



Heat of the Moment

The 1989 Hambletonian remains one of the event's most memorable editions

story by **Kathy Parker**

“When you win the Hambletonian, you do think that some guys go their whole life without that chance. But it takes luck to win. I go over the ones I got beat but could have won.”

Luck was certainly with Chuck Sylvester the day of the 1989 Hambletonian. Sylvester won the 1987 edition of the race with his great colt Mack Lobell, but he had no reason to expect a win two years later with Park Avenue Joe. Although of regal lineage, the son of Hambletonian winner Speedy Somolli and international trotting champion Delmonica Hanover had been a project for the trainer. Park Avenue Joe required throat surgery as a 2-year-old and suffered from stifle leg problems that slowed his progress at age 3. Because he had not shown himself to be much of a force on the racetrack, no driver had stuck with Park Avenue Joe.



How the Race Was Won

IN THE FIRST elimination of the 1989 Hambletonian, the favored filly Peace Corps took control of the race just past the quarter, and as soon as she cleared, second choice Demilo Hanover followed with Probe and Park Avenue Joe in the flow and trotting forward. On the last turn, driver Bill Fahy tipped Probe wide to go around Demilo Hanover. In the stretch drive, driver Ron Waples steered Park Avenue Joe into contention, and the two colts battled before Probe prevailed by a head in 1:54.3.

The second elimination heat went to Park Avenue Joe, but Probe certainly made it easier for his rival when he broke stride when racing room tightened up and his front feet hit Speedy GB's sulky wheel. Park Avenue Joe stayed strong, winning by 1¼ lengths in 1:55.3. Peace Corps, given a conservative trip this time, rallied from ninth to take second.

That set up the race-off. Park Avenue Joe started from post one since he had won the second heat. Waples and Fahy had Park Avenue Joe and Probe, respectively, matching strides into the first turn before Fahy settled Probe behind Park Avenue Joe.

After rating fractions of :29.4, 1:01.3 and 1:33.4, Park Avenue Joe hit the homestretch and the race was on. Probe challenged Park Avenue Joe three times, and each time, Park Avenue Joe, a colt of noticeably smaller physical stature, fought back. The colts hit the wire as a team in 2:00.2, but no winner was announced as the judges began their review of the photo and, upon determining a dead heat, the rules of the race.

CLOSE CALL / Opposite: After Ron Waples and Park Avenue Joe (1) battled Bill Fahy and Probe to a dead heat in the 1989 Hambletonian race-off, the judges named Park Avenue Joe the overall winner of the event. **Above:** That result gave trainer Chuck Sylvester his second Hambletonian win; over the next 13 years, he added two more.

The 1989 Hambletonian—the 64th edition of the race—was expected to be a showcase for world champion filly Peace Corps, who became the favorite when the colt Valley Victory was not entered due to illness. But Peace Corps was not at her best on Hambletonian Day and there was a crazy, not-in-your-wildest-dreams result: Park Avenue Joe and Probe each won a heat and then finished on the wire together in a two-horse race-off.

As the crowd of 31,815 gawked at the tote board, looking for the number of the winner, the judges reviewed the rules of the race. At first it was announced that the two horses were co-winners of the race. Then came a second announcement: Park Avenue Joe was the winner based on his summary of two first-place finishes and a second-place finish in the three heats. Because Probe finished ninth in the second heat, he was determined to be second in the summary standings.

“Never occurred that they had rules like that,” said a very disappointed Bill Fahy, who drove Probe.

The rule, however, was printed in the program, for all to read. Confusion still ensued. The Hambletonian was raced under USTA Rule 19, Section 3, which covered the placing system in heat racing. It specifically explained how the purse money in a heat race would be distributed. The rule included the language “a horse finishing 3-6 would be ranked ahead of another

horse finishing 4-4,” and stated that “a horse must win two heats to be declared the race winner and such horse shall stand first in the summary.”

The judges at the Meadowlands believed the first sentence in the rule determined the race winner. The first sentence read: “If the placing system is specified in the conditions, the purse shall be distributed according to the standing of the horses in the summary.”

“Okay, both horses won two heats,” said associate judge Don Latessa. “But it also states that horses must stand best in summary. Any dictionary will say that the summary is the total of those three races. Nobody told us they can have two winners. The votes of the judges were unanimous.”

The owners of Probe—Guy “Sonny” Antonacci and his sons Frank and Gerald, racing under the banner of Lindy Farms of Connecticut—didn’t see the rule interpretation the same way as the judges and believed their colt should also be declared a winner, effectively making the two colts not just dead-heat winners in the third heat but dead-heat winners of the race. After a lengthy court battle, both horses were declared winners, but the largest portion of the purse went to Park Avenue Joe based on his better standing in the summary.

Although the winner had to be sorted out in court, the Hambletonian Society had already rewritten the conditions of the race so that, beginning with

“Any dictionary will say that the summary is the total of those three races. Nobody told us they can have two winners.”

Don Latessa



Big Mack Attack

Chuck Sylvester's first Hambletonian triumph came with undoubtedly his greatest horse ever: Mack Lobell, a horse also regarded as one of the best ever. Mack Lobell was the heavy favorite to win the 1987 Hambletonian, which brought added pressure on Sylvester, who finished third in the race the previous year with filly Britelite Lobell. "Everyone expected Mack to win, and there was so much pressure," Sylvester recalled over 30 years later on a leisurely winter training morning in Florida. "It was a damned relief when that damn day was over."

Hambletonian No. 66, if 10 or fewer horses were entered, the race would be held with just one dash; and if more than 10 were entered, elimination heats would be contested and the winner of a second-heat final would be the race winner.

Park Avenue Joe's Hambletonian victory was the second of four for Sylvester, who became only the fourth trainer to win four or more Hambletonians. (He also won the 1998 edition of the race with Muscles Yankee and snagged

another in 2002 with Chip Chip Hooray.) Sylvester accomplished the four-win feat in a span of 15 years, becoming the first trainer to win four since Ben White, Stanley Dancer and Bill Haughton, all of whom won five. Reflecting years later, Sylvester said Park Avenue Joe's Hambletonian victory was a surprise and the fact that a third heat was required was a benefit to his horse.

"He was a horse who just was immature. That three heats that day, that was the key to winning," said the trainer.

Sonny Antonacci and his sons were able to enjoy the Hambletonian winner's circle spotlight by themselves the year after the historic dead heat. Their colt Harmonious won his elimination with a first-over rally and then enjoyed a second-over trip to take the final by a half length over Embassy Lobell. **HB**

Kathy Parker is the former editor of *Hoof Beats* and *The Horseman And Fair World*. To comment on this story, email us at readerforum@ustrotting.com.