owns Roseland Farm). He only has two horses in training now after all those years he owned and bred horses. He has this horse and Royal Performance, a 2-year-old who is going to run in the Smoke Glacken (on Saturday) at Monmouth. So I know this means a whole lot to him right now."



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Smithwick's Spice earns third stakes win of 2024 in Joey P.

Thanks to the race not being carded in 2023, Smithwick's Spice waited an extra year to defend his Joey P. Handicap title.

It was worth the wait.

Jockey Jorge Gonzalez wanted the lead with Smithwick's Spice, dissuaded pace rivals Gold Trust, Speaking and Bingo's Boy through an opening quarter in 21.86 seconds, then drew away to prevail by 4¾ lengths over Like What I See in the \$85,000 5-furlong turf dash for New Jersey-breds at Monmouth Park.

Smithwick's Spice is trained by Douglas Nunn, who has kept the gelding busy in 2024. The Joey P. was his 11th start of the year, and his fourth race of the Monmouth meeting.



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Smithwick's Spice wintered in Florida, where he captured the Turf Dash at Tampa Bay Downs Feb. 24. Smithwick's Spice won a restricted allowance at Delaware on July 31, scored the open

Select Stakes at Monmouth 17 days later, then finished sixth in Saratoga's Harvey Pack on Sept. 2.

A homebred owned by Robert Matthies' New Spice Stable, Smithwick's Spice is an 8-year-old gelding by Frost Giant. He has compiled a record of 13 wins from 48 starts for career earnings of \$692,492.

When describing Smithwick's Spice's effort in the Harvey Pack, Nunn said that the veteran is "not a horse that wants to be down inside. From the quarter pole all the way to the sixteenth pole, he was in tight and even got checked late. I think we didn't get to see the best of him."

Nunn got Smithwick's Spice's best in the Joey P, the final stakes race of the 2024 Monmouth meet.

Bel Pensiero wins Pinot Grigio Handicap

Like fine wine, Bel Pensiero improves with age, and the 4-year-old filly prompted the pacesetter under jockey Ramon Moya before pouncing her way to victory in the \$85,000 Pinot Grigio Handicap for New Jersey-bred fillies and mares racing 5 furlongs on turf.

Trained by Anthony Margotta Jr. for Hudson Stable, Let It Ride Equine Holdings and A R M Racing, Bel Pensiero broke best, then let a hard-ridden Let Her Run make the lead from the inside.

Let Her Run clocked the opening quarter in 22 seconds flat with Bel Pensiero in closest attendance. In behind those two were race favorite Bingo's Birkin on the outside and defending Pinot Grigio winner Mia's Crusade in a comfortable pocket position.



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Bel Pensiero took over for good turning into the stretch and, despite failing to change leads, always had enough in the tank to deny Bingo's Birkin by three-quarters of a length in :56.67.

Mia's Crusade finished another 2 lengths back in third. Summer's Comin, Delightful Ava, Let Her Run and Captured Darling completed the order

of finish. Amazing Graces Joy and Sea Maiden scratched.

Bel Pensiero returned \$13 to win as the fourth choice in the wagering.

Bred by ARM Consulting, Bel Pensiero is a daughter of Army Mule out of Milaya, a four-time winner by Eskendereya. The second dam, Trendy Lady, was Grade 3-placed sprinting on polytrack.

Bel Pensiero became a true stakes horse in 2024. She finished second in the 6-furlong Regret on dirt at Monmouth July 24, ran fifth in the Incredible Revenge at five-eighths on the turf, then tuned up for the Pinot Grigio with a runner-up placing in the restricted Eleven North Stakes at 6 furlongs on dirt Aug. 25.

Bel Pensiero has won four of 15 races while earning \$284,937.



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Gov. Murphy signs extension for purse enhancements for horse racing

Governor Phil Murphy has signed legislation that will extend the \$20 million annual purse enhancement for horse racing in the state, with the appropriation now running through to the state's fiscal year in 2029, the Governor's office announced.

Monmouth Park will receive \$10 million annually for purses, with the remaining \$10 million going toward purses for Standardbred racing at the Meadowlands Racetrack and Freehold Raceway, as well money earmarked for bonuses for state-sired horses and breeders' awards.

"Given the critical importance of the horse racing industry to not only the state's economy, but to farmland and

open space preservation, I am signing this legislation to signal my desire for the state to continue to make this investment each year at the level directed in the bill," Gov. Murphy said in a statement.

"New Jersey's horse racing industry is a key economic engine, supporting thousands of jobs and attracting tourists and fans from around the world. The funding promised by this legislation will allow New Jersey to continue to offer one of the most exciting horse racing experiences in the nation, while also providing a boost to an industry that is integral to our economy."

The legislation passed 76-0 in the Assembly and 40-0 in the Senate.

"We're grateful for the ongoing

support for horse racing shown by Gov. Murphy and the state's legislators," said Dennis Drazin, Chairman and CEO of Darby Development, LLC, the operators of Monmouth Park. "We're in a very competitive market in the Northeast, where purse structure is vital to attracting top horses and putting on the highest quality product we can. This added purse money keeps us on solid footing to continue to offer first-class racing to fans."

The original legislation designating the purse enhancement for racing was signed by Gov. Murphy in February 2019. That includes \$20 million for purses already appropriated for the state's fiscal year 2025.

Monmouth shows increase in average total and on-track handle for fourth straight year

Spurred in part by a record handle on NYRA Bets Haskell Stakes Day, Monmouth Park continued its upward trend with increases in both total and on-track handle for the fourth straight year, while jockey Paco Lopez and trainer Claudio Gonzalez were repeat winners of their respective titles as the 50-day meet came to an end on Sept. 15.

Total average handle was \$4,251,965, a 5.4 percent increase over last year's average of \$4,032,648 during a 51-day meet.

On-track handle averaged \$352,939, a 3.7 increase over last year's average of \$340,257.

In addition, the total handle of \$212,598,246 for the 50 days was an increase of nearly \$7 million over last year's 51-day total handle of \$205,665,035.

The overall on-track handle also

increased despite one less day of live racing, finishing at \$17,646,973 compared to \$17,353,093 in 2023.

"It's a testament to the owners, trainers and the quality of racing that we were able to show an increase in handle once again," said Dennis Drazin, Chairman and CEO of Darby Development, LLC, lessee and operator of Monmouth Park. "With everything we have on the horizon, from the state-of-the-art Caesars Sportsbook now under construction to the development that is planned for the property, the future of Monmouth Park has never been brighter."

Haskell Day produced a record total handle of \$21,748,294 for the 14-race card, eclipsing the record set a year earlier. The crowd of 38,976 was the largest for Haskell Day since 2015.

Among the future enhancements to the facility is the 16,000 square

foot Caesars trackside sportsbook, which is currently under construction. Completion is scheduled for next year.

JEMB, of which Morris Baily is the chairman of the board, has partnered with Darby Development and Monmouth Park to develop 80 acres of the track property, with plans calling for multi-family housing, a hotel and retail and youth sports facilities.

On the racing front, Lopez won his 11th Monmouth Park riding title overall and 10th in the past 12 years, finishing with 76 wins to 65 for runner-up Jairo Rendon.

Gonzalez won his third straight Monmouth Park training total, holding a 34-32 advantage over Mario Serey, Jr.

Robert Reidy, a Rumson resident, earned his first leading owner's title with 14 wins from 66 starts. Reidy has been an owner since 2010.



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