



COURTESY RICHARD LUGOVICH

Richard Lugovich with Hold the Salsa at Fair Hill Training Center

RIGHT SPICE

Richard Lugovich's career with state-breds piques with Hold the Salsa

BY CARLY SILVER

IN WHAT MIGHT BE a lackluster year for many, 2-year-old Hold the Salsa has spiced up 2020 for Richard Lugovich. In five starts the bay colt has scored twice, earning \$100,275 for his breeder/owner/trainer. A 1¼-length winner of the Oct. 2 Bertram F. Bongard Stakes at Belmont Park, "Salsa" most recently finished fourth on New York Showcase day in the one-mile Sleepy Hollow Stakes.

Hold the Salsa loves the "Big Sandy" Belmont track. He broke his maiden over the Elmont oval July 12 in his debut. Subsequent multiple stakes winner Thin White Duke was back in third while future Bongard runner-up Lookin for Trouble finished fourth. In his next start the son of Hold Me Back took a big step up in class, finishing ninth in the Aug. 7 Saratoga Special Stakes Presented by Miller Lite (G2). Thin White Duke turned the tables in the Sept. 4 Funny Cide Stakes at Saratoga, with Hold the Salsa back in fifth.

"He didn't like the track," said Lugovich.

B Good

Belmont once again proved more to his liking. In the Bongard, Hold the Salsa defeated Funny Cide runner-up Eagle Orb (winner of the Nov. 14 Notebook Stakes), covering seven furlongs on the dirt in a good 1:24.54.

"Well, to be honest with you," Lugovich said, "he trained beautifully going into it, and I knew he'd like Belmont a lot. So I told the rider (Junior Alvarado) to, 'Ride him like you own him.'"

A local trainer saddled Salsa for Lugovich, who watched the race excitedly from home. He wasn't the only one thrilled by the win, saying, "A friend of mine that drives the van, she was in Canada and said, 'Did you hear me screaming from Canada? I was watching it on TV.'"

Lugovich describes breeding, owning, and training a stakes winner as "sensational."

At the time of Hold the Salsa's conception, his sire, Hold Me Back (by Giant's Causeway), stood at Irish Hill Century Farm near Stillwater.

The farm's stallion manager, Bill Leak, described Hold Me Back as a "very large horse; 17 hands; very correct, and you knew he was there."

He passed on his frame and scope. "That was definitely what we saw, from

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— Bill Leak



Hold the Salsa winning the Oct. 2 Bertram Bongard at Belmont

foals that we had and we were involved with,” Leak shared. “He definitely gave them that size and that ranginess.”

The Irish Hill team has been actively rooting for Team Salsa.

“Yeah, we’ve been following very close,” Leak said. “We were very happy to have given them that opportunity to breed that horse. They must be super proud. And that’s the kind of horse that we felt like Hold Me Back would be able to bring to New York. It seemed like his young horses always had a bunch of talent, but for whatever reason—I don’t know if they were just too fast, too quick, being so big—that they kind of knocked themselves out of being a racehorse. But the Lugovichs, they’ve been doing things a long time, and they do things the right way.”

Northern Homebred

“Salsa” is a third-generation homebred. Lugovich purchased his great-granddam, the Kick filly Northern Nymph, for \$700 as a yearling. Ten years later he bought back the winning mare for \$2,700 at the Fasig-Tipton Midlantic December mixed sale. At the time she was in foal to the Sadler’s Wells’ son

Four Seasons. That resulting filly was Northern Sprite.

Sent to millionaire turf star King Cugat (by Kingmambo), Northern Sprite produced Northern Mambo.

“Northern Mambo never raced because, I believe, she bowed,” Lugovich said. “She was a big, massive, beautiful mare.”

However, her full sister, Spritely Mambo, broke her maiden first time out at Belmont Park in 2013. Retired to the Lugovich family’s Northway Farm near Stillwater, Northern Mambo foaled Hold the Salsa in 2018. Dam of a Freud yearling filly called Feel the Music, Northern Mambo was covered by Karakontie for 2021.

Lugovich always expected “Salsa” to excel on the turf, not the dirt.

“Here’s the truth of the matter,” he admitted. “I know he is a long turf horse, OK? Breeding—look at him, all right? King Cugat (foals), that’s all they are, is turf horses.”

Lugovich works out of Fair Hill Training Center near Elkton, Md. He’s fared well despite the coronavirus pandemic, saying, “I never miss a day of work. Once it started, I take care of the

horses. So you’re essential, you know what I mean.”

Contrary to his piquant moniker, Hold the Salsa is a mild-mannered horse.

“Salsa, you don’t even know he’s in the barn,” Lugovich said. “He’s quiet.”

Once, when Lugovich stood near his stall and turned his back on the colt, he fully expected “Salsa” to try to take a nibble or two. Instead, he said, the youngster just bonked him with his nose.

“When people walk around the corner,” Lugovich said, “he acts like he’s really tough, but he ain’t.” He added, “He just makes like he’s bad, but he’s not.”

Indeed, he explained, “He’s very, very intelligent, smarter than the average bear” and “bigger than an average 2-year-old.”

Salsa’s only vice? An appetite for peppermints. For his horses, Lugovich treks to Dollar General twice to three times a week to stock up on candies—he prefers the easy-twist-off wrappers.

“Most of them stop when they see me, when the hotwalkers see me,” he said laughingly. He imagines his runners are trying to say, “Come on, you cheap son of a gun! Give me a candy.”

RIGHT SPICE



Lugovich lives near Hershey, Pa.

East Coast Excellence

Lugovich lives near Hershey, Pa., but grew up in Bridgeport, Conn.

"When I was a kid," he remembered, "I used to go over to my friend's house

and rode horses all the time."

Like many, he went to the track as a child and fell in love with the sport.

"I went to Aqueduct one time with my older brother when I was, like, 15

years old," he recalled, "and I said, 'Boy, I'm going to own one of these before I die.' That was it."

Lugovich entered the Air Force and relocated to Washington, D.C.

"A friend of mine's father-in-law had a whole bunch of horses."

And from there, Lugovich reignited his passion for Thoroughbreds. Lugovich got to see a number of outstanding racehorses in his time. He watched the great Kelso win the 1964 Washington, D.C., International at Laurel Park. So he went and got a horse of his own.

He left the Air Force in 1968 and worked under a local trainer at Charles Town Races in West Virginia. Lugovich has worked at many prominent tracks over the decades, from Monmouth Park to stabling at Aqueduct and Belmont Park.

"I was at Pimlico, Laurel," he added. "Like I said, Charles Town. New England, I was in Boston, at Suffolk Downs. I was at Rockingham (Park), at Philadelphia Park; it was called Keystone then."

In 1979 a Lugovich-bred colt named Bourbon Prince won first time out at Aqueduct. The rewards convinced him to center his breeding operation in the Empire State.

"I just said, 'I need to get a whole



Hold the Salsa as a foal with Northern Mambo

bunch more of these,” he explained of New York-breds, calling the state’s rewards “just better money.

“I think the program has just gotten better. Everything has gotten a little bit better.”

“Look at the difference,” Lugovich noted. “If you’re running somewhere else and you run a horse—so you get \$30,000. If you run in New York, you get \$50,000. It’ll still cost you the same to feed them, cost the same to train them. If you can run for more money, more power to you.”

Lugovich decided to set up permanent operations in New York, though he also maintains a 20-acre farm near Hershey.

“And so then, after a while,” he said, “I looked for a farm for years and years and never could find one that was what I wanted. So then I finally found this place, and I bought it.”

Lugovich’s eldest son and namesake runs Northway Farm, where the family has about 30 horses, including 10-12 broodmares, plus five to six retirees.

The nursery has a three-eighths-mile training track, and the retirees graze in the infield.

“When the babies gallop,” Lugovich said, “sometimes the pensioners run around with them on the inside. So that way, when they get to the track, they’re not scared when I get them at Fair Hill. They’re already fine because they see a lot of horses, even though only two to three of them run together.”

Lugovich has nine horses in his barn presently, all owned by himself or his son. One up-and-comer is Copper Chalice, co-bred (along with Barbara Nelson) and owned by Rich Jr. The 3-year-old Palace Malice gelding broke his maiden June 5 at odds of 74-1. Rich Jr. appears to have inherited his father’s keen eye for horseflesh. He scooped up Copper Chalice’s dam, Oenophile, by Pulpit, for \$39,000 at the 2016 Keeneland November sale.

At the time, the mare was carrying Copper Chalice. Her Bellamy Road filly RNA’d for \$30,000 at the 2019 Fasig-Tipton Saratoga sale of preferred New York-bred yearlings. Named Cabernet Trail, she is now in training with Lugovich.

“She’s not so tall as she is big, if you



Hold the Salsa breaking his maiden at Belmont in July

know what I mean,” Lugovich said. “She’s wide with a big butt.”

Oenophile has a Twirling Candy yearling colt and a Violence weanling colt that arrived Feb. 20.

Family Man

In addition to Northern Nymph’s family, Lugovich has nurtured the bloodline of winner Regal Joanie.

“The horse was ruled off in New York,” he said, “and it had problems at the gate.”

He fixed up the daughter of Regal Embrace, whom he described as having “a gigantic head and small body,” and planned to sell her—that is, until his wife discovered some quality in her female family.

Sent to Gregorian, a son of Graustark and 1981 Broodmare of the Year Natashka, Regal Joanie foaled Regal Chant in 1994. In April 1996 the colt broke his maiden first time out at Aqueduct, trouncing six other opponents over 4½ furlongs.

“When I ran him the first time,” he said, “he was magnificent. He was a gigantic, beautiful horse.”

In December 1996, Regal Chant

romped in the Damon Runyon Stakes by 5½ lengths, defeating five New York-bred competitors over 1¼ miles. He went on to place in three stakes at 3.

Regal Joanie’s Hansel filly Lost in the Woods earned \$127,840 in the early 2000s. A full sister to Regal Chant, Chanton, was unraced and entered Lugovich’s broodmare band. Bred to stalwart New York sire Disco Rico, Chanton yielded Disco On, third in the 2011 edition of the Damon Runyon.

Another foal out of Chanton was Gregorian Jest, a daughter of Phone Trick. Bred to King Cugat, Gregorian Jest produced Lugovich’s homebred Royal Jest, who earned \$155,108. Bred to 1997 Belmont Stakes (G1) winner Touch Gold, Gregorian Jest foaled Gregorian Gold. In only her second race Gregorian Gold won the 2015 Lady Finger Stakes at Finger Lakes.

Perhaps Leak summarized the Lugoviches best.

“The Lugoviches, they’ve been so great for the New York-bred program,” he said, “really supporting it, with buying the farm here and having their son here. We need more people like them, for sure.” 🐾