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Sunday, July 22, 2018

# Zeron knows the dam will burst if Atlanta wins the Hambletonian

*On the day he announced his filly will take on the boys in trotting's ultimate race, the veteran horseman said tears will be plentiful if Atlanta can knock them off.*

by Dave Briggs




Dave Landry

In 2011, Rick Zeron finished second in the Hambletonian Oaks driving his trainee Lady Rainbow (shown together in the Meadowlands front paddock). Seven years later, he's taking a shot at the Hambletonian with his trotting filly Atlanta.

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**Atlanta (with Scott Zeron beating older trotters in May at the Meadowlands) will return to the Big M on Aug. 4 to try to capture trotting's ultimate prize.**

Rick Zeron has never been ashamed to admit he's a crier. So, just what would that mean if his filly Atlanta were to beat the boys in the \$1.2 million Hambletonian on Aug. 4 at the Meadowlands?

"The tears would flow," the veteran trainer/driver said, laughing. "I'd go through a box of Kleenex from the place where I was standing to the winner's circle... That's what it's all about. Racing is all about, as far as I'm concerned, winning the best race that you could possibly win and showing your emotions after the race. Unbelievable."

Saturday, the Ontario-based horseman announced what he and Atlanta's other connections had decided privately weeks ago – that, heats be damned, the uber-talented filly would, indeed, take on the boys in the main event instead of racing in the \$500,000 Hambletonian Oaks.

Despite a successful 43-year career with an emphasis on trotters, Zeron has never raced a horse in the Hambletonian, but he did finish second driving Lady Rainbow in the 2011 Hambletonian Oaks won by Bold And Fresh.

Though he ranks the Hambletonian in a tie with the Elitlopp at the top of the list of races he would most love to win, 61-year-old Zeron said putting Atlanta in against the

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boys isn't about taking a shot because the clock is ticking and opportunities are few and far between.

"I'm taking my shot because I think she's good enough," Zeron said. "I wouldn't put a filly in with the colts if I didn't think she could trot with them or beat them. I would never put my filly in that position to make her do something that I know she couldn't do."

Beyond blazing speed, Zeron said one of Atlanta's best qualities is, "that she recuperates after a race. Within 15 or 20 minutes, she's back to herself."

That, said Zeron, will help her deal with the heats on a likely hot day.

"Number two, she takes care of herself," he said. "She's not a bully. She doesn't pull. She's not erratic. She goes out there, you pick the lines up and put her behind the gate and she does what she's got to do.

"Another thing I really admire about this filly is she covers the ground so softly. If you watch the gait that she has on her, she covers the ground so perfectly, it's unbelievable."

Atlanta will become just the fifth filly since the year 2000 to race against the boys in the Hambletonian. The last filly to capture harness racing's most prestigious trotting event was Continentalvictory in 1996.

Zeron's decision to race Atlanta in the sport's biggest trotting event adds tremendous hype to the 93rd Hambletonian and the veteran horseman expects to leave a lasting mark.

"This will go down in history," he said.

Atlanta, a Chapter Seven filly out of Hemi Blue Chip bred by Order By Stable of Sweden, was purchased for \$60,000 as a yearling at the Harrisburg Sale in November of 2016.

"I watched the horse race many, many times – Chapter Seven – loved him as a stallion and was fortunate enough to buy her," Zeron said. "The only thing I didn't like was her name. I changed her name to Atlanta. Her name was originally Django Unchained. Why, I don't know. Great movie, loved the movie, but for a filly it's very odd. For a Muscle Hill colt or something like that, maybe, but not a trotting filly."

Rick said he picked the name Atlanta as a tribute to new members of his family. His daughter Jade's father-in-law lives in Atlanta.

"We were having a few beers and I thought to myself, 'That's a nice name for a horse, if I can get it.'"

Atlanta had a solid rookie season, winning four of 10 starts

and earning \$123,411, but was in the shadow of then-undefeated Manchego.

This year, Atlanta has posted an undefeated streak of her own through five eye-catching starts, including a 1:50.3 performance on May 28 at Vernon Downs in which she set the all-age track record in the \$238,613 Empire Breeders Classic that is a career best mile.

Zeron co-owns Atlanta with Crawford Farms, Holland Racing Stable, Howard Taylor and Brad Grant. He said his partners have provided full support for the Hambletonian attempt, as has Zeron's son, Scott, the filly's driver.

"Scott is right on board with me and we've talked about this extensively for the last two months or maybe two-and-a-half months. We've managed her perfectly and put her into race where she belongs, didn't put her in with aged horses, other than her first start," Rick said, adding he expects Atlanta to come into the Hambletonian in top form after a two-week break. "She loves coming off a two-week layoff. She's like a thoroughbred. She likes her time off to mellow out and enjoy herself, but you put the harness on her and she does her own thing. She's a natural trotter. I've been training horses since 1975 and I've never had a trotter like this. You can look up my record and I've had a lot of great trotters and won some great races – not the Hambletonian, but the Maple Leaf Trot, the Trotting Classic up here in Canada, lots of Golds and big events."

But none of those would compare to winning the Hambletonian, a scene Rick predicts would turn into tearjerker in short order.

"(Scott's) not a crier, but when he sees me, he'll probably have a tear or two," Rick said, laughing. "And don't think my wife Joyce isn't going to be sitting next to me crying, too."

One day seeing his name engraved on the base of the Hambletonian trophy would start the waterworks all over again.

"There's just no words to describe it," Rick said. "To have Scott Zeron winning the Hambletonian with Atlanta and Rick Zeron as trainer and co-owner of that horse? Priceless."

– with files from Mark McKelvie / Woodbine communications

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