

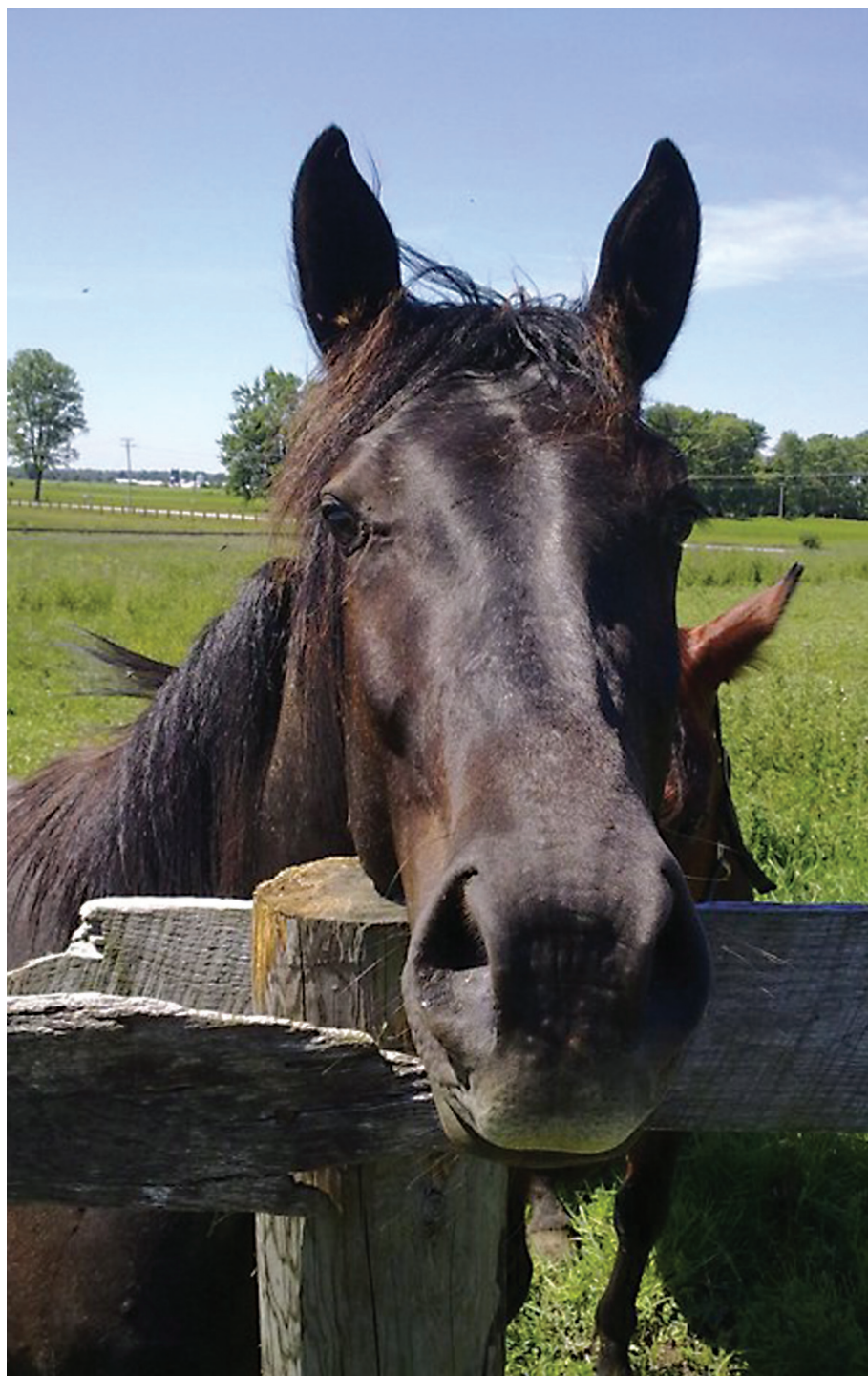


KEN ALWARD WITH DISTINCTIV SEAN, IN HIS EARLY YEARS.

Finding **PEACE, HOPE, &** **HAPPINESS**

Sometimes from sadness and tragedy comes a remarkable story of perseverance and joy. This is the tale of one inspirational young man, and the horse who carries on with his message of determination and optimism.

STORY BY CHRIS LOMON



What's in a horse's name? For friends and co-workers Ken Alward and Burt Newman, the one known as Distinctiv Sean, the four-year-old pacer with a few white hairs on his forehead, is more meaningful than they ever could have imagined.

Good afternoon. Just got home from Leamington & yes, Distinctiv Sean won again, I think in 2:03.4 and a gutsy trip. Parked the whole last half winning at the wire. This guy never quits... begins an email from Alward dated October 5.

The elation behind the victory, the second consecutive score (one that came on his daughter Regan's 22nd birthday) for the son of Rambaran, has nothing to do with purse money, nor does it have anything remotely to do with illusions of grandeur.

Instead, the triumph is a deeply personal one for Alward. The horse, his one and only horse, is named in honour of his late son, Sean, who succumbed to cancer on October 28, 2009, at the age of 30.

It would be Newman (the co-breeder of the horse), who first met Alward 13 years ago at Wilson's Tack, the place where the latter handles the reins as warehouse manager, who would eventually come up with the name Distinctiv Sean.

"My first impression of Burt was a guy who enjoys life and likes to help people when the going gets tough," remembered Alward.

Newman took an immediate liking to Alward.

"I met Ken when Doug Wilson of Pegasus Distributing hired me to help out in the warehouse, which eventually led to running several Wilson Tack Shops on race nights, mainly at Western Fair and Hiawatha," said Newman. "It didn't take long for Ken and I to become loyal friends, working with him every day in the warehouse. We both had an interest in hockey, so that became the major topic of conversation every coffee break.

"I had met Ken's family, his wife, Cindy, Sean and the two girls, Dawn and Regan, as they would drop in the see him at work every now and then," he continued.

So, it was no surprise to the Alwards that Newman, who-co bred the horse with John Dixon, wanted to offer a humble, but heartfelt gesture, in the days before Sean died.

"I remember sitting on the bed by Sean's



SEAN WITH HIS MOTHER, CINDY



KEN ALWARD WITH DAUGHTERS DAWN (L) AND REGAN (C)

"My reaction was of joy and sadness as we knew Sean was to leave us. I can remember Sean telling me Burt was in to see him about naming a horse after him and he was happy as he said Distinctiv Sean sounded good."

KEN ALWARD

side and he was showing me a picture book," remembered Newman, of the young horseman, who had worked at Dave McNeece Quarter Horse Farm, Seelster Farms, Killean Acres, Stonebridge Farms and Preferred Equine. "We had a few laughs and then I hit him with the question: 'Would you like me to name my next foal after you?' He smiled and looked me in the eye and said, 'Yes, I would like that.' He thanked me for coming to visit and as I walked away knowing I would never see him again, I knew in my heart and I prayed that his namesake would make the races and continue on his life."

Ken was humbled by the offer.

"Without him, this story would not have happened," said Alward. "My reaction was of joy and sadness as we knew Sean was to leave us. I can remember Sean telling me Burt was in to see him about naming a horse after him and he was happy as he said Distinctiv Sean

sounded good. When he was asked what would happen if the foal was a filly, he said to call her Distinctiv Seany. Sean never saw the foal as he passed away in October."

To say that Alward has had to contend with personal tragedy and adversity is about as massive an understatement as one could make.

Within 13 months, from July 2009 to August of the following year, Alward lost Sean, his wife Cindy, father, Bill, nephew, Scott, and mother-in-law, Vera.

"Through it all Ken has stood tall and been the tower of strength for everyone around him," said Newman. "Not an easy task to say the least."

Alward turned to family, friends and faith in the difficult moments.

"People ask me how I get through these tragedies and tough times," noted Alward. "I answer that it's my strong and

unwavering strength in God, my strong support system of extended friends and family, and the memories I hold close to my heart.”

His fondness for harness racing and horses, an association that dates back to the 1960's, has been a source of solace, and a cherished staple throughout the rough patches.

“About 45 years ago as a young man, I used to go to Western Fair Raceway and wash carts for 25 cents and jog the odd horse,” recalled Alward. “I was and still am amazed at speed of the horses and how they work with a driver like a Swiss watch when they are together, and the excitement of horses thundering down the stretch to a win or the best they can do.”

Just like he would discover with Distinctiv Sean, the only horse Alward has ever owned.

“I was in the process of moving to Alberta” recalls Newman, “so I asked Ken if he wanted to buy Distinctiv Sean from us, as my racing partner, John Dixon and I had to begin to disperse horses. Vic (Alward's late wife's uncle, trainer McMurren) picked the colt up from the Mennonites, near Goderich, who were breaking him.”

There were more than a few occasions when Alward, Newman and McMurren figured ‘Sean’ was a longshot at best for a



DISTINCTIV SEAN (L) WINNING AT LEAMINGTON RACEWAY

racing career.

“Vic showed an extremely patient hand,” said Alward. “We weren't sure, at one point, if he would ever make the races. So, we sent him to the Mennonites, to see how it might work out. When Burt moved out west, we got him back and Vic just stayed the course with him.”

Not a simple task by any means.

“When we brought him to the Mennonites, he was a real handful,” said McMurren,

a former mayor of Essex for seven years, who took out his trainer's license in the 1990's. “One day, I went up and there was a sign on his stall that said, ‘Jerk.’ They said it was because he always jerked his head when they were working with him. I knew better.

“There were a lot of people who told me to quit on him, that he wouldn't race,” he continued. “But, I kept trying. I have to thank (trainer) Gord McDonnell for his help. Once he got in the bike, things began to change.”

On August 30 of this year, over a ‘fast’ track in Sarnia, Distinctive Sean lined up behind the gate for a morning qualifier, his first on-track test.

With Alward looking on, and Alex Lilley in the sulky, he finished second, albeit 28-plus lengths behind at the wire. But he had paced his own mile in 2:01.2 with a last quarter in :30.4, and he was now qualified to race.

One week later, again at Sarnia, Distinctive Sean, at odds of 12-1, was third in his career bow. He picked up \$480 for his performance. This time he paced his mile in 1:58.4 with a :30.1 kicker on the end.

Another third-place effort was followed by a fourth, both coming at Leamington.

Alward, who was railside for every one of Distinctiv Sean's races, felt the next start could be the one he had been hoping for.

It was something that went through his

mind several times on the roughly 170 kilometer drive from London to Leamington on September 28, a trek he made with his daughters.

What would I do if he won? What would the girls do if he won?

He wouldn't have to wait long for the answers. Distinctiv Sean was in the opener. Post three.

Alward made his way to the windows before the start of the first race, putting down a few dollars to win on his horse.

“Before the race, I looked Distinctiv Sean in the eye and said, ‘Do your best. Do it for your sisters, Regan and Dawn, and your mother.’ Sean's favourite saying was, ‘Get ‘er done.’ That's what it says on his gravestone, which also has an image of a sulky on it.”

Distinctive Sean, the 7-5 mutuel favourite, was sent to the front by Lilley at the outset, and was still in charge at the half. The duo maintained a two-length advantage at the stretch call.

It was then when it hit Alward. Save for any late drama, he was going to win.

“What I was thinking was happiness, as I know Sean was watching from above,” he said.

McMurren stood a few feet behind the Alwards.

“It was their moment, and I wanted them to have that as a family,” he recollected. “It was emotional for me, too. It was two years of hard work. We got him back from the Mennonites in early 2012, and a lot of work went into getting him to this point. I don't usually get my picture taken with my horses after a win, but on this day, I made sure I did.”

Nearly 2,600 kilometers away in Calgary, the emotional enormity of the win got to Newman, too.

“I was eagerly waiting for the results from the Standardbred Canada website, but I had to go to work before they were posted,” said Newman, who had been in harness racing as a trainer, owner and breeder for 40 years. “When I returned home six hours later, I saw that he had won. I was so excited for Ken and his family.

“It is very clear that this horse is making

a large impact in the healing process for Ken, Dawn and Regan,” continued Newman. “This story is way more than just a first-time owner with a racehorse. It is more about how a horse has given a family new hope after they have experienced more grief than any family needs to in such a short period of time. Being part of this story may be the best thing that has ever happened to me in the racing business and I am so glad I could bring a little joy to a great friend and his family.”

On October 12, in Leamington, Distinctiv Sean won his third race in a row with a wire-to-wire victory in 2:00.1. The horse's continuing success is an unfolding part of the overall story of determination and perseverance.

A story that is equally important for Alward to share.

“If I can make one person reading this happy, I have done my job,” he said. “Just continue to believe in yourself and enjoy life. If I can, you can also. I know that's the same message Sean would want for everyone.”


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Joseph Davino, Owner
Which horse has changed your life? Take My Picture took me to Europe last year in the Elitlopp and Anndrovette has just been an unbelievable race mare. I've been travelling all over Canada, the United States and Europe and I've been in some of the most prestigious races in the world with these horses. It's been a real thrill for me and my wife.

What attracted you to your latest six-figure yearling purchase in Lexington, Satisfy My Soul? Nik Drennan is my trainer. I think he's one of the best baby trainers out there. He and I go to the sales and we look at them; I pick out the pedigrees and Nik looks at the horses. We thought that she was put together very nice and with her family background – Bushwacker and the other nice horses in her family – we took a shot and we'll see what happens. We actually purchased four horses in the sale.

As a third-generation wholesale plant grower, what is your favourite flower? Honestly, I only bring plastic flowers in the house. You know how the painter never paints...it's kind of the same thing. If I had to pick, I would probably say a Mandevilla or Hibiscus.

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