

Walner to take first step on Hambletonian path

by Ken Weingartner, Harness Racing Communications

Freehold, NJ --- Walner is ready to start on an abbreviated road to the Hambletonian. The returning Dan Patch Award winning trotter makes his delayed 2017 debut Saturday in a conditioned race at the Meadowlands, where he and regular driver Tim Tetrick will face seven rivals.

Walner won seven of eight races last year and finished the season with a five-race victory streak that included triumphs in the Breeders Crown for 2-year-old male trotters, Kindergarten Classic Series championship, and a division of the International Stallion Stakes in a world-record 1:51.3.

His return to action this year was hampered by a now-resolved issue with genital discomfort. He qualified twice last month, winning in 1:51.2 in the rain on June 17 and winning in 1:53 on June 24. His time of 1:51.2 is the fastest of the season for a 3-year-old male trotter and second to only filly Ariana G's 1:51.1 clocking on June 2 in the New Jersey Sire Stakes championship for 3-year-old female trotters at the Meadowlands.

Following Saturday's race, Walner's schedule has the colt heading to the Stanley Dancer Memorial for 3-year-old male trotters on July 15 at the Meadowlands and then the \$1 million Hambletonian Stakes for 3-year-old trotters on Aug. 5 at the Big M.



USTA/Mark Hall photo

Walner will make his 2017 debut Saturday at The Meadowlands.

"He needs the race," said trainer Linda Toscano, adding with a laugh, "I thought at first he might have too many starts going to the Hambo and now I'm worried there may be not enough.

"I remember being told a long time ago, man plans and God laughs."

Toscano contemplated sending Walner to the Earl Beal Jr. Memorial, which was won by Devious Man last weekend at The Downs at Mohegan Sun Pocono, but did not want to push her colt into a difficult spot right off the bat. Walner's seven foes Saturday are two 5-year-old females, three 4-year-old males, one 3-year-old colt and one 3-year-old filly.

The colt, Fly On, is also eligible to the Hambletonian while the filly, Ice Attraction, is eligible to the Hambletonian Oaks.

"I did not want to go to the Beal because I thought it was asking a lot of him because those horses have been seasoned at this point," Toscano said. "I don't like racing him against aged horses, but so be it."

Walner is a son of stallion [Chapter Seven](#), the 2012 Horse of the Year, out of the O'Brien Award winning mare Random Destiny. He is owned by Ken Jacobs.

"He has a real good foundation under him," Toscano said. "He seems to have been well in hand every time he goes. It's not the same as racing, so we'll get a much better read on how fit he is on Saturday night."