

## A Tactical Approach Yields A Perfect 10 for Takter

by Dave Briggs

Ten years after Nancy Takter started training horses, in the 10th Hambletonian in front of the new Meadowlands grandstand, driver Scott Zeron orchestrated a dream trip from the 10 hole that delivered Tactical Approach to victory in the 98th edition of America's Classic Trotting Race.

Having just used up all the karma to win Saturday's (Aug. 5) \$1 million Hambletonian from the 10 hole, Tactical Approach's part-owner Joe Sbrocco suffered the indignity of having his rental car break down in The Meadowlands' parking lot. He was on his way to a celebration dinner at Il Villaggio, long the restaurant of choice for Hambletonian winners.

"He's not handling it too well," Sbrocco's fellow owner John Fodera reported via text while offering his air conditioned car as refuge while they waited for a tow truck.

It was an inconvenience, for sure, but nothing could steal the moment from a Hambletonian that came up all tens for Tactical Approach's team of trainer Nancy Takter, driver Scott Zeron, Sbrocco and Fodera's co-owners John Fielding and Robert LeBlanc and the trotter's breeder Steve Stewart & Oakwood Farms (Harvey Knepp.) In Takter's 10th year as a trainer, in the 10th Hambletonian held in front of the new Meadowlands grandstand, Zeron orchestrated some serious magic to shoot up the inside in the stretch to win from the far outside post in 1:50.3 at odds of 12-1.

2022 Mohawk Million winner Oh Well was one length back in second. Yonkers Trot winner Up Your Deo was third, two lengths back of the winner, who improved to 4-0-4 in nine 2023 starts and 6-0-4 in 14 career outings. Lifetime, he has earned \$617,989.

It was the first time in the 43 years the Hambletonian has been held at The Meadowlands that the final of this race has been won from the 10 hole. There's a good bet — though not definitively provable at press time — that it is the first time in the race's nearly 100-year history that a Hambletonian winner has come out of the 10-hole.

That the winner of the \$500,000 Hambletonian Oaks, Heaven Hanover, also came out of post 10 (a year after Fashion Schooner did the same) made the Saturday afternoon card under perfect New Jersey summer skies as delicious and improbable and joyous a harness racing event as one gets these days. The fans turned out in envious numbers to see it — and brought their wallets. Total domestic handle of \$7,805,779 was the best total in the 10-year history of the new grandstand and, by far, a 2023 industry high.

Despite getting up on Hambletonian Day absolutely convinced she was going to win the race for the first time, Takter had something of a complicated relationship with the post position all week.

"[Drawing the 10] wears on you a little bit," she said. "I was sitting on an airplane on the tarmac, leaving from Lexington and watching the feed [of the draw], and they said, 'Tactical Approach, 10' and I was just, like, 'Great.' I texted Scotty and said, 'We're going to have to figure it out from the 10-hole.' He said, 'Well, that's not what I would've picked, but it'll be all right.' So, it was."

Watching trainer Marcus Melander win the Oaks two races earlier from the far outside did little to improve the trainer's mood.

"I actually came off the track and said, 'Well, that statistically just ruined our chances that the 10-hole is going to win both the Oaks and the Hambo,'" Nancy said.

Good thing Zeron had her back.

"This was the least amount of pressure I've ever had, just because of having a bad post," he told The Meadowlands' television crew. "I've had a lot of faith in this horse all year, but I've over-driven him in most of his starts. To give him a nice steer, a patient one, he respected it, and he thanked me.

"I just saw everyone protecting the two-wide path in the middle of the first turn. I just knew I was going to be fifth-over, sixth-over. I just elected to go left. For a million dollars, everyone is going to give their horse a chance. I was trying to under-drive mine and get a good portion of it. Turning for home, as close as I was, it was the best-case scenario.

"In the last turn, when I saw where we were situated, I was confident that if I had room, he would give me everything that he had down the lane. It was unexpected, just based on the post, not the horse."

The victory gave Zeron an astounding third Hambletonian win in just seven years. He is only 34.

Zeron drove Marion Marauder to victory in 2016. In 2018, he drove Atlanta to Hambletonian glory for his father, trainer Rick Zeron, and partners.

Scott is only the 11th driver to win at least three Hambletonians. The other 10 are in the Hall of Fame.

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Given all she has accomplished on her own, it's long past the time we need to mention Takter's father, but it's tricky when Jimmy Takter is a three-time Hall of Famer that won the Hambletonian four times.

Saturday, hanging on the edges of a chaotic winner's circle, Jimmy smiled taking it all in and seeing his daughter front and center.

"To me, it felt more special my daughter winning than when I did myself," he said. "You're a father, so you'd know why."

Nancy said she is both unbelievably proud of her father and bothered by the constant comparisons. "It's a big legacy to carry," she said. "I know he's very proud of me. We had a good hug after the race."

Sometimes it's a bit difficult to be in his shadow. I don't think a lot of people always want to give me the credit that I maybe do deserve. There are people that think he does all the work, but he's in Florida all winter when we do the work, so... Like I've said before, obviously he's my dad and he's there when I need him if I ever have a problem or a question. Other people go to Google and I go to my dad." Nancy was even the caretaker for Jimmy's 2010 Hambletonian winner Muscle Massive. That makes Nancy just the second person in Hambletonian history to go from being a winning caretaker to a winning trainer. Osvaldo Formia was the groom of both Lindys Pride (1969) and Speedy Somolli (1978) and trainer of Probe (1989) and Harmonious (1990).

That Tactical Approach is a son of Tactical Landing (out of Sarcy, sold for \$85,000 at the 2021 Lexington Selected Yearling Sale) adds to the story.

Jimmy Takter trained Tactical Landing and was able to turn a horse with health problems into a Breeders Crown, TVG and Hambletonian elimination winner with earnings in excess of \$800,000.

"My dad deserves to be put in the Hall of Fame again for the job that he did with Tactical Landing because it was just amazing," Nancy said. "I saw the transformation because I happened to be on the farm. I was training at a different training center, but the first day that Tactical Landing came to their farm I happened to be there to see my mom and I watched him train that horse and it was, like, 'Yeah, this isn't going to work.' Then, to see him just blossom through the year was unbelievable."

"[Tactical Landing taught me] that I needed to have patience. I think that people in this game, they are so anxious about racing 2-year-olds... All your owners tell you all winter, 'Oh, don't feel any pressure, we can race late in the year' or 'All the big stakes are at the end of the year' and then baby races roll around and they say, 'Why aren't we racing?'"

On this day, patience clearly paid off.

Nancy said winning as a trainer is, "way more exciting, but there's also a lot more pressure and a lot more expectations from everyone. Being a trainer, just the day-to-day of planning everything. I don't think people always realize just how much trainers actually do in a week... Last night, I had eight horses that raced. Three had to go to a detention barn, one at The Meadows, one at Saratoga and then today just get all the horses here. There's a lot of planning. I write lists all day long. Andrew McCarthy is always saying, 'Oh, Nancy is writing a list.' I write lists all the time. Everybody knows what they are doing."

Asked if she is a little Type A, Nancy laughed. "A lot Type A," she said.

It helps to have a terrific group of owners that once employed her father as trainer. She said she is blessed they put their faith in her and honored she was able to reward that faith with a Hambletonian.

"Tactical Approach has the best group of owners," Nancy said. "They all texted me this morning, just thanking me for the opportunity to be here. That's very special. There was no pressure going into this and they are just elated."

"I've known John Fielding since I was, like, 17 years old or probably even younger. They've watched me grow up. I've taken care of good horses for them when I was a caretaker and worked for my dad and so forth. So, I'm very happy that they've decided to support me in this endeavor and, obviously, it makes it a lot easier to have such a good group of owners."

It doesn't hurt to have an ultra-hot breeder on your side, too.

Tactical Approach is the third Hambletonian winner in nine years for Stewart's Hunterton Farm. Steve and Cindy bred 2014 winner Trixtion in partnership— campaigned by Jimmy Takter — and 2019 champ Forbidden Trade (solely) that won for trainer Luc Blais and owner Determination.

All three winners were something of underdogs.

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“The rail just kept opening up,” Takter said. “It worked out great. I was confident coming down the stretch that if he had enough room he was going to get it done.”

It was the sixth win in 14 starts for the colt, who earned \$500,000 for owners Robert LeBlanc, John Fielding and Joe Sbrocco & JAF Racing.

Tactical Approach paid \$26.80, \$13.20 and \$7.40. Oh Well finished second, returning \$6.20 and \$4.00. Up Your Deo paid \$5.60 to show. The time for the mile was 1:50.3.

Celebrity Bambino finished fourth and Point Of Perfect fifth after winning last week’s eliminations.

“Forbidden Trade it was all Greenshoe, Greenshoe, Greenshoe,” Steve said, “and when Trixton won it, it was all Father Patrick, Father Patrick.”

Even better than winning the Hambletonian, the Stewarts have a Walner brother to Tactical Approach to sell this fall.

“The farm lives and dies by what the racehorses do and them doing this is just another feather in our cap,” Cindy said. “These are our babies.”

“It’s one thing to be the buyer and you cheer for them more than anybody, but when you breed them you’re the creator,” Steve said.

For Fielding (Pinkman, 2015), LeBlanc and Fodera (both Ramona Hill, 2020) Tactical Approach delivered their second Hambletonian. Sbrocco is the only first-time winner of the ownership group.

“I’ve never had a feeling like this,” Sbrocco said. “This is a million-dollar race... It’s terrific, unbelievable. It’s not just the money, it’s the prestige with the Hambo.”

“I’ll never worry again when I draw the 10-hole as much as I did this time.”

Fielding agreed that getting post 10 was a downer.

“Once we drew the 10-hole, we kind of thought we were screwed,” Fielding said, “but Scotty drove an unbelievable race and we got very lucky that the seas parted and away we went.”

“You try so hard through the years and you keep buying them and buying them and hope you’re going to get here — to even get to the race is a big feat, but when you win it, it’s pretty special. Very, very special.”

Winning the Hambletonian after spending countless millions to own countless numbers of horses is exactly the kind of thing that keeps Fielding in the game.

“It’s like Hotel California,” he said, laughing. “You can check in, but you can never leave.”

LeBlanc, who like Fielding is Canadian, said he started screaming when he saw a hole open up and Tactical Approach shot through in the stretch.

“I knew he could win but until he crossed the line you never know,” LeBlanc said. “After he crossed the line I was shaking... Scotty drove him to perfection.”

“Winning never gets old. When [Ramona Hill] won it was during the pandemic and no one was there. Being in the winner’s circle was amazing.”

The win marks the eighth time in the last 10 years — and third straight — that the Hambletonian winner had at least partial Canadian connections.

Fodera said the fact that the front end was not holding up throughout the day gave him hope for Tactical Approach as they approached the Hambletonian, contested as race 12.

“Watching the races during the entire day the front end was not hanging on so now hoping for a good trip with cover,” Fodera said. “As the gates opened, watching the rail open up I gained some confidence and just hoped we would get a chance. At the top of the lane I knew we were full of trot and this became surreal with memories of Ramona Hill.”

“Winning with Ramona Hill was great but it was with COVID and we were so limited wearing masks and not having our entire family there... “I love this business... I’ve won three [Little Brown] Jugs and nothing is more exciting than the Hambo.”

Even if the victory celebration has to wait on a tow truck.

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### BOB “HOLLYWOOD” HEYDEN NOTES

- Driver Scott Zeron spent the 2022 Hambletonian in the broadcast booth after a racing accident sidelined during some of the peak Grand Circuit months.
- Tactical Approach was an \$85,000 yearling purchase from Lexington Selected Yearling Sale, under the name Rackuecourt, which was thankfully changed.
- For the first time in 43 editions of the Hambletonian at The Meadowlands the winner of the Oaks and the Hambletonian both were third in their elimination.
- Other famous third-place elimination horses who went on to win the big one:
  - Cool Papa Bell — 2022
  - Forbidden Trade — 2019
  - Windsong’s Legacy — 2004
  - Amigo Hall — 2003
- Tactical Landing went off a healthy 12-1 while race favorite Celebrity Bambino was fourth for the team of Ron Burke and Yannick Gingras.
- Overall, just two of the last 10 favorites have won the Hambletonian and they were the two right before Rebuff: Captain Corey and Ramona Hill. The first 30 held in NJ were more formful as 15 of 30 chalks rolled in.
- Linda Toscano (first woman trainer to score a Hambletonian victory and now Nancy Takter (third woman) put their names on a very exclusive list in 2023. They are two of just five trainers that have won the Hambletonian, Meadowlands Pace and the North America Cup. Steve Elliott, Blair Burgess and Tony Alagna are the others.
- The only female trainer ever favored in the Hambletonian? Julie Miller at 2-1 was second in 2017 with Devious Man.
- Tetric has now won the Hambletonian Oaks four times, and never been favored. He paid \$59.40 this year with Heaven Hanover. He also had Danae (\$24.40) in 2007, Bar Slide (\$8.40) in 2010 and Fashion Schooner (first from post 10 as the third choice) last year.
- A first crop stallion took the Hambletonian for just the third time this century:
  - Tactical Landing (2023) with Tactical Approach.
  - Muscle Hill (2014) with Trixton.
  - Andover Hall (2007) with Donato Hanover.
- This year also marked the first son of Muscle Hill to sire a Hambletonian winner.
- Father Patrick, who broke as the heavy favorite in his Hambletonian, picked up his first Oaks credit with his daughter Heaven Hanover winning the Hambletonian Oaks from the very same post he had in the 2014 Hambletonian, post 10.

