

## In Tribute To Tioga Downs

By: Jessica Hallett, on behalf of the men and women of Tioga Downs

Horses. Standardbreds. Racehorses. Athletes. Just some of the ways to describe our whole world in the harness racing industry; however, the key word that resonates with horsemen across the world is family.

Nichols, New York is a small, isolated town made up of one single gas station, one main road, and corn fields that stretch for miles into the next town over. In the summer months between May and September, the town becomes a hub for harness racing excitement at the Tioga Downs racetrack. Once the summer race meet ends, the track turns into a training center for horsemen to stay the winter. The number of horsemen residing at the winter training center has exponentially grown since the closure of South Florida racetrack, Pompano Park. Nonetheless, the racetrack lowers beneath the surface as other tracks take over the limelight during the offseason.

However, on Thursday, Nov. 9, the Tioga Downs racetrack garnered such attention that struck horsemen across the world. A huge ripple created a wave that paralyzed horsemen to their core as one of their greatest fears has just overwhelmed that small town in Nichols.

An arsonist, not to be named, made his way onto the winter training track through a service entrance before setting a barn on fire.

Once news spread among the local horsemen, they rushed to the aid of the horses inside the barn. Despite every attempt, the horsemen were unable to cross the path of the flames and smoke. All 30 horses inside the stables perished.

In the wake of the tragedy, the harness horsemen community has rallied around those affected by the senseless act. Efforts were joined by members of other equine communities as well as those not involved with horses at all. The waves of momentum set up by the community has demonstrated that the harness racing community as a whole is a true family.

A GoFundMe was developed to support all of the horsemen affected and with donations from over 800 people as of Friday evening, nearly \$110,000 has been raised. Jeff Gural pledged to match \$100,000. Other GoFundMe's have been created, too, for individual horsemen affected and those have generated thousands of dollars, too.

For one story, horsemen from California have funded a cross-country trip by truck and trailer to pick up equipment and supplies along the way to New York. In addition to generous donations of harnesses and buckets and jog carts and any supplies necessary to rebuild a stable, some horsemen have also donated horses to the expedition.

Horsemen from every track and training center across the country and those from the major breeding farms across the country have assisted in their own ways, too. Small business owners from the harness racing industry have started their own efforts to help the cause by donating their time and supplies to raise funds. These include T-shirts, keychains, bracelets, and more.

This is by no means a comprehensive list. This is just one scroll through the Facebook homepage that is filled with the horsemen community coming together, but there are many joint efforts going on right now to help these horsemen that have lost everything. Most of the efforts can be found under the tag #TiogaStrong.

In tribute to the horses that lost their lives, their stories are available below, as told from their loved ones.

Lee and Kayla Morris are a married couple, originally from England. The pair, along with their two boys, started coming to Tioga Downs as part of the Pompano Park-Tioga Downs travel circuit as the seasons worked out well together. When Pompano officially closed its doors on April 17, the Morris family began to stable permanently at Tioga. They had 12 horses in the barn on Nov. 9.

Better Call Saul was an 11-year-old gelded son of Muscle Massive-Kelsies Song. Known as Norman in the barn and owned by Lee Morris, he had 24 career trips to the winner's circle with earnings of \$267,202. He took his career mark of 1:56 at The Meadows.

"He was the absolute love of my life," Kayla Morris said. "He was cheeky, funny, and always hungry. He just wanted to be loved."

Prairie Dutchess was a five-year-old daughter of Floridabred Royel Millennium and the Artsplace mare Stonebridge Luna and was owned by Lee Morris. She had four career triumphs and \$43,205 to go along with a career mark of 1:55.2 taken at Tioga Downs. She was known as Suzie to Lee and Kayla Morris.

"She was Sassy Susan! She was so mischievous - always eating everything that she shouldn't have been. You could leave nothing outside the stall or it would be in there with her."

Mc Mach was called Macaroni. Owned by Mindy Findling Repko, the nine-year-old son of Mach Three-Northern Express had 31 wins and earnings of \$296,507. He took his career best time at Hoosier Park in 1:49.4.

"He lived for ear scratches. He would wait for William to come home from school and put his head down over the door ready for his scratches," Kayla said.

"He was our war horse at nine," owner Repko said. "We had Mac for five years, except for the six and a half months when he got claimed. We had promised him we would always have a home with us and didn't rest until we were able to get him back. Mac loved to race and left it all on the track each and every time. His favorite thing was getting his ears scratched."

Its Rigged, also known as Riggs, was a seven-year-old son of Riggins and the Cambest mare Cherry Bomb. He had ten wins, a mark of 1:53.1, and \$65,752 earned. David Yarock owned Riggs.

“He was a gentle giant. A big oaf. He never realized just how big he was. If he wanted a cuddle, you were getting one even if you didn’t want it. He was a big softy.”

Sd Watch Me Now, Steve, was owned by Forward Step LLC. The five-year-old Wind Me Up-Fox Valley Raquel gelding had 14 wins, \$150,507 earned and a mark of 1:52.1 taken at Vernon Downs.

“The prettiest boy in the barn. He was stunning and super grumpy. He would give you a secret kiss if no one was looking, then pull faces at you.”

Pineapple Sundae, known as Spongebob, was a three-year-old In The Arsenal-Dream Performer gelding owned by Dale Allen.

“He was such a quirky little guy. He drove me insane. If he had run out of hay, he made sure the whole barn knew by kicking the gate. We just spent six months rehabbing him from a knee injury. We bought him like that and he was like a project. He was due to come back into training on Monday.”

Violence, known as Oliver, was a four-year-old Muscle Hill-Shes Gone Again gelding owned by Mindy Findling Repko. He won twice this year and took his career mark of 1:56.2 at The Meadowlands.

“He was just coming back into work after having surgery,” Kayla said. “He was a big, humongous baby that honestly thought he was a miniature pony the way he would try to sit on you.”

Repko added, “He was ours because we were looking for a young trotter with an injury to rehab. He was a big, beautiful Muscle Hill colt. We did everything the right way to bring him back and have a chance to show his potential. We never got to meet Oliver because he was with Lee and Kayla. He should have been able to come home, but that won’t happen now. He was taken away too young at only four.”

Ruff Montana Lane (Racing Hill-Forever Ivy), also known as Lenny, was a sophomore owned by Robert Biagini, Mindy Findling Repko, and Lee Morris. Unraced as a freshman, he had four wins, a career mark of 1:53.4 from a qualifier at Miami Valley, and \$36,213 in earnings.

“He was our newest racehorse. He had just settled in and was coming on leaps and bounds. He was such a sweetheart – loved cuddles and kisses.”

Hunts Point, by Huntsville and out of the Well Said mare Apricot Sour, was a four-year-old gelding owned by the same partnership as Lenny. He had five wins, a mark of 1:52.4 from Philly, and \$53,755 earned.

“He was a big baby that was enjoying some down time after a hard summer of racing,” Kayla said.

“Hunts Point, who we called George, and Ruff Montana Lane, affectionately known as Lenny Larry Leroy, were ours with our friend Bob and Lee and Kayla,” Repko said. “All of us wanted a couple of horses to have some fun with. They were just starting to come into their own at four and three, respectively. And we will never get a chance to see them reach their full potential or be able to spoil them like the rest of our kids.”

Market Mayhem, Schlitz, was a five-year-old So Surreal-Market Dynamics gelding owned by Repko. He had one win in 1:53 from Vernon and \$30,151 earned.

“He was a big baby that just wanted you to love him all the time. He was a screamer and was forever calling out for some extra cookies,” Kayla said.

“Our baby,” Repko said. “He was the first born from our mare, Market Dynamics and only five years old. I called him Schlitz. He was the sweetest horse and as gentle as he could be for a rhinoceros. That’s what Kayla said he looked like the first time she saw him. He never met a treat he didn’t like and loved to get hugs when you hung his hay bag. He loved his job, never tired and never let you know if he had any aches or pains. He was supposed to shine on the racetrack and live out the rest of his life on our farm.

“We just want to say a personal thank you to Lee, Kayla, and Lance for being their surrogate parents and uncle in our stead. We love you guys,” Repko added.

“We also had two babies,” Kayla continued. “I called them Princess Di and Dandy Cheeks. Both were absolute pleasures to look after. Both sweet and kind and so eager to learn.”

The two babies were freshmen aged Always Smooth (In The Arsenal-Keystone Kimset) owned by Timothy Miller and Diamond Express (Dudes The Man-Leki Hanover) owned by Timothy and Hope Miller.

“Diamond was spunky, a best friend, and a beautiful soul with the kindest eyes,” Hope Miller said. “Our three daughters named her. She was our girl. Always Smooth, known as Smoothie, was kind, relaxed and went with the flow. She was such a good girl. She did everything you asked her to do.”

Kevin Reynolds is a Pennsylvania resident and has been stationed at Tioga Downs for a few years now. He had six horses in the barn.

My Delight was an eight-year-old son of Betterthancheddar-Kg Delight. He was owned by Reynolds and had 20 wins with \$368,663 earned. His mark of 1:49.4 was taken at Vernon Downs.

“The mouth of the barn and the lady’s man. He was a big, good-looking stud,” Reynolds said. “Him and I have the longest history of any of my horses.”

Hot Shot Joe was a sophomore gelded son of Roll With Joe and the Well Said mare Catharsis. Ross Bonney and Cathy Curly-Bonney co-owned the winner of six races and \$54,972. He earned his career mark of 1:53.1 this summer at Tioga.

“Definitely no lack of personality. He was a little guy with a love for life as big as the engine inside of him.”

Birdie Three was a sophomore Sportswriter-One Over Par filly owned by John Furfaro. She had three wins, a mark of 1:54.1 from Pocono Downs, and \$65,876 in earnings.

“The angel of the barn. She was a three-year-old filly that loved her work and nicker makers.”

Ideal Chance shipped in two days prior from trainer Ashley Bako, who owned the six-year-old gelding by Western Ideal, out of the Cambest mare Best Legacy. He had 21 wins, \$115,121 earned, and a mark of 1:55 from The Meadows.

“The new guy to the team. He got there Tuesday. I didn’t get a chance to know him real well, but from what I see, everyone who’s ever had him loved him.”

Payara (Bettors Delight-Emileah T) was owned by Reynolds. The five-year-old mare won 10 races, earned \$108,722, and took her career mark of 1:55 at Northfield.

“The dancer. She would dance in the front of her stall for hours on end. An ATM machine when it came to racing.”

Da Boogie Man was a six-year-old gelded son of Rc Royalty and the Kadabra mare Hurrikane Janie, owned by Reynolds. He had 14 wins, \$136,075 in earnings, and a mark of 1:54.4 from Vernon.

“He enjoyed his walks to the wheel with Rayna. A nine-year-old little girl could take him to the wheel while he’d make a grown man cry on the track.”

Trainer Allison Kolesar had four horses in barn F on Thursday. The Ulster, PA resident is a mother to Rayna, a young girl who loved her horses just as much and would be found frequently at the barn to play with the horses or walk them around the Tioga Downs stable area.

Grant Me This was an eight-year-old daughter of Pet Rock and the No Pan Intended mare Champale Blue Chip. Owned by Kolesar, she had 17 career triumphs and \$202,943 earned. Her mark of 1:52.1 was taken at Tioga Downs.

“She was my entire existence. She loved nothing more than to stress me out,” Allison said. “If she didn’t want to do it, then we weren’t doing it and she made sure there weren’t any further discussions about it. She loved her barn sister, Misty. She didn’t have an enormous personality, but when she did show you something, she made sure to get her point across.”

Silverhill Misty was an eight-year-old daughter of Proven Lover and the Artsplace mare Southwind Miranda. Owned by Kolesar, she had 22 career victories and \$139,193 earned. Her mark of 1:54.1 was earned at Vernon Downs.

“She loved everything. More personality than she knew what to do with. She love, love, loved her barn sister Grant Me This. She loved her tiny human, Rayna. She was always the bright ray of sunshine in the barn, the happiest girl you’d ever meet.

“My other two were babies. Buzzards R Flying (Buzzard) was coming three and my still unnamed was coming two years old. Home-breds from the mare Passion R Virginie. Buzzard was like an old wise man in spirit. Nothing phased him. He enjoyed talking to his fellow horse friends, and really enjoyed napping 22 hours of the day. His brother has much more bounce to him but shared the napping trait as well.”

Edgar (Sparky) Clarke along with his wife Cheri, a pair from the Pompano-Tioga circuit, had six horses in the barn. Sparky ran into the barn to try and save his horses. He received second degree burns on his face and was recently released from the hospital.

Danzon Hanover, known as the player in the barn, was a son of Explosive Matter and the Angus Hall mare Dancin Darlin. The five-year-old gelding had 11 wins and \$79,763 earned. Owned by Edgar Clarke, he earned his career best time of 1:55.4 at Tioga Downs.

“We called him the Player. He loved pulling zippers or strings from my jacket,” Cheri Clarke said.

Pocket Watch N, also known as Tank, was a seven-year-old gelded son of Hes Watching-Samantha Chloe. He was owned by Clarke and had \$114,572 earned. Of his 19 career wins, his mark of 1:52 was taken at Dover Downs.

“He was my guy. And he was also Mackenzie’s favorite.”

Lone Wolf American was a four-year-old son of American Ideal, out of the Cambest mare Feeling You. He was owned by Clarke and had career earnings of \$117,416. Among 14 career wins, the gelding, known as Wolfe, took his career mark of 1:52.3 at Tioga Downs.

“Sparky loved this fella. He always had his head out to greet us in the morning.”

Slave Labour and Hall It Off both came from Jim McDonald’s barn, but as McDonald traveled south for the winter, the horses stayed to winter train in the Clarke Stable. Four-year-old Slave Labour (Muscle Hill-Big Barb) had six wins to go along with \$70,408 earned. He took his career mark of 1:57 at Tioga Downs. Six-year-old Hall It Off (Cantab Hall-Pearl Axe It), known as Daryl in the barn, had 12 wins and \$130,350 earned. His career mark of 1:54.2 was taken at The Meadowlands.

“These two were two of Dona’s and Sparky’s favorites.”

Fireside Tail was a recent purchase out of the Harrisburg Sale by Sparky. The yearling was a daughter of Cattlewash and the American Ideal mare American Tail.

“We just brought her home from the Harrisburg Sale the night before. I’m so sorry little angel.”

Dan Harvey is another Pompano Park transplant from the Florida-New York circuit. Together, he and his lifelong partner Dr. Ann Robblee shared in the ownership of horses. Harvey had two horses in the barn.

Blazin Mooss, a four-year-old son of Always A Virgin and the Mcardle mare Blazing Blaire, was owned by Harvey. He had seven career victories and \$46,809 earned. This past summer at Tioga, Mooss, as he was known in the barn, took his career mark of 1:53.4.

“He was a love in the barn and a little bit coo coo on the track,” Harvey said. “He just started to be a good horse the last month and a half. In the last three weeks, he had two wins and a second.”

Karpathos was a 22-year-old retiree in Harvey’s stable. He was a gelded son of Balanced Image and Linfields Gem, owned by Ann Robblee. Known as Pathos in the barn, the gelding had 43 wins as a racehorse with \$359,006. He was retired in 2012 and returned to the care of Dan Harvey, who had the horse for two of his racing years. His career mark of 1:54.3 was taken at Pompano Park.

“The pet of the barn, especially for my co-owner and love of my life, Ann. I had him for almost 13 years. He followed me everywhere I went after his career. He’s a full brother to Earl and he almost made half-a-million. He loved banana-granola bars and grapes.

“Ann and I miss them so much already. We cannot describe how we feel.”

The horses were more than statistics or purse earnings. They were a part of a family. Each and every one was loved and had a loving home.

Remember to hug your horses extra tight today and if you can, consider donating to the cause to help these horsemen get back on their feet whether by thoughts and prayers, monetary donations, or equipment to help them build back. Nothing will replace their lost loved ones, but together we can help them recover.

In loving memory of the 30 who lost their lives on November 9, 2023.

Always Smooth, 2; Better Call Saul, 11; Birdie Three, 3; Blazin Mooss, 4; Buzzards R Flying, 2; Da Boogie Man, 6; Danzon Hanover, 5; Diamond Express, 2; Fireside Tail, 1; Grant Me This, 8; Hall It Off, 6; Hot Shot Joe, 3; Hunts Point, 4; Ideal Chance, 6; Its Rigged, 7; Karpathos, 22; Lone Wolf American, 4; Market Mayhem, 5; Mc Mach, 9; My Delight, 8; Payara, 5; Pineapple Sundae, 3; Pocket Watch N, 7; Prairie Dutchess, 5; Ruff Montana Lane, 3; Sd Watch Me Now, 5; Silverhill Misty, 8; Slave Labour, 4; Violence, 4; and Unnamed Yearling, 1