Alfie Carroll goes from fractured skull, brain bleeding to Canada's '15 dash champion
by Dave Briggs

Alfie Carroll never told anyone but family members about the skull fracture, or the fact his brain bled in three places. Canada's leading dash-winning driver in 2015 also kept quiet - partly, in keeping with his shy personality - about the fact doctors told him he was lucky the accident had not robbed him of some motion on the left side of his body.

"The one spot was right near the spot in your brain that controls your motor skills," Carroll said this week, a year-and-a-half after the accident at Flamboro Downs that left him with a concussion that was much more severe than the 30-year-old ever admitted publicly.

"I didn't want the judges to hold me back," said Carroll who was Canada's leading driver by wins at the time of the accident and wasn't about to lose all the career momentum it had taken him years to build.

Carroll was driving Dreamfair Dahlia for trainer Patrick Fletcher in the first race on the May 3, 2014 card at Flamboro when Bad Sister - the horse Brad Forward was driving for Gregg McNair - made a break in the first turn and fell to the track, taking Dreamfair Dahlia and Carroll down, too. As Carroll fell, he was hit in the head by the sulky shaft of Santanna Anna driven by Steve Byron.

Carroll said the blow cracked his helmet.

"I think that's what did the most damage," said the resident of the Ontario town of Iona Station, which is about 30 minutes southwest of The Raceway at The Western Fair District in London.

Doctors told Carroll to take three months off. He came back after one.

"I had just got going and then I went down and I didn't want to be out too long, but I probably should have taken another month off because I wasn't driving as well when I came back as I should have been," Carroll said.

"Everything seemed so slow. I was always a second behind. I was always worried about going down again and hitting my head."

Despite being off a month, Carroll finished third in the national dash race in 2014 - behind Trevor Henry (472) and James MacDonald (336) - with 311 wins.

Carroll stayed healthy in 2015 and won Canada's dash title with 408 victories, 65 more than runnerup Sylvain Filion.

"It feels good. I never thought I'd be the guy that would ever do that, but I'm glad I am, obviously," Carroll said, proudly. "I'm definitely going to try to get it again this year, but at least I have done it once so I can say it. There have been a lot of great drivers that haven't (won Canada's dash title)."

Thursday, two days after Carroll won six of Tuesday's 11 races at Western Fair, he was named the half-mile track's driver of the year for 2015. It was the second straight year he earned that honor. More than half of his wins in 2015
Nominations close February 16, 2016!

Pepsi North America Cup XXXIII
Three-year-old open pace.
$1,000,000 Guaranteed Final Purse.

Fan Hanover
Three-year-old filly pace.
Purse $480,000 E ($300,000 A).

Goodtimes
Three-year-old open trot.
Purse $235,000 E ($125,000 A).

Elegantimage
Three-year-old filly trot.
Purse $400,000 E ($250,000 A).

Somebeachsomewhere
Three-year-old open pace.
Purse $225,000 E ($75,000 A).

Casual Breeze
Three-year-old filly trot.
Purse $150,000 E ($75,000 A).

Confederation Cup XXXVIII
Four-year-old open pace.
Purse $225,000 E ($200,000 A).

Canadian Trotting Classic
Three-year-old open trot.
Purse $700,000 E ($425,000 A).

Governor’s Cup
Two-year-old open pace.
Purse $565,000 E ($90,000 A).

Valley Victory
Two-year-old open trot.
Purse $525,000 E ($50,000 A).

Three Diamonds
Two-year-old filly pace.
Purse $425,000 E ($50,000 A).

Goldsmith Maid
Two-year-old filly trot.
Purse $465,000 E ($50,000 A).

Battle of Waterloo
Ontario Sired Two-year-old open pace.
Purse $200,000 E Final ($90,000 A).

Battle of the Belles
Ontario Sired Two-year-old filly pace.
Purse $140,000 E Final ($60,000 A).

Click here for full details!
The same year, the B-track specialist also set a personal best for earnings with more than $1.8 million made. In 12 years in the sulky, Carroll has won nearly 1,700 races and over $8.5 million. But it was only the last two years that his career really gained momentum.

"The key to me being successful is really just having good trainers like Vic Puddy and Richard Moreau and Bob McIntosh and all the other guys. There's a bunch of other guys, too, but those are the big three that I drove for. Without them, I never could have won as many races," he said.

It all started on Nov. 29, 2013 at Western Fair when Puddy put Carroll down on a horse called The Big Bite.

"I had the seven hole and I won with him," Carroll said.

"After that, he started putting me down and then Moreau started putting me down. It just snowballed from there. I was lucky I had success with him right off the hop and that's what helped to get me going."

Carroll also had his two biggest career victories in 2015 six days apart. He drove Moreau's talented older pacing mare Sandbetweenurtoes to victory on Oct. 3 in the $76,000 Ellamony at Flamboro and, on Oct. 9 won the $36,500 Oktoberfest invitation at Western Fair driving Moreau's Evenin Of Pleasure.

The day after winning the Ellamony, Carroll received a special text message from one of his driving heroes. "It was John Campbell congratulating me for winning. He said, 'Nice drive.' I've talked to him a couple of times when he came down here, but I thought that was pretty cool that John Campbell took the time to do that."

Another driving legend thinks Carroll has the natural talent to be a star. Bill O'Donnell said he doesn't know Carroll well, but he likes what he's seen.

"I first noticed him when I used to race old Indiana Hall at Woodstock," O'Donnell said. "I thought, 'This kid really drives a horse well.' He was just young then and getting started four, five years ago. He wasn't one that was a licker. He wasn't bouncing up and down. He was very cool and calm. If you saw him last year when he won the Ellamony at Flamboro, Sandbetweenurtoes was one of the favorites. He just sat so calm and cool with her and she won. I expected him to bomb out of there, but he didn't. He just took her back nice and calm."

Carroll is the son of lifelong horsepeople Richard and Mary Carroll.

"I grew up around it, but I didn't think I really wanted to be in it going through high school, because it was tough to make a living," Alfie said. "But I hated school, so I started working with the horses more. My dad told me I should get my driver's license and make a little bit of extra money, if I could. That's how it got started. I definitely wouldn't be anywhere without my parents. They were the ones that let me make mistakes on their horses and didn't give me any grief about it."

Carroll, who drives horses virtually seven days a week - "The driving on the roads has been the worst part, especially in the summer because I went to Georgian and Grand River full-time" - said he gets his work ethic from his
The Meadowlands is working on building a new generation of fans, but it's not easy. (Lisa Photo)

My parents are very hard workers. My dad is 80 and he still goes to the barn every day and jogs horses and ships them around," Alfie said. "He's in pretty good shape for his age, I think, and it's probably because he keeps active and working hard. He works too hard, really. He doesn't need to work as hard as he does."

Alfie said his parents were quietly proud that he won the Canadian dash title. "They knew that I wanted it, so they were happy for me. They're pretty quiet. I'm like them. They don't really talk a whole lot," Alfie said.

Alfie said one day he would like to try the Woodbine Entertainment Group circuit, but for now the rising star is content on the province's smaller ovals. "Hopefully, I can have as good a year as I did last year. I always strive for a little bit better every year," Alfie said. "Hopefully, I can keep it rolling."

The Meadowlands chips away at the stone
by Dean Towers

One of the most interesting phenomenons I have seen in my time in horse racing - primarily from the business end - is a want to fix things quickly. New customers are wanted yesterday, new initiatives - like a takeout reduction or a guaranteed pool - are tried for a week, and if things don't go swimmingly after said week, they are deemed to not work.

The Meadowlands is working on building a new generation of fans, but it's not easy. (Lisa Photo)

My response to that is always the same. It took 100 years of customer under appreciation to chase people from patronizing the sport of harness racing. No one should expect things to get better overnight.

At one track - the Meadowlands - we are seeing a little bit of a shift in strategy; from the quick fixes, to trying to be more customer-centric, with small ball. Brick by brick, they are at the very least making an effort.

"Show Me the Horses!"

At the present time, approximately nine of every 10 dollars bet into the pools comes from outside the racetrack venue itself. One of the most fervent complaints from customers in simulcast land is the (lack of) quality of the
signal, and what the signal shows. Customers do not want to watch talking heads on their TVs, they want to see score outs. They don't want to see graphics taking over the little video box on their computer, they want a clean view of a post parade.

The Meadowlands - beginning primarily this year- might be the best track in all of thoroughbred or harness racing in addressing this complaint. They cycle their cameras from horse one through horse 10 during scoredowns, and the post parades are usually professional and well shot. If there is a more bettor friendly signal in racing, I have yet to find it.

Yes this is a little thing. But it's one of those little things customers expected to be fixed for years and for the most part were ignored.

"Psst, I'm Pulling to Last at 2-5."

Back about 10 years ago, I was watching a winner's circle interview with driver Luc Ouellette.

Luc said, "I wanted to give him an easy one from the 10 post tonight, but I saw the public made him 3-2 so I had to get off the wings and give them a run for their money."

Luc did get off the wings, found the five hole, grabbed cover and won easily.

There are, unfortunately, a lot of drivers who do not think like Luc. They drive "for the trainer" only; the betting public be damned.

The betting public is smart, and people who bet the races each night know horses are not machines, and there are times where you, as a driver or trainer, will grab leather. But at the same time they want their hard-earned money to be shown some respect.

This season, the Meadowlands created a new trainer intent policy, where trainers are asked what their plans are and this information is passed along to the public. So far, we have seen some success. Drivers and trainers are learning that those who pay for purses need to be shown some effort, and if the instructions are to find a helmet, they can do that by getting off fifth, not last. Bettors are learning that drivers and trainers are not out there to "stiff" horses, but trying to win if the opportunity presents itself, based on dozens of factors. Communication and mutual respect is a good thing for any business, and I give this initiative five gold stars at this early stage.

"Easy Handicapping, Low Prices, Low Handle"

As anyone who knows anything about wagering the horses will tell you, short prices at high takeout and low minimums is not only an elixir for zero growth, but a recipe for disaster. Harness racing has been plagued with low payouts for some time, even at a mile track like the Big M.

Combating this issue is intricate and difficult, but again, the Meadowlands has been giving it a college try. Fourteen-horse fields have been carded each week, and from top to bottom, we see fewer and fewer six-horse affairs with 1-5 shots. The track has a long way to go, and the push-pull of making sure owners can make their money while putting on a bettable product for the public will always be a struggle. However, progress is being made.

"A Deck of Cards Doesn't Cheat"

Horseplayer surveys, since what seems like forever, always exhibit one main characteristic: They want cheating, either on-track or off-track, taken seriously. A gas trainer with a parade of 3-5 shots and form reversals from suspect barns makes them shake their head and wonder if anyone is minding the store. Rule breaking on-track, like the quid pro quo that is seen in harness racing - letting a friend in front of you, kicking horses and getting an advantage while the judges sit on their hands, letting horses up the wood, etc - has been complained about since the Clinton administration.

Jeff Gural has been front and center on this issue.

I fully realize Gural is a polarizing figure inside the pylons, but on the customer side it's much different. If you sit 100 customers down and ask them who in the harness racing world is most looking out for them, I'd bet dollars to donuts close to 100 would say Jeff Gural.

For those who do not wager, for those who have their head buried in their day to day work, the above might seem like nothing to you; small ball, little things, most of which don't really matter. But for those who help create the money for purses, I can assure you, they are very serious issues. Fixing them will not help the sport overnight; you won't be asking the accounting department for a cost-benefit model of them; handle for the sport won't go up 25 per cent by year's end; no one is going to do a lot of back patting. However, when looked at in totality, the Meadowlands has been chipping away at the stone, trying to get customers they've lost back, and letting the ones they still have know their money is not taken for granted.

The Meadowlands has a lot more to do on pricing, length of cards and much more. But in 2016, I believe they're making some headway.
Boni cant wait to see what Always B Miki will do in 2016
by Dave Briggs

Forgive Bob Boni for sounding like an excited teenager when it comes to his ultra-talented five-year-old pacer Always B Miki.

"I can't wait," Boni said this week. "Can I fall asleep and wake up on May 1st? As I get older, I don't want to lose months, but I just can't wait for him to race. I'm very, very excited about it."

Last fall, the $1.2 million-winning son of Always A Virgin-Artstopper rebounded from his second serious career injury to storm through his only four races of the year in epic style after posting a 1:48.2 qualifier at Red Mile that equaled the world record for a qualifier. The Jimmy Takter trainee was dominant in the $300,000 Breeders Crown open pace final at Woodbine in October - defeating a tough older group by five-and-a-half lengths in the slop in 1:49.3. He then ended the year with a 1:49.1 victory in the $136,500 American-National at Balmoral to cap a perfect four-for-four campaign with earnings of $301,210 for owners Bluewood Stable (William Jones, Jillian Luff, Mitchel Skolnick, Bluestone Farms and Kitty Hawk Stable (Boni and Stuart Hankin), Roll The Dice Stable (Joseph Hurley) and Christina Takter.

In 2014, Always B Miki was scratched out of the $531,250 Breeders Crown final for sophomore pacers on Nov. 22 at the Meadowlands mere minutes before going to post with what was later found to be a broken left hind long (P-1) pastern.

"When he had the first broken bone we were cautiously optimistic," Boni said. "(Veterinary surgeon) Patty Hogan gave him a great opportunity to have a full recovery. She was very optimistic. But, I've been doing this long enough to know that they still have to perform. Surgery is still surgery and things happen. He came back as good as possible and then trained in May at the Meadowlands and trained as good as a horse can train. I watched him train a mile in :53 with a back half in :55. He was fabulous."

A few days later Takter called Boni to tell him Always B Miki had suffered a broken bone in the right hind P-1 pastern.

"So he went through the process again. When he trained in :53 for Jimmy he never looked better until the next go-round when he came back after the second surgery where he looked better than he did then. Now he's as good as the horse has ever looked physically. Mitchel (Skolnick) and I stopped in a few weeks ago and the horse looked sensational."

The prior injuries don't concern Boni.

"Not to minimize a broken bone, but soft-tissue scares the living daylights out of you. Broken bones heal... Now, hopefully, everything is good and solid. He goes great. He looks terrific and we look forward to some good races."

Boni said Always B Miki will likely make his 2016 debut in May.

Classy Lane fire fund tops $330,000
by Dave Briggs

The incredible success of the GoFundMe campaign set up to help those directly affected by the Jan. 4 barn fire at Classy Lane Stables in Puslinch, ON that killed 43 standardbred racehorses is proving to be an indication of the depth of the grief and generosity in the horseracing community. As of late Saturday night, the fund had exceeded $330,000 in just 11 days thanks to 1,145 donations. A GoFundMe spokesperson said the amount already is in the top five GoFundMe campaigns ever in Canada.

"It's wild... But I'm not surprised. Horsepeople really come together when something like this happens," said Central Ontario Standardbred Association (COSA) president and multiple Hall of Famer Bill O'Donnell.

O'Donnell said COSA - which represents the horsepeople that race on the Woodbine Entertainment Group (WEG) circuit - donated $25,000 to the fund. WEG, Meadowlands Racetrack owner Jeff Gural and the Ontario Horse Racing Industry Association are among those that have donated $10,000 each.

The Meadowlands reported Saturday night that it raised more than $30,000 for the fire fund - including Gural's donation - from donations made by horsepeople on the Jan. 8 and 9 cards. Ron Burke and Mark Weaver donated some $3,600 from a percentage of their horse's purse earnings.

Thoroughbred racing's Horsemen's Benevolent and Protective Agency in Canada and Hall of Fame horseman Keith Waples are on the list of those who have given $5,000. A long list of racing luminaries, such as owner John
Fielding, drivers Sylvain Filion and Yannick Gingras, Hall of Fame builder Dr Glen Brown, the Daily Racing Form’s harness division and thoroughbred racing’s famed Sam-Son Farms and Canadian Thoroughbred Horse Society have kicked in $2,000 or more.

O’Donnell said COSA has formed a seven-person committee to determine how best to distribute the money to help the six trainers and their employees left decimated by the blaze that destroyed Barn 1 at the training centre.

Trainers Ben Wallace, Roger Mayotte, Chantal Mitchell, Kris Di Cenzo, Dan Lagace and Floyd Amos lost virtually every horse they train and most of their equipment in the blaze, throwing them and their staff out of work.

Last week, COSA issued checks from its benevolence fund to pay the wages of the horse caretakers who lost their jobs because of the fire. O’Donnell said high on the agenda now is helping the trainers pay their bills.

"We want to get the trainers some money. The grooms, they all got a paycheck last week. None of those trainers did and they have ongoing bills, too," O’Donnell said.

**Tetrick wins six at Big M**

Driver Tim Tetrick won six of the 14 races on Saturday’s Meadowlands card.

Tetrick won with Bushwhacker in the second race (1:50, $2.80) and then recorded a natural hat trick with True Blue Hall in the fourth (1:51.4, $8.20), Moonlight Ransom in the fifth (1:52.3, $5.60) and Dinner At The Met in the sixth (1:52.1, $5.00). He rounded out the six-pack with a victory by Our Dragon King (1:51.3, $4.80) in the ninth and Arockin Hanover in the 14th (1:53.1, $2.20).

Total handle for the 14-race program was $2,826,048, including $156,822 in the evening’s trio of guaranteed-pool horizontal wagers. Since neither 20-cent Jackpot High 5 was hit, the Jan. 22 seventh-race High 5 will boast a $5,915 carryover, while the finale’s High 5 will carry $62,725 of added money should one punter take down the entire pool.

- with files from James Witherite, Meadowlands Media Relations

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**Updated Racelines!**

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**A further history of racing in Chicago**

I would like to make a correction in regards to an article published Jan 15, 2016 regarding the Illinois racing circuit. Actually, there have been other venues that have held harness racing through the years at Illinois tracks that come to mind in my 35 years of playing the sulkies.

Arlington Park had racing for a short time on their 1 1/8th mile track. I believe they only ran a season, but I can’t confirm if they ran for longer.

In addition, Quad City Downs located in the far western part of the state in East Moline IL near the Mississippi River, ran harness racing from the ’70s through 2015. There was also Fairmount Park in Collinsville IL (near St Louis in the far southern part of the state) who ceased racing harness in 1999. Both of the aforementioned tracks ran low price claimers and a multitude of NW type racing for those horses who could no longer compete at the higher levels the Chicagoland tracks offered on a nightly basis. A preferred event would usually consist of 8-10K claimers. Chicagoland racing history boasts many venues that featured harness racing dating back to the 1830s.

It is too sad the Illinois Racing Board, as well as dishonest businessmen and selfish politicians, have basically gutted this once thriving industry in the State of Illinois. Much like other parts of the country, the failure to recognize the contribution of agri-business side of harness racing has adversely affected the sport.

- Bill Noesges

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Saturday's Results:

9, Mea, $22,500, P, W/O $10,000 LIFE (P.P. 1-6 DRAWN, 7&8 DRAWN), 27.4, 57.1, 1:25.0, 1:53.4, SY
1-Doctor Rj (g, 7, Real Artist--Informant, by It's Fritz)
T-Paul Kennedy. D-Eric Goodell, $11,250, Lifetime Record:
121-28-14-7, $215,710
To watch the race replay click here

1-Astrore's Love (g, 6, Make My Day--Luvush Bluegrass, by Dorunrun Bluegrass), $1,000 2011 IN-PREM O-Eash Racing Stable Inc. B-Ora Wayne Miller. T-Don Eash.
D-Lewayne Miller, $10,000, Lifetime Record: 118-28-18-13, $278,685
Race replay is unavailable

Friday's Results:

2, M, $25,000, T, Open 1 Handicap, 26.4, 54.4, 1:24.3, 1:53.1, FT
1-Can Do (g, 7, Cantab Hall--Meadowbranch Queen, by Malabar Man), $17,000 2010 LEX-SEL O-Jody L Riedel.
B-Moni Market Breeders & Joie De Vie Farm LLC. T-Jody Riedel. D-Anthony Napolitano, $12,500, Lifetime Record:
117-30-23-16, $346,446

1-1 Rafa (b,g,4 - Camluck-Arizona Beach-Jennas Beach Boy) O/B-Robin L Morley T-Richard Moreau D-Sylvain Filion, $8,500, Lifetime Record: 4-4-0-0, $27,500

Saturday's Results:

2, M, $25,000, P, Open Handicap, M, 26.4, 54.2, 1:22.2, 1:50.0, FT
1-Bushwacker (g, 5, Rocknroll Hanover--Dolphins Can Talk, by Camluck), $135,000 2012 LEX-SEL O-Henderson Farms. B-Black Horse Racing Stable LLC. B-Al J Libfeld, CA & Marvin Katz, CA. T-Patti Harmon. D-Jim Marohn Jr, $10,000, Lifetime Record:
64-20-6-9, $167,539

To watch the race replay click here

9. WDB, $25,000, P, NW $20,000 LAST 5 STARTS OR NW $36,000 LAST 8 STARTS. AE: OPT. CLM. $50,000.
AE: NW $140,000 LIFETIME. 27.1, 56, 1:23.4, 1:51.3
1-Nirvana Seelster (b,g,5 - Camluck-No Strikes Against - Western Hanover) O-Bruce E Davy B-Seelster Farms Inc T-William Budd D-Richard Zeron, $12,500, Lifetime Record: 79-17-7-17, $145,630
To watch the race replay click here

Friday's Results:

10, MVR, $20,000, P, FILLIES & MARES OPEN, 27.3, 56.2, 1:25.1, 1:55.4, SY
1-American Girl (m, 7, Art's Chip--L Dees Lourdes, by Dragon Again), $6,000 2010 HOOSIER O-Darla D Gaskin & Stanley L Rosenblatt. B-Gardner Farms LLC. T-Tyler George. D-Trace Tetrick, $10,000, Lifetime Record:
113-29-24-7, $597,788
Friday's Results:
6, YR, $24,000, P, F&M PREFERRED HANDICAP POST POSITIONS 1-6 ASSIGNED, 28.1, 58.3, 1:27.1, 1:54.1, FT
1-Secrets Out N (m, 6, Mach Three--Holmes Town Girl, by Holmes Hanover) O-Andrew M Herzog. B-P J Creighton, NZ. T-Thomas Milici. D-Brian Sears, $12,000, Lifetime Record: 27-9-2-1, $75,637

Saturday's Results:
5, YR, $20,000, P, NON-WINNERS OF $25,000 IN LAST 5 STARTS, M, 28.0, 57.0, 1:25.1, 1:53.0, FT
1-Sunfire Blue Chip (h, 6, American Ideal--Shot Togo Bluechip, by Cam's Card Shark), $75,000 2011 SHS-HBG O-Christina Takter & John And Jim Fielding, CA & Brixton Medical Inc & R A W Equine Inc, CA. B-Blue Chip Bloodstock Inc. T-Jimmy Takter. D-Brian Sears, $10,000, Lifetime Record: 44-17-5-4, $922,174
To watch the race replay click here

6, YR, $32,000, P, OPEN HANDICAP POST POSITIONS 1-3 ASSIGNED POST POSITIONS 4-7 DRAWN POST POSITION 8 ASSIGNED, M, 28.2, 57.2, 1:25.2, 1:53.4, FT
Calls: 4H, 6H, 2H, 2H, NK - Finish Order: Panic Disorder, Hugh Hefner N, Drunken Desire A, National Debt, Phil Your Boots
To watch the race replay click here

7, YR, $20,000, P, NON-WINNERS OF $25,000 IN LAST 5 STARTS, M, 27.2, 56.4, 1:24.3, 1:53.0, FT
1-Bullet Bob (g, 7, Tell All--Erasable Art, by Artsplace) O-Fox Hollow Farm. B-Fox Hollow Farm. T-Mark Harder. D-Tyler Buter, $10,000, Lifetime Record: 126-25-18-13, $310,260
To watch the race replay click here

HRU Race Criteria
The race results contained in Harness Racing Update: North American races with a purse value of $20,000 and over and American-bred and sired winners of significant races abroad. Stakes races with a purse value of $60,000 and over are previewed in HRU.