

# THE SOUTHERN HEMISPHERE'S LEADING STUD FARMS



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## THE VIEW DOWNUNDER

# NEW ZEALAND RACING ON THE UPSWING

Unlike many racing jurisdictions, New Zealand is booming. Here are the reasons why.

Your local race card could be the first indication of a revolution taking place in harness racing half a world away.

When you have been scanning the fields for your local meet you might have noticed fewer unknown newcomers from New Zealand (easy to spot with that "N" suffix alongside their names).

While there are a number of contributing factors, with the weakened US dollar of the last year being one reason for less imports coming to that side of the world, the biggest reason that fewer New Zealand horses are crossing the Pacific is far simpler. Right now, home has never been better.

New Zealand harness racing, for so long a struggling industry whose only pot of gold has been selling horses to Australia or North America, has come alive.

Even in an industry noted for its pessimism, a wave of positivity has all but drowned out the cynics.

Now while I am not about to paint New Zealand as harness racing nirvana, compared with a decade ago it is pretty darn close.

The industry has undergone a makeover at almost all levels, with the breeding, yearling sales and most important racing sides all showing enormous growth.

Consider this. In the last decade the average yearling sales price at New Zealand's biggest sale was just under \$10,000. This season it was over \$35,000.

Back then, a New Zealand stallion (and almost all the commercial ones were North American imports) was elite if he stood at \$10,000.

Now leading sire Christian Cullen's book is full at \$25,000 (plus tax), while Mach Three is full at \$12,000.

But the greatest increase, the lavish cream on top of this cake, is on the track itself.

Stakes in New Zealand have sky rocketed to the point where our Australian cousins, 2,000 miles away to our west, can only look on in envy.

New Zealand's greatest race, the New Zealand Trotting Cup (which is actually for pacers, go figure) was our Holy Grail two years ago when it was worth \$500,000.

This November it will be run, over



Michael Guerin

3,200 metres from a standing start, for \$1.2 million.

The Auckland Cup, our next biggest is \$600,000 and as a signal of things to come, the richest three-year-old race, the Woodlands Northern Derby, is also \$600,000.

We now have an array of age group pacing races and open aged trotting races worth \$200,000 or \$300,000 while a series created by governing body Harness Racing New Zealand called the Harness Jewels, has stakes of \$1.5 million over nine races in one day.

A mini Breeders Crown if you will.

And even more staggering is most of these races have no early or sustaining payments scheme, so they are effectively free to race in.

The stakes earthquake trickles all the way to the bottom of the industry, with the powerful Auckland Trotting Club now offering \$10,000 for all maiden races.

Straight after that, a one-win horse can race at Alexandra Park in Auckland for never less than \$15,000 for the rest of its career.

**Now while I am not about to paint New Zealand as harness racing nirvana, compared with a decade ago it is pretty darn close.**

The best way to explain that is if your pacer wins one race at Alexandra Park a year, it will pay virtually all of its training bills for that season!

So I know what you are thinking: how did all this come about?

The reasons, as always in these situations, are varied and vast but there has been one major trigger for this industry explosion and it is the government, or more appropriately, the Minister for Racing, Winston Peters.

Mr. Peters was not only New Zealand's Minister for Foreign Affairs this year but also Minister for Racing, which would be sort of like the US having their Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice overseeing racing's future as a hobby horse (excuse the pun).

As you can imagine such a person has a lot of power and Peters, a true racing fan, was able to instigate a change to New Zealand's gaming tax laws that meant racing wasn't as unfairly taxed compared with casinos as in the past.

That was heavily lobbied for by the racing industry and Mr. Peters, the racing fan that he is, seemed to be one of the few top level politicians to take their concerns on board, as well as realizing the support of this largely unheralded body of people could help keep him in power.

A Fair Tax group was set up and lobbied Peters for changes to the New Zealand gaming laws that meant racing paid tax more in line with casinos.

Before the changes, 5.7 cents of every dollar gambled on racing went to the government, but that was slashed to closer to one per cent because the gaming laws were changed.

That meant racing wasn't being taxed solely on turnover, but instead on share of turnover retained, which is what happens to casinos.

That meant the gaming duty (tax) paid by the racing industry was reduced from \$42 million a year to \$10 million.

The result was that they have injected an extra \$32 million into racing, some of which has gone into stakes spread over three codes (Thoroughbreds, harness racing and Greyhounds).

Harness racing has always been immensely popular as far as racing goes in New Zealand, with just under 33 per cent of the total turnover on domestic racing being on harness racing.

So when an extra \$30 million turned up, a good proportion was able to be injected into stakes.

Now another injection is around the corner as internationalization of New Zealand's racing product becomes a reality.

Already New Zealand racing is simulcast into Australia, which has a huge racing punting base, and it returns a lot of money to the New Zealand industry for very little cost to the host country.

## JUST MAYBE THE BEST TROTTING COLT IN THE SALE...

### #96 **WARKENSON** br.c.

*Ken Warkentin-Aimees Image-Balanced Image*

From the first crop of the exciting young sire **KEN WARKENTIN**, the second foal of Oakville Stake winner **AIMEES IMAGE** 2,1:58.4s (\$365,577). Her first foal is now racing. The dam hails from an exceptional family being a full sister to OSS Gold and Trillium winner **LOVERS IMAGE** 2,1:59.2S (\$234,852), **DRIVING IMAGE** 1:56.1s (\$125,704), the dam of **MUSCLE SHOALS** 2,1:57s (\$140,834), **PERFECT VACATION** 1:54.3s-'08 (\$137,674) and half-sister to **VILLAGE ADVOCATE** 1:56.3f (\$496,480).

### #213 **KESONS CELEIGH** b.f.

*Mach Three-All Sports-Die Laughing*

Full sister to **ASTOUNDING** p,2,1:55.1s, 3,1:55f (\$47,441) – third in Battle Of Waterloo, half-sister to 2008 two-year-old **KESONS DAHLIA** p,2,2:01.1h-'08, **KESONS DURANTE** p,3,2:00.2H (\$23,645). From a full sister to **SPORTS TOWN** p,2,1:54f, 3,1:52f, 4,1:49.3 (\$848,540).

### #98 **KESONS ALLURE** br.f.

*Mach Three-Olive You Best-Pacific Fella*

Half-sister to 2008 two-year-old **KESONS AVAIA** p,2,Q2:00s and three-year-old **KESONS TROJAN** (race-timed in 1:59.2s). From a half-sister to **THREE OLIVES** p,2,1:52s, 3,1:51 (\$1,086,795), **MR TRENTONIAN** p,3,1:53.3 (\$121,667).

### #102 **KESONS TIGER** b.c.

*Mach Three-Anna Kournikova-No Nukes*

Half-brother to OSS winner **KESONS SERGEI** p,3,1:56h-'08 (\$40,381). From a half-sister to \$270,625 Emerald Breeders Classic winner **MADAM COUNTESS** p,3,1:52.1-'08 (\$186,006) and **JOHN ADAMS** p,3,1:51.1, 4,1:50.2s (\$387,373).

### #4 **KESONS EVITA** b.f.

*Artesian-Keystone Marla-Big Towner*

Half-sister to **KESONS KASHMAN** p,2,2:01.2h, 3,1:59.2h, 4,1:51.2s-'08 (\$62,809), **LEXUS BANDITO** p,3,1:55.3s (\$89,352). From a full sister to **HANG THE ODDS** p,4,1:52.1 (\$648,615).

*All are selling in the Selected session of the  
Forest City Yearling Sale on Sunday, October 19  
at the Western Fair Agriplex, London, Ontario*

**KESONS STABLES INC.**

Cambridge, Ontario

KEITH & GLORIA ROBINSON (519) 623-1232

Plans are now underway to send our racing into South Africa, Europe and hopefully one day, North America.

While that may not be every North American punter's idea of a good time, consider how much computers have become a part of racing in the last decade and imagine how many punters may be betting from home in the future.

With broadband internet bringing easy access to fields, form, replays and even live racing, why wouldn't serious

North American punters want to spend some time getting to know about New Zealand's Pick 6 jackpots, which can reach \$1 million on a Friday night?

If even a small percentage of harness racing fans in those countries bet on New Zealand racing because of its unique timing, the return to the industry could easily be another extra \$30 million.

When you already have an industry on the rise, an extra cash injection is going to make life seem pretty rosy.

So will anybody overseas actually want to bet on New Zealand harness racing in the future?

Well, the NZ industry is moving in the right direction to at least make it possible.

Slowly but surely, our racing is becoming more like yours.

After 100 years of New Zealand's biggest races being long distance events (two miles) from standing starts, New Zealand is waking up to reality.

Those races take time. Too much time for punters, for television networks, and of course, too much time waiting for owners and trainers, who often have to wait until a horse is five to set him up for the New Zealand Cup.


Remarkably, last year's New Zealand Cup winner was Flashing Red, a 10 year-old stallion. And he won it the year before also.

But that is changing. More and more money is being poured into the two and three-year-old races where horses like Changeover (by In The Pocket) and Auckland Reactor (by Mach Three) are superstars.

These horses can now win well over \$1 million before they turn four and have legitimate stallion value, which is why a largely North American-based syndicate paid around \$4 million for Auckland Reactor last May.

While he was soon sidelined with a mystery illness from which he has now recovered, a horse like Auckland Reactor or Changeover could race for over \$6 million this season.

So with big stakes, more mobile start races, and a plethora of hot North American blood coming on line in Bettors Delight, Art Major, Real Desire, Jeremes Jet and Mach Three to mention just a few, the gap between us and you is not quite as big as many people think.

Harness racing in New Zealand is shrinking the Pacific, bringing us closer to you while at the same time, making much of the harness racing world just a little bit envious. 

*For this month's column we have a guest writer in Michael Guerin who is a racing journalist for **The New Zealand Herald**. Neale Donnelley will return next issue.*



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