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Najja Thompson's positive and friendly demeanor is serving him well as the executive director of New York Thoroughbred Breeders

Thompson checking all the right boxes

EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR OF NEW YORK THOROUGHBRED BREEDERS LOOKS AHEAD TO BRIGHT FUTURE IN EMPIRE STATE

By TOM PEDULLA

NAJJA THOMPSON, EXECUTIVE director of New York Thoroughbred Breeders, is viewed in many different lights. All of them are positive.

Rahel Ayalew, his fiancée, praises him for his listening ability. David O'Rourke, CEO of the New York Racing Association, describes him as a "consensus builder." Joe Appelbaum, former president of the New York Thoroughbred Horsemen's

Association, sees him as a "great brand ambassador."

Anyone who has met Thompson, 42, appreciates him for his radiant smile and the warmth of his personality. He is the rare person who puts people at ease in uneasy times, helping to pave the way for progress made since he assumed his position Dec. 14, 2020, with the potential for major advances to come.

"He is a very amenable leader. He likes working with

ALL SIRES LISTS ARE THROUGH DEC. 31, 2023

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Average Earnings per starter \$75,541
By **Speightstown**, top five leading sire lifetime
Sire of Six Figure Yearlings and 2YOs

AEI 1.31 ranking higher than **VIOLENCE**, **SKY MESA**,
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2023 LEADING SIRES IN MASSACHUSETTS For daily updated sire lists visit BloodHorse.com

Rank	Stallion (Foreign foaled), (YOB,Sire), Where Stands	2023 Stud Fee	Rnrs/ Wnrs	BT SWnrs/ Wns	Rstrct SW/ BT SW	(Chief Earner, Earnings)	2023 Earnings	Foals	Cumulative		
									BT SWs	A-E Index	Comp Index
1	Indian Ocean (02, Stormy Atlantic)	N/A	2/0	0/0	0/0	(Let's Make a Zeen, \$5,900)	\$6,150	*268	6	0.74	1.16
2	Silk Broker (96, Pentelicus)	N/A	1/0	0/0	0/0	(Big Stock Winner, \$1,243)	\$1,243	34	3	0.62	0.45

* includes Southern Hemisphere foals

people and for people,” said Ayalew. “He is very thoughtful in his approach. He loves hearing feedback and people’s perspectives.”

Ayalew added, “He’s always thinking about how he can be the best person, leader, fiancé, son, friend.”

Thompson may not be the loudest voice in a room, but evidence abounds that he is an effective one, allowing him to proudly declare, “I think New York certainly leads the way. It’s the best state-bred regional program with the awards and incentives we have.”

Purses were raised 30% for New York-breds when they raced in open company last summer during Saratoga Race Course’s uber-competitive meet. Beginning in 2026, New York-bred overnight races for juveniles at NYRA tracks will carry purses matching their open company counterparts. More divisions are expected to follow as a massive \$455 million renovation of Belmont Park is completed.

Bidding for New York-breds at sales continues to be robust. Amid a national decline in foal crop, Thompson is optimistic about significant growth in the Empire State after many top farms made the unusual move of banding together to fill a long-standing void by landing two grade 1 winners as new stallions, Mind Control and New York-



Thompson caught the horse bug early and is seen here in the saddle alongside his grandfather, Basil Thompson Sr., and cousin, Patrick Scott, in 1988

bred Americanrevolution.

New York produced 1,261 foals in 2021, the most recent year for which statistics are available. Thompson is working to reach 2,000 annually.

“In a landscape in which we have more competition from sports betting, we need to do all that we can to ensure that we have quality field sizes,” he said. “That’s why we are working on these incentives to encourage people to breed and support the product and definitely elevate the game to get more ownership, more breeders, more horses. That makes for bigger fields and more excitement.”

Born in Westbury, N.Y., to parents of Jamaican descent, Thompson learned to appreciate world-class racing at a

young age. Larry Stewart, an uncle, bred and owned Thoroughbreds on a modest scale while operating a farm in Williston, Fla. The child delighted in accompanying him to the barn and to the track.

“He was always asking me questions about horses. How do you handicap?” Stewart recalled. “He was interested in the game from the very start.”

Thompson graduated from Florida State in 2009 having majored in history with a minor in philosophy.

He pondered law school or graduate studies. Stewart persuaded him to follow his passion for racing.

“He was born to do what he’s doing right now,” his uncle said. “I always told him he would go far in racing.”

Thompson worked for NYRA for more than nine years, developing a varied background during stints with the marketing and communications departments before spending time in human resources. He succeeded Jeffrey Cannizzo as the New York Breeders’ executive director when Cannizzo left to become NYRA’s vice president for government affairs.

Thompson’s past is contributing to his ability to help steer New York racing toward a brighter future.

“Najja is very much a consensus

“NAJJA IS VERY MUCH A CONSENSUS BUILDER. HE’S A PEOPLE PERSON IN A LOT OF WAYS. HIS ABILITY TO BRING EVERYONE TOGETHER—THE BREEDING INDUSTRY, THE RACETRACK—IS KIND OF EVIDENT IN THE STUFF YOU SEE US DOING WITH NEW YORK-BREDS AND KIND OF PUSHING THAT PROGRAM FORWARD.”

—DAVID O’ROURKE, NEW YORK RACING ASSOCIATION CEO

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Bred over 200 mares in his first two years at stud

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Rank	Stallion (Foreign foaled), (YOB,Sire), Where Stands	2023 Stud Fee	Rnrs/Wnrs	BT SWnrs/Wns	Rstrct SW/BT SW	(Chief Earner, Earnings)	2023 Earnings	Foals	Cumulative		
									BT SWs	A-E Index	Comp Index
1	Central Banker (10, Speightstown), McMahan of Saratoga Thoroughbreds	\$7,500	137/71	3/5	3/3	(Morning Matcha, \$246,350)	\$4,108,682	372	12	1.31	1.14
2	Tourist (11, Tiznow), Rockridge Stud	\$3,500	117/50	2/2	2/2	(Factually Correct, \$177,275)	\$2,818,727	*313	6	0.91	1.16
3	Buccheri (12, Kantharos), McMahan of Saratoga Thoroughbreds	\$5,000	89/50	3/4	0/3	(Book'em Danno, \$230,625)	\$2,679,764	144	3	0.95	1.08
4	War Dancer (10, War Front), Irish Hill & Dutchess Views Stallions	\$7,500	93/38	1/1	1/1	(Mz Big Bucks, \$150,550)	\$2,273,093	183	4	0.96	1.09
5	Freud (98, Storm Cat), Sequel Stallions New York	Private	61/27	3/4	2/3	(Therapist, \$564,345)	\$2,098,778	*1434	60	1.42	1.19
6	Bustin Stones (04, City Zip), Waldorf Farm	\$2,500	62/37	1/1	1/1	(Bustin Bay, \$325,065)	\$2,030,289	300	13	1.27	1.18
7	Mission Impazible (07, Unbridled's Song), Sequel Stallions New York	Private	49/27	0/0	0/0	(Zeebear, \$170,460)	\$1,378,043	313	8	1.01	1.15
8	¶ Solomini (15, Curlin), McMahan of Saratoga Thoroughbreds	\$6,500	42/11	3/3	2/3	(My Shea D Lady, \$336,500)	\$1,337,998	69	3	1.07	1.08
9	Bellamy Road (02, Concerto)	Pnsd	55/28	0/0	0/0	(Ciccibello, \$126,825)	\$1,180,808	*754	32	1.08	1.20
10	Big Brown (05, Boundary), Irish Hill & Dutchess Views Stallions	\$5,000	62/21	0/0	0/0	(Jemography, \$77,310)	\$1,141,171	*893	29	1.02	1.35
11	Union Jackson (12, Curlin), Sequel Stallions New York	Pnsd	43/28	0/0	0/0	(Tommy Gun, \$100,680)	\$1,112,062	86	2	0.86	1.02
12	Micromanage (10, Medaglia d'Oro)	Pnsd	34/15	0/0	0/0	(Mason Mania, \$111,080)	\$832,104	92	0	0.74	1.16
13	Redesdale (13, Speightstown), McMahan of Saratoga Thoroughbreds	\$2,500	32/15	1/2	1/1	(Ramblin' Wreck, \$182,850)	\$766,231	64	1	0.88	0.89
14	The Lieutenant (13, Street Sense)	Died, 2019	17/11	1/1	1/1	(Lifetime of Chance, \$187,567)	\$725,410	*67	2	1.82	1.11
15	Slumber (GB) (08, Cacique), Rockridge Stud	\$7,500	10/4	2/2	1/2	(Fluffy Socks, \$464,900)	\$657,346	23	3	2.12	0.94
16	Boys At Tosconova (08, Officer)	Died, 2022	23/14	0/0	0/0	(Boys Code, \$95,507)	\$637,346	99	4	1.16	1.13
17	Honorable Dillon (10, Tapit)	N/A	16/5	0/0	0/0	(Bernt Again, \$166,900)	\$553,798	*134	1	0.68	1.06
18	Frost Giant (03, Giant's Causeway)	Died, 2022	30/17	0/0	0/0	(Smithwick's Spice, \$74,860)	\$552,153	*476	16	1.09	1.08
19	Majestic City (09, City Zip)	Died, 2022	39/16	0/0	0/0	(Majestic Tiger, \$47,070)	\$511,358	126	1	0.60	0.99
20	Teuflesberg (04, Johannesburg)	Died, 2022	12/7	0/0	0/0	(Clover Street, \$141,075)	\$447,179	183	4	1.10	1.04
21	Courageous Cat (06, Storm Cat), Questroyal North	\$2,500	19/12	0/0	0/0	(Ihihadachance, \$125,789)	\$405,927	238	8	0.85	1.03
22	Bank Heist (07, Maria's Mon), Kaz Hill Farm	\$1,000	11/7	0/0	0/0	(Athena Beach, \$84,840)	\$349,490	108	2	0.77	1.19
23	Weekend Hideaway (10, Speightstown)	Pnsd	10/3	1/1	1/1	(Itsallcomintogetha, \$173,650)	\$316,355	16	1	0.85	0.96
24	A Shin Forward (05, Forest Wildcat), Rockridge Stud	Pnsd	14/7	0/0	0/0	(Shinfull, \$53,470)	\$249,141	48	0	0.56	0.82
25	Golden Ticket (09, Speightstown)	Pnsd	10/6	0/0	0/0	(Hope for Gold, \$51,430)	\$219,526	53	1	0.53	0.78
26	Al Khali (06, Medaglia d'Oro), Rockridge Stud	\$2,500	8/2	0/0	0/0	(Khali Magic, \$148,520)	\$203,420	21	0	1.03	1.14
27	Giant Surprise (09, Giant's Causeway)	Pnsd	16/4	0/0	0/0	(Maddie's Surprise, \$44,069)	\$165,281	144	4	1.11	1.17
28	Encaustic (04, Broad Brush)	Died, 2022	12/6	0/0	0/0	(It's Your Call, \$33,720)	\$160,462	60	0	0.51	0.76
29	Superstrella (08, Storm Cat)	N/A	4/3	0/0	0/0	(Supers Lucky Lady, \$56,625)	\$117,479	17	0	0.64	0.65
30	Zivo (09, True Direction)	Pnsd	10/5	0/0	0/0	(Mani Pedi, \$22,526)	\$108,863	34	0	0.51	0.74

* includes Southern Hemisphere foals

builder. He's a people person in a lot of ways," O'Rourke said. "His ability to bring everyone together—the breeding industry, the racetrack—is kind of evident in the stuff you see us doing with New York-breds and kind of pushing that program forward."

O'Rourke said of his comfortable interaction with Thompson and Cannizzo, "You're able to strategize, you're able to be open, you can debate things. No one is going to agree on everything, but everyone has the same focus. And that focus is to build the New York racing product and to build the New York-bred program."

Owners were extremely motivated to run New York-breds in open company at Saratoga last summer. Purses for maiden-special-weight races were \$136,500 for state-breds compared to \$105,000 for non-New York-breds. The difference also was significant for first- (\$149,500-\$115,000), second- (\$156,500-\$120,000), and third-level allowance contests (\$162,500-\$125,000).

According to O'Rourke, purse parity for juveniles at the start of 2026 signals a broader movement. "You can definitely



Rahel Ayalew and Thompson will marry in June

expect more. This is just the beginning," he said. "Those things will be announced as they get approved by our board and by Najja's board. There is more to come, but I don't want to get ahead of it."

O'Rourke said efforts to bolster the breeding program were not tied to the state's willingness to make a \$455 million loan to NYRA for a massive renovation that is expected to lead to a more compact, fan-friendly Belmont Park

that will offer three tracks—dirt, turf, and synthetic.

"NYRA's mission is to support New York racing and the breeding program is the foundation of that," he said. "This is just part of our mission as an organization."

And beginning in 2024, the New York State Thoroughbred Breeding and Development Fund Corporation board of directors unanimously approved a recent motion to increase the breeder award rates for all New York-breds who compete in New York.

Appelbaum sees much to be encouraged about. "I think people don't realize, it's never actually been better," he said of the whopping \$60 million breeding program. "Look at New York-bred purses. Look at the prices New York-breds are selling at."

At Fasig-Tipton's New York-bred yearling sale at Saratoga in 2023, 219 of 300 sold over two days in mid-August for a record \$20,904,000, including post-sale returns. That represented a 3.6% increase from the year before, when 188 yearlings brought \$20,175,000.

The bidding attracted country music

COURTESY OF NAJJA THOMPSON



"He's a Machine"

- Derek Ryan, trainer **BOOK'EM DANNO**

BOOK'EM DANNO, winner of the Pasco Stakes by 12 1/2 lengths

Book'em Danno

Own: Atlantic Six Racing LLC

Dk. b or b. g. 3 (Apr)
 Sire: Bucchero (Kantharos) \$7,500
 Dam: Adorabella (Ghostzapper)
 Br: Gregory J. Kilka & Bright View Farm (NJ)
 Tr: Ryan Derek S

Life	5	4	1	0	\$260,625	90	D.Fst	5	4	1	0	\$260,625	90
2024	1	1	0	0	\$30,000	86	Wet(346)	0	0	0	0	\$0	-
2023	4	3	1	0	\$230,625	90	Synth(437)	0	0	0	0	\$0	-
							Turf(303)	0	0	0	0	\$0	-

13Jan24-9Tam fst 7f	222	:45 ³ 1:10 ³ 1:23 ¹	PascoB50k	86	3/6	5	5 ³ / ₂	4 ¹ / ₂	1 ² / ₂	1 ¹ / ₂	Marin S	124	*.10	84-15	BookemDanno124 ¹ / ₂	WestSrtog124 ^{nk}	Rthmore118 ¹ / ₂	4p,traffic3/8,drew off
5Nov23-3Aqu fst 1	S 232	:47 ² 1:12 1:36 ³	NashuaL145k	86	2/5	1 ¹ / ₂	1 ¹ / ₂	1 ¹ / ₂	1 ^{hd}	2 ³ / ₂	Ortiz J L	122	*.105	91-12	Where's Chris120 ³ / ₂	Book'em Danno122 ⁵ / ₂	Billal120 ¹ / ₂	Ins-2p,dueled,outfnshd
8Oct23-5BAQ fst 6f	22	:45 ¹ :57 ¹ 1:09 ²	FuturityL145k	84	5/5	3	4 ²	3 ¹ / ₂	1 ²	1 ⁶ / ₂	Ortiz J L	122	*.40	97-08	BookemDnno122 ⁶ / ₂	WorksforM120 nd	WhrsChris120 ⁴ / ₂	4-3w pursuit, drew clr
9Sep23-8MLh fst 6f	223	:46 :58 ¹ 1:10 ⁴	SmkGickenB129k	90	7/7	3	5 ¹ / ₂	3 ^{nk}	1 ¹	1 ²	Marin S	117	*.40	85-19	Book'em Danno117 ²	Sea Streak115 ⁹ / ₂	Ship to Shore118 ²	Strong 3w bid, clear
12Aug23-4Mth fst 5 ¹ / ₂ f	222	:46 ¹ :58 ² 1:04 ³	SMd Sp Wt 72k	77	6/10	9	4 ² / ₂	3 ¹	1 ² / ₂	1 ⁹ / ₂	Marin S	117	3.40	90-17	BookemDnno117 ⁹ / ₂	ElectricE117 ³ / ₂	LgndryThundr117 ¹ / ₂	Bump,briefly lost iron

WORKS: ● Jan6 Tam 3f sly :36 B 1/4 Dec31 Tam 5f fst 1:01³ Bg 2/19 Dec24 Tam 5f fst 1:00³ B 2/14 Dec15 Tam 4f fst :49³ B 38/105 Oct29 Bel tr.t 4f fst :48² B 4/69 Oct22 Bel tr.t 4f gd :48 B 2/56

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Americanrevolution (left) and Mind Control, both grade 1 winners of the Cigar Mile Handicap, are among the latest stallions standing in New York

star Toby Keith, who purchased a Violence colt for \$380,000. He shared honors as the sales topper with a colt by Practical Joke that went to Tom McCrocklin, who intended to pinhook him. They were among eight prospects hammered down for \$300,000 or more; 26 went for \$200,000 or more.

While hopes are high for those potential runners, the reality is that New York-breds are too often conspicuous in their absence from the most important events. There was no representation at the 2023 Breeders' Cup World Championships after The Wine Steward was scratched from the Juvenile (G1) and Brocknardini was on the outside looking in for the Juvenile Fillies Turf (G1T).

"We would like more representation on the big race days," Thompson acknowledged.

STALLION STRENGTH

McMahon of Saratoga Thoroughbreds, which has stood the successful sire Central Banker for several years now, made an important addition to its roster in 2020 with 2017 Breeders' Cup Juvenile runner-up Solomini. He emerged as the top first-crop sire outside of Kentucky in 2023.

Urgency to add high-profile stallions is reflected in the willingness of numerous parties to unite to ensure that Mind Control and Americanrevolution, both winners of the Cigar Mile Handicap (G1)

at Aqueduct Racetrack, remained in a state in which they excelled.

Lere Visagie, owner of Rockridge Stud, views it as something that had to be done. "There is definitely a larger population of stallions that is not desirable to the general public," he said.

***"IN A LANDSCAPE
IN WHICH WE HAVE
MORE COMPETITION
FROM SPORTS
BETTING, WE NEED
TO DO ALL THAT WE
CAN TO ENSURE THAT
WE HAVE QUALITY
FIELD SIZES."***

— NAJJA THOMPSON

Mind Control, by 2011 Travers Stakes (G1) winner Stay Thirsty out of the Lightnin N Thunder mare Feel That Fire, proved to be plenty desirable in his first season at Rockridge while standing for an \$8,500 fee. He bred 190 mares, the most in state history. Per the agreement, he was moved to Irish Hill & Dutchess Views Stallions for 2024.

Mind Control, a three-time grade 1 winner, became renowned for his tenacity as he made 29 starts over five years with earnings of \$2,071,834.

"You would like to think that

competitive spirit gets passed along," said Todd Pletcher, who trained Mind Control during the latter part of his career. "He was successful at 2 and all the way through his 6-year-old year. To have that kind of soundness and longevity plus ability, that's what we're hoping for to improve the breed."

Pletcher, who trained Americanrevolution as well, praised the joint effort that allowed the son of Constitution out of the Super Saver mare Polly Freeze to remain in the state in which he was born. Despite being limited to 12 lifetime starts in a career that extended from October 2020 until September 2023, the New York-bred's talent was readily apparent.

Americanrevolution will stand at Rockridge for a \$12,500 fee in 2024.

"You never know which stallions are going to be successful, but they've got all the right tools," Pletcher said.

With all the good news coming out of the Empire State, Thompson, professionally, has much to look forward to in 2024. The new year also will bring his marriage to Ayalew, who works for a private equity firm. They plan to wed June 1—with the honeymoon briefly placed on hold. They will attend the first Belmont Stakes (G1) at Saratoga Race Course the following Saturday before finally making their getaway ahead of the July 11 start of Saratoga's 40-day summer meet. **BH**

LEFT: COGLIANESE PHOTOS/JANET GARAGUO; RIGHT: COGLIANESE PHOTOS/WALTER WLODARCZYK

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