Almost a year ago everything changed. The coronavirus was affecting people all over the world. People were getting sick, businesses were shutting down and no one was really sure what to expect.

Like many people, I thought we would be “back to normal” in a few months, but that didn’t happen and now, nearly 12 months later, we are still learning to do life during a pandemic.

It’s been a difficult time but it hasn’t been all bad. I was encouraged, as I hope you were, to see the way horsemen rallied together during these hard times. Eventually, after being shut down for months, racing came back and we were able to have marquee events like the Little Brown Jug and the Hambletonian— and we did it together.

We’ve come a long way since March 2020, and while there is still a long way to go, we have many reasons to feel hopeful in this new year.

I hope you and your family are safe.
Sophie Norton turned her childhood love of horses into a passion. It wasn’t until the past few years that she really began to pay attention. Before, it was just about the incredible horses: the beautiful manes, their strength, and the thrill of victory in a big race. But now things have changed — harness racing has taken a new role in Cheyenne Christman’s life.

Cheyenne’s family has raised, trained, and driven horses for decades and her childhood included numerous trips to racetracks on the weekends. Harness racing was a family affair and Cheyenne spent a lot of time observing her parents, Mark and Jolene Christman, as they drove and trained Standardbreds.

Jolene said Cheyenne was around 11 or 12 when she really started to show an interest in the sport.

“She always went to the track with us,” Jolene said. “She enjoyed spending time with me and riding together. I think it was a combination of being around the horses and racing.”

Cheyenne, now 17, has showed a continued interest in racing, which recently took an interesting turn. As she thought about how to get more involved — especially at such a young age — she came up with the idea of combining her two passions: creativity and harness racing.

“I love being creative in any way, shape, or form,” Cheyenne said. “That’s why I first got into YouTube. That’s why I got into horses, as well. Being able to combine the two, I think, is really awesome.”

Cheyenne’s first official video was published on her YouTube account more than four years ago, but Jolene said she’s been making them since she was 8 years old. Since then, her channel has grown to nearly 300 subscribers and has more than 20,000 views. Her videos cover a range of topics, featuring titles like “Car tour 2019” and “The TRUTH about...”
Letter from the Editor

While I’m starting to creep up on 40, I’m still fairly young by harness racing standards. It’s hard to believe I’ve been directly involved in the sport in some way for 18 years, wearing one hat or another. As I approach my third decade of making my living in harness racing, it heartens me to see so many in the next generation bringing fresh perspectives and making their own significant contributions to the Standardbred sport.

I didn’t grow up on the backstretch. In fact, I caught the racing bug on the other side of the rail — as a fan. In contrast, Jessica Hallett and Wyatt Long — two individuals highlighted in this edition of Youth Beats — grew up in harness racing families and are thriving in their respective multi-faceted careers within the sport.

Despite initially pursuing a career in the health sciences, Jessica’s early interests in photography and writing paved the way for her career as the track photographer at Saratoga, in New York, and as a writer for multiple industry publications. You can read her story on page 10 and view some of her art throughout the book — including our cover. Wyatt, a fourth-generation horseman, is still hands-on at his dad’s stable and is active as a trainer and driver, but has found his path as a USTA ID Technician and equine dentist — two very essential, but often taken for granted, elements of our industry. His story appears on page 15.

Neither Jessica nor Wyatt have reached their 25th birthday, yet they’re both making incredibly valuable contributions to our sport, be it in the winner’s circle or behind the scenes. It’s the drive, vision and energy of the current generation that can continue to propel harness racing forward. In that spirit, I hope you enjoy this issue of Youth Beats, and as always, thank you for reading!

Cheers, James
Harness Horse Youth Foundation

For those who know horses...and those who don’t!

BY HEATHER LASOTA

Editor’s Note: The following is a first-person account of 2023 Harness Horse Youth Foundation Leadership Program participant Heather Lasota of her time at the annual five-day event in Indiana.

At the end of May 2023, my godmother, Miss Mary Anne, called. “I’m calling because I know you and your mom are coming to Ohio to see me in June. I wanted to know if you are still into horses?” “Yes, I am,” I responded. “Oh, good! When you come to Ohio, would you like to take a day at a harness horse camp? I talked to Ellen, the person in charge of the program.” This was my chance. My chance to learn and grow with horses. “Yes I would love to do it! When is it?” “It’s June 28; call the Darke County Fairgrounds....”

Day Camp

I drove to the horse camp. Kids from ages 7 to 18, from Ohio, Missouri and Indiana — and me, age 18 from Arizona — attended. I thought for sure the majority had never had a horse, like me. Boy, was I wrong! All had horse experience as we walked into the stables.

“Choose a horse,” Miss CJ said. I looked at four horses then came to a white one. I stopped, looked into his eyes, and he looked into mine. I wanted this horse ... and so did my teammates. His name was Ima’s Hit and called Homer, 16 years old.

We learned how to ready the horse. Hours went by preparing Homer, hooking him up to the cart, and taking him to the track. A man assisted me and explained, “Homer is lazy and loves to eat.” We did not go very fast, but it was fun driving. Then, we washed the horse down and put him away.

This is it, I thought. I learned everything I can and will find people at home to work with horses so I can own one. And I was wrong again.

“Miss Heather?” I turned around and there was Miss Ellen. “Is there a way you can move your trip back a few more days? Until July 12?” “I don’t think so. Why are you asking?”

“Because I want you to come to Indiana to a Leadership Program from July 8 through the 12th. It’s a camp where you will be the ones in charge of taking care of the horses and learning more about harness racing.” I was shocked and excited. I can learn and experience more, but I work and like riding horses better. Then I thought, I won’t have this opportunity again. With encouragement from my mom and godmother, I bought airline tickets to go to Indiana by myself.
Day 1

I landed in Indiana and my godmother drove me to Miss Ellen’s house. That evening, we went to the local harness racetrack. This was my first time! I sat next to Matty; Justice, whose families own their own harness racing business; and Kennen, who works for a relative of Justice. They taught me a lot about it. Matty and I rode in the starting gate car. We both got to see the race close-up, watching the horses flash past and hearing the sounds of their hooves. Back at the hotel, I shared a room with Justice, who was my age.

Day 2

At 5:30 a.m., we awoke to go to the stables to work with the horses, feed them, and clean their stalls. Each day, it was a different horse. Then we went to different stables to learn about their training and activity. After lunch, we readied the horses and took them on the track.

Matty and I were the last ones to go out because we had two horses. We hooked them up to the carts. Each of us was assigned a driver who sat next to us in case the horse took off or we needed to hand him the lines. We had double responsibility that day, washing, putting away and feeding two horses. Whew! Once the horses were resting comfortably in their stables, we all sat outside and listened to the two drivers who talked about their experience.

We went back to the hotel rooms and got ready for bed. I didn’t get much sleep due to staying up with my friend Justice talking about life and what happened that day.

Day 3

The next morning, the routine at the stables started all over again. It was just as exciting the second time. Matty and I worked with a beautiful, tall, dark brown horse with a black mane and tail named I Want Another. We visited a horse therapy stable called New Wave Equine. We watched a horse exercise on a treadmill with water in it, soak in a freezing cold-water spa mixed with Epsom salt, and stand on a platform with heat lamps shining from above. The platform shifted to massage the horse’s loosening muscles. Finally, the horse was led back to a stall, where a therapist used a vibrating machine on sore muscles.

At the stables, Matty and I readied I Want Another and took turns driving him. Later in the day, we found out that the horse CD’s Miss M, called Missy, lost one of her shoes on the track. We walked the track to find the horseshoe, but to no avail. I did get to talk to Matty, and we became closer friends. The evening was fun with bowling and dinner. Everyone had a blast!
Day 4  
Matty and I took care of Missy. She was a bit more difficult to work with. Later we watched two professional trainers driving their horses in sync. One of the horses was going from trotting to pacing without any hopples on. I was fascinated by it. Every day I asked multiple questions, but this day I especially asked a lot and learned as much as I could.

It was time to jog Missy. As the driver and I took a turn, Missy decided to bolt, and I was unable to control her. The driver calmed her, then Matty and I washed her and put her away. We swam that afternoon before going to the races. Mr. Bob told me to get on the sulky for a win photo. We watched the races from the judges’ booth and talked to them.

Day 5  
Matty and I had Homer, the horse I connected with at the day camp. We learned about equipment and the anatomy of the horse. We watched the blacksmith trim the horse’s hooves and put on new horseshoes. Miss Ellen told us, “Today is a special day! After you go around the track twice, five of you will be able to turn the horse around and actually train the horse. I’ve been watching each of you to decide who I think is ready and able to control the horse.”

There were 11 of us, so there was a chance I was not going to be one of them. Miss Ellen began announcing the names. I did not hear my name, nor did I expect to because I was the least experienced.

“And our fifth driver is Heather.”

I couldn’t believe it. I was going to have an opportunity to simulate racing speed!

Clip-clop, clip-clop. Under a bright blue sky surrounded by lush green trees with leaves blowing in the breeze, I sat on a cart with a racer next to me. With lines in my hands, in front of me was a beautiful white Standardbred horse named Homer. “Are you ready?” Mr. Brandon, the man in purple riding gear next to me, asked. I nodded.

I started turning Homer around and saw I Want Another beside me, and I thought, I’m definitely going to lose to him.

“Give Homer more of a push,” Mr. Brandon said. Homer sees I Want Another coming up behind him and bolts faster. He would not let him pass. Homer crossed the finish line. He won first place. I won first place!

It was time to say goodbye, but I didn’t want to leave. Although I learned so much more than I ever thought I would about horses, I also learned how to not second-guess myself. Even if you have no experience with horses like me, just take that step. At least once, go to the Harness Horse Youth Foundation camps to enjoy and bond with people and horses.
Going to the track as a kid initiated Robby Bath’s interest in harness racing. Attending a Harness Racing Youth Foundation camp created his passion.

Bath, a 33-year-old Pennsylvania native who participated in the HHYF program in the early 2000s, got a taste of Grand Circuit success in September 2023, when Dame Good Time won a Bluegrass Stakes division at the Red Mile in 1:54.2 after finishing second to divisional standout Karl in the Kentucky Championship Series final two weeks prior.

“He’s really come into his own,” Bath said about the son of Chapter Seven-Dame Du Lac, whose family includes Grand Circuit winners Cartier Hall, Cash Hall, and Capetown Hall, as well as 2023 Yonkers International Trot participant Aldebaran Zeus A. “We had some issues with his feet when we first got to Kentucky, but we got that squared away and he’s doing well.”

Bath’s harness racing journey began with his father.

“He never had horses, but he liked going to the track and would take me with him,” Bath said. “He also had friends that had Standardbreds, and he would take me to the farm every once in a while.

“When the Youth Foundation camp came to Pocono Downs one year, I signed up for that. After that, I was hooked. I would go to the farm every weekend and during the summer, and one thing led to another until eventually I got my first horse. Slowly but surely, I got other horses. That’s how I got started.”

Bath had his own stable for several years, winning 125 races from 1,138 starts and amassing over $1.43 million in purses. However, since the coronavirus pandemic in 2020, he has mostly assisted other stables. Dame Good Time was his sole focus last summer and fall after he campaigned 4-year-old pacer All Or Nothing to a 2-1-2 record in five Kentucky Sire Stakes events last spring at Oak Grove.

Dame Good Time started six times at the Red Mile, winning once and finishing second twice while earning $147,810. In his remaining races, he went off stride. Despite intermittent gait issues, his late-season form, which includes a :26.4 last quarter mile in the Kentucky Championship, where he was timed in 1:53.4, was promising. And although Dame Good Time’s 2023 season — and Bath’s, too — ended with a disappointing seventh-place finish in a Breeders Crown elimination at Harrah’s Hoosier Park, the young conditioner relished the opportunity to compete on the sport’s biggest stage.

“It was an awesome opportunity for me to train a freshman colt on the Grand Circuit,” said Bath, who is spending the winter in Florida breaking young horses to race before charting his course for 2024. “It was really special to race such a nice horse in the Breeders Crown.”
AND THEY’RE OFF!

2023 Little Brown Jug
Despite growing up on the Pompano Park backstretch, Jessica Hallett seemed destined for a career in the health sciences. But her longtime avocations and love for Standardbreds have provided the 24-year-old Floridian her current vocation — and more than she could have ever dreamed of.

Hallett, the daughter of longtime horsepeople John and Michelle Hallett, dabbled in photography as a teenager, but never considered the possibility of ending up a full-time track photographer until taking over that post at Pompano for the storied oval’s 2021-22 season. In the time since, her art has taken the Standardbred world by storm — through her multi-faceted work as the track photographer and a writer for Saratoga Casino Hotel, and on some of the sport’s grandest stages, as well.

“It does come as a surprise,” Hallett said. “Everybody asks me if I went to college to be a photographer, but I went to school for pre-med — I went to school to be a doctor. I did all kinds of things, but nothing in the arts. I would play around with a camera; my parents got me a camera when I was 15. And I couldn’t take photos at night because they came out blurry.”

Following her studies at Nova Southeastern University, in Davie, Fla., during which she maintained two majors and four minors, Hallett found herself with the opportunity to photograph the final meet of Pompano’s six-decade stand.

“The previous track photographer, Dee Leftwich, decided before the end of the 2020-2021 year that he did not want to return for the final year,” Hallet explained. “They were posting ads looking for a track photographer for a few months and people were encouraging me to take it. I honestly had no interest — I didn’t think I could take good photos, especially at night, and I was hired for a full-time (with pay) medical job. The track photographer job was unpaid. In November, when we were making our way to Florida, I was already set to take pictures for the FSBOA Sire Stakes, like I always had. When I got there, I knew that Pompano had no track photographer for the last couple weeks, people were taking photos on their phones or screenshots of the simulcast. I told Gabe (Prewitt, director of racing) I would give it two weeks to try it out.

“I hated my photos,” she admitted, largely owing to the new challenge of shooting at night, “but I kept learning, trying new things, and eventually they kept getting better.”

But practice quickly became perfect for Hallet, and the temporary post became the springboard for her
current career. Not only did Hallett photograph the winner of each race at the finish line and in the winner’s enclosure, but she also captured a wide variety of action shots and behind-the-scenes glimpses of the paddock and once-bustling backstretch area. Many of those photos fill the pages of a coffee-table book titled *Pompano Park: A Tribute to the Final Season*, which Hallett published and released in December 2023.

When Pompano closed for good, in April 2022, Hallett had time to pursue one of her other passions: writing. And it, too, blossomed into another facet of her current career.

“I've always loved writing,” she said. “Through high school, my favorite thing was writing.”

Hallett’s writing has appeared in *Hoof Beats* as well as on the Harnesslink and Standardbred Canada websites, and she also serves as a news editor on the latter.

“I picked up Standardbred Canada in June 2022, right after Pompano closed. It was the right time because I had nothing to do. I took that job and, at the same time, I started writing for Kathy Parker at *Hoof Beats*.”

In her work with Standardbred Canada, Hallett edits incoming stories for publication and also writes race recaps and new features.

“They give me different kinds of stories and features to write; it’s a lot of fun,” she said. “At first, I looked at it and thought, ‘Am I going to be able to handle that?’ but then, it’s like, ‘Oh, that was easy.’”

With Pompano closed, the Halletts left Tioga Downs — their longtime summer base of operations — at the end of the 2022 meet and relocated to Saratoga Casino Hotel for its year-round racing schedule, and the winter of 2023 brought with it a perfect storm for Jessica. She took over the role of track photographer at the New York half-miler, has written occasional feature stories on behalf of the track, and has also been invited by the Hambletonian Society to photograph some of the sport’s premier events.

As far as the impact and reach her work has had on the industry? Hallett sums it up in one word: “Surreal.”

“We went to the Breeders Crown at Woodbine (in 2022),” Hallett recounted, “and Jim Campbell ran over to me and was like, ‘I saw your photos of me at the Hambo, and I wanted to meet you!’ That’s weird to me that Jim Campbell, here he is, he just won the Hambletonian and the Oaks, and he wants to meet me? I was 23 at the time. It’s just weird. They’re acting like I’m famous. It’s different. I have all these messages, everyone asking, ‘Did you get photos of my horse?’ or even people calling me to submit my photos for awards. I never expected it to blow up like this.”

The accolades came twofold at the end of 2023, as Hallett was voted the recipient of the United States Harness Writers Association’s Breakthrough and Unsung Hero awards.

As for what’s to come?

“I honestly don't know,” Hallett said. “Right now I'm staying at Saratoga. I love it here. They treat me great, the horsemen are great — everything about this job is just amazing. I just take the opportunities as they come and see what's out there.

“I took photos for fun on the side at Tioga and Pompano, and then the opportunity to work as the track photographer at Pompano came about. The opportunities will come if you work at it; you just have to start small and work your way up.”
Employing a variety of perspectives and an innate aesthetic sense, Jessica Hallett captures the entire gamut of the Standardbred experience through her photography, ranging from the heart-warming sight of a mare bonding with her foal to the pure adrenaline of competition on the track.

*Photos courtesy of Jessica Hallett*
It’s long been said that variety is the spice of life. Just ask Wyatt Long, given the many hats he wears in the harness racing industry. And when you consider that the fourth-generation horseman has yet to celebrate his 20th birthday, his expansive résumé becomes all the more impressive. Coming from a racing family — including his dad, Wayne; and uncles, Gene and Donnie, all of whom train Standardbreds — it comes as little surprise that Wyatt would follow in the family business. In fact, he drove 21 winners last year and also broke his training maiden with then 4-year-old pacing mare I’mnotforeveryone. However, a whirlwind 2023 has taken Long’s career path away from the track — but not away from the horses. In October, Long became a USTA ID technician, covering all of Delaware and the southeastern corner of Pennsylvania.

“I insert microchips and freeze brand horses — those are the main two things,” Long said. Given his territory includes Hanover Shoe Farms and much of southeastern Pennsylvania’s large Amish and Mennonite populations, Long’s ID tech duties will see him log plenty of two-hour road trips from his home base to serve Standardbred owners and breeders in the Keystone State as foaling season heats up. “It’s a lot of phone calls — more phone calls than I can count in a day!” Long said. “They’ll call me and tell me how many horses they have. I’ll get the registered mare’s name for each foal. Everyone has their own registered number, so the number will be freeze branded. The microchips all have their own number, so I attach that with every horse that I do into my ID tech program that goes to the USTA.”

As far as what the microchipping process entails?

“It’s just like giving a shot; it just goes underneath the skin,” Long explained. “They come prepackaged in syringes; we just open them up, scan them, make sure the numbers match, insert them, and that’s it.”

If Long’s new post weren’t enough on its own, he also has a year of equine dentistry experience after taking a month-long certification class in Florida last winter through the American School of Equine Dentistry. Even amid his expanding responsibilities and also finding time to participate in rodeo events, Long still plans to stay true to his racing roots.

“I still work part-time for my dad when I can,” Long said. “I won’t be driving amateur races this year, but I’m still training and driving my own horses.”
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