

Manitoba Miracles

“Victory is a thousand times sweeter when you're the underdog.”

In those 10 words, Jenny Han – American author, screenwriter, executive producer, and showrunner – captures the enduring allure of longshots: those underestimated, expected to falter against stronger opponents, but driven by will and hope to overcome the odds.

In the world of horse racing, success isn't always about who has the biggest budget or the best bloodlines. Sometimes, it's quiet resolve, grit, and unwavering perseverance – horse and human – that make the difference.

Arthur Rey and his sister-in-law, Lorraine Rey, humble horse people from the unincorporated community of St. Claude, Manitoba, are living proof.

Known as the dairy capital of its province, St. Claude – the population was 625 based on a Census of Population conducted by Statistics Canada – is home to a curling rink, a skating rink, and a pair of annual events, namely, the Summer Rodeo Winter Carnival.

It is also the birthplace of a pair of notable Standardbreds, Emmetts Buddy, and Grit N Grace, pacers who would go on to defy the odds, on and off the tote board, their respective journeys taking them from smalltown obscurity to the bright lights of big city racing in Canada.

Between 2022 and 2024, just 70, 68, and 79 mares were bred in Manitoba. Compare that to Ontario's 2,623, 2,544, and 2,481 mares bred in the same years. It underscores how rare it is for a Manitoba-sired horse to break through.

Yet two such horses did – each with a story that defied the odds.

Arthur Rey remembers the day Emmetts Buddy was born: May 7, 2019.

The brown colt with a white right-hind pastern was sired by In The Irons, out of the mare Logicallyinclined.

In The Irons had a decent 3-year-old season but was never a standout. He retired at 12 with modest earnings, having ended his career in lower-level races at Flamboro Downs. He sired just 14 foals. Emmetts Buddy was the standout.

Logicallyinclined, a \$4,000 yearling, made \$3,900 in nine Manitoba starts and took a mark of 2:07. Of her nine foals, one – Racemup – went on to make \$348,000-plus, though most of it came after he was claimed for \$15,000 and raced under different ownership in Ontario.

Emmetts Buddy debuted at Manitoba's quaint Miami Fair on July 9, 2022, with a win. But it was his second victory – on July 23 – that changed Arthur Rey's perspective.

"He never showed me anything special except for the one race in Miami," recalled Arthur of half-length score in 2:06 1/5. "He got parked just close to the three-quarters, then he took the lead and still won the race. I thought, 'Hmmm... maybe there is something there.' That was the first time I noticed that he had something special."

Rey, who typically breeds, breaks, trains, and sells his horses, put Emmetts Buddy up for sale near the end of his 3-year-old season – for \$20,000. No takers.

That's when he had an idea: why not try racing him in Ontario?

The horseman who has produced many stakes winners in his home province and was named Horseperson of the Year at the 2018 Manitoba Harness Racing Industry Awards, then had an idea: what if he gave Emmetts Buddy a shot at Canada's top track?

His rationale for taking such a leap with the 2022 Manitoba Great Western Stakes winner was much more than a dart throw.

"He was showing me some speed," said Arthur. "As a 3-year-old, we had problems with him in terms of soundness. He had trouble with his back, the SI joint (the joint connects the sacrum at the base of the spine and the ilium, part of the pelvis). He was rough on the turns. He would lose ground on the turns, but in the stretch, he would really smoke it."

"I thought maybe Mohawk, being a bigger track, would allow him to do better."

All Arthur needed was a trainer. Enter Mike Kwietniowski – via the most unlikely of channels: harness racing online games.

"There are harness games named Off and Pacing and Catch Driver," said Kwietniowski, of the multiplayer harness racing stable management games created by Ryan Clements. "I got to playing those games and there was a chat group on there. I got to be good friends with Garrett Isman – he is from Manitoba – on there. He sent me a horse, Jim Strikesitrich, and it kind of snowballed from there. The horse did well for us out here in Ontario. I only had three or four horses at the time, and the horse got claimed from us."

"I didn't really expect any more horses to come from out there in Manitoba," continued Kwietniowski. "And in the fall, Garrett called me and said he wanted to send me a few more. He asked if he could give my number to some of his dad's friends, who were looking to send some horses from Manitoba as well. I thought, 'Great. No problem at all.'"

One of those horses was Emmetts Buddy.

Initially unsure of what to expect from his new pupil, Kwietniowski kept an open mind.

“I had never trained any horses from there except for Jim Strikesitrich. I didn’t know if they would be great, okay, or anywhere in between.”

He got his answer after the horse’s first training mile under his tutelage.

“The first time I trained Emmett, I called Arthur right away and said, ‘I think you might want to hold onto this guy for a while.’”

Kwietniowski wasn’t the only one who was impressed. His father-in-law, longtime horseman Rene Laarman, saw the same things his son-in-law did.

“I thought if Mike and Rene were saying that, maybe we do have something good on our hands, more than I thought I had,” recalled Arthur.

Lofty expectations were tempered by a rough start to Emmetts Buddy’s racing life in Ontario.

“Then, of course, after I told Arthur that, we had a rocky beginning with Emmett, said Kwietniowski. “At the farm, he was always great. At the track, the first six months or so, he was a handful, especially in the paddock. A photographer from TROT got a great shot of him head-butting me in the face. He would work himself up – he wasn’t mean or anything – into this nervous energy before the race.

“The first couple months didn’t go so well.”

There was a familiar reason behind those poor performances.

“He broke stride the first couple times because of the same SI joint problem,” Arthur noted. “Once we straightened that issue out, things got better.”

Much better.

“Once we got him straightened out, he was just on top of his game,” said Kwietniowski. “You could feel he has class. And he never gets tired – any time, you ask him, he wants to go. He felt like a very good horse.”

Emmetts Buddy, whose first win at Mohawk came on December 17, 2002, steadily climbed the conditioned ranks at Woodbine Mohawk Park in 2023, taking a lifetime mark of 1:49 and earning four Preferred wins.

The horse, known for his out-of-the-clouds, come-from-way-out-it modus operandi, became a fan favourite at the southwestern Ontario oval.

All to the delight of his connections, some of whom watched his scintillating stretch drives from 2,035 kilometres northwest.

“Racing at that level, climbing up the ranks, was really something unexpected, but amazing,” said Arthur. “When Emmett did well, Elissa (Mohawk and Woodbine TV personality, Blowe) said on the Mohawk broadcast show that the bells at the church in St. Claude would be ringing. We love that. That’s what makes him a fan favourite, the way he races. People love the ones that fly home.”

Emmetts Buddy crafted a four-year-old campaign that included 12 wins, six seconds and four thirds from 36 starts while banking \$224,190.

Among those dozen victories, a 1:49 mile on August 26, 2023. He became the first Manitoba-sired pacer to break the 1:50 barrier – a landmark moment.

"It is certainly an honour to have," said Rey, at the time. "And lucky. I have to say, we have to be lucky to have these horses. I think there's certainly help from above. We don't do that all by ourselves."

The sum of those performances landed Emmetts Buddy as a finalist for the 2023 O'Brien Award in the Older Pacing Horse, alongside multiple Grand Circuit stakes winner Tattoo Artist, who was voted the O'Brien recipient in the category.

“Emmett, there is no end to him,” lauded Kwietniowski. “I have never seen a horse with that stamina. He would pace faster in the last sixteenth than in any other part of the mile. He would just take off.

“He would go a mile in 1:49 and not even be blowing when he came off the track. There have been probably five or six times when I thought there was no way he was going to get up in time, and by the wire, he was in front. I have never seen a horse close the way he does. He just flies.”

Sporting a record of 22-14-9 from 70 starts, along with \$372,999 in purse earnings, Emmetts Buddy, who last raced on April 19 of this year – he finished second at Mohawk – is now back in St. Claude.

The fastest Manitoba-sired pacer in harness racing history is recuperating from a “few little ailments.”

“I am still hoping Emmett will come back,” said Arthur. “We will give him the winter off and start up in the spring. He doesn’t owe me anything. I’ll give him the time he needs and if he doesn’t come back to race, he has a forever home with us. I have his half-brother, Buddys Piper, and the two of them are running around in the pasture.”

Perhaps Buddys Piper, a son of Manitoba stallion Im The Pied Piper – the latter is owned by Lorraine Rey and her son, driver Dean Rey – can follow in the same hoofsteps as his accomplished half-sibling.

“I would like people to know that in this game, everyone has a chance,” shared Arthur. “You don’t need to be a \$300,000 colt to make it. Maybe the percentage of success is not as great, but everybody has a chance to come across a great horse. If you don’t have luck in horse racing, you’re in trouble.”

Retired from his full-time career working as an accountant/controller in the Manitoba dairy industry, where he was for 39 years, Arthur has more time than ever to tend to the 14 horses who currently call his farm home.

It is a good life; one he is grateful to have.

“At one time, our whole family was all in the sport. I have two sisters and five brothers. We all had horses at one time. Right now, we are three brothers left in the business. My younger brother, Richard, and Roland, who is married to Lorraine, and then there is me.”

The man whose horse is, on occasion, the talk of the town.

“I have cousins who follow Emmett. Right after the race, they will text me. It’s been a lot of fun seeing how happy he has made people out here.”

Rey’s interest in Ontario racing isn’t limited to his own horse.

His Manitoba pride extends well beyond that.

“I always try to watch when Mike and Lorraine have their horses racing, and when we have ours racing. I appreciate Travis and Jodie Cullen, too. They come from Manitoba and look what they have achieved – it is amazing.”

As is the tale of Emmetts Buddy, the very definition of an underdog success story.

Rey hopes there will be others to come.

“We are breeding good-caliber horses here in Manitoba. The stallions might not be known, but they come off good lines.”

He then added, “I always cheer for the underdog. We saw that with Louprint in the North America Cup. The driver (Ronnie Wrenn, Jr.) wasn’t well known, but he is climbing the ranks. So, to see him get the winning drive in a million-dollar race – it’s outstanding. I think people enjoy those types of stories.”

Grit N Grace has a compelling one of her own.

A daughter of Im The Pied Piper and Dragonart, Grit N Grace was born on May 17, 2021 – and like Emmetts Buddy, she bore a white right-hind pastern.

“When Roland (Arthur Rey’s brother) and I got married, we got involved in racing pretty much right off the bat,” said Lorraine Rey. “We have had horses every year since then and we’re still racing. It must be pretty close to 53 years. We typically breed most of our own stock and keep some to race. Over the years, you get a feel for certain horses who you think would produce decent horses. So, you look at those family lines and go that route.

“Luck, obviously, plays a huge factor. A lot of that is the case, but obviously, you do your homework and try to find the right ones that suit your approach to breeding.”

Im The Pied Piper, owned by Arthur Rey, and Dragonart, owned by Lorraine, fit that philosophy.

Both horses had non-descript racing careers.

Im The Pied Piper had a moderately successful 3-year-old season but didn't produce anything of note on the racetrack after the age of six; he was racing in a \$7,000 claimer at Hanover at age 10 when Lorraine and Dean bought him.

He has only 14 foals also, and just one good one, that being Grit N Grace.

Dragonart had four career starts, all in Manitoba. She had purse earnings of \$1,963 and a lifetime mark of 2:06. She has three other foals, including Wednttalkaboutbruno, a three-year-old bay gelding co-owned by Lorraine, who won at The Loop in Manitoba, in 2:04.3 on August 2.

Grit N Grace is by far the most accomplished.

“I had a horse named Grace N Grit and I was struggling to find a name,” recalled Lorraine. “I thought of that horse and then I just reversed it. There was nothing out of the ordinary from any other ones we have foaled over the years. There was nothing that gave us any indication early on that she was going to be special. We started to train her, and she was nice as an unraced two-year-old – she did everything you wanted her to.”

As a three-year-old rookie, she won four of her first five starts. After a second on July 6, 2024, to launch her career she reeled off four consecutive scores, including victories in the Lady Crocus and MSSBA Futurity.

It was the Lady Crocus effort that caught Lorraine’s attention.

“When she won that race at Miami in 1:58, that clinched it right there – we knew we had a very nice horse,” said the horsewoman, who also holds the reins as the horse’s owner and trainer. “We felt she could have a very good career as a racehorse.”

Grit N Grace set the track standard at The Loop in the Silk Lace first leg for Manitoba-sired three-year-old fillies on August 17, 2024, pacing the mile in 1:59.4. The previous record of 2:00 for three-year-old pacing fillies was established by Westward Angels in September of 2023 before being matched on both August 10, 2024, and October 12, 2024.

After a 2 ¼-length triumph at The Loop on October 10, 2024, Grit N Grace was on the road, headed to Mohawk.

“Lorraine sent a couple horses to me the year that Emmetts Buddy came to Ontario,” noted Kwietniowski. “Since then, every year, at the end of their race meet, around September, they send ones that they like here.”

Kwietniowski took an immediate shine to his new charge.

“Grit is cool as a cucumber. Nothing bothers her and she is happy all the time. You could put her out first, put her out last, jog her first, jog her last – nothing fazes her. Emmett has to be the first one in the barn and the first one in the paddock. You would jog him right away and then he would settle down.

“She is a sweetheart. I can’t find any fault in her. She has a great gait – much better than Emmetts, who isn’t a great leaver. It takes him time to get going in a race and then he would rocket home. Grit is pretty handy. She can leave, she can sit in the hole, she can come from the back – she has a quick turn of foot. She can go from a :30 quarter to a :26, just like that.”

Grit N Grace has won three Filly & Mare Preferreds at Mohawk, and was second, at 33-1, in this year’s Juravinski Memorial at Flamboro Downs, and second, at 69-1, in the Forest City Pace at Western Fair.

“I am very pleased, very surprised and very proud of her,” said Lorraine. “We decided to send her out there because she was racing so well here, and felt she deserved that chance. We hoped she would do well but never had any thought of her making it to the Preferred level. It’s a big surprise and a pleasure.

“Dean, my son, who drives her here in Manitoba, always talks about when you ask her for more, she always gives that to you. When I see her racing in Ontario, I see a horse who is very much at ease in her surroundings and is very comfortable whenever she races. She goes out there and it looks like it comes so easily to her.”

Last year, Grit N Grace went 7-6-1 from 16 starts, along with \$57,465 in purse earnings. In 2025, she is 7-6-1 from 21 starts, accompanied by \$175,840 in purse earnings.

Her biggest fan never misses any of her races.

“I scream and yell,” said Lorraine, with a laugh. “We all get a little nervous, but at the end of the race, we are standing up and cheering her on. From word of mouth, people have heard of her. We have people out here who love harness racing, so it’s nice that they care and they want to see her succeed. Mike has done a great job, and he gives us updates on her all the time. All of it is so wonderful.”

Sharing her beloved mare’s journey with family makes it that much more special.

“This has always been a family thing for us, so for everyone, including our grandchildren, to be part of it all is amazing. My granddaughter owns one this year. We get together on the weekends and get to see the horses. I have two broodmares. My husband, Roland, has three with my other son, Justin. We have about five or six who race each year.”

The modest operation goes hand-in-hand with the modest Rey clan of St. Claude.

Like her brother-in-law, Lorraine would love to see other Manitoba-bred horses match strides with their Ontario contemporaries under the bright lights of Mohawk.

“Out here, it is special. Maybe there is a thought that Manitoba horses are not as capable as other ones in Canada, but they are. You just have to give them that chance.”

Mike Kwietniowski credits Arthur and Lorraine for their hands-on, thoughtful approach.

“The Reys do such a great job of raising their horses. They teach them their manners at a young age, they look fantastic, and they aren’t scared of anything. You can tell how hard they work on them and the care they put into them.”

Underdogs, by most standards, the two pacers certainly are.

Inspiring, to those in Manitoba and beyond its borders, is unquestionable.

“Grit and Emmett each give you 110 per cent every race,” said Kwietniowski. “It is so fun going to the races with them. You always know there’s a chance to win with both of them.

“For them to have horses of this caliber, they are over the moon. And it’s so well deserved. They are great people who do an amazing job with their horses.”

A reminder to any in the horse racing game that victory is indeed a thousand times sweeter when you’re the underdog.