

A Tale of **TWO** Survivors

Over the last three years, the Sugg family has faced more than its share of scary incidents

story by **Kimberly A. Rinker**

JOHN “DUKE” SUGG

is a survivor, and it turns out that it is a trait that he shares with Yanks Dugout, a trotter he co-owns with his father, Ivan, who also bred the horse.

It has been three years since Duke, 51, almost lost his life in a horrific accident at the Seneca County Fairgrounds in Tiffin, Ohio, and just over a year since Yanks Dugout nearly perished in a creek that runs through the family farm in Deshler, Ohio, 95 miles northwest of Delaware, where Ivan won the 2003 Little Brown Jug as the trainer of No Pan Intended.

With his father a trainer, Duke followed a natural career path into the Standardbred industry, working in the family business alongside his brothers, Steve and Kurt.

“The farm has been in our family forever,” Duke shared. “We used to have 80 horses, and no matter how many are there, you still have the work. After my brother Steve passed from cancer in February 1996, and Kurt moved away later that year, it was just Dad and me.”

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John “Duke” Sugg



SAFE AT LAST / The Suggs and their trotter, Yanks Dugout, enjoy a peaceful moment at the farm. From left: John “Duke” Sugg and his wife, Lisa; and Duke’s parents, Ivan and Patty Sugg.



WHOA! / A constant performer for Duke since his sophomore year, Yanks Dugout notched this win at Scioto Downs (*above*) in July of last year, just days before a mishap at Sugg's farm resulted in the gelding being stuck in a creek (*opposite*).

When his father retired from training, Duke took a job as a freight conductor with the CXS Railroad in 2011, but he continued to drive at the fairs and occasionally at the raceways. He says that he began working for CXS “before Ohio got good,” a reference to the resurgence of the sport in the Buckeye State due to revenues from video lottery terminals.

“At one time we had nine trucks and six horse trailers,” he recalled. “We could be at almost any track within four to 4½ hours—The Meadows, Mohawk, the Chicago tracks—and Raceway Park was only an hour away. We didn’t have one track that was right down the road, but we could go to a lot of places in the Midwest from our farm.

“If you had a nice trotter, one that wasn’t Grand Circuit level, but right below that, you could go to Chicago or Detroit with that horse and do well,” added Duke. “When Balmoral and Hazel (Park) started fading out, I was worried Ohio was on the verge of the same thing, and with the railroad being just a stone’s throw from our farm, it seemed like a natural spot for me. There’s no-

where else I can make the kind of money the railroad offers that is this close to home. I can feed the horses in the morning and be to work in 10 minutes. It offered the perfect scenario for me, my family, the horses and the farm.”

ON JULY 22, 2019, Duke drove to Tiffin to drive a few horses at the fair, something he had continued to do despite working full time outside of harness racing. Little did he know that the third race on the evening’s card would forever change his life.

“Mom’s sister, Judy, went with me to the races that night,” Duke recalled. “I remember telling her about the trains on the ride to Tiffin. That’s the strange thing about a brain injury. I pick up different memories at various times.”

As Duke explains, healing after a traumatic head injury requires memory reconstruction—the ability to recover a consciousness that eludes and often only allows for raw, detailed snippets to resurface. This is what he has salvaged about the accident:

“I remember it was a four-horse

field, and I was sitting second behind Ryan Stahl (driving Lemonade Lucy), with Jay Weller (driving Wall Of Dragons) right behind me in third, and all of a sudden, my filly (Herbal Filly) just went down. Just like that. Art McMurray had told me to watch her, that she was dangerous, but I didn’t think much about it. The weird thing is, I had been leaning on the outside fence before the race and I saw guys in golf carts going back and forth across the track, and I was thinking, I wish these guys wouldn’t put these lines across the track. I swear that’s why my horse went down; she didn’t have a shadow roll on, and those lines freaked her out.

“Years ago, we had a horse named French Embassy who was a nice 3-year-old, and we were qualifying him at Northville Downs,” he continued. “Near the paddock on the last turn, there’s a big shadow that covers the track and my brother Steve was on the front end with that horse, and he comes to that spot and just drops, and there’s a big pileup, but everybody was okay. French Embassy saw those tracks and went down, and this filly saw those tracks and reacted the same way. Afterwards, they put a shadow roll on her, and she never did that again.”



Louise Weller, whose family's horses are stabled at Tiffin, was watching from the sidelines when the accident occurred, and she was the first to reach the fallen driver. She is also the head nurse at the Toledo Nursing School.

"If she hadn't been there, I don't know what would have happened," said Duke. "She was working on me for 20 to 30 minutes before the paramedics came. Without her help, I might not have made it."

DUKE suffered severe brain trauma with three different brain bleeds as well as a shattered left wrist. He was placed in a coma for 12 days after being life-flighted to University of Toledo Medical Center.

"Louise called the hospital and told them to treat me like a motorcycle acci-

dent victim," he said. "The brain bleeds affected my short-term memory. Part of my brain died, and eventually the brain reassigned that non-working section to a working section. When I woke up my brain didn't function the way it had before, and I felt like I had aged 20 years. Realistically, I don't know how I made it, as with any kind of brain injury, it's an awfully slow healing process. Nothing with the brain is fast."

Worst of all, the brain bleeds affected his eyesight.

"My eyes were damaged more than anything," Duke shared. "My neurosurgeon told me my eyes would never get better. Really bright lights make seeing difficult, and if I put something on the counter, when I look down, I don't see it except if I turn my head a certain way. Once I was driving to Scioto and took a different way on a country road

because of construction, and I missed a stop sign. That scared me, so I've learned to look to the right of the road because I'm able to see everything that way. If I could read right to left, I'd be fine, because that way I'd see the whole page."

Besides the damage done to his eyesight, Duke understands that his brain is different in other ways as well.

"My brain doesn't process stuff like before," he continued. "It's like there's a traffic jam in my brain. I used to be able to talk to five or six people at once, but I can't do that anymore. I can't have multiple people talking to me; it has to be one-on-one. It is the same with my eyes."

These days, his son, Brett, and daughter, Brooke, help with the horses, and Duke said he is content to not venture onto the track too often.

"I think he was in such a hurry to find his friends and went from zero to 60 like a bullet. There was nothing I could do to stop him; he just wanted to be with his buddies."

John "Duke" Sugg

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“The last thing I want to do is to put my wife Lisa and the kids through this again,” Duke revealed. “I can watch from the sidelines where it’s safe. I’ve driven in a couple of qualifiers and races—albeit pretty cautiously.”

ENTER Yanks Dugout, who was a 2-year-old when Duke was injured. The son of Triumphant Caviar out of the Muscles Yankee mare Yansky was a homebred foaled March 17, 2017.

Duke had trained and raced Yansky—who earned \$122,127 and was owned by his father—throughout most of her career. When she retired to the breeding shed, she first produced Yanks Ball Girl 4,1:57f (\$60,722), Fashion Can Do It 3,1:58.1f (\$30,030) and Yanks DJ 2,Q2:04.3f (\$5,509). Yanks Dugout was her fourth foal. Her fifth, Katie’s Lucky Day, became undeniably the most accomplished of the family when she captured the 2021 Kentucky Filly Futurity. She now has a lifetime record of 1:50 and career earnings of \$544,156.

Yanks Dugout made only three starts as a 2-year-old and earned just \$183, but since his 3-year-old season he has been a steady breadwinner for the Suggs. He won eight of 14 starts as a sophomore and was in the midst of his 4-year-old season when he had his own brush with death.

“We were really busy last summer, and I had three horses at the farm:—Dontyousayit and Miss Cowboy Star—and Yanks Dugout,” Duke said. “It had rained a ton in mid-July, and I brought the horses into the barn since everything was such a mess. I shipped the [other two] out to race, and I don’t think Yanks Dugout realized they were gone. He had been turned out with them and they were buddies. So, after they shipped, he was the only horse in the barn.”

Duke has a vivid memory of the details of the day.

“I was getting ready to jog him and had him in the cross ties with the jog

NO. 1 DAD / Duke’s father, Ivan Sugg (center), won the Little Brown Jug in 2003 with No Pan Intended. Flanking him in this photo are Duke (right) and another son, Kurt.



cart hooked, and when I dropped the ties, he took off and went flying around our track,” Duke said. “I took my truck and tried to stop him, but on the backside, there’s a fence and he started running alongside it. The field behind it had corn that was all tasseled out and all of a sudden, he’s gone, and I can’t see him anymore.

“I thought he must be stuck in the corn field somewhere, so I called my wife, kids, mom and dad, some local people, and the police for help. One of the neighbor kids had a drone he used, but still we couldn’t find this horse. At

the end of our property to the west, there’s a bridge that was taken out and leads down to the creek, so we drove there but didn’t see him.”

FOUR hours later, there was still no sign of Yanks Dugout, and the Sugg family feared the worst. Then came a glimmer of hope.

“A kid had a kayak, and we rode it down the creek and suddenly, Yanks Dugout is right in front of us,” Duke shared. “He was lying down, with his head above water. The creek is fairly

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wide and surrounded on both sides by trees and bushes and he had run through them, tumbled down this steep hill, with the cart attached. The only thing broken was the apron and the cross bar.

"He was flat on his side and his foot was stuck between the shaft and fork of the cart, so I got his foot unstuck and got him up. We got lucky his head wasn't under water. We got a rope and pulled him out and up the hill through that brush, walked him back to the barn and gave him a bath. A vet came out and stitched up a deep cut on his eye—it was the only major injury he suffered. He had minor scrapes, but most of those came from him trying to get up."

In 45 days, like his indefatigable trainer, Yanks Dugout returned to the races.

"He's lucky we got him out alive," Duke continued. "If it had happened a few days before, he would have drowned. You could see the tracks where he ran one way and then came back along the fence line before he

tumbled down through the bushes and into the creek. I think he was in such a hurry to find his friends and went from zero to 60 like a bullet. There was nothing I could do to stop him; he just wanted to be with his buddies."

Since his accident, the now 5-year-old Yanks Dugout has gone on to take a mark of 1:52.3 and earn more than \$200,000. Through Aug. 18, he has \$332,023 in career earnings for the Sugg family, with \$146,165 banked this year while racing for trainer Ron Burke. On May 21, Yanks Dugout finished second to Atlanta in the Open Trot at the Meadowlands.

"He's racing great for them out east, so we saw no reason to bring him back here," said Duke of entrusting Yanks Dugout to the Burke Brigade. "My dad's (almost) 80 now and it's great that he can have a nice trotter to enjoy."

After much reflection, it is clear Duke believes he has much to be thankful for in his life.

"My wife Lisa is my biggest supporter," he stressed. "She lets me be who I

am—and that is not the same person I was before my accident.

"And, the number 22 has some weird connection to me," he continued. "My accident happened on July 22, my brother passed away on Feb. 22, and Yanks Dugout almost died on July 22."

Duke also thinks there's a reason he chose not to board an ill-fated flight on Aug. 27, 2006.

"I was supposed to be on a Comair plane that crashed," he said. "I had flown from Philadelphia to Lexington to race Bono Bests in a sires stakes and was to fly back the next morning. But I really wanted to get home, and Brian Brown had a trailer shipping to Ohio, and I hitched a ride with him after the races. I got home at 5:30 Sunday morning and that plane took off half an hour later and crashed on the runway, and only the co-pilot survived." *HB*

Kimberly A. Rinker is a longtime Standard-bred industry journalist and former Standard-bred trainer. To comment on this story, email us at readerforum@ustrotting.com.

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