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Free-legged Zooka bouncing back

Thursday, March 18, 2010 - by Karen Briggs, USTA Web Newsroom Senior Correspondent



Toronto, ON --- He is the world's fastest free-legged pacer, having been the first to break the 1:50 barrier when he laid down a scorching 1:49.3 mile at Kawartha Downs in July 2007. But since he left the shedrow of Campbellville, Ontario trainer [Ben Wallace](#) in January 2009, world record holder Zooka has struggled to regain his previous form.

A graduate of the Ontario Sires Stakes program, the rangy Zooka, an 8-year-old gelded son of Astreos-Twin B Keyko, was more recently a stalwart of the Open ranks at Woodbine and Mohawk racetracks in Toronto, going head-to-head with the likes of Ramegade Bruiser, Tigerama, and Secrets Nephew. In the 2007 Breeders Crown at Mohawk, Zooka captured the show spot, less than two lengths behind [Artistic Fella](#) and Mister Big.

After being sold in the January 2009 Tattersalls Select Mixed Sale for \$152,000 to Robbins Nest Farm and Wendy Crissman of Delaware, Zooka failed to make a pari-mutuel start for nearly 10 months. He was a vet scratch from an Invitational event at the Meadowlands at the end of January, and didn't see a starting gate again until May, when he qualified at Harrah's Chester in Pennsylvania. Zooka would qualify twice more in May and June, move from the tutelage of Chuck Crissman, Jr. to Ken Rucker, then disappear again.



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Zooka has won 25 times in his career, with earnings of \$1,200,205.

He resurfaced back at his old stomping grounds at Mohawk last October, qualifying for new trainer Ondrej Gois in 1:57.4, but his first trip behind a starting gate after that was less than successful. In a \$15,200 Preferred event at London, Ontario's Western Fair Raceway, Zooka was distanced -- and his subsequent 11 starts for Gois weren't much better, though the old warrior did show a glimmer of his talent in early December, defeating Cuzzin Sid and [Eagle Luck](#) in 1:52.4 to pick up a single win check in a \$26,600 conditioned event at Woodbine.

Soundness issues inevitably creep into the equation as a horse ages, regardless of how good-gaited he may be. Zooka struggled with his share in 2009, but with surgery having resolved some of his difficulties, he now may be back on the road to being competitive.

Zooka relocated to the barn of Rob Fellows in January 2010 after Gois was suspended for a positive test -- and there the freewheeling free-legged gelding has delivered checks in six out of seven starts, all at Woodbine.

Over a sloppy track on March 13, Zooka turned in one of his grittiest performances in years.

"That was an incredible race, one of the best I've ever seen," said Fellows. "He doesn't have gate speed so he tends to get parked, and he still struggles on the turns, but he was right there in that win photo (beaten a head by Spago Hall in 1:54.2).

"I got him under bad circumstances, but it was at the right time. He wasn't competitive in the Open ranks anymore, but he arrived just as he became eligible to drop in class. The drop down suited him and he got brave, like any horse does. It made my job easy, and his too."

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Fellows, who handed the lines to PEI native [Mark MacDonald](#), attributes much of Zooka's recent success to his driver.

“Mark has just done a tremendous job with this horse. He really clicked with him.”

With over \$1.2 million earned and 153 starts under his belt, it's a treat to see this gritty gelding pacing to victory again without hindrance of hobble.

Related Articles :

- [Two champions lost](#) (Friday, July 09, 2010)
This week I'd like to mark the passing of two great old champions. One was a Standardbred, the other a Thoroughbred. And tragically, both met their ends on the racetrack, trying their hearts out as they'd always done.

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