

Frank Baldachino – Success In Indiana Program And Beyond

by Rose Flood



“Someday you’ll see my horse win,” is what a young Frank Baldachino would say to his dad while watching his uncle drive at the Meadowlands. Who could have predicted he would own horses like Hannelore Hanover and All Bets Off. Both of whom were seen in this year’s Breeders Crown finals.

Baldachino found his way to harness racing while spending time with his dad. His uncle was a trainer/driver at the Meadowlands when the track first opened and Baldachino’s father would bring him along to the track so the two could spend some time together; he was immediately hooked. There was something about having his family in the business that fueled his desire, hunger and passion for the game.

Like most great stories, the beginning had some rough patches. Baldachino remembers when he started about 15 years ago, when he began to question if the racing business was worth it when his first few horses did not pan out. With a bit of time, however, things picked up. Casinos partnering with tracks helped to raise purses. The internet and TVG made replays more accessible and a number of tracks could be showcased. In fact, TVG is what helped lead Bal-

dachino to the Midwest.

While watching tracks on TVG, he thought “I’ve got to get a couple horses to race at Hoosier Park.” He wanted to be intimately involved with the up-and-coming Indiana Sires Stakes program and ultimately discovered success with horses like Bud’s Hope, Summer In Fiji and Go On BB. Go On BB was even the first Indiana-sired horse to surpass \$1 million in purses. Summer In Fiji went undefeated as a two-year-old. From the start, Indiana proved to be good to Baldachino, but he says it’s good luck, good time and good fortune.

It’s nearly impossible these days to mention the name Frank Baldachino without bringing up the famous Hannelore Hanover, who was the first female winner of

the Breeders Crown Open Trot in 19 years, the second swiftest trotter of all-time and fleetest female in the history of the sport. But at what point was it clear that Hannelore Hanover was going to be a force to be reckoned with? According to Baldachino, about halfway through her three-year-old season. Her fiercest competitor was Churita, who kept besting her time after time. Baldachino decided that “She’s not going to beat her again,”

Hannelore Hanover



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MR CANTAB - 2,1:56.1; 3,1:53.3

Cantab Hall - Miss Marita, by Joie De Vie



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Sire of: Homicide Hunter 2,1:56.4; 3,1:53.4, 4,1:50.1f-'16 (\$1,109,407)

UNDEFEATED 2015 Indiana Sires Stakes Champion - 3 Year Old Colt Trot
At 4, he established a **WORLD RECORD** for Aged Geldings on a 5/8 mile track!
At 5, defeated World Record Holder, Hannelore Hanover (5,1:49.2-'17), while setting a **NEW TRACK RECORD** for Aged Geldings at Hoosier Park!

**Sired the winners of
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Including:

Homicide Hunter (pictured above)

**His 2-Year-Olds earned
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2 Year Old Indiana Sires Stakes Winners:

Custom Cantab (pictured to the right)

&

River Otter

2,1:58.1-'17 (\$139,692)



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Custom Cantab 2,1:55.3-'17 (\$214,486)

2017 Indiana Sires Stakes winner.
2nd in Kentuckiana Stallion Management Stake to Basquiat 2,1:52.4-'17 (\$241,671), while race timed in 1:54.1.

For Booking Information:

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bid again. We were now over our limit but we felt certain that this was the right horse for Rod. With some encouragement from me, Ernie bid twice more topping out at \$125,000 but again we found ourselves as the underbidders and we left Harrisburg without a horse for Rod. Disappointed described us perfectly as we wondered how Rod would react. As we boarded the plane and told him of our day, Rod's reaction told us much about the man as he said "Why didn't you just buy him?" Not mad, not disappointed...just why didn't you spend more of my money? By the way, Daylon Trooper went on to earn another \$800,000 in his racing career.

The Indiana General Assembly did a great job kick-starting the Indiana horse racing industry when they funded it through a riverboat admission tax paid at all the Indiana gambling boats. It provided a steady purse structure while pari-mutuel gaming got off and running. What it also did was limit just how far Indiana could go in the North America harness racing industry. The racing season was short as it had to be shared with the thoroughbreds as this was before Indiana Downs was built. Rod and I had many conversations about this. Yes, things were good in Indiana but they could be so much better as the horsemen were willing and wanting to take it to the next level. Rod vision saw casino's at the racetracks being a way to get more money into the Indiana racing industry and he began to have his team make probes about it with Indiana's legislatures. He asked me to put together a type of economic paper regarding the harness racing industry and I set out to visit breeding farms and the few training centers that were around at that time. A few weeks later, I presented Rod with a 12 page paper, complete with pictures of the major farms. The smile on his face aid it all as he had his secretary Marcia, make multiple copies to give to Centaurs lobbyists. We went to the Columbia House for a drink and met several of the lobbyists working on this monumental task. Presenting the Indiana horse racing industry as an agriculture commodity was just the ticket he said. It took several years and a ton of letter writing and phones calls from horsemen working along with Centaurs lobbying efforts to get the deal done but it got done! One of the key things that allowed the Indiana General Assembly to pass such a slot bill was the track had to be Indiana

owned. No way would they allow Hoosier's money to be sent to Churchill Downs across the river. Centaur got the message as well and promptly bought out Churchill Downs ownership in Hoosier Park. I was at the party the night the slots at the racetracks bill was passed and there was much celebration as you might expect. Rod pulled me off to the side and stated "I will never forget what the horsemen did here. Never. I promise that this is going to be a partnership as long as I am in charge" He was more than good to his word.

Rod was never happy about Indiana Downs efforts to tap into the Central Indiana market. I didn't blame him as he had far outspent the owners of Indiana Downs in getting the slot bill passed. There was an upside to it though and that was the opportunity for extended racing seasons for all breeds. Paul Estridge, the man behind Indiana Downs, was also a harness racing guy. I always believed that Rod wouldn't have had so many issues with Indiana Downs had it been built up by Chicago or down by Louisville but it was just too close in Shelbyville. The licensing fee to build the casino's at the racetracks was high. REAL high! As it turn out...too high! Coupled with the cost of building the casino's, both tracks fell into bankruptcy and the harness racing industry was worried. What would happen? Horsemen began to pare back their financial investments. I had dinner with Rod at St Elmo's to try and find out just exactly what was going on. The bankruptcy was embarrassing to him no doubt but it wasn't going to stop him from moving forward. He had a plan and they would come out of bankruptcy stronger than ever. It took several months but again, Rod was good to his word as Centaur was able to reorganize their finances and retain ownership of Hoosier Park. The Indiana harness racing industry breathed a collective sigh of relief as many horsemen had now begun to know Rod and his Centaur team. They didn't just know Rod...they trusted Rod and his visions for the future. Centaur was able to get their finances squared away enough that they purchased Indiana Grand! That opened the door for one breed-one track that Indiana now has.

I doubt it was Rod's idea but I know he had a hand in it somehow and that was the Fab Five. Hoosier came up with the marketing idea where

the top drivers were used in marketing harness racing. They were everywhere! The marketing team even made a hilarious video featuring the Fab Five. I kind of wished something could have been done with trainers instead of drivers but Rod told me in the clubhouse one night to make certain I was going to the concert the next night. He had this big grin on his face but wouldn't tell me any more. The next night a HUGE crowd was gathered on the apron watching the races and waiting for the doors to the concert to open. Had to be close to a 1500-2,000 people and harness racing was getting maximum exposure. The gates to the concert opened immediately after the races and fifteen minutes later, the Fab Five, dressed in clean colors, were whisked to the stage to throw harness racing t-shirts to the crowd. I was sitting 2 tables over from Rod and he caught my eye and gave me two thumbs up. He had just exposed a tremendous crowd to harness racing most for the first time.

As I said earlier, many horsemen in Indiana have a relationship with Rod Ratcliff but I don't believe anyone has had a longer relationship with Rod than Ernie Gaskin and myself. Ernie and I had a conver-

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and was hoping Hannelore Hanover would be a strong open horse. When he received his stakes book and realized she was not in any races as a four-year-old, he made sure she would be there for the stakes races and the rest is history. "She's the real deal," he says, "but never did I expect her to be as good as she is." He says Hannelore Hanover being crowned as 2017 Horse of the Year would just be icing on the cake.

Baldachino talks fondly about all of the horses he works with. He describes All Bets Off as a consummate professional with a special place in his heart. He also spoke fondly of Dream Kid, the two-year-old and three-year-old ISS trotting colt winner, whom he purchased as a youngster. "It's always special when you buy a baby and it becomes a real good horse." Baldachino only has

sation about how many dinners Rod was buying horsemen. This was a couple of years before the slots at the tracks bill passed and Rod would buy folks dinner in the clubhouse so he had a chance to talk to them one on one about writing letters to their legislatures. It went on for months. Ernie and I decided we'd take Rod out for dinner and we'd buy his dinner. We met at a popular downtown steakhouse and had a great evening talking mostly harness racing. End of the evening, the check comes, we pay it and get up to leave and Rod says "wait a minute.....I thought you guys wanted to talk to me about buying a horse!" Ernie explained "Nope. Not this time. We've watched you buy so many meals over the past months that we thought we'd buy you one for a change" Rod was truly touched by the gesture and stated that no one had ever bought his dinner before.

Next month we will have more on the Rod and the rest of the Centaur Gaming team that has brought Indiana harness racing to the position it finds itself today.

kind things to say about all of the people he works with in this business, such as trainer Ron Burke and his partners; he holds them in high esteem.

The primary thing Baldachino wishes for the future of the sport, is for racetracks to conduct a more concerted and cooperated effort to promote the sport in a more meaningful manner. He recognizes this can be complicated when tracks are owned individually, but believes it is important to attract new fans because of just how wonderful the sport is. "When you do go to big nights like Breeders Crown and you see the excitement and the passion, you know it can be done, but it needs to be done on a more consistent level. That's what I want to see."

So if you want to make Frank Baldachino happy, go to the track on a Tuesday night and experience the joy, enthusiasm and pride he enjoys. Who knows maybe you might just want to get in the game.