Will The Hambletonian Finally Be Miller Time

Trainer Erv Miller knows from experience how tough it is to win the Hambletonian and his 2010 hopeful is the Yankee Glide colt Il Villaggio. By Greg Reinhart

Photo by Nigel Soult
Trainer Erv Miller has been down the road to the Hambletonian before. The Illinois horseman nearly took harness racing’s most coveted prize in 2006 when Classic Photo finished second to Vivid Photo. After a few failed attempts, Miller is back in the spotlight again in 2010 as he will send out Il Villaggio in his three-year-old campaign.

Il Villaggio ended his two-year-old year with an 8-6-0-0 summary, which was good for earnings of $488,183, and for his efforts, Il Villaggio won the O’Brien Award as Canada’s top two-year-old male trotter. Before he ever took to the track as a three-year-old, Il Villaggio was a winner as he topped Stan Bergstein’s experimental ratings for three-year-old trotters at 1:51.

Initially christened with the name Doc N Dugan, Il Villaggio was bred in Mount Pleasant, Ontario, by Harry Rutherford and his wife Diane Ingham who operate as Cool Creek Farm. Il Villaggio, who is a son of Yankee Glide out of a lightly-raced Balanced Image mare by the name of Dance To Market, may not strike pedigree hounds immediately, but his dam is a full sister to a pair of $100,000 plus earners in the talented, but precocious, Captain Brady and the hard-knocking Extreme Image. Rutherford and
Ingham have an Angus Hall yearling colt that will be offered for sale this year. “We bought the mare Soignee Kash (Dance To Market’s dam) from Clint Galbraith,” Rutherford stated. “Soignee Kash’s dam (So Proud) had produced four $100,000 plus winners, and back in those days it was pretty tough to make $100,000, $150,000, or $200,000, so I was kind of excited about that family.

“We had Captain Brady and he did what he did, and Dance To Market, when we sold her, the same guy who had Captain Brady bought her. I know that they really loved her. They said she could sure finish a mile. She had quite a temperature after her last start as a two-year-old in Windsor, and she never did come back from it, so we were able to buy her back as a broodmare.”

After spending his formative months in Ontario, Doc N Dugan was sent by Rutherford and Ingham to Kentucky for the 2008 Lexington Selected Yearling Sale, and that’s where he caught the eye of Myron Bell and of Erv Miller, despite the fact that Doc N Dugan decided to go on an impromptu tour of Carter Duer’s Peninsula Farm.

“Carter consigns our horses for us, and we sent the colt down two months prior to the sale,” Rutherford said. “The reason we do that is if you’ve got something that’s decent Carter likes to get them early because the trainers come in to The Red Mile to train and then in the afternoons they have nothing to do so they go out to the farms and look at the yearlings for the upcoming sales.

“Myron Bell and some of his group came to Peninsula Farm to look at the yearling, and they liked him when they had him out showing. Myron asked Carter if they could turn him out in the paddock to see how he moved and Carter said sure. He has a beautiful spot to do that.

“So they brought him out and I guess the horse trotted around and around, and he must’ve looked pretty good because then when he came up to the fence he just jumped the fence. He took off around the barn, and they had to go catch him. Myron told me about it, and so did Carter. Carter said to me, ‘you didn’t tell me you sent me a jumper.’”

Il Villaggio’s richest payday last season came in the $515,000 William Wellwood Memorial at Mohawk in late September which he won in 1:56.

Doc N Dugan went through the Lexington Selected Yearling Sale on the second day as hip number 180, and after a winning bid of $100,000, Brittany Farms, Blue Chip Bloodstock, Inc. and Il Villaggio Partners (Leah Cheverie, John Fodera, Mel Hartman and Riverview Farms) took possession of the colt with Miller assigned the training duties. He was given the name Il Villaggio in tribute to the famous Italian restaurant of the same name located near Meadowlands Racetrack.

“Myron picked him out and I went out and looked at him at Carter Duer’s when Myron was out there with him,” Miller said. “Both of us liked him. Myron really liked the pedigree on the colt, and I thought the individual was okay. What caught my attention was his gait. Even in the pasture, he had a nice gait. He had a lot of reach to him, and that’s something I look for in a trotter.”

Once the colt was in Miller’s care, he
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followed the same path as most of his charges. First it was off to Miller’s home base in Illinois and then Il Villaggio went to Florida where Miller spends the winter preparing for the upcoming racing season. Il Villaggio immediately impressed his trainer and there were high hopes going into his two-year-old campaign.

“He was a medium-sized horse and he had a great attitude from day one. He was a natural and he gaited up nicely,” Miller stated. “He did it on his own. He was a little bit immature to start with, but he came right out of it once we broke 2:30. He just stepped up right after that.”

After he was taught his early lessons in Florida and Illinois, Il Villaggio headed to New Jersey. He prepared for his campaign with a pair of qualifiers, one at Gaitway Farms, which he won by three-quarters of a length in 2:04, and then one on July 1 at Meadowlands Racetrack, which he took by three lengths in 2:00.4 in off-the-pace fashion.

Il Villaggio was driven from that first qualifier until the end of the season by Tim Tetrick, who told Miller that he was high on the colt, and Miller shared Tetrick’s feeling after watching his pupil.

“Tim really liked him from the first time he drove him, and that’s why he stuck with him all year. Tim was especially happy with how much speed the horse had at the end of a mile,” Miller explained. “He could really trot a big quarter and not feel like he was going all that much. He gets over the ground so easy. When we would train, we went along pretty good with him and you could tell he really had that gait that would carry him and his speed well.”

However, as the saying goes, “the best-laid plans of mice and men often go awry,” and Il Villaggio was no exception as he threw his connections for a loop in his first pari-mutuel start, which came in a division of the New Jersey Sire Stakes at the Meadowlands. Il Villaggio went off as the odds-on favourite in that race, but he made a break before the start and wound up going home empty-handed.

Fortunately, Il Villaggio got right back on track and found the winner’s circle. First, he won a New Jersey Sire Stakes division the week after the break, coming from well off-the-pace to score in 1:55.4, which would go down as his fastest mile of the campaign, and the following week, he bagged the $200,000 New Jersey Sire Stakes final in similar fashion, sweeping by the highly regarded Break The Bank K to win in 1:56.

“He was a little too keyed up in his first start, and he was also a little green since he was just starting out,” Miller said. “It worked out well, though, and then he had a little break before his next start, so we could give him some time to catch up.”

The New Jersey Sire Stakes final was on July 28, and Il Villaggio didn’t resurface until August 28 when he won a qualifier at Mohawk Racetrack by six and a quarter lengths in 1:59. Il Villaggio would then take a $114,667 Champlain division at Mohawk, closing in :27.3 to win by a length and three-quarters in 1:56.1.

With the Champlain hardware in his bag, it was on to the William Wellwood Memorial, which is Mohawk’s biggest race for two-year-old trotting males. Showing a new dimension of early speed in his $30,000 elimination race, Il Villaggio rolled to a four length triumph in 1:56.3.

Then in the $515,000 final, Il Villaggio was three-wide at the opening quarter, and wound up first-over after briefly ducking down to the rail past the quarter-mile marker. Despite that rugged trip, Il Villaggio still kicked out a :28.2 final panel to capture the event by a length and three-quarters in 1:56. Miller noted though that those impressive performances may have
taken something out of Il Villaggio, which would come back to haunt him later in the season.

“He was really good up at Mohawk, but I think like some other people that have some trouble up there, it caught up to him later in the year,” Miller said. “After that he showed getting off just a little bit. I think the racing up there is a little harder on a two-year-old than any other horse.”

After his trip to Canada, Il Villaggio went to The Red Mile in Lexington, Kentucky, for the first week of the Grand Circuit meet. In his lone try over the red clay oval in an $83,000 Bluegrass division, Il Villaggio was most impressive, rolling to the lead at the half and never looking back on his way to a five and a quarter length victory in 1:56.4.

From there, it was back to Canada, where Il Villaggio took part in a $25,745 Breeders Crown elimination on October 16 at Woodbine Racetrack, but that would not be Il Villaggio’s night to shine. Il Villaggio loomed boldly from first-over on the far turn against pace-setter Lucky Chucky, but then rolled into a break in the stretch, ending his season.

“He won easy down in Lexington that day, and he just showed his class, but at Woodbine, he just wasn’t quite himself,” Miller said. “He wasn’t quite right. Like I said earlier, being up in Canada, it probably just got the best of him. We were trying to keep him within 10 starts, so we stopped with him after that.”

After enjoying a break from the races, Il Villaggio has begun training for his upcoming campaign, and Miller is excited about the changes he sees in his charge.

“Up to this point we’ve been back about 2:22 or 2:23 with him, and so far he seems good soundness-wise. I trained him on March 13, and he trained the best he’s trained so far, even over most of last year,” Miller said. “I think he’s a little more mature this year, which you can tell in his behaviour.

“Last year he’d get a little keyed up easily. He would do it mostly in a race, but he’d also do it a little bit when training. This year he’s mellowing out pretty good, and he seems so much more relaxed.”

Il Villaggio’s connections have a plan in mind regarding Il Villaggio’s schedule for the year ahead, which is greatly helped by the fact that since he’s New Jersey-sired, he can race in the New Jersey Sire Stakes events at the Meadowlands in addition to the Grand Circuit races to get ready for the Hambletonian. Although the Hambletonian is the focus at this time, Il Villaggio has plenty of other races on his docket as well.

“We’ll basically stay at the Meadowlands until after the Hambletonian,” Miller stated. “Some of the races that conflict with other races we want to be in, we didn’t nominate him to, but after the Hambletonian we’ll evaluate the races and put him where he needs to go.”

Because of his previous Hambletonian experiences, Miller knows what a challenge it is to take home the top prize, but he has a great deal of faith in Il Villaggio, and although nothing is a given, especially this year when the pool of contenders is as deep as it is talented, he feels that Il Villaggio has the traits that a Hambletonian champion must possess.

“You’ve got to have a good enough horse to win the Hambletonian, and you’ve got to do everything right,” Miller stated about what he personally has to do for Il Villaggio to claim the Hambletonian. “If you happen to get a horse that’s good enough to do it, you still have to make everything else come together, and you’ve got to try to get the horse to peak right for the race. I think that’s a major thing, not to have them ready too early or too late, but to have them ready when it’s time. Everybody wants to win this race, and I’d like to win the Hambletonian for sure.

“It’s going to be a tough group of colts. My horse has enough ability that if he’s 100 per cent I think that he can be a serious contender. He’s got speed, and this year he seems so much more mature than he was last year. I think he’s going to come back, and his manners are going to be good. He seems quieter and a lot manlier about his work.”

If Il Villaggio can put all that together, it could be “Miller Time” on the first Saturday in August at the Meadowlands.