

Tapeta will be the lone surface used at Belmont Park's winter meet

Fresh Take on Winter Racing

BELMONT PARK'S TAPETA DRAWING NEW FACES

By **TERESA GENARO**

UNTIL RECENTLY, NEW YORK WAS one of the few racing jurisdictions that had never experimented with a synthetic racing surface. While racetracks in Florida, Kentucky, California, Illinois, Pennsylvania, Canada, and Dubai all installed synthetic surfaces, New York remained firmly committed to dirt.

Many of those surfaces did, eventually, go down as mere experiments, with tracks in Kentucky, California, and Dubai all returning to their original dirt surfaces.

One doesn't have to look far to see the irony in the opening of a Tapeta surface at Belmont Park this year, at a time when no top-tier racing circuit runs primarily or exclusively on

ALL SIRES LISTS ARE THROUGH NOV. 8

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Rank	Stallion (Foreign foaled), (YOB,Sire), Where Stands	2026 Stud Fee	Rnrs/ Wnrs	BT SWnrs/ Wns	Rstrct SW/ BT SW	(Chief Earner, Earnings)	2026 Earnings	Foals	Cumulative BT SWs	Cumulative A-E Index	Cumulative Comp Index
1	War of Will (16, War Front), Rockridge Stud	$5,000	159/73	3/4	1/3	(U. S. S. Valor, $352,050)	$4,657,326	*249	5	0.90	1.54
2	Solomini (15, Curlin), McMahon of Saratoga Thoroughbreds	$7,500	120/60	2/2	2/2	(Wynstock, $292,255)	$4,474,661	228	7	1.28	1.06
3	Bucchero (12, Kantharos), Ironhorse Stallions	$12,500	128/77	5/7	1/5	(Book'em Danno, $415,000)	$3,959,167	256	9	1.15	1.06
4	Central Banker (10, Speightstown), McMahon of Saratoga Thoroughbreds	$7,500	139/64	1/1	1/1	(Hot Currency, $230,700)	$3,546,458	551	19	1.22	1.12
5	Honest Mischief (16, Into Mischief), Sequel Stallions New York	$7,500	83/31	3/3	3/3	(Boston's Phinest, $217,400)	$2,774,827	174	10	1.23	1.19
6	War Dancer (10, War Front), Mill Creek Farm	Private	63/23	3/4	1/3	(Waralo, $247,000)	$1,815,656	281	7	0.95	1.01
7	Shancelot (16, Shanghai Bobby), Rockridge Stud	Private	45/21	1/2	0/1	(Listenupshance, $476,160)	$1,663,649	75	1	1.29	1.14
8	Leinster (15, Majestic Warrior), Mountain View Farm	$7,500	39/20	5/6	1/5	(Laigina, $295,225)	$1,589,912	58	5	1.31	1.00
9	King for a Day (16, Uncle Mo), Irish Hill & Dutchess Views Stallions	$5,000	46/19	0/0	0/0	(Mo for the King, $138,900)	$1,308,514	100	2	0.92	1.02
10	Combatant (15, Scat Daddy)	Died, 2022	28/13	1/2	1/1	(Chummers, $274,023)	$1,099,406	*45	2	1.13	0.88
11	Bustin Stones (04, City Zip), Waldorf Farm	Private	48/23	0/0	0/0	(Lika Rolling Stone, $128,725)	$1,033,618	352	13	1.19	1.16
12	Slumber (GB) (08, Cacique), Rockridge Stud	$5,000	31/12	0/0	0/0	(Carc Brothers, $201,300)	$989,447	70	5	1.54	0.96
13	¶ Mind Control (16, Stay Thirsty), Irish Hill & Dutchess Views Stallions	$6,000	47/13	1/1	1/1	(Sun Kissed Bliss, $131,630)	$942,430	110	1	0.67	1.01
14	Peace and Justice (10, War Front), Irish Hill & Dutchess Views Stallions	$7,500	44/18	0/0	0/0	(In Spades, $107,800)	$906,914	159	3	0.97	1.18
15	Name Changer (13, Uncle Mo), Kaz Hill Farm	$2,500	20/9	0/0	0/0	(My First Dinah, $133,743)	$719,373	44	1	1.04	0.96
16	Mission Impazible (07, Unbridled's Song)	Pnsd	31/17	0/0	0/0	(Last Glory, $79,243)	$627,814	348	8	0.96	1.11
17	Big Brown (05, Boundary)	Pnsd	30/8	0/0	0/0	(Power of Women, $103,938)	$555,436	*935	30	0.99	1.31
18	Union Jackson (12, Curlin)	Pnsd	13/10	1/1	0/1	(Bergheim, $142,396)	$515,873	94	3	0.96	0.96
19	Freud (98, Storm Cat)	Pnsd	36/14	0/0	0/0	(Master Freud, $64,500)	$489,715	*1465	60	1.40	1.16
20	Weekend Hideaway (10, Speightstown)	Pnsd	9/4	1/1	1/1	(Being Betty, $249,370)	$457,094	22	2	1.45	0.94

** includes Southern Hemisphere foals; ¶ Indicates a first-crop sire*

anything except turf or dirt.

The additional irony may well be that the synthetic track at Belmont is what revitalizes winter racing in New York. It is certainly the hope of officials at the New York Racing Association, along with a number of trainers who will keep a string over the winter, some for the first time.

Early in the three-year process of rebuilding Belmont Park, NYRA announced that a 1-mile Tapeta oval would be installed as a fourth racing option, one that would be the sole option during winter racing when Belmont reopened. Belmont also has a 1½-mile main dirt track, a roughly 1⅛-mile inner turf course, and a roughly 1¼-mile Widener Turf course. Both of the turf courses were shortened during the renovation.

Since Belmont's opening Sept. 18, the Tapeta surface was being used for off-the-turf dirt races, but it will be the only surface during the Belmont winter meet, which runs from Dec. 10 and will continue into March with a definitive end date not yet released.



Dignify became the first winner on Belmont's Tapeta when the Sept. 20 turf races were shifted to the synthetic track due to rain

It was announced Oct. 19 that overnight purses at the winter meet have been increased by 23% with more than $26 million in overnight purse money on offer. The average overnight purse will see a per-race increase of nearly 10%. Purses for New York-bred races will be the same as open company races. The New York-bred NW1X category will enjoy a $10,000 purse increase to $87,000, nearly a 13% jump from the previous year, while the New York-bred maiden special weight category will be $85,000, a 13.33% increase.

The decision to race solely on synthetic in the winter was not met with equanimity by New York's horsemen when it was announced in the summer of 2024; trainers, breeders, and the New York Thoroughbred Horsemen's Association all expressed displeasure, with some predicting that the decision would lead to a further dilution of the winter racing product, with local trainers opting to run elsewhere instead of staying at home.

Whether that happens remains to be seen, but because both of the new track and other incentives offered by NYRA, trainers who usually race elsewhere over the winter are already making plans for a Belmont base, among them Saffie Joseph Jr., Michael Trombetta, Kelsey Danner, Adrianne DeVaux, Rodolphe Brisset, Phil Antonacci, Steve Klesaris, and Mark Casse.

THIS PAGE: SKIP DICKSTEIN; OPPOSITE PAGE, TOP: OBS PHOTO; BOTTOM: SKIP DICKSTEIN

Casse is no stranger to racing on synthetic surfaces; as far back as 2008, he spoke enthusiastically about synthetic tracks at a panel in Saratoga Springs, N.Y., based on his experience running at Woodbine, which installed a Polytrack surface in 2006, replacing it with Tapeta for the 2016 racing season. He is among those who will establish a presence at Belmont this winter, primarily because of the new track.

"I don't really remember the last time I stayed in New York over the winter," Casse said. "Twenty years? Twenty-five? But I've got 75 horses at Woodbine that run on Tapeta and grass. You can run on Tapeta (at Gulfstream Park), but they don't run their best races on it. It's generally for the cheaper horses. (Jockey) John Velazquez told me that the new track at Belmont looks great."



Cognizant of the strength of the New York-bred program, trainer Rodolphe Brisset has been stocking his barn with New York-breds



Tina Bond, president of the New York Thoroughbred Horsemen's Association, said she's hoping Tapeta means "... a fantastic product for winter racing, which is vital and essential to New York racing and to the New York breeding program."

OPPORTUNITIES FOR NEW YORK-BREDS

Casse pointed out that New York-bred turf horses have a limited racing calendar in New York, something that will change with the Tapeta surface.

"Now they can run year-round," he said. "Last year, maiden 2-year-old races for New York-bred on dirt struggled to fill, while the same conditions for a turf race would get 40 horses."

Casse's decades-long period of success racing in Canada earned him a spot in the Canadian Horse Racing Hall of Fame in 2016, and a glance at the trainer's Equibase page shows that in a given week in October, starters at Woodbine dominated his list of runners, while Casse had only four horses entered at Belmont. That prominence at Woodbine makes the new Empire Trillium Series particularly attractive for him.

Earlier this year, NYRA and Woodbine announced the series that will comprise 14 stakes races worth a total of $3.2 million. Run over the tracks' Tapeta surfaces, the first eight races in the series will take place at Belmont between December 2026 and February 2027, with six races run at Woodbine between April and July of next year. The races will be restricted to horses foaled in New York or Canada, and Casse plans to bring both Canada-breds and New York-breds to his Belmont stable.

DeVaux spent plenty of winters at Belmont as an assistant, but since she went out on her own in 2024, she spent the winters at Fair Grounds Race Course & Slots in New Orleans. Not so this year.

"We have quite a few New York-breds in our barn," she said, "and the purses are too good to leave. New York-breds can run for the same purse money as open races, and I've got some 2-year-olds that could be good fits for the Empire Trillium Series."

In May, NYRA announced another incentive, the Big Apple Bonus, which launched Sept. 18 and will continue through April or, as senior vice president of racing and operations Andrew Offerman put it, "until the resources run out."

DeVaux said that she'd been contacted by some owners inquiring about that bonus, which offers financial bonuses on a tiered level.

For horses that ship in to race from jurisdictions from Tier A tracks, those less than 400 miles from Belmont Park, a $3,000 bonus will be paid out on a horse's first start at Belmont, with $2,000 going to the owner and $1,000 to the trainer. Stabling areas within 400 miles of Belmont include Monmouth Park, Laurel Park, Fair Hill Training Center, and Finger Lakes.

Horses shipping from tracks such as Woodbine, Fair Grounds, Churchill Downs, and Oaklawn Park, among others that are more than 400 miles from Belmont, comprise Tier B, and they can earn a $6,000 bonus, with $4,000 going to the owner and $2,000 to the trainer.

Runners can also earn a $2,500 bonus for making a third consecutive start at Belmont after having qualified via Tier A or Tier B. The bonus is forfeited if the horse runs at a non-NYRA track after earning the first-start bonus. Horses shipping to Belmont to run for less than $20,000 are eligible to earn 50% of the Tier A or B bonus and 100% of the third-start bonus. Horses running in graded stakes are not eligible for the third-start bonus.

Maryland-based trainer Trombetta is among the conditioners in line to benefit from the Big Apple Bonus. He intends to split his 50-horse stable this year between his base at Fair Hill Training Center and Belmont.

"I kept some horses at Belmont for a little while, maybe 12 or 15 years ago," he said. "The bonus incentives and the synthetic are bringing me back. I'm trying to improve my business, and I'd be cheating myself if I didn't do this."

Though he's requested only five stalls, he expects to rotate horses in and out throughout the winter, given the relative ease of shipping horses between Fair Hill and Belmont, and perhaps request more stalls later into the meet.

"I've got a lot of turf inventory, so this can make a difference," he said. "Maybe I can get through November and December without going to Florida to run."

He's also looking to increase his New York-bred stock, adding to the "handful" of state-breds already in his barn.

Usually based in Florida, trainer Joseph was active for the first time at this year's Fasig-Tipton Saratoga New York-bred Yearlings Sale, purchasing three for a total of $542,000, including a $350,000 colt from the first crop of Forte.

"It's new for me to shop here," he said at the time. "I've dabbled with it before, but we're going to have more of a presence in New York next year. Obviously, the incentives of the New York program make you more willing to get involved. We bought a house in Saratoga, and we're probably going to keep a lot of horses here."

"WE HAVE QUITE A FEW NEW YORK-BREDS IN OUR BARN AND THE PURSES ARE TOO GOOD TO LEAVE. NEW YORK-BREDS CAN RUN FOR THE SAME PURSE MONEY AS OPEN RACES, AND I'VE GOT SOME 2-YEAR-OLDS THAT COULD BE GOOD FITS FOR THE EMPIRE TRILLIUM SERIES."

—TRAINER ADRIANNE DEVAUX

Brisset was out of the country during this year's Saratoga New York-bred yearling sale, but he took home a Frosted colt and an Olympiad colt from last year's sale. He paid $110,000 for the latter, which, now named Miracle Morrow, won on debut over Belmont's inner turf course Oct. 9.

Earlier this year, he purchased a New York-bred Yaupon at the Ocala Breeders' Sales March Sale of 2-Year-Olds in Training auction. He planned to attend Fasig-Tipton's Eastern Fall Yearlings Sale at the end of October and at next year's OBS sales, looking for New York-breds at both of them.

"It's a great program, and I want to support it," he said. "Last year I knew that I was going to be present in New York when we started to talk to clients, so we bought a couple of New York-breds."

Brisset spent plenty of time on Belmont's backstretch as Bill Mott's assistant, but this is the first year that he'll be based there on his own.

"The new tracks give us lots of options," he said. "You can run 6 furlongs, 6½, or 7, and you can run a 1-turn mile. You don't find that other than at Woodbine."

Both Brisset and trainer Danner previously kept horses at Turfway Park, which installed its own Tapeta surface in 2020 after running over Polytrack for 15 years.

"We were at Turfway when the Tapeta was installed, and I think I was actually the first person to breeze on it," Brisset said.

"We've run over Tapeta before, and we have a couple of New York-breds," said Danner, who had a strong Saratoga Race



Mom's On Break is an example of a horse who has competed well on both Belmont's Tapeta and dirt surfaces. The 2-year-old filly finished a solid third in her career debut on dirt and won her next race while making her Tapeta debut



Maryland-based Michael Trombetta is looking to increase his New York-bred stock as he advances his footprint in New York racing

THIS PAGE, LEFT: COGLIANESE PHOTO; RIGHT: BILL DENVER/MARYLAND JOCKEY CLUB; OPPOSITE PAGE, TOP: ANNE M. EBERHARDT; BOTTOM: COGLIANESE PHOTOS/ SUSIE RAISHER

Course meet at which she ran 11 horses, winning with three of them and garnering a second and third. "I feel like of all the racing jurisdictions, Kentucky and New York are the strongest, and I'm trying to get my foot in the door in New York."

She'll continue to stable in Kentucky as well, traveling back and forth between there and New York.

"I'm going to try to buy some more New York-breds," she said. "They run for good money, and I'm hoping that we'll get some different distances on the turf and Tapeta."

"We knew that switching to an all-weather track would appeal to a broader horse population," NYRA's Offerman said. "The initial response to what the new Belmont facility and the training surfaces feel like are very optimistic."

He added that he received more calls this year than in previous years about the deadline for stall applications and characterized the call volume to the racing office as "up substantially" as people make their winter racing plans.

Offerman also said that beginning Dec. 7 and continuing through the end of the winter meet, the trainer bonus for horses that finish in fourth through last place will return. Paid for out of the purse account, the bonus is designed to cover the cost of The New York Jockey Injury Compensation Fund.

"I'm thrilled that people are coming to New York to race," said Tina Bond, president of the New York Thoroughbred Horsemen's Association. "Hopefully, that will mean a fantastic product for winter racing, which is vital and essential to New York racing and to the New York breeding program."

The Tapeta surface is no doubt attracting some horsemen to Belmont Park, but a downside is that some of those horsemen are bringing their turf horses to New York and sending their dirt horses elsewhere, potentially calling into question the usefulness of New York's Kentucky Derby (G1) qualifying races. The Remsen (G2) is scheduled to be run on the main dirt track Dec. 5, but the listed Withers and Gotham (G3) will both be run on Tapeta, as will the Busanda and the listed Busher Stakes.



Among the draws for trainer Kelsey Danner to race in New York is the lucrative purse money for New York-breds

Those prep races are a big part of the reason that Brisset will keep a string of 15 dirt horses at Oaklawn Park.

"We have to keep a dirt base," he said. "It's a little bit of a mystery to me that at Belmont they totally shut down dirt racing in the winter. We don't have a big barn, and we have to keep our options for dirt. We have 20 or so horses in training for our main client, and the goal is to try to see if we can make it to the Kentucky Oaks or the Kentucky Derby."

There will also be, he said, a learning curve when it comes to figuring out which horses will like the Tapeta.

"Tapeta is different from Polytrack," he said. "With the Polytrack, turf horses like it and dirt horses didn't. Tapeta, you don't know until you try. We found this out the hard way. The first year with Tapeta at Turfway, we brought 12 turf horses and not one of them won a race. It's not like they were 20-1; they were in the right spot, and when they got back on grass, they all won. With Tapeta, you have to figure out the profile horse by horse."

Casse, too, will send his dirt horses to Oaklawn, along with a small string at Fair Grounds, though he is more optimistic about horses making the transition from the Belmont Tapeta to the Churchill Downs dirt.

"I've said it for 30 years," he said. "Churchill Downs, especially in the spring, is kind to turf tendencies. It's as close to turf or synthetic as there is, and horses that run well on turf and synthetic can run on the Churchill dirt. Horses that run good at Turfway run good at Churchill Downs. And if you want to have the best possible dirt track at Belmont, you can't run on it in the winter. We always have to adjust."

DeVaux concurred.

"There's going to be a learning curve," she said. "We can train all winter on it, and it's well maintained and beautiful. I have no problem with Tapeta, and if it's safer and means fewer cancellations, I'm all for it." BH



Horsemen acknowledge there will be a learning curve to determining if a horse is suited to Tapeta