

AUGUST 5, 2011 | \$3

THE CANADIAN SPORTSMAN



The People's
Champion



DAVE LANDRY

AUGUST 5, 2011



COVER

After winning his third straight Maple Leaf Trot, there's little doubt San Pail has become The People's Champion, at least in Canada. But consider the impact San Pail has had on the people closest to him — in particular, trainer and co-owner Rod Hughes (shown), wife Emily, young son Wyatt and Rod's father, Jerry. For them, there's no doubt San Pail is their champion. See feature p. 20.

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All Hail THE PAIL

Canadian underdog hero San Pail's popularity is growing, never more than in the aftermath of winning his third straight **\$730,000 MAPLE LEAF TROT** in his most impressive performance to date. By the way, how's he *still* the underdog?

story by Lauren Lee | photos by Dave Landry

It's Monday morning and Finland is calling Rod Hughes. Not the entire country, obviously, but a few trotting gentlemen eager to congratulate the trainer and his beloved San Pail on their third consecutive win in the \$730,000 Maple Leaf Trot. Someday, they say, it would be wonderful if San Pail did some trotting overseas.

The phone call is one of the clearest examples yet of San Pail introducing the Hughes family, of Dunsford, ON, to a whole new world.

"The whole thing is unreal," said Hughes, who, despite a whirlwind of success over the past three years, is still very much in awe of just how much his life has changed thanks to one amazing horse.

"It's like, 'Hold my coffee for a moment, I've got to take this call from Finland,'" said Hughes, 38, deliberately using a la-de-da inflection that elicits a cackle out of his wife, Emily, sitting nearby.

"It's like a lot of things around here," she says. "We wouldn't be where we are without The Pail."

Such instances of The Pail's growing popularity are becoming more commonplace. A week before the Maple Leaf Trot final, breeder/co-owner Glenn Van Camp found himself 2,000 miles from home at the Calgary Stampede. He ducked into the local casino to try to catch his horse racing in the MLT prep race and innocently overhead two guys in front of him having a conversation. They were excitedly talking about a horse named San Pail, easily one of Canada's best, they said.

As the smile spread across his face, Van Camp couldn't help but introduce himself to the strangers and, on behalf of San Pail, thank them for their support.

The fact that San Pail's bandwagon now makes stops across Canada and across the world still seems a little ridiculous to those who remember when his fan club could comfortably fit on a bicycle-built-for-two.

Once upon a time, Emily and Jerry Hughes (Rod's dad) were the only ones onboard. In the spring of his three-year-old year, the two solitary souls stood by the side of the track at Kawartha, hoping for some good words from



San Pail, Rod Hughes and Wyatt Hughes.

Rod after he qualified the San Pelligrino—Village Beauty gelding.

It was just about eight months before, in the fall of 2006, that fate led Rod to Brooks Feed Store in Port Perry, ON, where he was asked by Robert Van Camp, Glenn's son, if he'd like to try training the heretofore incorrigible San Pail. The deal was three-quarters ownership in the

horse in exchange for the Van Camps never seeing another training bill with San Pail's name on it.

In his first career start, Rod drove his suddenly-promising reclamation project to a fourth-place finish, trotting in 1:59.

Coming off the track that night, Rod told his wife and his father, 'If I'm within five lengths next week

turning for home, I don't care how fast they are going, this horse wins.'

"They both looked at me like I was nuts," he remembers, with a laugh.

"Sure enough, I'm within four (lengths) turning in and I had to say to myself, 'Put up or shut up' and he won going away that night."

In retrospect, Jerry laughs at how

barren San Pail's first ever win photo looks now.

"It was just us in the beginning, but we're always happy to add some more seats to the bandwagon."

Those seats were needed on July 23 at Mohawk. San Pail's fans were out in full force, dressed in purple after Standardbred Canada — as part of its I Love Canadian Harness Racing promotion — encouraged those coming out to the track to wear that colour in support of the two-time defending champion and playfully thumb their noses at the dreaded nine-hole with which he'd been saddled.

The sea of purple cheered him with such vigour that driver Randy Waples, in full showman mode, doffed his helmet as he passed by in the post parade.

All the while, San Pail was quiet and focused as he went about his business for the third straight year. This time, they did it with a make-or-break move by Waples to brush San Pail up from fourth to first down the backstretch. In a flash, the driver went all-in, figuring he'd try to get away from the pack and then hold on tight.

By the top of the stretch it was clear that no one was coming for him, not race favourite Arch Madness, nor familiar foes Lucky Jim and Enough Talk, nor fellow Canadian challenger Define The World. It was San Pail's stage again, amazingly, in an even more emphatic display than his previous two triumphs. Arch Madness finished three lengths behind in second place, notably passing \$3 million in lifetime earnings in the process. Hot Shot Blue Chip was third.

"He's just a great individual and it takes a really, really great horse to go by him and it's as simple as that," said Waples, in the paddock following the race.

"It gets better every year. The first year, it was unbelievable and then to come back and repeat, it was, like, 'Wow. It can't get any better than this.' And now, honestly, the reason I scored him out as long as I did afterwards is because I was literally next to tears," said Waples.

"I just wanted to be alone with him. He races so hard for me and just does everything that I want him to and it's just amazing to be able to sit behind him. I just wanted to be alone with him by myself, just to talk to him and tell him how proud I was of him and tell him how great he is."



ETERNAL IN BLOOM

It was the one wilted petal on an otherwise beautiful rose.

Last year, Dreamfair Eternal was passed in the stretch of the Roses Are Red final by Tug River Princess marking one of the very few disappointments in what would be her 2010 Canadian horse of the year campaign.

In this year's edition of the race, held July 23 at Mohawk, there would be no such disappointment. In fact, Dreamfair Eternal (Randy Waples) made amends in dramatic fashion, rallying late in the mile to nose out a win over Laughandbehappy and Anndrovette in a three-horse photo.

The time of the mile was 1:50 and the winner's share of the \$385,000 purse pushed the seven-year-old mare over the \$2 million-mark in career purses. Her next trip to the winner's circle will be the 50th in her illustrious career for owner/breeder John Lamers and trainer Pat Fletcher.

"She's seven years old and she's still giving us starts like that. It's just all heart and determination," said Lamers, with obvious pride.

After a slow start to 2011 by her standards, opening the season in mid-May with fourth, then third-place finishes against fillies and mares open competition on the WEG circuit, she has impressively returned to form in the last month. On June 25, she won the \$121,000 Ellamony at Flamboro Downs, then claimed the \$111,000 Ontario Masters on July 9 at Georgian Downs.

"I think she's just a year older and so it took her a few more starts to get wound into form," said Waples.

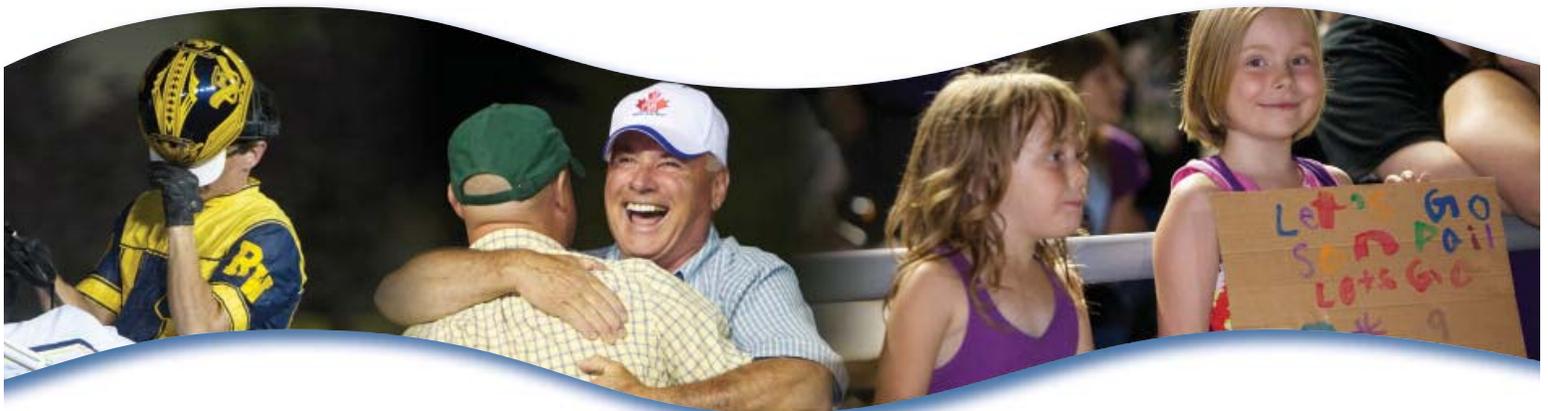
"She's been good ever since and she always gets better as we go along."

That's music to Lamers' ears, especially since he plans follow the same stakes schedule as last year with stops in the upcoming Lady Liberty and Golden Girls, followed by the hopeful defense of her titles in the Milton Stakes and Breeders Crown.

"If she can stay as good as she was today, I think she can duplicate what she did last year. I think she's on target," said Lamers.

"Eternal has proved herself through the years and I've said it many times over, we don't have to beat anybody. They've got to beat us."

—Lauren Lee



For the third straight year, Jerry, serving as San Pail's caretaker, beamed while holding the trotter's head in the winner's circle — trying to calm the occasionally flighty creature amid an avalanche of noise and a cascade of people.

"I told Randy beforehand, 'I went over this race in my mind a hundred times and I have no idea how you are going to do it,'" said Jerry, who even in the most confident rehearsals of his 100 run-throughs didn't have the horse easily drawing away from his rivals.

"Unbelievable. That's all you can say."

The win pushed San Pail's 2011 record to 8-2-0 from 10 starts and catapulted the trotter over \$2 million in career earnings from his 43 lifetime wins. His 1:51.1 clocking was a new career best, set a new stakes record and equaled the track and Canadian record. He joins Grampa Jim (1969-1971) as the only horses in history to win three consecutive Maple Leaf Trot titles.

For Jerry, it was a special historical footnote. He was a friend of Louis Forbes — Grampa Jim's caretaker during his Maple Leaf Trot glory days.

"He just recently passed away, too," Jerry said of Forbes. "So I was thinking about him winning those

three in a row with Grampa Jim and how I had a chance to do it, too."

"But you start thinking, is it too much to hope for? Is he *that* good? And although you try not to pay attention to it, you hear about Arch Madness, Enough Talk, Lucky Jim. Every horse can have a bad race so you just don't know.

"There's a lot of history in that race and now we'll always be a part of that history."

The Hughes family has changed a lot over the past three years, most notably three-year-old Wyatt who was just a babe in arms when San Pail won the 2009 Maple Leaf Trot. Two years later, he's a walking, talking powerhouse of energy and a very knowledgeable mini-horseman. He loves to watch the races on TV and point out Randy, Luc and Sylvain, all the while giving his own very loud race call.

Besides Rod and Randy, Wyatt is the only other person allowed to sit behind the champion and he loves to call the shots around the barn.

"He was out here one day and he had Rod's helmet on. He put gloves on, walked into Pail's stall, stood right underneath him and said, 'Let's go, Pail. Hook 'em up, Daddy,'" said Emily, who, until recently,

worked full-time as a registered nurse. Thanks to San Pail's generous contributions to the household income, she now stays home and joins her husband working in the barn.

She's been around horses all her life, first as a competitive rider until her early 20s, then helping out at Kawartha Downs part-time while she was going through university.

It was Kawartha where the couple first met, not 'at a bar' as Rod likes to joke. They knew each other for about four years before they ended up dating, then took only three months to get engaged from there.

"Our first date, he took me to Georgian to paddock a horse," says Emily. "I think when he saw that I could wrap a horse — and that he didn't need to re-do it afterwards — that was it for him."

"Yup," Rod said. "A little bit of trust right there."

Together, they've got 14 horses in the barn at the moment. In a perfect world, Rod says, he'd prefer about 10 because there's about four of them in there that haven't impressed and probably need to move on.

He pauses, smiles and acknowledges the irony cloud that has formed over his words.

"But, you know, The Pail got weeded out once, too. Are you

going to be the one who lets something like that go?" he said.

"I've always got a little bit of that in the back of my mind, you know, another half-a-year isn't really going to kill me to keep this one around."

Having patience with his other late-bloomers is a small price to pay, considering all that San Pail has given them.

"The only way I can put it into perspective is this... the way he's treated us around here is that you go around all year racking up bills and debt and once a year he wipes your slate clean. That's pretty amazing," said Rod.

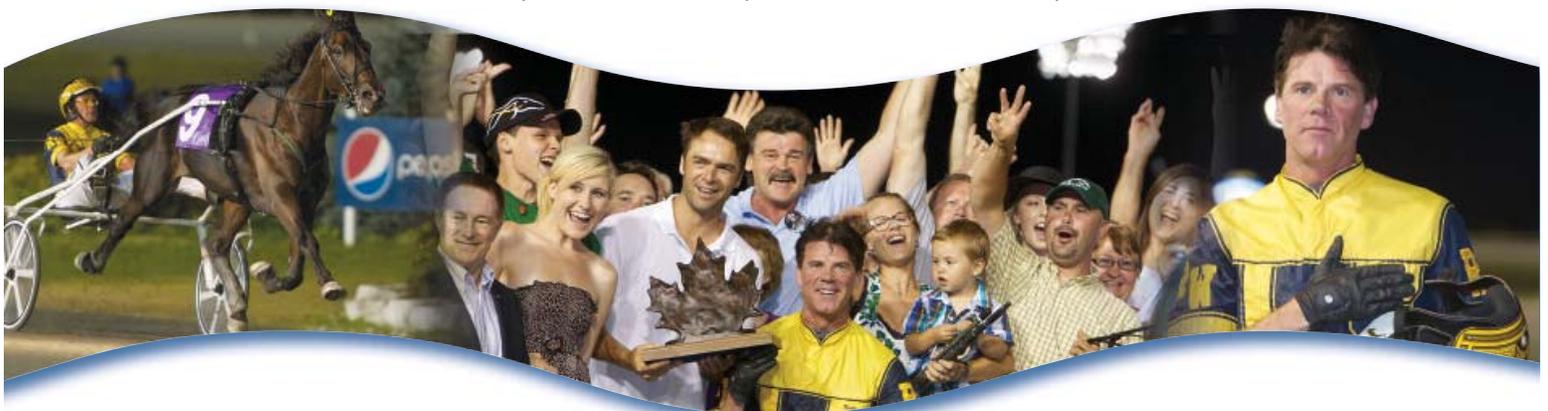
"We bought a farm and you think that you're going to have a mortgage for 25 years," said Emily.

"That's what you're supposed to work your whole life for — and he's given it to us in three years."

Rod believes in 'If it ain't broke...' and San Pail hasn't needed any fixing in a very long time.

As such, he sticks as close as possible to the script that has brought him to the top of Canadian racing, earning back-to-back O'Brien Awards as Canada's best older trotter to go along with his Maple Leaf Trot trophies.

"It's very regimented. I don't



change *anything*. Leading up to the race, I pulled out his Maple Leaf Trot shoes from the last two years and made sure to look at them and see that the cork patterns were exactly right on," he said.

Staying the course, Rod believes, has enabled San Pail to maintain such a consistent, high level of performance over the past three years.

"There's a lot of pride in keeping him that good for that long. I try not to pat myself on the back, but after three Maple Leaf Trots I might pat it once," he said, albeit reluctantly.

"I think it's definitely more a sense of accomplishment and a source of pride this time around, rather than the pure excitement of the other times he won it."

Despite all of his credentials, San Pail remains the underdog in many ways. On the tote board, he paid

more than eight dollars to win, this as the two-time defending champion with a record of 7-2-0 in nine starts coming into the race.

And for the third year running, there was a highly-touted horse coming in that was going to put cute little San Pail in his place, with Lucky Jim, Enough Talk and Arch Madness grabbing pre-race headlines in successive years only to each be cast as Goliath to San Pail's David.

But when does the three-time Maple Leaf Trot champion and two-time O'Brien award winner stop being the underdog?

Rod's dying to find out, which is why he's breaking with tradition and planning to do things a little differently this year. It's not 'if you can't beat 'em, join 'em' so much as 'I can beat 'em, but I guess I'll have to join

'em outside of Canada to prove it.'

To this end, plans call for San Pail to race more in the U.S. this season beginning with the Nat Ray on Aug. 6 at the Meadowlands. If things go well, there could also be stops at Vernon for the Credit Winner and Lexington for the Allerage, before heading back home for the Breeders Crown at Woodbine.

Rod hopes, for San Pail's sake, that a few good showings will finally get the trotter the respect he deserves outside of his loyal and ever-expanding Canadian fan club.

"I think hopefully we can go down there and show them that we are just as good at the Meadowlands as we are here. Then, they'll have to give it to him," said Rod.

Why is that respect or validation for San Pail so important?

It is likely because, after all he's

done for them, the Hughes family speaks of 'The Pail' with the sort of reverence usually reserved for kin who bravely fought in great wars or forged a path to the new world. They love and respect him so much that they simply want everyone else to see him that way, too.

Randy Waples does, and he perhaps said it best in the moments following San Pail's historic Maple Leaf Trot victory.

"Tonight was about a great horse and a little guy from Dunsford, Ontario who took it all... *again*," said Waples, with great emphasis, perfectly underscoring the night's significance.

In the end, it wasn't about underdogs or powerhouses or tote boards or bandwagons. Much more simply, it was the story of a horse, a family and history. 



BACK IN ACTION

At 25-1, Action Broadway winning the \$349,000 Armbro Flight was unexpected, but a smiling Mark MacDonald standing beside her in the winner's circle may have been the bigger upset.

The smile took some effort, though not because of a lack of emotion or happiness. He was still a little sore after undergoing surgery the day before to remove an arch bar from the bottom of his jaw.

Aside from some ongoing dental work, MacDonald said it should be his last surgery as he recovers from facial injuries — including breaking his nose and jaw in several places and losing a handful of teeth — he suffered on May 26 in a scary accident where he was catapulted out of the bike and face first onto the racetrack.

The July 23 card marked MacDonald's return to full-time racing, although he's popped up a few times since he first returned to restricted duty in late June.

On this night, it was a warm welcome back with a nice stakes win — and a surprising one at that given that it was his first time driving the four-year-old mare. In truth, he's not even really sure how he

ended up driving Action Broadway (Broadway Hall—Photo With Molly) in the first place.

"Divine intervention, maybe?" he suggested, after the 1:53.3 off-the-pace victory by just a neck over fellow longshots Kandor Hanover and Frosty Flirt. Overwhelming favourite and defending champion Buck I St Pat stalled badly to finish sixth, 21-lengths back.

"She was TBA and I thought, 'Geez, I'd like to drive her. She's a nice filly' but I really don't know how it happened."

Trained by Virgil Morgan, Jr. for owner/breeder Kenneth Sommer of Sheffield, OH, Action Broadway has 17 lifetime wins and more than \$600,000 in purses.

No matter whether it was divine intervention or just the right place at the right time, MacDonald will take any good break he can get.

"She looked good on paper. I needed a little luck, obviously," he said, referring to her odds.

"But, hey, I can't have all bad luck, right?"

— Lauren Lee