

SPORTS & LEISURE

Yankee Paco left great memories for many

By **DAVE BRIGGS**
Special to the IFP

Trevor Ritchie of Acton will forever have a place in his heart for Yankee Paco, the horse that was a trailblazer for Canadian standardbreds.

Last Wednesday, Ritchie said he was saddened when word came from Australia that 15-year-old Yankee Paco had been euthanized. The stallion's health had deteriorated in recent months due to a severe joint problem.

It was 12 years ago this month that Ritchie drove Yankee Paco to victory in the 75th edition of the Hambletonian, harness racing's version of the Kentucky Derby.

Ritchie said the first thing that popped into his mind upon learning of Yankee Paco's passing was standing in the winner's circle at the Hambletonian.

"Obviously, that was the highlight of my career. I'll always be thankful to him for that," Ritchie said.

Apart from it being the first—and only—Hambletonian victory for Ritchie and Yankee Paco's trainer, Doug McIntosh of Wheatley, Ont., it was also the first time a Canadian-bred horse had won trotting's greatest race.

"There's only one horse that will ever be able to lay claim to that," Ritchie said. "It was just a great moment for me, obviously. I'm sure Doug would say the same for him. The Canadian breeders had to be proud that a Canadian-bred horse won what a lot of people say is the most important race."

Yankee Paco was a son of Balanced



Harness racing icon Yankee Paco became the first Canadian-bred Hambletonian winner when Trevor Ritchie of Acton drove him to victory in 2000. The trotter died Wednesday in Australia.

Photo courtesy Dave Landry, The Canadian Sportsman

Image, the Ontario-based Hall of Fame stallion who stood most of his career at Glengate Farms in Campbellville until his death in 2004.

Though Yankee Paco will forever be linked to Hambletonian lore, the trotter earned nearly \$1.5 million and won a string of other stakes races, including the Canadian Trotting Classic among his 14 victories in 25 starts. Yankee Paco was named Canada's horse of the year for 2000.

Yet, his most indelible mark was

made on Aug. 7, 2000 at the Meadowlands Racetrack in New Jersey when he won the Hambletonian despite never seeing the rail the entire mile.

Ritchie remembers the mile in vivid detail.

"He was, basically, parked the whole mile," the driver said, admitting he got caught outside and was forced to go with Plan B when the horses he thought would provide some cover all cleared to the front. "I just took a nice hold of him and sat out there and rated him

down the rest of the backstretch and around the turn. . . . (In the stretch) I just said 'Go' to Paco and he went. He went from there through the wire.

"As it turned out, it may not have been a great drive, but I think it was the drive that won him the race."

It was just one of many times Yankee Paco displayed "courage," Ritchie said.

"He wasn't the soundest horse in the world, so I give him even more credit. . . . As soon you turned him and showed him the gate, he was just all race. He threw away any aches and pains that he had and just went to business."

He was also very good for Ritchie's business.

"He certainly helped my career along. I think he gave it a pretty good boost," said the 56-year-old winner of more than 3,600 races and earnings of almost \$70 million. "It seemed like after that win I started getting listed on horses that I might not have, normally, got listed on. I ended up winning three Breeders Crowns that fall and I believe some of that had to do with Paco winning the Hambletonian, to be honest with you."

Yankee Paco spent his last years performing stallion duty at Empire Stud in Australia.

Yet, he will forever stand as a Canadian harness racing icon.

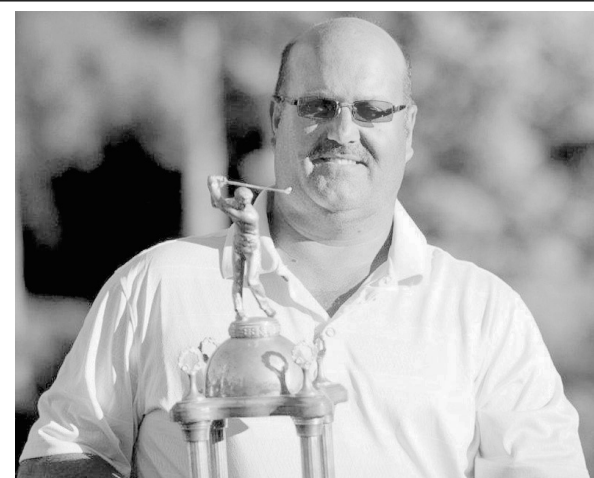
—Dave Briggs is the editor of *The Canadian Sportsman*, the oldest harness racing magazine in North America. He can be reached by email at dbriggs@canadiansportsman.ca



North Halton club champs

Gloria Sinclair (**left**) and Bill Swartz (**right**) were declared the women's and men's champions, respectively, following The Club at North Halton's annual club championship tournament earlier this month. Sinclair earned her 21st women's club title, shooting rounds of 83-76-83 and also claimed her 13th North Halton senior women's championship with those scores. Swartz fired rounds of 69-70-70 to finish at seven under par. Other club champs for 2012 include: Junior Girls—Jennifer Knox; Junior Boys—Robbie Johnson; Senior Men's—Rick Cody.

Photos by Cam Noble



SHOPPING THIS WEEK?... SHOP LOCAL

Shopping local saves you money. Out of town shops have done a good job of convincing us all that sole traders = expensive, but the evidence just isn't there to back this up. If you add in travel, parking costs, fees to transport larger items home and your time, the overall cost is often much higher. SHOP LOCAL, SHOP HALTON HILLS!



THE INDEPENDENT
& FREE PRESS
YOUR LOCAL COMMUNITY NEWSPAPER
905.873.0301