

‘Something Special’

By Wes Mayberry

To hear Neil MacInnis tell it, the story of Rhodena Blu’s first career win is one of incredible circumstances.

“Bred by accident, foaled by someone who had never foaled a horse before, groomed and co-owned by a 9-year-old who bosses me, and travels to races with a Shetland pony,” MacInnis posted to his Facebook page after Rhodena Blu’s first career win on July 23 at MGM Northfield Park.





It wasn't just any win. Making just her second career start in a purse race, and first ever on a half-mile track, Rhodena Blue tripped the wire in 1:57 to win a division in the second leg of the Buckeye Stallion Series for 2-year-old filly pacers. In what driver Aaron Merriman described as a "wild ride," the Lather Up filly left from the rail and was third at the halfway mark. She pulled wide on the ensuing turn but quickly regained momentum to lead the field past the three-quarter pole and into the final stretch en route to the almost two-length victory.

"Going to the half, she felt eager — like she wanted to go — but she got very steppy, and when I went to help her, she pulled up to about five or six wide," Merriman says. "Then it was like she knew she made a mistake and was like, 'I want to go,' so I just let her pace. I just kind of walked her through the last turn, and she just went."

MacInnis, a Canadian horseman who trains Rhodena Blue and co-owns her with 9-year-old daughter Rory, was ecstatic.

"It shows that if you persevere and work hard, good things will happen," he says.

Neither Rory nor Rhodena Blue's Shetland pony companion, Queenie, was able to join MacInnis and his victorious filly in the winner's circle that night in northeast Ohio. But there was still plenty of reason to celebrate, especially in light of what the family endured five years ago.

Healing Through Harness Racing

In the face of unimaginable tragedy and heartache, MacInnis has found solace in harness racing.

"In retrospect, I don't know what would have happened if we didn't have the horses

to focus on," MacInnis says, reflecting on the life-altering events of 2020.

That was when MacInnis' wife, Sarah, passed away. She was diagnosed with cancer in late 2019 and passed away just six weeks later, leaving a gaping hole in the lives of Neil and Rory.

"Our lives were torn down and destroyed," MacInnis says. "We were very much alone and isolated."

Due to COVID-related restrictions, MacInnis and his daughter were forced to grieve alone. He admits to entering a very dark place mentally. So dark, in fact, that he didn't want to live anymore. The anxiety, depression, and panic attacks became almost too much to bear.

To try to cope with his grief, MacInnis had decided to leave the equine industry. But divine intervention had other plans. When he was packing his supplies in the barn, he found a note his wife had written encouraging him to continue his passion for horses. He opted to heed that advice, and he's glad he did.

"Our dedication to the farm, our horses, and racing increased not as a result of my wife's passing but because of it — there is a difference. In crisis and tragedy, you must keep moving and use anguish as a motivator," he says. "The barn and our horses became the outlet where Rory and I found solace and healing, and it really developed our relationship because it was something we did together."

It's easy to see why time spent with the horses had such a powerful healing effect. Sarah, an avid equestrian, had Rory in the barn with her from the moment she was born, strengthening the bond between mother and daughter and the love each of



Rhodena Blue in the winner's circle at MGM Northfield Park **Photo:** Diane Wise Photo



Aaron Merriman drives Rhodena Blue to victory in the second leg of the Buckeye Stallion Series at MGM Northfield Park.

them had for horses. That provided fond memories for Neil to focus on.

"I can still see them to this day — Rory in the saddle and her mom gently pulling the reins of the horses as they floated around the paddock," he says. "I'm incredibly fortunate to have had the time that I did with Sarah and the daughter she gave me and the life that we have."

Now Neil shares his own special bond with Rory thanks in part to Rhodena Blue and Queenie.

Rhodena Blue

There was just something about Rhodena Blue that stood out to MacInnis from the moment she was born.

"There has always been something special about her," MacInnis says.

The filly is the result of both loss and happenstance. When MacInnis' mare, McTaylor, was in foal to Bulldog Hanover, he discovered she was pregnant with twins. An attempt to save at least one of the twins was unsuccessful, leaving McTaylor barren

as Bulldog Hanover was on his way to The Meadowlands toward the end of breeding season.

"I was down about it all," MacInnis says.

Unbeknownst to him, there was still hope in the form of a phone call from a number he didn't recognize. Rather than let it go to voicemail like he almost always does with unknown numbers, he answered. On the other end was a lady from Sugar Valley Farm asking if he intended to breed his mare to Lather Up. Having had no intentions to breed to an Ohio stud, MacInnis was confused. But considering Lather Up's history — 23 wins and over \$1.7 million in earnings in 37 starts from 2017 to 2019 — he was quick to respond in the affirmative.

"Lather Up was a stalwart as a racehorse, and that option was intriguing to me," MacInnis says. "I later realized that my brother did the booking as a backup."

Fast forward to June 6, 2023. McTaylor gave birth to a foal — Rhodena Blue. MacInnis named her after a Cape Breton community that no longer exists and the blue spruce mountain that anchors behind it. While he admits that his training methods with her were a bit unconventional, MacInnis saw plenty of potential for her in racing.

"I started jogging her in the back fields and roads near my farm. The trail takes us through valleys and small rivers and just about everything you can go through in rural areas. The distance is about eight miles, but she thrived on it," he says. "When I finally brought her to the track, she was plenty fit to go tough miles. She has a willing attitude and slick gait. I started her cautiously by design knowing full well the miles she will need to go this summer."

MacInnis drove Rhodena Blue to a second-place finish in a qualifier at Grand River Raceway on July 2 with a time of 2:00.3. He returned to the sulky on July 10 for her first purse start, placing fourth in 1:56.4 in a race at Woodbine Mohawk Park. Two weeks later, Rhodena Blue, along with pal Queenie, made the trip across the border that ended with the BSS victory.

Queenie

As a Shetland pony, Queenie was an unconventional addition to MacInnis' stable. But her presence has been invaluable in more ways than one.



Rory was introduced to Queenie through her coach, April LeBlanc, who owned the pony at the time. She started riding Queenie when she was 5 and suggested to her dad that he bring the pony to school to interact with the students.

"So we started bringing her in, and the students loved the experience," MacInnis says. "I really wasn't supposed to, but we did it anyway. For many, it was the closest they would ever get to a horse."

The bond between Rory and Queenie only grew from there. Rory has been competing with her and has even been known to sneak her into the house, especially around Christmastime.

"Queenie never left and has been here ever since," MacInnis says. "I guess she is staying for good now."

Probably so, as Rory isn't the only member of the MacInnis household Queenie has bonded with. Rhodena Blue has also found the Shetland pony to be a comforting presence, especially during transits.

"One day I shipped Rhodena, and the whole ride up she was not happy. So we ended up taking Queenie with us, and Rhodena stayed relaxed," MacInnis says. "Now they always come as a pair."

At home, Rhodena Blue and Queenie are inseparable in the field. The Standardbred steps up to protect her smaller companion when necessary.

"Whenever the other horses try to bully Queenie, Rhodena will stand in front of her," he says. "They balance each other out somehow."

Their bond is also a strong reminder of just how much horses have meant throughout many generations of the MacInnis family.

A Generational Passion

Though he now lives near Toronto, MacInnis grew up in Cape Breton Island at the eastern end of Nova Scotia. His parents weren't involved full-time in equine affairs — his father was a school principal while his mother was a nurse. His dad was an exceptional athlete in baseball and track and field, though, and his love of horse racing grew from his love of competition.

"When he was old enough, he would drive some of the older gentlemen to the races at

the track, and from there, he had a few of his own horses," MacInnis says of his father.

He passed that love of horses on to his children.

"We always had a few horses racing at the fairs, especially in the summer months. It was a real thrill," MacInnis says. "Eventually, I got my driver and trainer license and started racing and owning my own horses. My brother, Ross, trains and drives, and another brother, Allan, is keen on the breeding side. We talk often, and 99% of it is harness racing."

While working full time as a high school English teacher and raising Rory, MacInnis still finds time to care for the horses he owns on his small farm in Primrose, Ontario. He breeds, trains, drives, and mostly shoes his own horses.

"Anyone that comes from a rural upbringing knows that your days are 5 to 9 and not 9 to 5," MacInnis says. "The days are all-encompassing, and it leaves little time for anything else. But it is all we know, and I don't think we would have it any other way."

His recent trip to Ohio only further reinforced harness racing as his labor of love.

"One of the things I realized when I went down to Ohio is that the roots of racing are still there. I met some amazing people, and I really enjoyed the experience," he says. "Being on the Northfield backstretch, it took me back in time to see the track kitchen and men walking around with programs in their back pockets. I was on cloud nine because it reminded me of what I grew up with, and to cap it off with a win — it doesn't get better than that."

MacInnis' family connection to horses is special, and he's hoping it continues well into the future.

"I noticed in my historical family photos there were always horses in the background," he says. "I want Rory to have the same experiences I had so that years later our future descendants will notice those familiar beings in the background — horses."

Healing

There's no way to ever fully heal from the sudden, unexpected loss of a loved one. But Neil and Rory have found some solace in their horses. They also credit the support from friends such as Roger Mayotte and renowned veterinary surgeon Dr. Huw

Lewelyn and more recent Ohio-based acquaintances including Chris and Tessa Lems and Sam and Jodi Schillaci. Neil is also thankful for a newfound companion who has helped him and his daughter find comfort amidst grief.

"I have met someone else, Jacalyn, and she and her daughter, Phoebe, have been an incredible complement to my life, giving daily stability and support," he says.

It hasn't all been smooth sailing, though. In preparation for Rhodena Blue making her U.S. debut in the BSS, MacInnis was transporting her and Queenie to Georgian Downs and was involved in a collision when another motorist ran a red light.

"Queenie was flipped upside down, and Blue had a few scrapes, but they seemed to be OK," he said at the time. "So we were ready to take on some tough competition in Ohio."

Against that tough competition, Rhodena Blue came out on top.

"Our gorgeous little hell-raiser survived a head-on collision five days before and then a hustle down to Ohio with her sidekick to win her first race," MacInnis posted on Facebook.

The victory truly was the culmination of incredible circumstances.

"When I think about the odds of any of this happening, all those watershed moments, the happenstance, the art and promise that happens in everyday life if you stop long enough to consider it — What could be better?" MacInnis says.

