

PLAYING THE HORSES



For horse racing enthusiasts,
nothing beats the thrill of the track

BY NICHOLAS OAKES

Larry Chappell and other owners pose with veteran trainer Earl Smith and R Es Mary after her second win of the Breeders Crown, the biggest race of the year in Atlantic Canada. The win comes with a \$25,000 purse.



By all definitions, Oct. 12, 2008, was a good day for Larry Chappell. He was standing in the winner's circle for the \$25,000 Breeders Crown with his horse, R Es Mary, who had just stamped herself as the best two-year-old female racehorse east of Montreal. After nearly not qualifying for the championship race, she now stood victorious in front of a crowd of 2,000 people. It was a far cry from what Chappell had expected when he bought his first horse three years earlier.

The now 51-year-old Charlottetown, PEI resident is a contractor with his own business, Chappell Construction. He gets his materials from Metro Building Supplies, a company owned by Don Smith and his son Peter, who have owned horses for decades. Larry was talking to Peter one day and told him he was interested in getting a racehorse, even though he didn't know anything about the busi-

ness. Chappell had always dabbled in different hobbies (owning drag cars, stock cars and motorcycles) and the idea of having a racehorse appealed to him.

In the fall of 2005, he joined up with Don, Peter, and their partner (potato farmer Gerald Morrissey) and bought a yearling filly named Woodmere Britestar. They paid \$4,700 for her at the Atlantic Classic Yearling sale in Charlottetown, where over 120 of the 400 Standardbred racehorses born every year in Atlantic Canada are sold.

The group turned the horse over to veteran trainer Earl Smith to get her ready for the following year's harness racing season. Smith is a winner of over 2,000 races and consistently prepares some of the region's best young horses.

Once a horse is bought as a yearling, it's taken to a racetrack or training centre to be broke to harness. Harness keeps

the race bike or jog cart, used for racing and training respectively, attached to the horse. Each horse is different, so they all respond differently to the harness, but once they get used to it, they begin training for races.

During a recent 7:00 am visit to Smith's stable in Charlottetown, I found the 60-year-old plying his trade like he has been full-time for over 40 years. With the smell of straw in the crisp spring air, I grabbed one of the buckets of horse feed hanging on the stall doors and opened the first gate. The horse inside stared at me, then came pushing his nose against my shoulder trying to see what I had for him. I dumped the contents in and kept going to feed the rest. After that's done, every horse is taken out to have their stall cleaned and fresh bedding put in. Then it's exercise time.

Did you know? Number of race dates and races held in Atlantic Canada in 2009:

New Brunswick 55 race days - 532 races	Nova Scotia 103 race days - 1,279 races	Prince Edward Island 111 race days - 1,370 races	Newfoundland & Labrador 25 race days - 184 races
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High Stakes

The cost of a racehorse doesn't end with its purchase price. The basic cost of owning a racehorse starts at \$15,000/year.

- training (\$30 a day – includes feed, hay, straw, and trainer's work and expertise)
- renting a stall from the racetrack (\$80 a month)
- horse shoes put on and replaced each month (\$70)
- vet bills (anywhere's from \$10/month and up, depending on if the horse stays healthy)
- stake payments in the Spring of a horse's two-year-old year. Before a horse starts racing, payments for stake races are due and usually amount to around \$800 for the opportunity to race for \$400,000 over the horse's next two years.

Where are they?

Harness racing in Atlantic Canada:

Charlottetown Driving Park, PEI
 Summerside Raceway, PEI
 Fredericton Raceway, NB
 Exhibition Park Raceway, Saint John, NB
 Truro Raceway, Bible Hill, NS
 Inverness Raceway, NS
 Northside Downs, North Sydney, NS
 St. John's Racetrack
 and Entertainment Centre, NL

Seventy-five per cent of the purse for each race goes to the first and second place finishers. Shown here: R Es Mary leading the field.

This doesn't always go so smoothly. One day at this stage, I went into a stall to put a halter on the horse (Mr. Pogge) so I could stand him in the aisle, hook him to the two chains on the wall so he couldn't walk away, and put his harness on – but step one wasn't in that horse's plans. When I walked up to him in his stall with his head in the corner, he wheeled around at full speed, hugged the outside wall and ran out the door before I could catch him and get his halter on in the aisle. Smith just laughed. "He's rearing to get at it today," he said.

Things were going a lot easier the last time I was there, and when Smith had one horse ready he jumped on to go jog him. "Get the Western Terror fella ready next," he said as he was going out the door. Stephen Quinn, who works at the barn, went to the stall only to find the horse was laying down sleeping. He told the horse it was time to get up. The horse opened one eye, looked at Quinn, then rolled over so he was facing the wall and refused to get up until he was ready. I couldn't help but laugh. A two-year-old horse like him would be 13 in human years, so the attitude made sense.

Once on the track, a horse usually jogs four miles a day, and trains once or twice a week until they get to the point where they can go a mile in about two minutes and five seconds. That's a good foundation; when they start racing, an average race sees a mile run in 2:00 or less. After jogging or training, the horse comes back in to the barn, gets bathed with a hose, then brushed off when it's dry, along with any work that has to be done to their legs.

There are a lot of costs involved in horse racing, and considerable money has to be invested before the owner realizes any returns. Thankfully for Chappell, Woodmere Britestar made \$30,000 racing for the ownership group in 2006/07. After that, to put it simply, Chappell was hooked, though the best was yet to come. In Oct., 2007, the

group bought R Es Mary for \$12,000. She was a good looking yearling out of a high producing family, sired by a hot new stud.

Hot turned out to be the operative word. R Es Mary was a hot head from day one, always wanting to go as fast as possible, not content with standing still. The trait served her well, as she made \$30,905 in her two-year-old racing season. For R Es Mary, the jewel of the year was the \$25,000 Atlantic Breeders Crown. Atlantic Canada's premiere race of the year, it has been held at tracks around the region but usually takes place in Charlottetown. Originally the filly didn't have enough points to make the race but another horse dropped out and she got a spot: and won.

Even though it was a race she wasn't supposed to be in, Chappell says he had a gut feeling it was his horse's race to lose. "Something just made me believe we were going to win," Chappell remembers. "I was sitting with Peter at the top of the grandstand and he said, 'I can't believe how confident you are'. I told Peter to put some money on her because she was going to be good. We were like two kids at the candy store."

Although Chappell was unsurprised, he was still ecstatic to win the Breeders Crown.

"It might be a once in a lifetime thing. That's the race you go for all year long. It's a pretty important race."

Then, in R Es Mary's three-year-old campaign, she put \$51,744 in the bank, including winning the Breeders Crown a second time. She was subsequently sold for \$19,000 to a trainer in Delaware, USA.

The sad fact is that horses almost have to be sold after their three-year-old year because of the dramatic drop in purses once they turn four. Races can go for purses of \$5,000 up to \$45,000 in the Maritimes for stake races for two and three-year-olds, while ordinary races (that fill most race cards) range from \$800 to \$2,400. Outside of the region, purses are



dramatically higher.

The pinnacle of the sport in Canada is Woodbine Racetrack in Toronto, where every race has a purse of \$10,000 to \$50,000, and stakes for up to \$1.5-million. Thankfully, a high number of Maritime horses have become successful outside the region with hundreds of Maritime-bred horses competing in Ontario, Western Canada, and the U.S. East Coast. Not to mention superstar Somebeachsomewhere, who was owned and trained by a group from Truro, Nova Scotia, and went on to win over \$3-million in two years racing in 2007-08.

Even though he hasn't had a star racing on the big stage, harness racing has turned into a hobby Chappell can't help but love, between going to see his horses jog in the mornings, to talking to his trainers, and to travelling the Maritimes to watch his horses race. With that love in hand, Chappell has been the owner of 14 different horses. Some were champions and made money like R Es Mary and some he admits "weren't worth a ham sandwich", but he still bought more. Today he owns five which are training at the Charlottetown Driving Park.

"Sometimes I think I have too many animals but then I go to the track and I could get seven or eight more," Chappell grins. "I just get so caught up in it. It's a great spot to go on a weekend to pass the time. You meet good people, you really do. I enjoy it and Kathy (his wife) enjoys it, so why not?"

A great deal of what keeps bringing him back are the horses themselves. "They're all different and you get attached to them, and I guess you're not supposed to do that but I did. It's hard not to."

This year he has four two-year-olds but his main hopes look to lie in colts R Es Fred (Mary's younger brother) and Tiger Williams, named after the Toronto Maple Leafs player from the '70s. He was also the NHL's all time leading player for penalty minutes. Chappell hopes this Tiger Williams gets known for spending his time in the winner's circle. | **ABM**



Collecting the Winnings

Purse percentage breakdown by finish:

- 1st 50 per cent
- 2nd 25 per cent
- 3rd 12 per cent
- 4th eight per cent
- 5th five per cent

One of Larry Chappell's newest horses, two-year-old colt Tiger Williams.

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