

Winter series champion JL Cruze returns for second leg of Graduate

by Ken Weingartner, Harness Racing Communications

Freehold, NJ --- After dominating winter events at the Meadowlands and Pocono earlier this year, JL Cruze is ready to face his toughest test of the season. He is heading to Saturday's (June 6) second round of the Graduate Series for 4-year-old trotters at the Big M, where he will meet a field that includes two-time Dan Patch Award winner [Father Patrick](#).

The race is the second of two Graduate divisions for the trotters, with 2014 Trotter of the Year Shake It Cerry headlining the first group. The card also includes two second-round Graduate divisions for 4-year-old pacers, featuring winter series sensation Rockeyed Optimist meeting stakes stars JK Endofanera, Luck Be Withyou, and Limelight Beach in the first division.



Curtis Salonick photo

JL Cruze will look to win his eighth straight race on Saturday in The Graduate Series.

[Patrick](#), who won the Maxie Lee Memorial Invitational on May 24 at Harrah's Philadelphia in his only start so far this season.

JL Cruze brings a seven-race win streak to Saturday's start. For the year, he has won 11 of 13 races, including the Super Bowl, Singer Memorial, Shiaway St Pat and Weiss series championships. He has won \$155,513 for owners Ken Wood, Bill Dittmar and Stephen Iaquina, who purchased the horse for \$37,000 at November's Standardbred Horse Sale Mixed Sale.

The group purchased JL Cruze -- who had three wins in 14 races prior to the sale -- because he fit favorable non-winners conditions at Dover Downs, where the owners race frequently. Now he will get the opportunity to race against world champion [Father](#)

"He's been unbelievable," trainer Eric Ell said. "We didn't know what we had bought when we bought him. We just knew we had a young trotter that fit some cheaper classes at Dover. We just popped him in a couple of those (winter) series in case he turned out to be something, and he did.

"It's been a fun ride, that's for sure. I'm looking forward to racing the big boys. We're going to see if we can go with them or not."

JL Cruze's most recent start came April 21 at The Downs at Mohegan Sun Pocono, where he won the Weiss final by a length over Opulent Yankee in 1:52.4. He prepped for his return in the Graduate by finishing second to Gural Hanover in a qualifier on May 30 at the Meadowlands. He was timed in 1:52.1 with a :26.4 last quarter-mile despite being on the mend from a cut he suffered on his right front foot three weeks earlier.

"He's doing good," Ell said. "He grabbed his quarter on his right front foot and he was really sore. I couldn't do much with him and couldn't get him trained. It was a freak thing; he's never done it before. But he qualified well. It looks like he's going to be OK for Saturday.

"The sky is the limit for him. He just keeps getting better all the time. After the Weiss final I gave him some time off, which he needed. I gave him two weeks completely off in the field

and then I started bringing him back. He really needed the time. He was able to put some weight back on and get freshened up again. We'll see what happens on Saturday."

John Campbell has been the regular driver of JL Cruze, but on Saturday will be in Canada for stakes races at Mohawk. David Miller will drive JL Cruze, who will start from post three in a seven-horse field.

[Father Patrick](#), who has won 23 of 29 career races and earned \$2.51 million for the [Father Patrick](#) Stable ownership group, will leave from post five with Yannick Gingras at the lines for trainer Jimmy Takter.

The remainder of the field is Resolve, Rompaway Galaxy, Opulent Yankee, Uva Hanover, and Madewell Hanover.

In the first division, Shake It Cerry -- the only female in the field -- will start from post two with Takter driving. Shake It Cerry has won 24 of 32 career races and earned \$2.08 million for Solveig's Racing Partners. The remainder of the field is DD's Hitman, Muscle Network, Gural Hanover, Datsyuk, and Sumatra.

Shake It Cerry and Opulent Yankee, trained by Julie Miller, won first-round Graduate divisions, held May 25 at Tioga Downs. The third round is June 19 and the \$250,000 final is July 11.

On the pacing side, Rockeyed Optimist and Doo Wop Hanover -- both from the stable of trainer Steve Elliott -- won the first-round divisions at Tioga. Doo Wop Hanover romped by 7-1/2 lengths over stablemate Rock Out in 1:47.4. It was the fastest mile in Tioga Downs' history.



Fred Brown photo

Doo Wop Hanover won his Graduate division on May 25 in 1:47.4, the fastest pacing mile ever at Tioga Downs.

Doo Wop Hanover will start from post No. 1 in the second of the two divisions for pacers Saturday. He is joined by Bushwacker, Somewhere In L A, Lyons somewhere, All Bets Off, Rock Out, and Mattamerican.

Rockeyed Optimist leaves from post four in his division, which includes JK Endofanera, Luck Be Withyou, Caviart Luca, Limelight Beach, and Somesizesomestyle.

The third round for pacers is June 19 and the \$250,000 final is July 3.

"They're all good, knock on wood," Elliott said about his three starters. "(Doo Wop) is real good right now. He's always been good. He was a little unmanageable at times, if you left with him he wouldn't come back to you. We rigged him a little differently and he seems fine.

"I think Rockeyed is better coming from behind, but he's become more versatile and learned how to race. Rock Out is faster than he shows he is. He's going to be better as the year goes on."

JK Endofanera, whose stakes victories in 2014 included the North America Cup, is making his second start of the season. He won the first round of the TVG Free For All Series for older pacers on May 16 at the Meadowlands, giving him 15 wins in 28 career starts and earnings of \$1.50 million.

Limelight Beach won last year's Little Brown Jug while Luck Be Withyou was the Breeders Crown champion at age 2.

All Bets Off won the 2014 Art Rooney Pace and Messenger Stakes. Lyons somewhere captured the Cane Pace and Mattamerican won the Horseman Stakes.

"There are a lot of good 4-year-olds out there," Elliott said. "It's a tough transition from (age) 3 to 4. I want to keep (my horses) against 4-year-olds so they mature the right way. Hopefully, anyway.

"I don't know if there are any easy races, they go fast everywhere all the time. But it helps when you have nice horses."