

Quality Critical to New York Breeding Program

By [Joe Nevills](#)
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As the racing calendar rolls into the showcase meet at Saratoga Race Course, there is perhaps no more lucrative time to have a New York-bred on the track.

Statebred maiden special-weight purses during the opening weeks of the Saratoga meet will typically be contested for \$73,000, while allowance fields will run for pots in the mid- to upper-\$70,000 range. Even the rare New York-bred claiming races in the condition book feature purses between \$40,000 and \$45,000.

Those purses signify a high earning potential for owners of New York-breds, but they also raise the ceiling on returns for breeders who take advantage of the state's incentive programs.

A New York-foaled and -sired runner that wins in the state earns a bonus of 30 percent of the purse for his or her breeder up to \$40,000. Stallion owners receive a 10 percent incentive for top-three finishers in state up to \$10,000 per award.

"I think that this is probably the best environment that I've ever seen for breeding Thoroughbreds in New York since I had my first New York-bred in 1975," said Dr. Jerry Bilinski of Waldorf Farm in North Chatham, N.Y. "I think it's the best program in the country with the best racing venues in the country, and when you're right in proximity of Saratoga to boot, it's not hard to wonder why more people don't get into the business."

While the final count of mares bred will determine the success of the 2014 breeding season in New York, Bilinski, who stands stallions Bustin Stones and Breathless Affair at Waldorf Farm, said early returns appeared to be positive.

"The breeding season went fine," he said. "As far as the New York-bred program, I think it's excellent. I know in my own case, it's given me and a number of my clients positive attitudes to buy more broodmares and increase the size of the broodmare bands at our farms. The awards are fantastic, and oftentimes, it takes three or four years to see the benefits and the fruits of your labor, but I can say it was all worthwhile."

The recent spike has also signaled a change in the landscape of New York's breeding market from where it was situated before the market recession. While the broodmare population has begun making its way back from its lowest point, the number of stallions in the state has not grown at the same rate.

In the decade prior to the Thoroughbred market crash of 2008, New York stood up to 159 stallions, according to Jockey Club figures. More than 200 stood in the state in the early 1990s.

The number of stallions in New York bottomed out at 64 in 2011, and by 2013, amid an industry-wide upswing in the state, the population had only risen to 70.

The roster of sires retiring and transferring to New York has been steadily improving, but Bilinski said that the quality of the state's stallion market has a long way to go before being considered a truly national-level commercial program. He said that he still breeds his mares in Kentucky every other year to keep his operation profitable.

With that in mind, Bilinski stressed the importance of choosing quality stallion prospects and having a built-in population of mares to support them, especially in a growing market such as New York, which has the potential to jump to another level commercially if the right kinds of horses are introduced to the breeding pool.

“I have many people that want to stand stallions, but they have two or three mares and they expect you're going to fill a book,” he said. “Their idea of success sometimes is a stallion they've bred themselves that won a major race or had a real good work but didn't win a lot of money. There's a lot of excuses, and unfortunately, those excuses don't end up being something you can use to increase the number of mares you can bring to a stallion. They want to see results, and it's the same as it's always been: pedigree, race results, conformation, and support.”

Another outcome of the purse and incentive hike is an increase in average earnings per year for New York-bred runners. The average New York-bred runner earned \$26,689 in 2013 over 7.2 starts. That figure is the highest ever, according to The Jockey Club, and marks a 16 percent increase compared with 2012, when the average statebred earned \$23,089 over 6.8 starts. In the 19 years prior to 2012, the average earnings per starter for a New York-bred surpassed \$20,000 only once.

“It has made a New York-bred much more valuable and brought more attention to them,” said Philippe Lasseur of Keane Stud in Amenia, N.Y. “There's much bigger interest now than there used to be because of that. You can see that from the sales, also. People are making money there.”

The average price for a yearling born in the Empire State rose 102 percent over four auction seasons, from \$25,861 in 2010 to \$52,293 in 2013. A dramatic increase in statebreds sent through the auction ring also caused a 180 percent rise in gross sales over the same time frame, going from 385 horses bringing \$9,956,500 in 2010 to 534 yearlings selling for a combined \$27,924,200 last year.

That momentum bodes well for the upcoming Fasig-Tipton New York-bred yearling sale Aug. 9-10 in Saratoga Springs, N.Y. With a record 316 yearlings cataloged, the sale will go a long way in establishing the value of a New York-bred at auction in 2014.

“We've seen dramatic increases overall in the last 24 months,” said Fasig-Tipton President Boyd Browning Jr. “In 2013, I would have thought it'd have been hard to build on the success of 2012, and yet we did. I think it gives people confidence, whether you're breeding or buying New York-breds, that there is real money available out there. We saw a continued increase in the overall

quality of horses, both in the pedigree and physical individuals during the inspection process in 2014, and we're as bullish as we could be going into the sale this year.ö