

## From the Mines to the Hill Top

Nineteen years ago, Greg Peck left Sydney Mines, NS with little more than big dreams of big races. Today, Peck sits on top of the trotting world thanks to the spectacular 1:50.1 world-record-equaling performance by Muscle Hill in the 84th Hambletonian. Both the physical and metaphysical journey from there to here has been a long one for Greg Peck. But, sometimes, one gains considerable perspective from the mountaintop.

It is the Monday morning after Peck's Muscle Hill equaled the 1:50.1 world record for trotters with a dominant performance in the \$1.52 million Hambletonian on Aug. 8 at the Meadowlands Racetrack in front of a live TV audience on NBC. A sudden heat wave has turned the White Birch Training Centre near Allentown, NJ into a sauna. Peck is dressed neck to ankles in a maroon training suit with yellow racing stripes. A few feet away, beneath a shade tree, beside a white paddock fence that runs next to Peck's barn, the Hambletonian trophy rests on its wooden crate waiting for the trainer's staff to gather for a photo.

Peck is, for the moment, clearly oblivious to it all — the heat, the holy grail, the double-takes by passing White Birch regulars unaccustomed to seeing the sport's most famous trophy lying around by one of their paddocks.

Forgive Peck's lack of focus. There is a lot to mull over; not the least of which is whether he should race Muscle Hill in the Breeders Crown open trot against four-year-old fellow world-record holder Lucky Jim (Peck later chose the American-National instead). Saturday was the day of days for Peck that also included a stakes-record win in the Peter Haughton Memorial with Holiday Road. It seems appropriate the first morning back to work would find the 45-year-old native of Sydney Mines, NS lost in thoughts and introspection.

"Like (my wife) Nancy says, 'We've suffered a lot of years.' We came here with nothing. A lot of what it is, is I've matured. It took me 45 years to finally relax and be the way I should be," he said. Then Peck paused and shook his head in slow disbelief. "It took me 45 friggin' years. But the way I get fighting with people, it was my fault." It was a powerful admission.

Thomas Pontone said Peck has undergone something of a transformation campaigning Muscle Hill. "He's always been a good trainer. It's not the training that's changed about him," Pontone said, quick to stress the trainer's talent, knowledge and work ethic. "But he tends to want to debate people. In his profession, he's on the opposite side. It's like a salesman fighting with his customer. You can't do it."

Pontone and his father, Louis — the T L P Stable of Kearny, NJ — were the original investors with Peck in Muscle Hill when the son of Muscles Yankee out of Yankee Blondie was plucked from the 2007 Harrisburg yearling sale for \$55,000. The owners of a casket company, the Pontones not only have become fast friends with Peck, they've provided savvy advice to the trainer since Muscle Hill began to show otherworldly abilities as a young horse.

"My father calls him every morning. It's just advice from business people... on how to run a business. That's what (Peck) has to realize — it's still a business to him. You have to run it professionally and with courtesy to everybody else that's out there. I don't think he meant anything in the past. I think he's just a great person. He just spoke his mind and sometimes you can't."

Despite the incredible pressure of campaigning the overwhelming Hambletonian favourite and all that entails, Peck handled it with aplomb. On the sport's biggest stage, he repeatedly spoke of his wife and sons Brendan and Sean. He mentioned his parents, Bernie and Grace, and his roots in Sydney Mines. He gave kudos to his staff — "Remember, it's not like we have 20, 30, 40 two and three-year-old trotters. We have half-a-dozen. So, that says something. I'm very, very humbled by

that and they've done a great job," he said. Heck, Peck even used his platform to campaign publicly for the Meadowlands to get slot machines.

"This is our Churchill Downs," Peck said of the Meadowlands, "and the Hambletonian is our Kentucky Derby. We're the only state in the union that can look the gaming people in the eye and say, 'We can give you a phenomenal racing product.'

"We need the Meadowlands to get slots, gaming, whatever you want to call it, because this is still the engine that drives the business."

Before there was a Meadowlands, a boyhood Peck gobbled up the pages of trade magazines such as *The Harness Horse* that spun delicious yarns of winged horses, giant horsemen and harness racing wonders from magic kingdoms far, far away from Cape Breton. The Big M was born when Peck was a teenager and changed harness racing forever.

"What I always wanted to do was win races at the Meadowlands and today was the pinnacle of it," Peck said in a press conference on Hambletonian Day.

Both his father and his grandfather ran a grocery business in Sydney Mines and trained horses on the side. In the week leading up to the Hambletonian, Peck told Sherry Mazzocchi, in a story published in the *Philadelphia Inquirer*, that his grandfather delivered groceries with a horse and wagon in the summer and occasionally a horse-drawn sleigh in the winter. Sometimes, the family competed in ice racing over a frozen lake.

Bernie Peck had a love of trotters that he passed on to his son. "He was ahead of his time," Greg said of his father, who used a variety of training techniques. The Maritimes, with purses too low for anyone except the completely smitten to make the effort and commitment, instilled in a young Greg Peck both an incredible passion for horses and also a desire to find something better.

"There was an old-time horseman one time. He was looking out over one of the tracks at home and he said, 'You know, when it comes to horse racing, it's not the end of the world, but you can see it from here,'" Peck said, drawing laughs from the press. "That was a very well-put line. With the purses, we don't take it lightly."

If we ever needed proof Brian Sears wasn't the type of guy to pump a fist, raise a whip skyward or leap into someone's arms, we know it now. No driver has ever had a better day at the track than the one Sears had on Hambletonian Day. If emotions were ever going to spill to the surface for all to see, this was the time. Which is not to say Sears wasn't pumped after posting an ungodly stakes trifecta — winning the \$1.52 million Hambletonian with Muscle Hill, its companion race for fillies, the \$750,000 Hambletonian Oaks, with Broadway Schooner (see story p. 30) and the \$523,600 Peter Haughton Memorial for rookie trotting colts with Peck's Holiday Road.

Up close, Sears' eyes danced and there was a noticeable quiver in his voice.

"To win two big races like this on the same day is very humbling. To put your name up with those other people that have won it, it's a great fraternity to be with," he said. In all, the 41-year-old reinsman earned \$1,555,675 for the day and established a new single-day earnings record for a driver, surpassing the \$1.4 million Bill O'Donnell collected on Aug. 16, 1984. Sears also became the first driver to win both the Oaks and the Hambletonian in the same year and the first in 14 years, since John Campbell last did it, to win both the Hambletonian and the Peter Haughton in the same year.

Though it was his third straight Haughton win and fourth in five years, Sears vanquished some growing doubts about whether he could win trotting's greatest race. "It's a great feeling," Sears said of finally notching both his first Hambletonian and Oaks victories after many solid chances in recent years. "I knew I had the horse to get it done."

Of course, he's speaking of Muscle Hill, a supreme talent Peck said Sears drives exceptionally well. So much so, that even during a performance in which Muscle Hill equaled the all-time world record, Peck said Sears left gas in the tank. He sat virtually motionless as the trotter opened up in the stretch to dust off highly-touted Explosive Matter by six lengths with the same closing fraction (:27.1) Muscle Hill used in his opening salvo in a gate-to-wire romp from the rail.

Peck said Sears' mother says the driver "inspires horses. And that's a good way of putting it... He's done a great job. He's accented the horse," Peck said.

Could Muscle Hill have gone a sub-1:50 mile in the Hambletonian? Absolutely, said Peck. "He's just waiting on Brian to call on him," the trainer said. Not long after Hambletonian Day, Sears also surpassed the \$100 million in career earnings by Standardbred Canada accounting, which records Canadian and U.S. currencies at par.

And what about Sears' icy calm when the greatest of nearly 7,000 career victories was finally upon him? Simple. "I just didn't want anything stupid to happen. It's not over until it's over," Sears said. "I didn't want to chase him off his feet and try to make him do anything that he wasn't prepared to do. So, everything worked out just perfectly."

How good is Muscle Hill? Jerry Silva calls the trotter "by far the best." To be fair, the super owner was talking about Muscle Hill being the best of the four Hambletonian winners Silva has owned. But when your other winners are Continentalvictory (1996), Self Possessed (1999) and Deweycheatumnhowe (2008) that's high praise indeed.

"Yes, this was number four," Silva said with a chuckle. In his day job, Silva is the chair and chief executive officer of Chem Rx, a long-term care pharmacy based in Long Beach, NY he founded more than 40 years ago. In harness racing, Silva is a man who has owned a piece of a huge number of the greatest standardbreds to race in recent years. There are far too many to mention here.

Muscle Hill is the first horse Silva's had with Peck. How the owner ended up with a 50 per cent share of the horse — prior to a lucrative stallion deal being brokered with Southwind Farm of Pennington, NJ — is a tale of good fortune befitting a man who has had more than his share in the horse business.

"This horse was really the oddest one of them all. I didn't buy into him as a yearling. There was an owner that didn't pay the bill for 50 per cent," said Silva, who has owned many horses with the Pontones in the past. "They came to me and I thought it was 25 per cent, so I sent a cheque in for \$13,500 for 25 per cent and then two months later they called me and said, 'No, it's 50 per cent.' So, I sent another cheque for \$13,500 and that's how I owned 50 per cent before we did the syndication with Southwind and then the syndication with the limited partners." Silva said he didn't hesitate for a second before cutting the second cheque. "It worked out," he said, laughing. "Sometimes it does, sometimes it doesn't. Sometimes you wish you shoulda, sometimes you wish you didn't."

Despite having many, many good days in the business, Silva said this year's Hambletonian Day — which included Holiday Road's victory in the Haughton — was exceptional. "I've had good days, but this was special," Silva said. "I had a first and a second in the Hambo with Self Possessed and Angus Hall. That was exciting. I won three Hambo eliminations with Self Possessed, Angus Hall and Bit O Candy. That goes back awhile. That was an exciting day, but this was very special."

It's hard to believe now, but Muscle Hill was less than perfect as a baby. Jimmy Ladwig, the yearling manager for Winbak Farms, the breeder of Muscle Hill, said when the trotter was first brought in from the field "he was rough."

In particular, Muscle Hill needed some chiropractic work. Ladwig knew his boss, Joe Thomson, loved the mare, Yankee Blondie, and had given her every chance to succeed by breeding her to top stallion Muscles Yankee.

"I was just smart enough to make the phone call to the chiropractor," Ladwig said. "We kept on it... and took care of him and it worked." All that came before Muscle Hill grew into the strapping youngster Peck fell in love with watching his yearling video. "Honestly, he blossomed. Once we got his back straightened out, he blossomed and he had a great video. He put on about 100 pounds. "He went for \$55,000. Greg bought him and he went on to win the Hambo, so he did all right," Ladwig said, grinning.

Loving the colt was the easy part; buying him not so much. Pontone said Peck, at first, had trouble lining up partners. The Pontones first became involved with Peck in May of 2007 when they purchased a share of a three-year-old stakes horse named Wind Surfer, ostensibly to own a horse with Bill Perretti. "We purchased the horse just to be partners with Bill," Pontone said. "Greg (Peck) was the trainer of the horse. "That fall, Peck went to Harrisburg with one goal: to buy Muscle Hill.

"He loved that horse," Pontone said. "He saw me at the bar the night before. I guess he spoke to a couple of people about buying the horse and he didn't really have good reactions from people. He said, 'Listen, you said you'd buy a yearling with me this year.' I said, 'Absolutely.' He said, 'I want you to buy one yearling with me.' I said, 'Absolutely. Show me who he is tomorrow. We'll go look at him. After you give me a price of what you think he's going to go for, if it's okay, we'll buy him.'"

The next morning, Peck took Pontone to see Muscle Hill, who sold as hip 199.

"We looked at him and I said to him, 'What do you like about this horse?' He said, 'The video. I loved his video.' I said to him, 'How much?' He said, 'I think he's going to go for about \$50,000.' I said, 'Okay. If you think you can get him for \$50,000, go get him.' We got him for \$55,000," Pontone said. Beyond money and career advice, what the Pontones brought to the equation was considerable karma.

Since the father-and-son bought their first horse in May of 1997 — a 20 per cent stake in claiming mare named Falcon Sight — they've owned, to Thomas Pontone's count, seven millionaires, "off buying maybe eight to 10 horses a year. It's not like we're purchasing 30-40 horses a year. It's just that every year it seems we're able to pick out a good one. "The third horse we ever bought was my father went to a sale with Joe and Victor Leonardis and we bought Red Bow Tie. We bought 15 per cent of Red Bow Tie."

The gelded pacer Red Bow Tie won two Breeders Crowns and earned over \$2.6 million.

In 2000, the Pontones landed two knockout pacers — McArdle (\$2.4 million) and Art Major (\$2.7 million). Buying trotters, at first, was more challenging. "The first trotter that we got involved in was Experience Victory, a \$650,000 purchase that was a bust," Pontone said of Self Possessed's half-brother who did end up making nearly \$140,000.

For awhile, that experience tempered the Pontones' desire to pony up for high-priced yearlings, particularly trotters. But Muscle Hill can even make a pricey bad memory seem positively dreamy in the rearview mirror. Muscle Hill has earned \$1,832,542 lifetime with a nearly-perfect record of 13-1-0 in 14 starts. The \$760,166 cheque for winning the Hambletonian pushed the trotter over \$1 million on the year in just five perfect starts.

"I've watched the replay (of the Hambletonian) about 100 times so far," Pontone said. "Maybe it was the 25th time I watched the replay that it actually sunk in. "Every time (my father and I) look at each other, we smile."

As for whether the rise of Greg Peck will mean it will be more difficult for the Pontones to get in on horses with the trainer, Pontone said, "I don't have any fear of that. (Peck) understands, too, that my father and myself are a little bit lucky."

Beyond training horses, Peck, a business administration major at St. Mary's University in Halifax, was shown the ropes of the media training business by his brother-in-law, Barry McLoughlin. Peck now owns Fine Line Inc., a media training company that advises corporate executives on dealing with the press. Peck's client list includes Exxon Mobil, DuPont, the Environmental Protection Agency, the Republican National Committee and former Ontario premier Mike Harris. Yet, Peck didn't always apply his own advice to the running of his stable.

Apart from being the people that helped Peck land Muscle Hill, the Pontones have also been good for Peck in terms of helping him improve his business acumen. One key piece of advice from the Pontones which Peck took to heart was not bragging publicly too much about Muscle Hill. It's a page taken straight from the How-Not-To-Tick-Off-The-Racing-Gods Handbook. "We just said (to Peck), 'Just keep on saying 'there's a lot of good horses out there.' Don't ever say that we have the best horse,'" Pontone said. "You can think it all you want. In my mind, I'm thinking it, you're thinking it. Just don't say it.' There are good horses out there and on any given day, any horse can win any race. He kept to that philosophy and just kept focusing." Peck even named his obsession: Operation Hambletonian.

That Peck also won the \$523,600 Peter Haughton Memorial on Hambletonian Day with Holiday Road in a 1:54 stakes record shows the trainer is already penciled in as the early favourite to win the 2010 Hambletonian. Not bad for a guy who arrived in the United States 19 years ago with virtually nothing but big dreams of big races. "It's just a fantasy. I'm happy for Greg, because he deserves it," Pontone said. "He deserves success."