

Banner Week for Ninety North as Wabbajack and Sheldon Both Find the Belmont Winner's Circle – Breakthrough Performances Set Stage for Exciting Summer for Young Racing Syndicate

A little over a year ago, Ninety North was just starting to find its footing. The first year of operation had seen growth in the client base, but the racetrack results weren't coming just yet. When late April of 2013 came around, fortunes seemed to change very quickly and rather extremely as Ninety North reeled off four consecutive wins to kick off the summer.

Somewhat similarly, Ninety North was coming off a difficult stretch this spring, marked by injuries sidelining Spiral Stair, Chief Energy, and Thieves Guild. Once again, the tide turned, and once again it was Wabbajack who set the tone. On the Belmont Stakes Day undercard, Wabbajack was entered for an allowance race that drew a competitive field of eight horses. While there were no real "monsters" on paper, the field was full of horses that had been campaigning consistently and were clearly ready to fire their best shots on that big Belmont Day stage. Somewhat inexplicably, Wabbajack was listed at 8-1 on the morning line, though the analysts and bettors disagreed. The Daily Racing Form handicappers pegged Wabba as the consensus best bet of the day while the at post time the son of Midnight Lute was sent off as the 5-2 favorite.

When the gate opened, Wabba broke about as well as he ever has, and he quickly found himself settling just behind the obvious frontrunner, Jimmy Connors. Jockey Rajiv Maragh allowed Wabba to continue in his tracking position all through the backstretch through strong fractions of :23 and :46, and stayed in about the three-path the whole way around. Heading into the far turn, Maragh began to ask Wabba for more run, and after a few strides, he had managed to draw off to a clear lead. When he struck the finish line, Wabba had recorded a one-and-a-half length victory and was never challenged late. Adding to the excitement of the win was that it occurred on one of the biggest days in recent racing history and in front of a crowd of around 100,000 people!

"This horse won on pure class," Ninety North President Justin Nicholson said after the race. "We have to remember that he was running in a field full of horses that had current form, and Wabba hadn't run since a tough outing back in February, and that one was coming off of an even longer layoff. Needless to say, we didn't come into this race in the way you'd want to come into an important race because horses in our barn are likely to fire their best efforts with a little more bottom into them. That said, the fact that Wabbajack won anyway means that he

was flat out better than this group of horses and won purely on talent. It's good to know that with several factors stacked against him, he gave his all and rewarded all of us for our patience to this point. Hopefully, winning on a stage like that helps boost the Ninety North name s well!"

"Wabbajack came out of the race very well," trainer Jim Toner said afterwards. "He was absolutely exhausted for two or three days, which is good. That means he gave us what he had, and probably also means he will improve from the fitness he got in this race. I'd be shocked if he doesn't run an even better race next out. He's definitely bouncing around the barn now and he feels great. I'm pretty sure he knows he won. Now our job is to do what we can to string a few good races together and actually get some momentum going."

Wabbajack's next target race is yet to be determined. The likeliest next step is going to be to come back in a non-winners of 2 at Belmont as the allowance races carry strong purses of \$75,000-\$80,000...practically stakes-level purses anywhere else in the country. The last race at that condition was a mediocre seven-horse field, and if Wabbajack had been in that group, he would surely have been one of the favorites. If Wabba were to come back with another strong effort next time out, a possible option in August would be the Philip Iselin Stakes at Monmouth on August 17th. That race is a mile and an eighth and carries a \$150k pot, and the added benefit of being outside of Saratoga, where the stakes races for the handicap division are typically absolutely loaded. "All of the future schedule for Wabba is still a bit hypothetical as we are waiting to see exactly what the next Belmont book has to offer," Nicholson said. "We'll nominate for some stakes races as well in case we can catch a light field somewhere or other, but I don't expect it. I'd guess we'll have another allowance try and then a stakes try if it goes well."

The Wabbajack win would have been enough to make last week a successful one, but fortunately there was more to come. A few days later, his next-door neighbor in Barn 26, Sheldon, took to the Belmont turf course to contest a maiden special going a mile and a quarter on the grass. Sheldon came into the race off a strong runner-up finish at the same level and distance a few weeks earlier, when a tough trip likely cost him the victory. With that in mind, the Ninety North team felt that Sheldon should have a strong chance to graduate in this spot. Once again, the analysts seem not to give a Ninety North horse a ton of respect as Sheldon was made 5-1 on the morning line and ranked behind a couple of horses he had beaten just a few weeks earlier. However, this time the bettors agreed

with the analysts and Sheldon went to post at that 5-1 price, seemingly a gift for those who believed his last race gave him a good chance to win this time.

In the early stages of the race, jockey Junior Alvarado got Sheldon to settle a little bit closer to the pace than he had been in some earlier starts rather than backing him out of the field entirely. The pace was fairly strong early, which strung the group out and meant there were a lot more opportunities in the early stages of the race for Alvarado to pick a comfortable position but still have room to his outside to kick clear when the time came. As the race went on, Alvarado kept Sheldon in midpack but appeared mindful throughout that he maintain ground to his outside for a clear late run. Approaching the far turn, Alvarado made his move, bringing Sheldon to the outside and asking him for run, and as he reached the top of the stretch, Sheldon appeared to be taking dead aim at the frontrunners. By midstretch, Sheldon had reeled in the rest of the field and began to draw off, ultimately recording a two-and-a-half length victory. As a fun little fact, the trifecta was filled out by Hines, a \$500k auction purchase, and Heyaraat, a \$1.7 million auction purchase. Sheldon sure beat some blue-bloods in this spot!

“This was the race we felt like Sheldon had in him based on his big run last time out,” Nicholson said afterwards. “Based on pedigree, it always seemed likely to us that Sheldon would develop over time and would improve as the distances got longer. We’re seeing both of these expectations play out in front of our eyes now, and it’s exciting to watch.”

“This horse just needed a clean trip,” Toner said after the race. “He’s got a big turn of foot and clearly has the talent to compete against nice horses. I think this race made it evident that he’ll run as far as they’ll write the races, and I’m sure we’ll have opportunities to test that in the future. For now, though, I think we have a very nice three-year-old on our hands, and we’ll try to keep him running against his own crop for the next few months and see if we can pick up some big checks along the way. He came out of the race great and even nipped at me the next day, which if you know Sheldon is completely out of character. He was feeling pretty full of himself!”

As of now, Sheldon’s target race is the Grade 3 American Derby at Arlington (Chicago area) on July 12th. The race is for three-year-olds going a mile and three-sixteenths on the grass. Toner and Nicholson have produced some strong competitors in the male distance/turf division over the past few years and both are looking forward to the opportunity to shape a campaign for just such a horse again. Some of the past horses that have been successful for Toner and the

Nicholson family in the mile-plus turf division include Blazing Fury (won G3 Saranac, 4th BC Turf), Two Months Rent (won G3 Hawthorne Derby), Bold Hawk (won G3 Hawthorne Derby), Zifzaf (3rd G2 Fourstardave), Gritty Sandie (won G3 Lawrence Realization), etc.

“All in all, I’m confident that Sheldon couldn’t be in better hands for what we’re hoping to accomplish with him!” Nicholson said. “I’m looking forward to the rest of his career from here!”



