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By Tony Sisti

Westbury—Carmine Abbatiello, the leading dash-winning driver at Roosevelt Raceway, is making more money since leaving The Meadowlands to concentrate on driving at the Westbury track two weeks ago.

Abbatiello is considered one of the nation's top catch-drivers (a driver who drives horses for other trainers) and he makes most of his money catch-driving. The problem at The Meadowlands was that he wasn't getting very many catch-drives. This situation caused him to defect.

"I was spending most of my time shooting pool in the paddock at The Meadowlands," Abbatiello said. "The trouble was that I only have nine horses in my stable and I was just getting one or two catch-drives a night. I couldn't hack it so I said the hell with it and decided to come back to Roosevelt. I'm getting four or five catch-drives a night and I'm making twice as much money at Roosevelt as I did at The Meadowlands."

Abbatiello's dilemma at The Meadowlands was caused by the fact that catch-drivers, even one of the best in the country, are not in great demand. "Most of the trainers at The Meadowlands drive their own horses," he said. "They don't use catch-drivers because even an average driver can do well on the mile track over there."

There are differences between driving on a mile track at The Meadowlands and a half-mile track and Abbatiello is convinced the bigger track penalizes the top drivers. "I didn't have an edge over there," he said.

"You can't get in any trouble on a mile track. A guy can sit sixth or seventh with a horse and he knows he's going to get out and if he has the best horse, he'll win most of the time. A driver can even make a mistake driving a race and still win at The Meadowlands."

The exact opposite is true at Roosevelt. Abbatiello said. "Driving on a half-mile track requires a lot more talent. There's more movement in a race, you've got to know how to leave with a horse and you have to make the right move at the right time. If you don't, you can easily wind up boxed in along the rail or parked out. Make a mistake in a race on a half-mile track and you're dead."

Other than the inactivity, Abbatiello wouldn't criticize The Meadowlands. "It's a nice track and the people over there treated me fine," he said. "They have a lot of good drivers and horses racing over there. But I'm glad to be back at Roosevelt. I'm more comfortable racing on a half-mile track and I can make a lot more money."

Trainer George (Buddy) Regan is the main reason Abbatiello is happy he's back at the Westbury track. "I've been catch-driving most of Buddy's horses and he has a great stable," Abbatiello said. "I think 16 of the first 21 horses I won with here were from his stable."

Abbatiello lives in Colts Neck, N.J., and it takes him an hour and a half to drive to Roosevelt each night compared to his former 40-minute drive to The Meadowlands. But he'd rather spend his time making money driving horses than shooting pool.



Newsday Photo by John H. Cornell Jr.

Carmine Abbatiello and a friend