

# Lifetime of horse racing brings love, happiness and tragedy

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BY CURTIS STOCK, EDMONTON JOURNAL    SEPTEMBER 21, 2009 8:36 AM



Lorne Dupont, an 86-year-old horse trainer, is retiring after spending 70 some years in the horse racing business.

Photograph by: Ed Kaiser, Edmonton Journal

Yawning shadows of an autumn afternoon -- a day as warm as a mother's embrace -- stretched beneath an old, weathered lawn chair Lorne Dupont sat upon for the final time in his barn area at Northlands Park.

The stalls that once housed a succession of champions were empty, the horses sold.

After 70 years spent on racetracks that initially weren't much more than plowed ovals cut in the grass for one-or two-day exhibitions in little prairie towns, Dupont, 86, Alberta's oldest thoroughbred trainer, has finally decided to retire.

"It's time," Dupont said last week, staring into space through a lifetime of horse racing that has brought him love and happiness--and more than any man's share of tragedy.

"Part of me has trouble leaving. But I know it's the right thing to do. There's no racing in Calgary. Calgary is my home and a lot of the Calgary owners are getting out of the business.

"But I think 70 years in horse racing is enough anyway.

"It's time," he said again.

As he spoke for hours on end on a Tuesday morning that stretched well into the afternoon -- 70 years

of racetrack stories impossible to sum up or really even begin to bundle into a neat,

little package -- there were times when Dupont didn't know whether to laugh or cry. So he did a little of both as he sold off his memories bit by bit from his tack room that was growing emptier by the minute as horsemen kept filing in to buy the equipment he had gathered but would no longer need.

The heavy, metal pails that horses like Whispering Sea and Merger -- who both went on to win the Queen's Plate in the 1960s--would have lapped up water from. Brushes that would have combed the manes of the likes of Welcome Partner, who Dupont also sent east to win the 1962 Coronation stakes, defeating the seemingly invincible Canebora and paying \$110 to win. Bridles that stakes winners like Touch of Mint, Emotional Hit and Deacon's Duster would have looked through as they ran past their opposition time and time again.

Plastic feed tubs. Shanks and halters. Even the coffee pot that began percolating every morning, seven days a week, often even before the sun woke up -- a full tin of ground coffee included in the offering. All sold.

"It's not the best feeling to see your stuff go," he said, taking \$40 for a couple of bridles, \$20 for this, \$10 for that, stuffing the money deep into his dark denim jeans, the only pants he ever wears.

"I'm selling it all.

"Except this," he said, bringing a helmet painted in his familiar yellow and blue colours, a drawing of Pegasus on the side, down from a shelf.

"Maureen painted this for me."

Maureen was Dupont's daughter, a beautiful girl with an infectious smile. But not long after she painted that helmet for dad, she was dead. She was just 19 years old.

It was July 17, 1985. Seven o'clock on a Wednesday morning.

Storms had lashed the skies, swept

Alberta's oldest trainer, who lost a daughter in a tragic accident at the track, calls it quits after 70-year career

along by raging wind the previous evening and delaying the Queen Mother's arrival in Edmonton.

But this day -- when more than 200,000 people would show up downtown to watch the Klondike Days parade -- dawned soft and warm. Not a hint of fury in the air.

"Maureen was on her saddle horse when one horse on a walking machine came to a stop and another thoroughbred on the same machine started acting up," Dupont began, the words coming sad and slow.

"The trailing horse kicked up some dirt that hit Maureen's horse in the face. Maureen's horse overreacted. She went right over backward. She had a helmet on but it didn't help. She landed right on her head."

Dupont was standing right there, helplessly watching it all unfold in what seemed to be slow motion, helpless as he is now retelling a scene that will haunt him forever.

"It was like a shotgun had gone off."

All the father could do was cradle his daughter's lifeless body in his arms. And cry.

Brain-dead, Maureen was taken off life support the next day.

Almost a quarter-century ago, it feels like yesterday to Dupont.

"Oh, was she a good girl. I could tell you so many stories. How she won the Powder Puff Derby. How she liked to sew. You know the day before her Grade 12 graduation she didn't have anything to wear, so she asked her mom, my wife, Anne, to take her into town. They went to a store and Maureen picked out the material she liked. She went home and sewed herself a beautiful blouse.

"Oh, why do the good always have to die so young?"

Anne has hardly been to the track since that day.

"It's just too tough for her," said Lorne, who this past January celebrated 50 years of marriage.

The same year they buried one daughter, the Duponts found even more pain wedge its way under their door. A second daughter, Debbie, was diagnosed with brain tumours.

The surgery, however, seemed to have gone flawlessly. For the next eight years, there wasn't even a hint of a problem.

And then the tumours returned, bigger and darker than ever and growing fast.

"It was terrible the way she suffered."

Two years later, at the age of 35, Debbie was dead, too.

"Losing Maureen quickly was probably better than watching Debbie die. She wanted so much to raise her two kids. She loved life.

"And for a long time life was good to her, too."

But a man must go on and Dupont has. He walks so briskly you almost need to get into a gallop to keep up.

Not that death didn't almost corral him as well. Plenty of times.

Like in the summer of 1983, when five horses broke out of the starting gate at Northlands in a training session. Dupont was riding a two-year-old, Troy Ounce. Jockey Nancy Jumpsen was on another horse of Dupont's. In front, they were side by side; the other three horses tucked snugly in behind.

Bernie Sears was riding one of the other three horses. Don Seymour, who would become one of Canada's top jockeys, was on another. Shorty, who didn't seem to have a last name, was on the third.

Thundering hoofs echoing everywhere. Trainers trying to hone their animals into a winning effort. It could have been any morning on the racetrack. But it wasn't.

Unknown to the five riders, another horse had thrown its jockey and was coming back riderless -- the wrong way -- and galloping full bore straight into the path of the five working horses.

"The loose horse ran smack into me," said Dupont, shaking his head and recoiling with a grimace. "Nancy was thrown into the infield. The other three horses ran over top of me."

Concussed and his back and hip seriously injured, Dupont was partially paralyzed for three days. Amazingly, five weeks after the accident, with Dupont still in the hospital, Troy Ounce won.

"The horse that hit me died, but somehow Troy Ounce never got hurt at all."

Dupont did though. It would take him eight months before he even started to feel all right.

"The doctors told me the only thing that saved me was because I was in such good shape."

Dupont got lucky that day. He also got lucky in 1946.

"We were taking a mare and a foal in a truck to Fort Qu'Appelle, just north east of Regina. There were a lot of sharp turns, a lot of steep grades. Around one turn the trailer joint came apart."

Dupont remembers wrapping his arms as tightly as he could around the foal. He remembers the trailer turning over and over, somersaulting madly, the metal shearing away, until it stopped at the bottom of the hill at the edge of the river.

The mare died. Remarkably, Dupont and the foal escaped with only a few scratches.

When you live on a racetrack, injury and death always ride side by side, one constantly tugging and pulling on the other's saddle pad.

When Dupont was 18, a delivery truck ran into him and a horse he had harnessed. The truck shattered both of the mare's front legs, swift as an axe driven into a log.

"I still remember her moaning and groaning. It was horrible. The sound made me go into shock."

In 1962, Dupont broke his neck while breaking a yearling at Golden West Farms, which he ran for Max Bell, one of Canada's leading sportsmen, philanthropists and businessmen.

"I just about didn't make it," Dupont said of that accident when a horse suddenly propped, frightened for some reason by a bale of hay. Like Maureen, Dupont landed on his head.

"I was in shock for three days. They didn't think I'd come out of it."

But he did. Like always. Even the time he got blood poisoning in 1984 after a horse crushed Dupont's hand against a saddle. He spent a week in intensive care, and that was only because Anne insisted on taking him to the hospital. The gash became infected and doctors said if his wife hadn't brought him in, he probably would have died in his sleep.

Despite the setbacks, the injuries and the deaths of two daughters, Dupont still had plenty of fun. A smile was and still is never far from his face. Then again, he won just about every big race there was.

Born in 1924 on a farm near Wynyard, Sask., so sick as a child that he didn't start school until he was nine, Dupont said, "The doctors gave up on me."

But giving up are two words Dupont has never uttered.

Any one of the accidents on the track could have made a lot of people give up and leave horse racing far behind. The death of two daughters that way could have made any man go mad.

Never mind the winter fire of 1947 at Whittier Park in Winnipeg that nearly wiped him out, leaving two of his horses dead and Dupont "with the jeans I was wearing."

Or just three years later, Winnipeg's Red River flooding its banks for 51 days, forcing horsemen stabled at Whittier Park on the river's banks to flee.

Dupont said he tied 39 horses together -- halter to tail. "I put a rider on the first one, climbed on the last one and we could hear the water's roar as we were leaving. It sounded like four trains."

One of nine children, Dupont arrived at his first racetrack in Saskatchewan in 1940. At the end of the Dirty Thirties which withered crops the way it did pocketbooks, Dupont came looking for a job. Any job.

Light and small in stature, Dupont was the right size to be a jockey. Born

and raised on a farm, he knew how to ride horses the way most kids learn to ride bicycles.

But he also wanted to be a cowboy. So he did both.

Winning with Flying Somers, the first horse he ever rode as a jockey --he would also win 50 races with that horse's sister, Fay Somers -- Dupont would ride thoroughbreds in the afternoon at the two-and three-day bush meets at whistle stops that took the fairs and their baked pies across Saskatchewan. At night, he would get on the backs of saddle broncs and barebacks at the evening rodeo. He even tried a few bulls.

"But when one of them got me by the seat of my pants and shot me over the fence, I said, 'No more bulls for me.' "

Not that the money was any good. The meets were mostly in Saskatchewan at places like Weyburn, Assiniboia, Moose Jaw, Meadow Lake, Kamsack and Yorkton. Purses, on a good day, might have been \$30, of which the winning jockey would have got about a dollar.

But then, in those days, the average annual salary was less than \$2,000 and a loaf of bread cost eight cents.

In 1946, Dupont outgrew himself. Too big to be a jockey, he went to work for Captain Stanley Harrison. A retired English army captain who served with the Winnipeg Light Infantry in the First World War, Harrison would become Saskatchewan's most distinguished builder of racing.

Then, in 1957, he got a phone call.

"I was at a hockey rink and they page me. I'm thinking, 'Who died now?' Instead, the caller was Max Bell, who had made his fortune in oil, was the single-largest shareholder in the Hudson's Bay Company and one of the largest shareholders in Canadian Pacific. Bell wanted Dupont to run his thoroughbred operation in Okotoks--then Alberta Ranches, later to be called Golden West Ranches.

Bell, who only had two things on his desk--a Bible and the Daily Racing Form--had some prominent racing partners: Frank McMahan, an industrialist who also made his fortune in oil and who would win the 1969 Kentucky Derby and Preakness with Majestic Prince, and Hall of Fame champion jockey Johnny Longden.

Dupont could hardly say no, especially to a man like Bell, whose Calgary Stampede parties had a guest list that included Dale Evans and Roy Rogers, Robert and Ethel Kennedy, Bing Crosby, Gordie Howe, Bobby Orr and Bob Hope.

"I used to go pheasant hunting with Bing Crosby," Dupont said of the singer/actor who would win the Irish Sweeps with Meadow Court, a horse Crosby owned with Bell and McMahan.

"He always wanted to see a foal born and one time when he was at Golden West Ranches I told him tonight was his chance. Two foals were born that night.

"Dale Evans and Roy Rogers always said they wanted to adopt Maureen. They just loved her."

Dupont, however, wasn't sure about Bob Hope.

"One time he was up there with his wife and he was perfect. The next time he was just the opposite. In fact, Mr. Bell told me to take him to the airport. He never said a word to me the whole time."

One of the first horses Dupont developed for Bell was Welcome Partner. Although Roy Johnson, who was training Bell's horses in Toronto, thought it was suicide to send a horse like Welcome Partner to Woodbine to take on Canebora, a future Hall of Famer who the next year would win the Canadian Triple Crown, Dupont convinced Bell otherwise.

Johnson really thought the idea was insane when Dupont insisted on using Dickie Armstrong, currently Northlands clerk of the scales, as the jockey. And when they drew the outside 13th post position ... well, good luck.

As expected, Canebora went right to the top. And not unexpectedly, Welcome Partner, whose mother died at birth, leaving the colt an orphan and requiring Dupont to nurse it with milk from a baby's bottle, went right to the back.

Then, in a blink of an eye, it all changed. Down the backstretch, Welcome Partner went from last to second. Canebora still had a five-length lead but Welcome Partner kept coming. And coming. He went on to win easily, paying \$110 for every \$2 bet.

Dupont also broke Whistling Sea for Calgary owner Paul Olivier before sending the horse to Toronto for

Johnson to train and win the 1965 Queen's Plate.

Three years later, Dupont sent another Queen's Plate winner he had broken for Johnson to train. This one was Merger, owned by Bell.

The Queen's Plate, Bell had often said, was the one race he wanted to win. Dupont helped him do it.

When it came to judging horse flesh, Dupont wasn't wrong very often.

Longden didn't care much for a two-year-old that Dupont liked: Shy Bride. But, in the paddock, Dupont picked up a stone and handed it to Bell saying he'll win by as far as you can throw it. Shy Bride won by 21 lengths. The next year he won the Woodstock stakes in Toronto.

Dupont wasn't wrong the day he saddled a four-horse entry in Calgary either.

"I gave my wife \$5 and told her to run a parlay on all of them," said Dupont, who went on his own after Bell died in 1972.

The first three won and Anne came up to her husband with more than \$100, saying she couldn't possibly put that much money on the last horse, Alley Back.

"I said, 'Are you kidding, he's the one I like the best,' " Dupont laughed.

Alley Back paid \$27.00. Anne won \$1,800.

Yes, he's called a lot of things right. He claimed a horse called Bow Dancer for \$8,000. The horse had won two races in four years. Dupont won 22 races in three years, including the Western Canada Handicap and the Sprint Championship in 1983.

In 1992, he made the biggest bet of his life. He put \$300 to win on a horse named Deacon's Duster in the Calgary Maturity.

Deacon's Duster won by five lengths and paid \$28.

No, Dupont doesn't get it wrong very often. And calling his retirement at this time is probably also right.

Along with everything else, Dupont sold the clock in his tack room. As every racetracker knows, horse racing is all about time because it's all about how fast a horse can run.

Dupont knows that, too. "It's time," he said one last time. [cstock@thejournal.canwest.com](mailto:cstock@thejournal.canwest.com) Read my blog at [www.edmontonjournal.com](http://www.edmontonjournal.com)

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