

**The following is the excerpt from Remembering Those Lost, written by Keith McCalmont.**

## **REMEMBERING THOSE LOST**

### TRULY UNIQUE PERSONALITIES

It hasn't been an easy transition for owner-trainer Floyd Amos, who lost Big Bang Ballykeel and Hasty Heart in the blaze. A general machinist and toolmaker by trade, Amos revamped his work schedule once his kids were grown and out of the house so he could train horses in the morning before heading to his main job.

"I don't wake up to an alarm clock. I've done this for so many years I just automatically wake up at 4 a.m.," said Amos. "Now, I'm up every morning wondering why I'm awake when I don't have work to go to."

The Cambridge native grew up around horses and has owned standardbreds going back some 30 years.

"In the mid '80s, I bought a couple cheap ones to play around with, but then we started having kids," he said. "In 2010, the kids were grown up, done junior jockey, and I had time to start picking up horses again.

"I get to the barn at five in the morning and try to get to work for 10 a.m.," he continued. "I go racing whenever I can. I've just always liked horses of any kind but I really like standardbreds."

Part timer or not, Amos has a horseman's work ethic.

"I took a wicked pay cut so I could do it. In my line of work, they want you to work 60- 70 hours a week, but I'm at the age where I'd rather work just 40 hours a week," said the mid-50s Amos.

The morning chores brought Amos a sense of accomplishment and he enjoys caring for his animals. The simple tasks of cleaning stalls, doing buckets and bathing the horses, all in the company of his fellow horsepeople in Barn 1 at Classy Lane, was a healthy way to start the day, both mentally and physically.

The camaraderie in the barn was ever present even if they knew they would battle on the racetrack later that night.

"If I had a bit of down time I might help one of the other grooms out to make their day a little easier," he said. "One of the other grooms would be there to put in lunch for my horses and give me a hand if I couldn't be there at noon because of the other job."

What really made the mornings come alive for Amos was jogging his horses, under cover of darkness, on a peaceful training track.

“Quite often you’ll see coyotes on the track. The horses don’t seem to mind and it’s very peaceful and quiet,” said Amos. “Surprisingly, there were often a few others out training on the track by 6 a.m. as well. It’s complete relaxation.”

He looks back fondly on his mornings with Big Bang Ballykeel, a four-year-old Mach Three colt, and Hasty Heart, a three-year-old Angus Hall gelding that never had a chance to step up under the lights at the racetrack.

“The horses I had were easy to get along with and had good personalities. They were pets more than anything I guess. I only had the two so they had my complete attention,” said Amos.

Big Bang Ballykeel, who went by the barn name of ‘Sheldon’, was a new arrival for Amos.

“They took the name off the show Big Bang Theory,” said Amos. “He was kind of a smart aleck, always with a hold of your coat when you’re trying to leave. He wasn’t going to go out and set any world records, but he was an easy horse to get along with and gave you an honest effort when he raced.”

‘Sheldon’ banked a modest \$8,890 from 28 lifetime starts, but Amos considered the little joker a project worthy of his time and effort.

“I bought him off of Cam McKnight in September. They had done a good job breaking him, he was very friendly and mannerly. A nice little horse to be around,” recalled Amos. “His last two races he was doing better, but he got locked in both times.

“He was starting to be a little more consistent to where he could have made a little money. We weren’t going to get rich, but he might have sent me to the Dominican for a week.”

Hasty Heart was another pet project for Amos, purchased over the summer from one of the owners of barn mate Roger Mayotte.

“He was just a young, little trotter. They wanted to get him to the races as a two-yearold and they came to the conclusion he wasn’t going to get there. I had looked after him for Roger a bit, sort of working as his groom and I ended up buying him,” said Amos.

Though young, Hasty Heart made an impression on those he encountered.

“He picked up the nickname of ‘Smudge,’ laughed Amos. “My wife wanted to come out and see him when I bought him and she asked me, ‘What do you call that mark on his head?’

“I said I don’t know a smudge?”

The name stuck and soon ‘Smudge’ was making friends down the road at Birch Grove Stable while turned out on a summer respite just being a horse and growing into himself.

“The girls there got attached to him and always wanted to know when he was racing,” said Amos. “After the fire, I got a bunch of text messages from the girls that had riding horses there expressing their sympathy and explaining what a strong personality he was.”

It’s here that the heartbreak resonates. “I really liked his personality. He was a real clown, always playing and trying to get your attention,” said Amos. “He was a little immature as a two-year-old, but he seemed to be growing up...I guess we’ll never find out.”

In the aftermath of the fire, Amos continues to be comforted by the support of the community.

“It’s amazing how many people will phone and offer help or their condolences. One person is buying us all new driving suits. Just today I received a stopwatch from a family,” said Amos.

Even from outside the racing community comes a depth of understanding and compassion.

“A lot of guys I’ve worked with have never seen a race in their life, but I’m getting calls from them,” he said. “They can’t believe how many animals were lost all at once. Something like this, it seems to touch everybody and they want to try and help in some way.”

Amos continues to fight his way through a bitter January and vows to return when the time is right.

“In February, I’ll start looking for horses,” he said. “When I find a couple that catch my eye I’ll hope to be back racing by March. It may not work out that way, but hopefully I’ll be racing again soon.”

#### MEMBERS OF THE FAMILY

On a cold January 11 race night in the Woodbine paddock, Rob MacKay, longtime assistant for Roger Mayotte, is busy harnessing Kinetic King. ‘King’, a six-year-old trotting bay, escaped the fate of his fellow barn mates by finishing an even sixth in the Preferred Handicap at Woodbine on the night of the blaze.

“Everything we have left is right here. You’re looking at it,” said MacKay while circling the bay gelding. “With the horses gone, all we had left was Kinetic King and his race gear. Everything we had but two race bikes and the truck and trailer was gone in the fire. Of course, that’s trivial compared to the life lost.”

Mayotte, a soft spoken gentleman, captured the sentiments of his fellow horsepeople with a touching statement released following the fire.

Horse people are horse lovers. We care for and work with these beautiful animals seven days a week. They are always on our minds.

I lost some of my best friends on Monday night as did some of my fellow horse people. These friends cannot be replaced. The way they perished will never be erased from our minds. Only time can help distance it.

MacKay agrees with Mayotte that only time can heal, but he admits that reminders of what was lost pop up when least expected. He recalls a moment just a few days earlier after training Kinetic King at their new home at Argyle Farms.

“The reality that the barn is gone and the horses are gone has set in now, but it’s the little things which still jump up that sting,” he said. “I used to have two real nice wool coolers and after Roger trained ‘King’ at the farm the other day, I went to get one of the coolers and I realized as I went to get it that it was gone. Everything is...gone.”

Mayotte Stable horses that were lost to the fire that evening in Puslinch were Dreamliner, Georges Legacy, Vintage Rose and Weight Time. To handicappers, they may have been names on a page, but to MacKay, they were family... living and breathing works in progress striving to reach their potential.

Dreamliner, a three-year-old Kadabra colt, banked \$40,000 in just five starts for co-owners Just In Time Stable and The Fine Whine Stable.

“He had some issues with his gait early and Roger really persevered with him. Truthfully, I thought he was a lost cause early on, but he had a great attitude on the track and always wanted to go by other horses.”

Training miles at Classy Lane under the guidance of Mayotte and daily care from MacKay polished Dreamliner into a potential diamond.

“He was a big, strong colt, but he was really an up-and-comer who achieved a lot with perseverance,” said MacKay.

Dreamliner demonstrated that perseverance best with a stirring third-place effort in the Champlain Stakes, out-trotting his odds of 65-1 as the longest shot on the board.

“He had a few quirks. He didn’t like people coming up behind him too quick but other than that he was a real pet. We were really looking forward to racing him this year,” said MacKay.

Weight Time, a sophomore son of Muscle Mass, had been purchased for \$42,000 at the Harrisburg Yearling Sale in 2014 by the Just In Time Stable.

“He was a very fast two-year-old charted in 1:57.3 and then he got sick and we just tried to be as nice to him as possible and nurse him through what he was going through,” recalled MacKay.

Although he didn’t earn the purse money his stablemate banked, the talent was there to be uncovered.

“He was faster than Dreamliner. He was real nice gaited and trained down perfectly,” said MacKay. “It’s just unfortunate that he got sick after a few starts and never really had the chance to reach his potential. Weight Time and Dreamliner would have been a nice one-two punch moving forward.”

MacKay connected with Dreamliner who, at times, could be a difficult colt.

“We had an understanding. He was a bit of handful when we started but we came to an understanding on how to do things,” said MacKay.

In time, the brown colt seemed to enjoy his people as much as his fellow horses.

“Back at the barn, he was always out with his head over the gate,” said MacKay. “A lot of horses have a tendency to look out the windows and watch the horses going by, but Dreamliner preferred to watch what was going on inside the barn instead.”

Georges Legacy was an expensive \$75,000 purchase at Harrisburg just a few months ago by the ownership group of Ross Warriner, Doug Millard, Louis Liebenau, Ben Mudry and Roger Mayotte. The two-year-old Kadabra colt was only just learning the ropes, but seemed to be something of an old soul.

“Put into a new situation, in a new barn, stud colts can be a handful, but he was like being around an aged horse. Roger really thought a lot of him. He was in the early stages of learning and was an exceptionally good gaited yearling,” said MacKay. “Roger spends a lot of time with the yearlings and this horse was one of the easiest horses we ever broke from the first time we put the harness on him.”

It can be said that Vintage Rose, a three-year-old daughter of Vintage Master owned and bred by Gary Smith, grew up a little too fast. The leggy bay failed to hit the board in four starts and made her last appearance in August at Mohawk.

“She was a real big, growthy filly who went through some growing pains last year. She never really hit her stride,” said MacKay.

As a two-year-old the towering bay tried her luck in grassroots and straighten maiden tilts, and was race-timed in 1:56.2 but earned no money.

“She just kept growing and was never able to find her little niche where she would be competitive. She had a good pedigree by a hot sire, so we had some hopes for her,” said MacKay. “We hoped her mental maturity would catch up to her physical ability to let her be a competitive grassroots horse.”

What strikes most about MacKay’s recollections of his lost labour is the instant recall of not only their breeding and racelines, but the particular quirks of their personality. It’s the sort of bond that develops only through hours of hands-on care.

As is always the case when mourning the loss of the loved one, there is a struggle to leave behind the hurt while not forgetting that spark of life that brought the lost friend into your heart in the first place.

“It gets a little easier every day and you think about it a little less when you don’t see it in the media,” said MacKay. “Others have gone through it before, moving forward from the fire in ‘92 at Mohawk.”

Like Amos, MacKay is humbled by the outpouring of support from friends and family as well as community organizations such as the Central Ontario Standardbred Association (COSA) whose GoFundMe page has surpassed \$360,000 in donations.

"It will give everyone a little foothold to rebuild. The industry has really stepped up and I'm thankful for that," he said.

#### RELATIONSHIPS TO REMEMBER

Owner-trainer Chantal Mitchell lost seven racehorses and three mini horses in the Classy Lane fire.

Among the first to arrive at the scene of the blaze, Mitchell, on January 11, was the first trainer to return to the winner's circle, exactly one week later, when Rakin It In held off an onrushing The Loan Ranger for a desperate nose score in Woodbine's maiden pace.

"It was unbelievable. I wasn't sure he was going to last," said Mitchell of the four-year-old Bettors Delight gelding, who was making just his second career start. "He's just learning and he doesn't know where the finish line is yet. I knew he'd give his all, but I was worried someone else was going to outpace him."

Rakin It In debuted on the night of the fire, a third-place finish in the evening's fourth-race, sparing his young life. It was while bringing Rakin It In home to Classy Lane later that evening that Mitchell encountered the tragic scene.

"I think if I didn't see it all happen, I would be wondering if something could have been done," said Mitchell. "But, I was there and I know first-hand that there was nothing I could do and that gives me some peace.

"Even if the fire department was there at the same time as me, even they couldn't have saved them there was that much smoke," continued Mitchell. "It gives me that little bit of solace so that I'm not asking, 'What if'. I miss them all. They were all nice horses."

Mitchell, a pillar of strength throughout the ordeal, has granted numerous interviews to media speaking thoughtfully and with great compassion demonstrating to the non-racing public how much love there is for the horses lost.

She credits Rakin It In for keeping her, for the most part, even keeled, in the face of tragedy.

"If I didn't have my one horse it would be a little more difficult. Because I have him, I've got something to do everyday and I strive to make everything as normal as possible for him," she said.

Rakin It In struggled in the days following the fire.

"Horses are creatures of habit, especially Rakin It In. The first few days he was very distraught. He wasn't in his own stall, he wasn't with his friends and it wasn't the same routine," said Mitchell.

"So, I've done everything I could since the fire to try and calm him down and get him into a new routine where he would be happy."

Mitchell trainees that perished include Body Balance, Conata, Edgartown, Railee Special, Sky Desperado, SOS Ticket Master and Striking Cheetah. Also lost were three miniature horses Daisy, Margarita and Sammy who were owned by Mel Tilley.

Mitchell's boyfriend, Kris DiCenzo, who was also stabled in Barn 1, lost four of his own horses in the fire. The trio of Mitchell, DiCenzo and Tilley worked together each morning to train their horses.

"Every day we'd get to the barn for 6:30 a.m.," said Mitchell. "We'd start putting horses in the paddock and on the walker and do stalls. Kris would go to the track and jog and I'd take horses to the pool to swim. I had four or five horses that would swim everyday."

It was a busy operation but by working together the day would blur by as they dreamed of race nights ahead.

"We'd snap the odd random photo when the horses were doing something funny. The usual girly thing," laughed Mitchell.

Particularly amusing for Mitchell was the unlikely friendship shared by Conata and the mini Margarita.

A five-year-old pacing mare, the beautiful roan Conata owned a record of 13-14-6 from 53 career starts.

"Conata was tough as nails. She had a bowed tendon, so she wasn't the soundest horse, but every week she went out and raced and gave everything she had. Each week she was as gritty to the wire as she was the week before."

The consistent Conata was a dream horse for the race office, always available to fill out a race. In return, she nearly always brought Mitchell home a cheque and seemed to thrive on competition.

"Conata had a very short memory in the sense that if one week she got a terrible trip, she'd bounce right on back the next week. Some horses when they get a rough trip it takes them two or three weeks to come back from it," said Mitchell. "Conata would forget about it as soon as she left the track. She could be tortured three weeks in a row and then you put her in a good spot and she'd win in :54 at Flamboro. That's the sort of horse she was."

Though the gritty Conata may not have wanted to admit it, Mitchell attributes some of the mare's success to the lovable mini Margarita.

"They loved each other," said Mitchell. "They were stall buddies. You'd put her in there with her and she'd lick her and clean her and then the next time you walk past the stall she'd be chasing her around with her ears pinned. They had a love-hate relationship."

That bit of barn banter and horseplay with Margarita seemed to do a world of good for Conata who, at times, struggled to relax and enjoy her paddock time.

"Sometimes other horses in the paddock can get mean. But if you put a horse out by themselves, sometimes they don't enjoy their turnout," said Mitchell.

Conata was one of those horses.

"At first, Conata would just spin in circles and didn't know what to do with herself. But, as soon as I put the minis out she didn't want to come in anymore. She'd stay outside all day.

"When I partnered her with the mini is when Conata started racing her best," continued Mitchell. "She was always kind of agitated at the track but after meeting Margarita she would show up so much more relaxed."

Mitchell's stable star was Body Balance. The six-year-old gelded son of Yankee Glide, owned and bred by Douglas Millard, won 11 of 55 starts and banked \$184,852 in purse money.

"He raced his heart out this year," said Mitchell. "He was a trotter out of Elegantimage so he had very good bloodlines and he won in 1:52 flat this year, which was one of the fastest miles in Canada.

"I'm really going to miss him. He was the most laidback trotter you'd ever meet," continued Mitchell. "He loved his job and when I took him to the track I knew he'd give me everything he's got no matter what - - whether it was bad conditions or too hot. He won his last two starts in late summer and we were giving him time off. He was just about ready to jog again."

An established money-maker, Mitchell believed the best was yet to come for the improving Body Balance.

"He made over \$91,000 in 2015 and won five races, but we were giving him a rest as he'd worked all year long," she said. "We were just getting ready to bring him back for his six-year-old year hoping he'd be even faster, but what can you do."

If Body Balance represented the present success for Mitchell, then Ronald Mersky's homebred Railee Special was the future.

The two-year-old daughter of Muscle Mass, out of Railee Beautiful, was a full sister to the good earner Railee Priti.

"Railee Special just turned two and she wasn't even training yet. We were going to start training her next month," lamented Mitchell. "The talent was there. We felt she could have been something. John Bax trained her full sister and this filly was bigger and stronger, so we were hoping she'd be even better. You never know until they get behind the gate, but she had everything her sister did and more."



Though young, the feisty Railee Special struck a chord with Mitchell.

"She was special. She wore her name well. When we broke her she was great, but one day we took her out to jog and she just stopped," recalled Mitchell. She'd been going out at that point for three weeks to jog with no problem, but this time she stopped and wouldn't go forward.

"For a week, I couldn't get her on the racetrack and then one day she decided it was fine," continued Mitchell. "I've never seen that before, but this one was special."

It's what some people might call a 'blonde moment'.

"I'm a blonde so I can say it," laughed Mitchell. "I've had blonde moments and this filly, she had a, 'trotting filly moment'. Trotting fillies are always special."

For the 28-year-old Mitchell there will be other special moments to come in racing. She's earned the respect of many in the industry for her strength in character in a time when the general public is only just coming to understand the bond between horses and their caretakers.

"We work for them so they will work for us. I think the public has grasped that and understands how much we loved each horse and how devastating it is," she said.

And in time, the victories to come will serve as tribute to those that died in the fire. A tribute started on January 11 by Rakin It In.

"He really picked the right time to win one," said Mitchell.