

## Habitat's 'Road to the Hambletonian' begins with Dexter Cup

by Ken Weingartner, Harness Racing Communications

**Freehold, NJ** --- Habitat enters this season playing second fiddle to stablemate Mission Brief, but he will be the first 3-year-old trotter from trainer Ron Burke's stable to venture onto the road to the Hambletonian Stakes.

A multiple stakes-winner in 2014, Habitat will get his campaign started Saturday (May 2) when he faces seven foes in the \$133,170 Dexter Cup for 3-year-old trotters at Freehold Raceway. Habitat, who is one of four Hambletonian eligible horses in the field, will start from post six with Yannick Gingras in the sulky.

Also in the Dexter will be four horses from the stable of trainer Ray Schnittker -- Gabe The Bear Dean, HA Taylor, Bavaro, and Broken Record -- along with Charlie Norris' Divisionist, Jimmy Takter's Apostles Creed, and Rich Gillock's Sixteen Encores.

Apostles Creed, Divisionist, Habitat, and Sixteen Encores are eligible to the Hambletonian.



*Nigel Sout photo*

**Habitat banked \$534,407 in earnings as a 2-year-old, with seven victories.**

Last year, Habitat won seven of 13 races and earned \$534,407 in purses -- a total that ranked third among all 2-year-old trotters, behind only division Dan Patch Award winners Mission Brief (female) and Pinkman (male). Habitat's victories included the William Wellwood Memorial and Matron Stakes as well as divisions of the Tompkins-Geers, Champlain, and Bluegrass.

"I'm very happy with him," said Burke, who owns Habitat with Our Horse Cents Stables and Weaver Brussemi. "I'm pleasantly surprised. He did improve (from last year) and I didn't think he would because he was smaller and so quick to learn last year. I'm thrilled."

Burke was so pleased with Habitat's early work that he decided to enter the colt in the Dexter. Habitat, who won a qualifier in 1:56.3 at Harrah's Philadelphia on April 21, received a bye into the Dexter final based on career earnings. Broken Record, Gabe The Bear Dean, and Sixteen Encores also got byes while Apostles Creed, Divisionist, HA Taylor, and Bavaro reached the final thanks to finishing one-through-four in an eight-horse elimination last weekend at Freehold.

"I wasn't planning on going to (the Dexter)," Burke said. "Then I trained him a week out and he was so good, I thought I would look it up and see what horses (were eligible). I threw him in at Philly and Yannick said he was vicious. I knew there was the chance I could get a bye and then it gave me 10 days to work him again in between. I was happy with it.

"It's a nice purse for the level of competition. It's not going to be the hardest horses he's going to face all year and it will be a nice start to the year to get him going."

Habitat, a son of stallion [Conway Hall](#) out of the mare Habit's Best, made one start on a half-mile track last year, going off stride in a division of the New York Sire Stakes at Buffalo Raceway. Burke, though, believes Habitat will be alright on Freehold's half-mile oval.

"Freehold is such a good track; they get around there so well," Burke said. "I don't really worry about it too much."

Habitat would enter the year as the star of most stables, but Burke also is preparing Mission Brief for her 3-year-old campaign -- and a chance to take on the boys in the Hambletonian. She is scheduled to qualify Friday morning (May 1) at the Meadowlands. Last year, she trotted the fastest mile in history by a 2-year-old -- 1:50.3. That time, on paper, was at least eight lengths better than any other 2-year-old trotter last season.

Additionally, of the four fastest miles ever by a 2-year-old trotter, Mission Brief owns or shares three of the times.

"If not for Mission Brief, I'd be falling all over (Habitat)," Burke said. "But they're not the same horse."

Apostles Creed won the Dexter Cup elimination by one length over Divisionist in 1:59.4. Takter has trained four Dexter Cup winners during his career. Schnittker has five triumphs in the Dexter Cup.

Following is the field for the Dexter Cup in post order with listed drivers and trainers:

1. Gabe The Bear Dean, Jordan Stratton, Ray Schnittker
2. HA Taylor, Steve Smith, Ray Schnittker
3. Bavaro, George Brennan, Ray Schnittker
4. Divisionist, Charlie Norris, Charlie Norris
5. Apostles Creed, Brett Miller, Jimmy Takter
6. Habitat, Yannick Gingras, Ron Burke
7. Sixteen Encores, David Miller, Rich Gillock
8. Broken Record, Ray Schnittker, Ray Schnittker