

Garbage, grit and the Hambletonian miracle

In the continuing saga of New York's Antonacci family, which used a sanitation biz as the springboard to victory in the 1969 trotting classic, they again invoke some lofty assistance, reinvade Du Quoin—and win!

Frank and Tom Antonacci are the proprietors of the Crown Carting Company of Flushing, N.Y. In plain words, they are in the business of collecting garbage. With three trucks and six employees, they serve 800 restaurants and food stores. Not a huge operation, as garbage goes, but a good, steady living for two Italian-Americans who scratched up from the streets of New York.

The Antonaccis have another interest, harness racing, and their specialty is driving the sport's established owners bananas by the incredible ease with which they pick off big races. They have only a three-horse stable, featuring a colt lucky even to be walking, but last week they showed up at trotting's premier event, the Hambletonian—and they did it again. On a hot, dusty afternoon in Du Quoin, Ill., the lucky colt, named Speedy Crown, demolished the world's best 3-year-olds in two straight heats, the first being the second fastest (1:57 $\frac{2}{5}$) in Hambo history. Maybe it shouldn't have been all that surprising. Two years before, these same Antonaccis—then hooked up with their kinsman Guy Antonacci and other garbage-collecting cousins, the Lomanginos—had knocked off the Hambo in their first try with an animal named Lindy's Pride. Then, as now, their winning driver was an Ohio cowboy named Howard Beissinger.

Last week Frank and Tom Antonacci, along with their bounteous families, came out of the stands in giggling, wiggling numbers and overflowed Victory Lane, collecting \$64,885 of the \$129,770 purse. "To have one Hambletonian winner was a miracle," said Frank Antonacci, "but to have two in three years—plain people like us—is unbelievable. I think God must be with us."

When Lindy's Pride won in 1969, harness racing gave itself a pat on the back

as a truly democratic sport. But in November of that year, after Lindy had swept the top five 3-year-old stakes, the Antonaccis and Lomanginos had a "disagreement over certain aspects of the horse business," as Frank puts it. The Lomanginos bought out the Antonaccis and took over Lindy Farms, while the Antonaccis momentarily dropped out of the sport.

By April 1970, Frank and Tom had decided they missed racing too much, so they paid Beissinger \$20,000 for a colt named Headin 'n Heelin. He was named—and bred—by Beissinger, an easy-smiling horseman who would almost as soon be bulldogging steers at rodeos as driving harness horses. The colt was the first foal of the mare Missile Toe, who is owned by Beissinger. His sire, Speedy Scot, won the 1963 Hambletonian for the esteemed Castleton Farm and is a most promising young stallion. The Antonaccis liked everything about the colt except his name, which they changed to Speedy Crown—after their business, of course. Right away they had some bad luck.

"When I sold the colt, he had a little splint about the size of a chestnut below his left knee," Beissinger recalled one morning last week. "The splint began to hurt him about a month after the Antonaccis bought him."

It hurt so much, in fact, that Beissinger called in Dr. William Lee, a Florida veterinarian, to remove it. The operation was successful but rather odd: instead of more normal surgical tools, Dr. Lee used a hammer and chisel to take it off.

Thereafter nobody heard much about Speedy Crown until early this summer, when he won five straight races at Scioto Downs, then three straight at Vernon. He entered the Hambletonian picture last month at The Meadows,

when he was parked out an entire race but lost to Castleton Farm's much-touted Hoot Speed by only half a length. "That's when I began to think he had it," said Beissinger.

From there Beissinger and Speedy Crown took an unusual route to Du Quoin's Victory Lane. The colt was not eligible for the big Hambletonian prep races at Springfield, Ill. and Indianapolis. "I was too cheap to nominate him, I guess," said Beissinger. "You can't stake him for all of them unless you're a millionaire."

So while Hoot Speed was winning at both Springfield and Indianapolis, and thereby gathering momentum and support for the Hambletonian, Beissinger had to be content with time trials and workouts. Even when Speedy Crown turned in a hot 1:57 $\frac{1}{5}$ trial at Indianapolis, many horsemen shrugged. They still had to be shown what he could do under the Hambo's special conditions—two heats or more against top competition under a killer sun.

Last Wednesday Du Quoin awoke to overcast skies, but around noon the sun blazed out. Among the early racegoers were Janna Spear and Phil Bersinger, a pair of 18-year-old Californians who had won an expenses-paid trip to the Hambletonian by virtue of their Aug. 9 appearance on TV's *The Dating Game*. Asked how she liked Du Quoin in comparison with, say, Hawaii or the Bahamas, Janna smiled bravely and said, "Oh, the people are great but—ugh—I don't like the humidity." Which is more, probably, than Karen and Rich Carpenter could say. At their Tuesday night performance at Du Quoin's fair, the popular singers quit in the middle of their

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THE HORN heralds yet another Antonacci victory. That's Frank, with part of his family, and Speedy Crown winning the first heat.



last number and walked off the stage. Seems they were a bit miffed because many of the farm folks in the crowd began to leave. The Carpenters obviously never had to milk cows.

Unaccustomed to multiple miracles, the experts looked for a wide-open race, no fewer than four of the nine starters having trotted miles in two minutes or less. It was a bookie's dream, entirely in the mind, of course, because bookies and totes and such are forbidden at Du Quoin. In the old days, or so legend has it, there was a man who hung around the lobby of the antiquated St. Nicholas Hotel in downtown Du Quoin. He was noted for two things. One was writing obscene poetry. The other was making book on the Hambo. Had he been doing his thing last Wednesday, he probably would have made Speedy Crown and Hoot Speed co-favorites.

The owners made a most unlikely match-up. Hoot Speed (also a son of Speedy Scot) trots for one of the

most prestigious operations in the sport. Castleton Owner Frederick Van Lennep is tall, elegant, rich and powerful. The Castleton empire consists of three farms—1,000 and 800 acres in Kentucky and a 900-acre spread in Florida. In addition Van Lennep runs racetracks in Florida and Michigan, not to mention a Florida dog track. Last week he and his family glided into Du Quoin in a large, lavish, customized bus.

In the first swift heat of the Hambo, Hoot Speed challenged pace-setting Speedy Crown from the half-mile mark to the top of the stretch but broke stride and faded back to eighth. In the second, Hoot raced gamely near the front for three quarters and finally finished a well-beaten third. In the overall standings, Hoot Speed was fourth, preceded by the Billy Haughton-driven A.C.'s Orion and Savoir, Jimmy Arthur driving.

Speedy Crown's margin of victory the first time around was an easy three

lengths, and in the second, when the humidity deflated some of his rivals, his superb condition paid off. He came back fit and strong to win by 2½ lengths in 1:58½. "My horse trotted real well," said Jimmy Arthur, "but Speedy Crown was the best today." Some thought he might become one of the best ever. "I've never seen a colt who could trot more than this one," said Delvin Miller, the owner-breeder-driver-trainer who is harness racing's most conspicuous personality. Miller, a sometime reindeer driver—he claims West Germany's Gerhard Kruger blind-sided him into a Swedish ditch during an exhibition of Santa-class trotters one memorable day—added a little international tang to Victory Lane by presenting a Scandinavian rune stone to Beissinger. This was a modern tablet carved in the primitive manner of authentic stones, and on it was an invitation to the winner to race in Stockholm. Kruger himself was at Du Quoin behind an American-bred, Italian-owned

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colt, Top Hanover, which finished seventh in a field of nine.

Beissinger, not a man to brag, allowed that Speedy Crown was "as good" as Lindy's Pride. On the track Beissinger had been entirely confident, cutting out all the pace in both heats.

"Hoot Speed just wasn't right today," said the colt's trainer-driver, Glen Garnsey, who was sorely disappointed. So was Van Lennep. After the Hambletonian he was in the bus, discussing the race with friends.

"By the way," said one, "what business are those people in?"

"Garbage," replied Van Lennep. "I understand there is good money in garbage."

Meanwhile, the Antonaccis were putting on their cast-of-thousands act at a party given by Bill Hayes of the Du Quoin trotting dynasty. The adults sipped champagne, except for Frank, who toasted the victory with orange soda. All the little Antonaccis—Frank and Tom married sisters in 1949 and now each has four children—hovered around the *hors d'oeuvres* table. Pretty Francine, 19, one of Frank's children, was worried. She had told her boss she was sick so she could get to the race, and she wondered if she might be fired.

Tom Antonacci remembered to call his mother, Amelia, who was born in Italy and now resides in Copiague, Long Island. She reminded him of something he had forgotten in the excitement: it was her 66th birthday.

In the Crown Carting Company, Frank works outside with the drivers and trucks while Tom stays in the office and tends to bookkeeping. Somebody asked Tom if he planned to give his employees a day off to celebrate.

"I'd like to, but I can't," he said. "You know, the garbage must be picked up no matter what. Look," he added, "I love the horses, but garbage is my bread and butter."

Sure. In the meantime, other owners had better start worrying about the 1973 Hambletonian. Remember that mare Missile Toe? Speedy Crown has a little sister named Speedy Toe, just a yearling now, which means she will be the right age for Du Quoin in two years. The Antonaccis own her. Beissinger will train and drive her. Just remember to have plenty of *hors d'oeuvres*, Bill Hayes.

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