

Fathers Figures to Love the Racing Game

New participants Daniel Fathers and partners, Paul Rutledge and Tess Hardy, join the Ontario QH racing community, going from the ownership seminar, to the sale, to the racetrack in record time. by Keith McCalmont



PHOTO BY TIM LEVY

Now positioned to pursue a life-long dream, actor Daniel Fathers is eager to establish himself in both the racing and breeding aspects of the QH racing business.

It was almost a Hollywood beginning for actor Daniel Fathers in his first foray into the world of Quarter Horse racing.

The 45-year-old native of London, England, best known for playing the Jonas Brothers' Uncle Brown in the Camp Rock films, purchased Luck b A Lady B with partners Paul Rutledge and Tess Hardy at September's QROOI Yearling & Mixed Sale and watched with delight as she closed to finish third in a Fort Erie maiden claiming event, a couple weeks later.

Fathers, who admits to being a fan of Thoroughbred and steeplechase racing in his youth, is smitten with the burgeoning Quarter Horse racing scene in Ontario.

"It's like Mens' 100 Metre dash in the Olympics," says Fathers. "That's the flagship race, and I think Quarter Horse racing is like that. It's so sexy and so fast. It really excites me!"

Luck b A Lady B went postward as the 9-5 favourite that day and was closing quickly at the finish after a rough start.

"I tried to use my binoculars when they came out of the gate and I lost them as they're way too fast for me," laughs Fathers. "I couldn't believe how fast it was at the finish line. You couldn't even read the numbers of the horses."

A Childhood Dream

The actor, familiar from his numerous film and television appearances in *Pontypool*, *The Border*, *Flashpoint* and his recurring part as horse trainer Stewart Forrester in CBC's *Heartland*, is now realizing a childhood dream of owning horses.

"Horses are my second career, but I'm going full bore with it right now," says Fathers. "When I was eight years old, my mum sent me to a racing stable to be a stable lad. We had to get the horses tacked up, clean their stalls and send the jockeys off to do their training runs and clean the tack when they came back in. We'd have riding lessons in the afternoon."

An accomplished athlete, Fathers received a full sports scholarship to Britain's acclaimed sports school, Kelly College, achieving international amateur status in both rugby and track, and was selected for England's rugby final squad. An absolute bundle of energy, he somehow managed to also find time for theatre and dance.

While it may seem like Fathers had it all, the affable actor recalls a dream of a different sort. "I wanted to be a jockey," he laughs. "But, I grew."

Fortunately, a different type of opportunity has arisen through the friends he's met along the way in his lifelong journey of acting on stage and screen.

"My partner in life, Nicki, was an exercise rider at Woodbine,"



New to racing but not to the horse world, Tess Hardy and Paul Rutledge are shown with Luck b A Lady B, purchased in partnership with Fathers, at their farm near London, ON.

says Fathers. “We’re partnering up and developing our own equine program as I’m doing with Paul (Rutledge) and Tess (Hardy), my partners, in Luck b A Lady B.”

Rutledge, and his life partner Hardy, own Action Specialities Equine, a company that specializes in providing horses and livestock for ongoing film and TV productions. Rutledge has worked as a stunt double for Fathers on numerous occasions, while Hardy, an accomplished equestrian, assists with training the equine actors.

“I first met Daniel on the set of *The Border*,” recalls Rutledge. “He was an energetic guy who wanted to get into riding and expand more on his acting roles. We helped him buy a horse and gave him lessons and turned him loose and he’s enjoyed it ever since.”

Fathers and Rutledge hit it off immediately and the equine training paid off in the form of a role in an acclaimed TV series.

“I got cast in CBC’s *Heartland* as a horse trainer,” smiles Fathers. “Part of the reason I got it, is that they needed actors who could, one, act, and two, be around horses. They had difficulty finding those kinds of people, but I fit that bill.”

With his acting career taking off, Fathers spent his time flying back and forth between Ontario and Los Angeles building an impressive resume. But the equine dream still burned within.

“I was in L.A for three years and when I came back a year-and-a-half ago, I wanted to find an area in the horse business that I would fit,” says Fathers. “I emceed a Toronto Horse Day event because of my role in

Heartland, and there I met a bunch of rodeo guys and they invited me to do rodeos with them, and then I got into barrel racing and they sent me to rodeo school where I rode bulls.”

A Racing Partnership Is Born

Rutledge and Fathers, who had stayed in touch over the years, reconnected when the actor returned to Ontario on a more permanent basis, and a fortuitous moment occurred.

“Paul happened across a pamphlet for the Quarter Horse racing ownership seminar put on by the Quarter Horse Racing Industry Development Program and we thought, why not investigate further,” says Fathers.

The seminar, which was held at Ajax Downs in September, was more than convincing.

“It was brilliant,” recalled Fathers. “They really laid it out. They had horse owners there, trainers, lawyers to talk to about syndicates and even tax people.”

Buoyed at the prospect of entering the Quarter Horse racing game, Fathers, Rutledge and Hardy cracked the books and prepared to take the plunge at the Yearling and Mixed Sale held at the Orangeville Fairgrounds.

“We went through literature on Quarter Horse racing and bought a book called *Wire to Wire*, which is the story of Walter Merrick, the dean of Quarter Horse racing,” recalled Rutledge. “We went online to Equibase and really did our homework and studied.”



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Their plan, arranged over a two-week period, but based on a wealth of experience garnered by Rutledge and Hardy, was to build a broodmare program with the goal of producing racehorses and benefit from Ontario's lucrative breeders' awards program.

The partners also wanted to buy at least one ready-made horse in order to get some immediate racing experience. The horse that caught their collective eye was Luck b A Lady B. Somewhat enamoured with the Oklahoma-bred's pedigree, the trio started bidding, but when the price soared to \$3,000 they reached an impasse. Luckily, an Ontario racing industry veteran intervened with some sage advice.

"We were sitting behind Greg Watson," says Rutledge. "When we were haggling over whether to go another \$100 on her, he turned around and said, 'that horse is worth every penny and she's ready to race. If you buy her, I'll train her for you'".

Spurred on by Watson's encouraging words, they continued their bidding and moments later the gavel banged down. Luck b A Lady B was theirs for a price of \$3,500.

With Watson tied up preparing for a race south of the border, he recommended his friend Barry Wood to the partnership group to oversee their first fledgling steps into the racing game.

Fast-track Education

Gaining the day-to-day racing experience is a key part of understanding the industry in the eyes of Fathers.

"We wanted a horse that was already proven in racing to help us learn the everyday part of the business," stated Fathers. "We wanted to hire a trainer, talk to the trainer, understand what the trainer will be doing and understand the costs on an on-going basis to understand managing cost and risk and injuries."

At the September sale, Fathers was the final bidder on Luck b A Lady B, as well as broodmare hopeful, Slipping by DHd.

"She had a really good racing season last year and she's bred top and bottom with fantastic speed indexes so we thought she would be a great buy as a broodmare," says Fathers of his breeding prospect purchase. "The man who owned her (Bill Farrell) was there at the sale and said she'd had a knee operation. We might race here as a four-year-old if she heals, if not, she's a great prospect as a broodmare. We got her at a steal (\$1,200) and I couldn't refuse."

Hardy and Rutledge also opened up their wallet at the sale, reaching outside of their partnership with Fathers, to purchase the 12-year-old mare, Two Tears Dot Com. The mare has already foaled a number of winners on the track.

"You have to out-cross a bit and look at what is actually producing," advises Hardy. "She won the first ever Alex Picov Memorial and was second in the Maple Leaf Derby. You might not say you want that horse based on bloodlines, but you'd want her on production record."

It is a testament to the accessibility of Ontario's Quarter Horse racing industry that three prospective owners were able to educate themselves, purchase a horse and race within a matter of weeks of wading into the often intimidating waters of competitive horse racing.

"The whole community has been friendly and very helpful to newbies

like us, who want to get involved and make the right moves," states Rutledge. And, it is a testament to the ownership trio's faith in the sport's future locally that they are investing their money into the breeding side of the game and carving a foothold in a program that handed out thousands of dollars in breeders' awards in 2011.

"We really feel we're in the right place at the right time with Quarter Horse racing in Ontario," says Fathers. "It's a growing industry. The Ontario Racing Commission wants to invest in people like us and they want to attract new owners, new breeders and grow the industry. They're putting tons of money and incentives into the industry through their development program."

Fathers is certain that he, and his partners, have really stumbled into an industry with nowhere to go but up. "We're not only on the ground floor, we're on the right elevator," he says.

Securing new owners is essential to the growth of the industry and Ontario Quarter Horse racing has hooked a real keener in Fathers.

"I have a real thirst for knowledge and I know I need to catch up in this industry to really be educated," states Fathers matter-of-factly. "And, I want to be educated as fast as I can. With me, it's not a case of a guy who had a bit of money from acting and decided to use it as a tax write off and have a bit of a thrill with horse racing. I decided this year I wanted to really get into the business of horses."

The actor knows that he can't expect to take home a cheque, like he did with Luck b A Lady B, in every race, and he's prepared to take his lumps along the way.

"We'll make mistakes and we'll come up against hardships, just like any other outfit," says Fathers. "But I believe that every mistake we will make will be a learning experience and we'll just get better and better."

A Goal of Getting to the Top

As Fathers, Rutledge and Hardy wait for the 2012 racing season to begin, they can hold on to the memory of a thrilling first start.

"It was surreal," purrs Fathers of his first trip to the paddock. "I had access to places where I normally wouldn't be allowed, and I could talk to the trainer and jockey. Paul and I were standing there tickled pink and excited. It was like Christmas day for us as six-year-olds. That was our horse and she was about to race."

English-born jockey Tony Phillips even managed to make the experience extra special for his fellow countryman.

"Tony said to me in the paddock, 'Alright mate, I'm going to bring back the dosh.' And he did!" laughs Fathers. "She finished in the money and it was a fantastic learning experience and unbelievably exciting."

Fathers will continue to be busy in Quarter Horse racing's off-season as the host of a brand new reality show, *Canada's Greatest Know It All*, which will air on Discovery Channel Canada on Monday nights in January.

"If you can envision *MacGyver* meets *Myth Busters* meets *Survivor* that's what *Canada's Greatest Know It All* is," he laughs. He can only hope the show will be as successful as Fathers meets Rutledge meets Hardy.

"It's still a bit weird as we only decided to enter the industry a month or two ago," ponders Fathers. "But we've decided to be in the horse business, and second place is not an option." **RD**