

Heart of It All

Two New Jersey townships have become the epicenter of U.S. harness racing

by Jane Meggitt

Location, location, location.

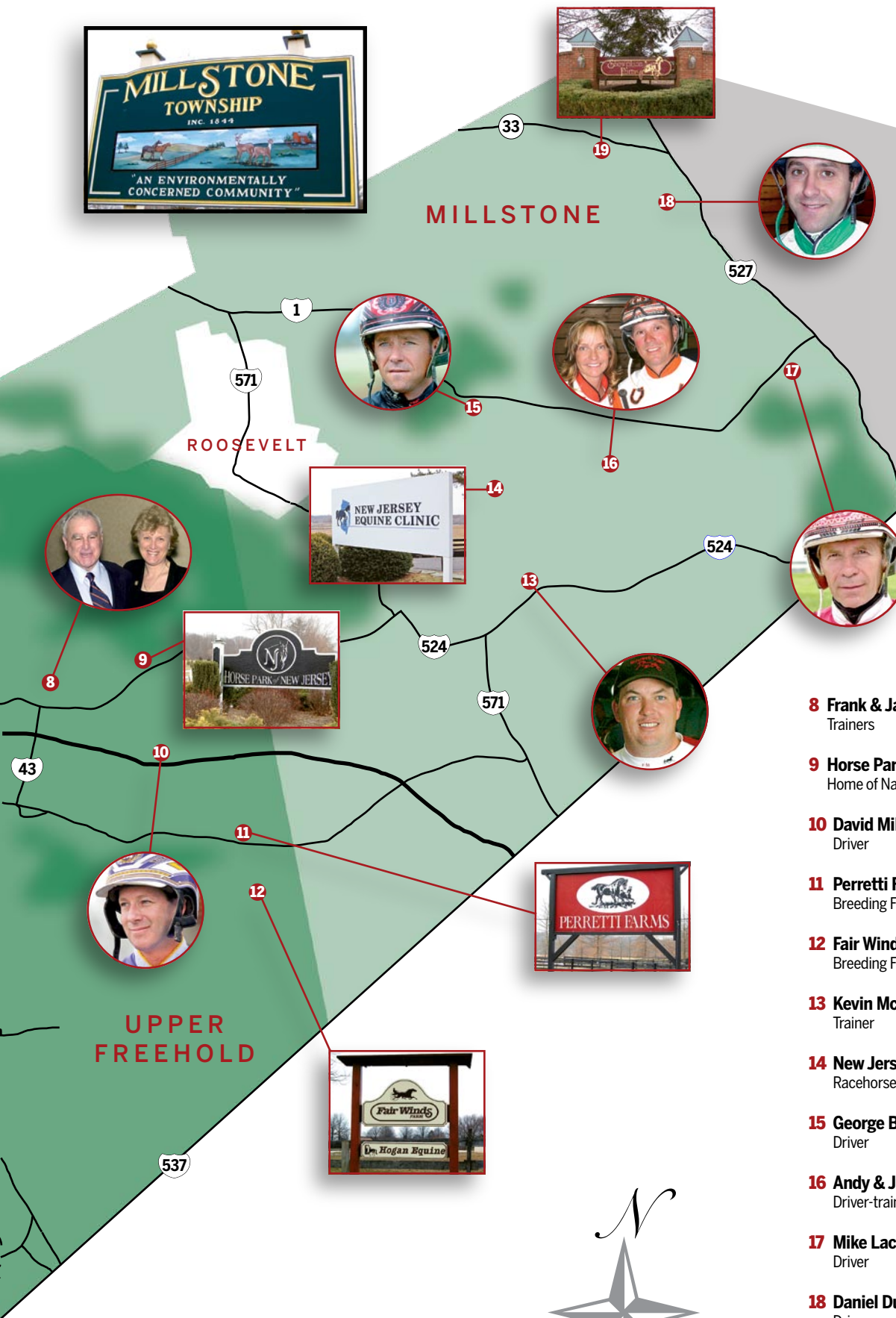
The real estate mantra is a primary reason that Millstone and Upper Freehold Townships in western Monmouth County, N.J., are the epicenter of the harness racing industry on the Eastern Seaboard. Throw a rock in either town and you're likely to hit a trainer, driver, breeder or vet in the Standardbred world.

The Meadowlands is just an hour away, while getting to Freehold Raceway takes just 15 minutes. Six other tracks—Yonkers, Monticello, Dover, Chester, Harrington and Pocono Downs—are within a three-hour drive. The towns seek to remain rural, and both have permanently preserved thousands of acres through the state's Green Acres and farmland preservation programs. And both are clinging to maintain the integrity of their harness-centric communities in light of New Jersey's internal struggles between the racing and casino interests.

Millstone's mayor, Nancy Grbelja, owns Standardbred racehorses. She says her community is "saturated" with farms and fields that support the equine industry with hay, straw and grain production, and it is for that reason that the quality of life for residents is so spectacular. The local governing



- 1 Yannick Gingras**
Driver
- 2 Chris Ryder**
Driver-trainer
- 3 Bjorn Noren**
Driver-trainer
- 4 White Birch Farm**
Training Center and Breeding Farm
- 5 Concord Stud Farm**
Breeding Farm
- 6 Trond Smedshammer**
Trainer
- 7 Walnridge Farm**
Breeding Farm



- 8 Frank & Jacquie Ingrassia**
Trainers
- 9 Horse Park of New Jersey**
Home of National Standardbred Show
- 10 David Miller**
Driver
- 11 Perretti Farms**
Breeding Farm
- 12 Fair Winds Farm**
Breeding Farm
- 13 Kevin McDermott**
Trainer
- 14 New Jersey Equine Clinic**
Racehorse Veterinarian
- 15 George Brennan**
Driver
- 16 Andy & Julie Miller**
Driver-trainer Duo
- 17 Mike Lachance**
Driver
- 18 Daniel Dube**
Driver
- 19 Showplace Farms**
Training Center



1 mile



body is committed to supporting the industry in every aspect possible.

Top drivers and trainers such as David Miller, Trond Smedshammer, George Brennan and Yannick Gingras call Upper Freehold home. No matter what happens to New Jersey racing, Smedshammer said he'll be hard-pressed to leave his 18-acre farm.

"It's just heaven," he said. "If I had a bad day, I can relax and the next day is different."

Surrounded by preserved land, his farm is quiet and peaceful. Gingras, who grew up in Quebec, and his wife, Vicki, a Maine native, both love a country atmosphere and found it here, close to the New Jersey Turnpike. Miller, originally from Ohio, has lived here since 1999 for the same reasons.

PEOPLE AND PLACES: Above: Millstone mayor Nancy Grbelja with retired pacing mare Theycallmedebreeze. Center: Perretti Farms, located on some 900 acres in Upper Freehold, raises more than 120 yearlings each year for public auction. Far right: Concord Stud Farm, situated on 249 acres in Cream Ridge, is in the heart of central New Jersey's "Little Lexington."

The first horse farm that travelers see as they enter Millstone from a major artery is that of veteran driver Mike Lachance. Equestrian statuary flank the entrance to the immaculate facility. He moved to the township from north Jersey eight years ago, looking for a place with land.

"Millstone is beautiful," he said. "There's a horse on every corner."

His trainer son, Patrick, keeps his horses on the 15-acre property. Mike Lachance decided to call the township

home because while rural, it's "in the middle of everything." Freehold Raceway is only 10 minutes from Lachance's farm.

Julie and Andy Miller decided to settle in Millstone for a number of reasons. They wanted to be within 10 minutes of their stable. Once they decided on Gaitway Training Center in nearby Manalapan, they looked for property and fell in love with Millstone immediately.

"It is a quiet, small town, the schools are excellent, and crime rate was low,"

said Julie Miller. "Also, for Andy, it is half-way between Meadowlands and Chester. At the time we moved here those were the two tracks he drove and we raced the stable at the most. We have been here now for four years and still love Millstone."

It all started with Stanley Dancer, according to veterinarian Dr. David Meirs II, the owner of Walnridge Farm and the township historian of Upper Freehold. Dancer was born and raised in the township and his own farm was





in neighboring Plumsted, where his son Ron currently presides as mayor. During Dancer's prime in the 1950-'60s, his training center was the focus for those who cared about harness racing all over the world.

"It was like Catholics going to the Vatican," said Meirs, who served as Dancer's vet. Meirs' son Richard, also an equine vet, runs the Walnridge Equine Clinic on the farm property. The elder Meirs turned his farm into a Standardbred breeding operation in 1972, when the New Jersey Sire Stakes program came to fruition. He stood Peerswick and Eric B when he started out, but Walnridge no longer has stallions in New Jersey.

Meirs' other son, David III, the proprietor of Concord Stud Farm, said the soil quality makes the area a great place to raise horses. He noted that "a scarily

high percentage" of horses up for Horse of the Year honors were raised in central New Jersey. The Meirs breeding dynasty should continue for another generation, as daughter Julie, 30, becomes more involved in the family business.

Heritage Hill Farm sits on 504 prime, preserved acres in Upper Freehold. One of the founding farms for the NJSS program, it's owned by Liz Dey, wife of the late equine veterinarian, Dr. Stephen P. Dey II. Her father, Charles I. Smith, helped begin the NJSS. Both of their sons, Steve and Greg, followed in their father's footsteps and became equine vets.

When the Sire Stakes got off the ground, Heritage Hill stood Meadow Eddie and Lucky C, but today the farm has only broodmares and young stock.

Dr. Scott Palmer, owner of the New Jersey Equine Clinic in Millstone, started

practicing on the backstretch of Freehold Raceway in 1976 and has been working with harness horses in New Jersey for the past 34 years.

"The Freehold-Meadowlands circuit provided a very solid year-round venue for harness racing for many years," he said. "With the recent creation of nearby racinos in Pennsylvania and New York, the opportunities for racing in this area have been expanded.

"Additionally, farmland is still available, the quality of life in this area is excellent, and there are abundant services here to support the horse industry."

Palmer, originally from Reading, Pa., decided to practice here because of his interest in racing and surgery. When he graduated from veterinary school at the University of Pennsylvania in 1976, New Jersey seemed to be a rising star in

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the racing world. That was the year that the Meadowlands opened. Palmer called Dr. Fred Adams, who had an office in Millstone, and respectfully suggested that Adams might like to hire him because Palmer could “keep the home fires burning” at Freehold and the local training centers, while Adams went to the Meadowlands to care for clients’ horses who would be stabled there.

His clinic, permanently preserved as farmland, boasts a banner on the fence line demanding that politicians “Stop Horsing Around—Approve Video Lottery Terminals Now.” Palmer had the banner made four years ago because he felt it was important to make a statement about moving forward with a racing business model that would keep New Jersey competitive with its neighboring states.

“The gaming public is spending their money outside the state and we are losing

millions or billions of dollars to nearby destinations in New York, Pennsylvania and Delaware,” he said. “The casino lobby in New Jersey is a powerful political force that has kept innovative gaming expansion from New Jersey racetracks and the casino subsidy has been a double-edged sword.”

Jacquie “Lady Jay” Ingrassia, the only woman ever to win a Triple Crown race, which she did with Goalfish in the 2000 Yonkers Trot, has called western Monmouth home since 1975. She and her husband Frank, a fellow trainer, built their house in Upper Freehold in 1982.

“Frank can enjoy fishing just down the road in one of the three lakes in the Assunpink Wildlife Management Area, and I can ride my horses there, too—6,000 acres of heaven, not to mention the beautiful Horse Park of New Jersey just two miles away,” she said. A USTA District 12 director, as well as

a director of the Standardbred Breeders and Owners Association of New Jersey (SBOANJ), Ingrassia said that racing in the state is doomed if some kind of relief, such as slots, isn’t granted. According to Ingrassia, when the casinos started up back in the 1970s, no one had the foresight to realize what a disastrous effect they would have on horse racing.

“It’s time to make amends. If we want to keep our state green, we must preserve racing and breeding within it,” she said.

When their racing days are over, Standardbreds can go on to a second career as riding horses. The Horse Park of New Jersey, a jewel for equestrian sports, is set in Upper Freehold. Although primarily a setting for sporthorse activities, including the Jersey Fresh Three-Day Event, the annual National Standardbred Show and a Standardbred sale is held there every year.

Judy Bokman, a founder of the

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Standardbred Retirement Foundation, and her equine veterinarian husband Steve live in Millstone with their two young sons. They chose the town because it has rural beauty, yet it's so close to everyday needs.

"We can raise our kids with diversity," she said. "We're on a horse farm yet close to the shore, the mountains, and the culture of New York City and Philadelphia, yet convenient to the training centers and centrally located to so many tracks."

Equine orthopedic surgeon Dr. Patricia Hogan has a very short commute—her clinic at Fair Winds Farm in Upper Freehold is across the street from the house she shares with her husband, trainer Ed Lohmeyer.

WORK AND PLAY: *Far left: Showplace Farms is a year-round training facility located on 150 acres in Millstone Township, and is home to such trainers as Steve Elliott, Kevin McDermott and Linda Toscano. Left: White Birch Farm in Allentown is home to such trainers as Jim Campbell, Nifty Norman and Trond Smedshammer. Below: Mares and foals go for a run at Walnridge Farm, located on 300 acres in Cream Ridge.*

"I can tell you right off the bat that for my business, being in this area is the best possible geographic location in the country," she said. "There are at least 17 racetracks within a two-hour drive from my clinic, and that does not include training centers. My caseload is 99-percent racehorse—evenly split between Thoroughbreds and Standardbreds. I am a kid in a candy store right now."

Hogan and Lohmeyer keep a dozen broodmares at their farm, and take them across the street when they're due to foal. Lohmeyer points out there's a reason New Jersey is called the Garden State, because of its wonderful soils.

"It's a great place to raise horses," he said. "Many champions have been raised in New Jersey."

As for the future, Lohmeyer hopes the governor recognizes the value of the Meadowlands and all that it does for open space.

"Slots would make a lot of money for the state of New Jersey, and keep



employment figures up for agriculture,” he said.

At about 900 acres, Perretti Farms dwarfs the other large breeding establishments in its midst, and the land is permanently preserved. The Perrettis didn't start out with Standardbreds; their first serious venture into the equine world was a 1,000-acre ranch for cutting horses in Texas, according to Anthony Perretti, son of the farm's founder, Bill. Anthony competed in cutting horse competitions along the East Coast, and the family stood a top Quarter Horse stallion and had broodmares.

They relocated to New Jersey in 1977. Bill Perretti met his second wife, Cindy, at the Pegasus Restaurant at Meadowlands



LANDMARKS: *Above right: Equine statuary greets visitors to Mike Lachance's 15-acre farm in Millstone. Right: Breeding and foaling services at Heritage Hill Farm, located on 500 acres in Allentown, will be handled by Dr. Stephen P. Dey III and Dr. Greg Dey after the death of their father, farm founder Dr. Stephen P. Dey II, in February.*



Racetrack. A friend of Perretti's helped him get started in the harness racing business, and he bought 400 acres in Upper Freehold, starting with between 40-50 head, according to Anthony.

"It was never supposed to be the colossus it morphed into," said Bob Marks, Perretti Farms' marketing director. "The area was likely chosen since other farms had been in the neighborhood for decades, almost like satellites of the Meadowlands."

He called it a mini-Lexington, as far as horse country goes. Western Monmouth county is good horse and farm country and everything a farm needs is nearby. In Marks' view, the biggest problem has been the emasculation of the flagship

Meadowlands, now at the mercy of slot-fueled competitors such as Pennsylvania and New York. He added that the NJSS and New Jersey racing program can no longer match those in neighboring states, and the breeding industry is hurting accordingly.

Perretti Farms currently stands five stallions, about half of those standing in the state. But what stallions they are: Rocknroll Hanover, Muscles Yankee, Matt's Scooter, Mcardle and Revenue S.

In 2001, Perretti disbursed his pacing stock, and planned to follow that up with selling the trotters. Anthony Perretti moved back to New Jersey and got involved with the family business, and now their stock is 50/50 pacers and

trotters, with about 200 head. The area is "harness central," according to Anthony.

The Monmouth County Board of Chosen Freeholders recognizes the importance of this industry. It has established a blue ribbon committee called "Save the Horse," which Grbelja chairs. Other members include Anthony Perretti; Upper Freehold veterinarian Dr. Greg Dey; Mark Mullen, owner of Fair Winds Farm; SBOANJ co-founder Anthony Abbatiello; and SBOANJ president Tom Luchento. The committee lobbies state officials to help them understand the value and importance of the horse to the state's economy.

"This blue ribbon committee must continue its work until the state changes its attitude and establishes a long-term solution to make the racetracks of New Jersey self-sufficient and lucrative for our horsemen," said Grbelja. "For the love of horses and racing, all of us must work together to find a solution and make harness racing tops in New Jersey once again."

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