

Niatross Claiming Series starts Saturday at Buffalo Raceway

by **Brian J. Mazurek, for Buffalo Raceway**

Hamburg, NY --- The New York State Lottery used a tag line "It only takes a dollar and a dream." Well for the horses, owners and trainers at Buffalo Raceway in the Niatross Knockout Claiming Series, it takes only a \$250 entry fee, some risk, racing luck and a dream to win some big money by the end of the second weekend in May.

The popular Niatross Knockout Claiming Series starts up again at Buffalo Raceway Saturday night (April 4) with 38 pacers ready to go to the post in five divisions.

The \$4,000 claimers will eliminate each other the next four weeks with the purses going up \$1,000 each Saturday and the claiming tag increasing by \$1,000 as well. The lone survivor will take home the lion's share of the estimated \$25,000 purse on Saturday (April 25).

And if that wasn't enough incentive to enter, the top four finishers in this finale will come back on Saturday (May 9) and go against the four qualifiers from the series held earlier this meet, including the winner Dedalos, Goddess's Justin, It Was An Honor and Delightful Caitlin, in a \$25,000 Invitational.

The eliminations start this week with the purse in each leg being \$5,000 and the claiming price of \$5,000 (mares are \$6,000). Only six will be eliminated on Saturday, but then half of the field will be knocked out each week as the top four finishers move on from each leg until reaching the April 25 championship.

Buffalo Raceway's second leading trainer, John Mungillo, gave some insight on the Niatross Claiming Series.

"It's definitely a series that the owners like because they can make some very good money," said Mungillo. "You need some racing luck with good draws and also hope you don't get a horse claimed out of a race. If you get stuck with an eight hole, you basically are racing for at least fourth place or better so you can advance."

Mungillo remembered back in 2011 when he had Iam Billy The Man. He won the Niatross and did so without winning a leg until the final.

"It was like moving the chains; you just want to keep moving up and make the next round. I think Iam Billy The Man finished like fourth, third, second, then won it all off the rail -- and never got claimed.

"Iam Billy The Man was one of my favorites and I think he won about \$50,000 that year. That's a lot of money for a \$4,000 claimer. It paid a lot of bills. That's a good thing about the Niatross. It's good money for these horses. The "A" final went for over \$26,000 earlier this year and even the consolation went for \$10,000, which is quite an incentive to get your horses involved. Now with the \$25,000 Invitational added, it's definitely worth it."

When asked about having a horse claimed out of a race in the series, Mungillo was quick to point out, "Basically you run that risk every time you enter your horse of the \$4,000 caliber

when they aren't in the Niatross. Those level horses normally are in for a price so you always take a risk of losing it anyways."

And one of the most heart-wrenching parts of the event is after the race is over when track announcer Michael Carter calls out the claims. You may be overjoyed with the victory or advancing on, but your horse may be headed to a new barn with a chance for bigger money and a higher claiming price next week.

"You can't worry about that part," Mungillo said. "It's usually a surprise (the claim) unless you've heard something before the race."

Mungillo made a prediction that there might be a lot of claiming out of the first round because only six horses are going to be eliminated and thus 32 will advance with a higher purse and steeper claiming tag in the quarterfinals.

There were 16 claims made in the "A" event earlier this year with the most coming in the second round (\$6,000 claiming price/\$6,000 purse). There were three taken out of the semi-finals for \$7,000 and the new owners were then in line for the \$26,200 purse after the \$7,000 risk.

Dedalos escaped the claim box and he cruised to the victory in the final from the rail for driver Drew Monti to take home the \$13,100 first place check for owner Louis Frascella and trainer Michelle Gramza.

Of the 38 entered for the five divisions on Saturday, "A" division champion Dedalos and Goddess's Justin are the only two returning that have already earned a spot in the \$25,000 Invitational on May 9. And if they are claimed somewhere during the series, the new owners of Dedalos and Goddess's Justin are in line for the \$25,000 Invitational bid.

It's a great series for the fans to watch and one that the owners and trainers hope to cash in upon with little collateral damage.

Let the fun begin.