

A father says goodbye to the Cup

My dad just gave away his last horse.

He was a strong-bodied, grey-coloured colt standing only four inches high, made of porcelain. The figurine always had a place of honour in our home. For years, that place was high atop a mantle in a room that neither my brother Jeff nor I was allowed to play in as kids, for fear that careless hands might topple one of my father's most prized possessions.

A few days ago, he carefully wrapped his horse in tissue paper and presented it to a family friend, who is also a long-time horse lover.

"We must be getting close if he gave that horse away," I said softly to my mother.

She nodded.

The only thing to be thankful for is that the diagnosis wasn't ambiguous. There was no need to think about what-ifs or maybes or waste time with uncomfortable treatments hoping for a miracle. At the end of April, doctors told my father to get his affairs in order and to spend his time doing the things he loved.

The cancer that began in his pancreas, widely acknowledged as one of the most difficult to detect, had spread unnoticed to five different places in his 67-year-old body, leaving him with a prognosis that measured his time in weeks or months, not years.

With time of the essence, he didn't wallow or complain, but instead relished small moments with his family and long visits with his friends. He began to say goodbye to many things he loves, including harness racing — one of his oldest and dearest friends.

You may have seen my dad, Eric Schellenberger, before — he'd be the one wearing the *Sportsman* hat, bragging about his daughter.

Born and raised in Clinton, ON, home to the gold standard of small-town racetracks, he owned and raced horses at Western Fair and many other places in the 1960s and 70s, long before I was born.

He took a two-year-old filly named Hurricane Lisa to Delaware, OH to race on Juliette Day and was thrilled to be part of the atmosphere. He proudly campaigned the iron-willed, trotting-bred pacing mare Frosted Flakes, a 17-time career winner, to many victories out of trainer/driver Don Corbett's barn, where Corbett's wife Vera worked day and night caring for the horses and a teenage Trevor Ritchie served as groom.

On July 4, 1970, he watched his pacing filly Sharon Sota, a horse he used to jog between classes at Fanshawe College, storm to a win at Western Fair. Later that night, he pressed his luck and asked my mother to marry him.

Also before my time were the spur-of-the-moment trips to the Jug, Lexington, Yonkers and Chicago, when my parents would hop in the car at midnight and make their way to a hallowed racing destination for no other reason than that they felt like it.

But I was around for Sundays at Clinton Raceway long after my dad had sold his horses and dialed back into his long-held position of fervent harness racing supporter and fan.

On the Sundays of my youth, I'd swim for a while at the nearby community pool and then soggily make my way across the park to the grandstand, where I'd find my dad sitting high in the last row on a pale green flank, studying the race program. He'd tell me who to watch in the upcoming race and then we'd eat crinkle-cut fries off a tiny red plastic pitchfork and share a lemonade. Cancer was never further away.

By late May of this year, my dad had very little energy and was having trouble getting around. There were still many things he wanted to do, but his body seemed unwilling to permit them.

On Molson Pace night, as I surveyed the rainy skies above Western Fair Raceway waiting to cover the race, I heard someone calling my name.

It was my dad, who sat side-by-side with my mom Liz, under the cover of the grandstand. They had driven the hour from Clinton to celebrate their 38th anniversary at Western Fair, the site of their first date.

Neither the rain, nor his pain, was going to keep him from that race.

"It would be more painful not to go," he said, simply, confirming again what I have always known — he is one of our sport's true fans, of which there are far too few these days.

A week-and-a-half later, against long odds once again, he laced up his spikes in the Clinton Raceway charity golf tournament, joining a team of his friends who work at Clinton Raceway Slots. After the round, he chatted with friends and horsemen with a wide smile on his face. When trainer Dan Creighton stopped by his table to shoot the breeze about Frosted Flakes for a few minutes, the smile grew wider.

He stayed in bed for most of the week leading up to the North America Cup, but always held out hope that he'd be able to make it to Mohawk by the time Saturday night rolled around.

"Saturday's a long way away," he told my mom on Thursday evening, not willing to admit that unless there was a big improvement he'd be watching the race from his bed.

As the warm sun began to set and the Goodtimes went postward in Race 3, I saw my father arrive at the track with my mother and brother in tow. He was a little late, but he was there.

On a picture-perfect evening with a wonderful card of racing, surrounded by his family in a packed Mohawk grandstand, my father said goodbye to racing.

And racing, most certainly, returned the favour. 🍀



