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Inside Atlanta's monster Hambletonian victory

Atlanta, a filly her caretaker calls a creature, delivered a monster win for Canada's father-and-son team of Rick and Scott Zeron that was a lifetime in the making.

by Dave Briggs



Claus Andersen

Rick Zeron (left) had tears in his eyes as he hugged his son Scott after the pair won the 93rd Hambletonian together.

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(Chapter Seven - Hemi Blue Chip)

Winner of the \$1,000,000 Hambletonian Final in 3, 1:50.4!

Atlanta is the 14th filly to win this prestigious event in its 93 year history.

Owned by: Rick Zeron, Crawford Farms, Holland Racing Stable, Howard Taylor and Brad Grant

Trained by: Rick Zeron

Driven by: Scott Zeron

Breeder: Order By Stable

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Claus Andersen

Assistant trainer and caretaker Ernie Hendry (with driver Scott Zeron) is the one that started calling Atlanta a "creature" this winter.

After 46 years of working to get to this moment, Rick "The Whip" Zeron was not going to be denied now. With a rolled up race program clutched tightly in his hands, he began beating it to shreds on the table in Pink as his filly Atlanta opened up coming off the turn, urging her home from his perch in the Meadowlands dining room.

When Atlanta crossed the wire a full length the best Saturday afternoon – becoming not only Zeron's first Hambletonian winner, but also the first filly to win trotting's greatest prize since Continentalvictory last did it 22 years ago (making Atlanta just the 14th filly to win it all-time) – Zeron was really in the pink as mayhem ensued. There were hugs, tears, screaming and an abused race program sent airborne never to be seen again.

"My whole life, since I was 15 years old – and I'm 61 now – I've wanted to win the Hambletonian," said Zeron, who lives in Oakville, ON. "I wanted to win the Little Brown Jug and the Hambletonian... to win the Hambletonian with my son driving and me training? No words can describe that."

"The Whip" – so nicknamed years ago in Ontario for his

proclivity for handing out whips to kids after driving wins, not so much for his handiwork with that particular tool, or a rolled up program for that matter – was an emotional mess when reached his son Scott on the track.

"I can't even remember what he said to me," Scott said with a chuckle. "He was crying and cursing, so it was better there were no TV cameras."

As for that shredded race program, Scott understood his father's emotion all too well, because he had lived it out in Atlanta's sulky.

"I can imagine that anticipation with me cutting that mile," Scott said. "Where's the wire? Where's the wire?"

That expectancy was heightened because about 90 minutes earlier in their Hambletonian heat, Scott gave the daughter of Chapter Seven—Hemi Blue Chip a similar front-end trip that came up a neck short of Crystal Fashion.

"I WAS REALLY BEATING MYSELF UP"

"I was really beating myself up over that elimination," Scott said. "The concerns were her being a filly and, for the first

time, hitting the bottom of her lungs in the elimination. Then to go out and say, 'Do that again' that worried me, just because she's a filly and you don't know how they are going to take it for an attitude."

Rick said he, too, was concerned after Atlanta came up short in a torrid mile of 1:50.1, until he talked with his team.

"Scott said to me, 'In the elimination, she just got away from me a little bit, she covers the ground so easy, I didn't realize we were going so fast,'" Rick said, adding he texted his assistant trainer and Atlanta's caretaker Ernie Hendry in the paddock to make sure the filly was okay.

"I told him the other day, 'After the elimination, check this mare and if she's not 100 per cent, we're not going to race her a double heat and we'll scratch her in the finals.' Ernie said she took about seven or eight minutes or maybe 10 minutes to get her wind back, but she got her wind back. I said, 'Are we okay?' He said, 'We're good to go.'

"Scott won a race a little later with Western Joe and I saw him in the winner's circle and I said, 'Are we okay?' He said, 'Dad, I've got this. Don't worry about it.'"

Scott said his confidence in Atlanta comes from knowing her talent and having worked with her, off and on, all winter.

"I think she's the greatest horse I've ever driven and, if she is, then she'll bounce back."

Meanwhile, Atlanta's other connections were having similar concerns going into the final – concerns that were quickly eased by Scott Zeron.

"I think in the first elimination, she just got away from (Scott)," co-owner Brad Grant of Milton, ON said. "The second time, backing her down to a :29 second quarter, I think that was the race right there."

The driver said the draw and the Hambletonian finalists dictated a return to the front-end strategy.

"Just the way that program set up for the Hambletonian Final, it looked like no one was going to control the race," Scott said. "Alarm Detector didn't, so I felt like that was going to be my job to do that and, maybe, they just thought she was too grabby in the elimination, that she's a grabby horse, but she's not. By the same token, I think nobody really wanted to re-move. Looking at that program, I really thought it was going to set up the way it did, having (Jimmy) Takter (driving heat winner Tactical Landing) come first up with Timmy (Tetrick driving Crystal Fashion) second over. I felt



Claus Andersen

Atlanta's co-owner Brad Grant said it felt "pretty damn good" to raise the Hambletonian trophy.

that if I had soft-ish fractions that I would just pull the trigger midway in that last turn to try to leave Timmy's horse back there in a bad spot and it worked, thank God."

The splits in her heat were: :26, :53.2, 1:21.1 ending in a mile in 1:50.1.

In the final, the splits were: :26.2, :55.2, 1:22.4 and a mile of 1:50.4.

"In the second heat, when she was drawing away, I was pretty confident," said co-owner Howard Taylor of Philadelphia. "The only one that was coming at her was Tactical Landing and I own him, too. I was pretty confident (about a victory), but I was hoping for her."

FROM BROKEN BACK TO HAMBLETONIAN

For Michelle Crawford, who bought a piece of Atlanta exactly two months before the filly dusted off the boys Saturday in the 93rd Hambletonian, the victory was particularly poignant for two reasons: 1. Crawford Farms of Syracuse, NY has the rights to keep Atlanta as a broodmare when her racing career is over and 2. Just before leaving for last year's Hambletonian, Crawford was thrown from her horse and suffered a concussion and broken back in three places.



Claus Andersen

Despite finishing second in their heat with a front-end trip, Scott Zeron carved out a similar journey in the final. He said the key to Atlanta's victory was a soft second quarter in the final.

"A year ago, I was wondering if I'd walk again and this year we won the Hambo with a filly," Crawford said, crying. "This is our mommy, our broodmare. She's the future of our stable."

Not only did Crawford and Rick Zeron shed tears in the winner's circle, so too did Hendry, who has worked for Rick for 10 years after an 18-year stint working for Hall of Fame trainer Bob McIntosh.

"I'm not an emotional guy, but I was choked up in the winner's circle," Hendry said. "I'm very laid back and nothing seems to bother me, but I was crying. I'm not afraid to admit it. That's really, really special. Top of the stretch I thought she was going to be close and all I could keep saying was, 'Where's the wire?' I don't usually scream or holler or anything like that, but I'm sure the grandstand could've heard me. I was screaming."

For his part, Howard Taylor was beaming, not crying about

the filly bred by the Order By Stable of Sweden, raised at Concord Stud and purchased by the group as a yearling for \$60,000 at the 2016 Standardbred Horse Sales Company's auction in Harrisburg, PA.

"It doesn't get any better," Taylor said. "I always dreamed about winning the Hambletonian. Did I think I was going to do it? Never, but I always dreamed about it... I did win the Meadowlands Pace, but this is the best. It just doesn't get any bigger."

Brad Grant, who also won the Cane Pace on the card with his sophomore pacing colt Stay Hungry called winning the Hambletonian, "amazing. It is my first time in it... and to win it with a filly with such talent, to beat the boys, I mean, it doesn't get much better than that. They'll remember her for a while," Grant said.

Asked how it felt to raise the silver Revere bowl, Grant



Claus Andersen

The laid-back filly enjoyed a drink from the most famous trophy in harness racing.

grinned.

“It felt pretty damn good,” he said, adding that there was an extra bonus for Atlanta’s mostly-Canadian connections that includes co-owners Bill and Christine Holland of Niagara-On-The-Lake, ON.

“We all win because of the dollar – it’s 30 per cent better for us,” Grant said, laughing referring to Atlanta’s total take on the day of \$525,000 in the \$1.2 million event. “But, for any of us, I don’t think it’s about the money. Winning the Hambletonian is our Kentucky Derby and I’ve known Rick since we were kids. And to win it with Howard is great and Bill Holland... I was an owner with him on his first horse, so it’s been good.

“I just hope the beer is cold on the plane back. We’re going to have fun.”

DECISION TO TEST THE BOYS

Rick and Scott Zeron both believed during the winter that Atlanta had the goods to beat the boys in the Hambletonian.

“Rick believed in her and believed in going to the Hambletonian right from the start,” Grant said. “We all kind of said, ‘Well, let’s see.’ Scott was the one, I don’t know which race it was, but he stepped up and said, ‘She can beat them.’ So then everybody was on board and there were no questions asked.”

Scott had the most experience with Atlanta having sat behind her in all five of her pari-mutuel starts and three qualifiers in 2018.

“I just felt that she’s flawless. There’s nothing wrong with her. She’s always been sound, nothing fazes her, so I just



Claus Andersen

Two-time Hambletonian champion Blair Burgess (left) was on hand to present the winning trainer trophy to fellow Canadian Rick Zeron (with wife Joyce Zeron).

thought, for conditions, everything was perfect. I didn't think we'd hurt her by doing this."

While some suggest announcing three weeks ago that they were taking on the boys was a strategy to scare off other fillies from doing the same in a year in which there are a number of talented sophomore female trotters, Scott said, "It was never a scare tactic. It was just a matter of having her last race at Vernon, making sure everything went to plan and then, when she came out of it, announcing what we already knew. In my opinion, I don't think they were ever intending on going (to the Hambletonian). Plunge (Blue Chip) wasn't planning on going. Phaetosive wasn't going. I guess it just came down to (Hambletonian Oaks winner) Manchego and Takter made it clear to some reporters that he didn't want to early in the season."

MANAGING THE CREATURE

All along, even going back to Atlanta's 2-year-old year, Rick Zeron was carefully managing the filly in the hopes of

getting a shot at the Hambletonian.

"I managed her last year very well. I drove her myself, other than twice. Mark MacDonald took over for me at Vernon Downs and Sylvain Filion drove her for me in an overnight race prior to going to the Breeders Crown, but I was really good with her. I knew what I had and she got stronger and stronger and stronger as the year went on," Rick said. "She was fourth in the elimination of the Breeders Crown and she came back and was fourth in the Final. We put her away down at Chris Coyle's farm in North Carolina and I knew that she had something special for this year. I really believed that when we trained her back down at Sunshine Meadows (in Florida) in the wintertime. She just kept getting better and better."

That's when Hendry started calling Atlanta "a creature," a name he says is a Canadian variation on beast.

In some ways, it's an odd choice of words since Atlanta is as relaxed as horses come.



Claus Andersen

Prior to being interviewed on CBS by Greg Blanchard, Rick and Scott Zeron were having a blast basking in Hambletonian glory.

“She’s just so laid back you can do anything you want with her. I usually put her away in the cross-ties and I’ll drop the cross-ties and she’ll walk right into her stall. She doesn’t do anything wrong. This is her, right here. That’s what she does,” Hendry said, pointing to the filly standing calmly in her stall in the Meadowlands paddock after delivering the holy grail to her grateful connections.

Creature though she is on the track, Rick said the Hambletonian plan was to avoid racing Atlanta at the Meadowlands on the road to Aug. 4.

“When I knew what we had with this filly this year I said, ‘I’ve got to get her away from (the Meadowlands) and keep her in the New York Sires Stakes, keep her strong, keep her fresh, keep her happy, (keep her away from) tougher racing, like the Delvin Miller when Manchego and Plunge Blue Chip went at it,’” Rick said.

FIRST THE HAMBLETONIAN, NOW AN O’BRIEN

Atlanta is expected to get a few weeks off now, and then head for Canada for her next three races.

“I’m going to skip the New York Sires Stake final and I’m going to race her in the Simcoe, something else and the Elegantimage because I want her to get nominated (for an O’Brien Award) in Canada and she has to race three times up there (in a year to be eligible),” Rick said.

The side benefit is that after being on the road for the better part of 10 months, Atlanta’s right-hand man, Ernie Hendry, will finally get to go home to Ontario.

“I’ve got a daughter there, so I get to see her,” Hendry said. “I went to Florida all winter, then I went home for a week and then I have been in New York (at the Mark Ford Training

Center in Middletown) ever since.”

But before team Atlanta looks forward, they are going to take a second to look back and revel in the history-making moment that came on the first Saturday in August.

“It’s the first time a filly won in 22 years and it’s the first time that a driver has won the Hambletonian with a filly and a colt since Continentalvictory and Mike Lachance,” Rick said, referring to Scott’s second Hambletonian in three years coming on heels of Marion Marauder’s also distinctly Canadian victory in 2016.

That year, Rick Zeron shed tears at home while watching on TV as Scott hoisted the Hambletonian at the age of 27.

“I had to stay at home that year and race horses,” explained Rick, a man who has trained the winners of more than \$25 million in his career and collected more than \$102 million in purse earnings as a driver with 8,119 wins to his credit.

This time, there was no chance Rick Zeron was going to miss it.

“A good friend of mine, Erv Miller, said to me when (Scott) won the Hambletonian a couple of years ago, ‘You didn’t come down to watch your son win in the Hambletonian?’ He was serious about it. I said, ‘No, I had to work.’ He said, ‘You’ve only got one shot in a lifetime.’ So, I thought, this year I’d bring my own filly down to win the Hambletonian,” Rick said, laughing. “And I told Erv that, too. When I saw him at Pocono in a qualifier he laughed about it, thought it was hilarious when I told him.”

For Rick, it all goes back some 10 years ago when Scott started driving. Like his management job on Atlanta, Rick knew the path to glory was for Scott to develop on smaller tracks first.

“I gave him a shot, starting on the B tracks,” Rick said. “I said, ‘Stay on the B tracks, drive a bad horse well and then you can come to the A track and drive a good horse better.’ But he did the rest on his own, after he left Canada (in 2013 to drive permanently in the United States).”

Five years after moving stateside, Scott Zeron is a two-time Hambletonian champion and helped deliver a coveted Hambletonian to the father that got him started.

“This is huge,” Scott said, which is something of an understatement given all the tears shed around him.

“It’s really special,” Rick said, choking up a bit again. “Special for me because that’s my son.”



Claus Andersen

For the second time in three years, young Scott Zeron has been able to kiss the Hambletonian.

HARNES RACING UPDATE

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Editor: Dave Briggs

Production: Brian Fuller

Graphic Design, Ads & Placement: Lisa Bihuniak

Advertising Sales: Wilma Van Vaerenbergh | [contact for ad sales/questions](mailto:wilma@harnessracingupdate.com)

Results & Stats Editor: Lisa Duong

Founder: Bill Finley

Contributors: Claus Andersen, Karen Briggs, Jerry Connors, The Curmudgeon, Paul Delean, Bill Finley, Joe FitzGerald, Dean Gillette, Ron Gurfein, Bob Heyden, Dean Hoffman, Dave Landry, Lauren Lee, Dave Little, Chris Lomon, David Mattia, Trey Nosrac, Tom Pedulla, James Platz, Bob Roberts, Sandra Snyder, Brett Sturman, Dean Towers, Jay Wolf

Get in touch with HRU

PO Box 230 | Millwood, NY | 10546 | Telephone: (226) 374-9999

Editor/News Stories: editor@harnessracingupdate.com

Advertising: advertising@harnessracingupdate.com

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