



Turning the Barrels

WPCA Newsletter



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The 2013 Equine Award of Excellence: The Story Behind The Award

Eddie Melville wouldn't be able to tell you how many miles he's chased chuckwagons on horseback, but he'd quickly tell you that no matter how smooth or rough the ride, his love for the sport and the thoroughbred never diminished.

In fact, he never thought the horses got enough credit, so three years ago he went to his boss and convinced Import Tool to sponsor public awards recognizing the top wagon horses in the World Professional Chuckwagon Association.

~Calgary Herald, October 26, 2008

The truth is that **Eddie Melville** simply loves wagon horses like few others ever have. He is a walking encyclopedia of the great stories about wagon horses, from the times he watched his grandfather **Orville Strandquist** race to today.

Eddie and his brother **Billy Melville** always thought that the horses deserved better recognition but were not sure what that should look like. It had been talked about many times before, in particular when **Kelly Sutherland** was winning the Calgary Stampede five times in six years. Kelly had the same great lead team but there was no recognition for them.

In the winter of 2004–2005, Eddie finally decided it was time to do something about it. Eddie and Billy spent hours that winter discussing what the format should look like. Their original idea is still the format that is used.

Eddie arranged for his employer Import Tool to



Eddie Melville is interviewed by his brother **Billy Melville** at the Calgary Stampede. Eddie and Billy are the driving forces behind the creation of the Equine Award of Excellence.

Photo by Dana Ziekle

sponsor the award with a \$500 per horse award at the end of the season. They presented a complete package to the WPCA Board and got approval to proceed.

That first year, drivers did not know what

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to expect. When Eddie and Billy would go around to the barns no one really understood what was happening. Eddie knew they had to come up with something special at the awards night, so they created the first Equine Award of Excellence Video. The video has become a featured attraction of the evening. Once the drivers saw what was happening, they began to get more involved and supportive of the award.

A key feature of the format is that it has six different winners with one horse each; one driver's team couldn't dominate the award in any given year.

During the season, Eddie goes around the barns every night to get the names of the horses from the top five outfits that night. To earn points, the driver has to run in the top five. The horses on the day money team get five points, all the way down to the fifth place team, which gets one point for each horse on the outfit that night. Billy then enters the data into the computer file so they can see the current standings at any time.

At the end of the season, the highest pointed horse, regardless of position, earns the first award spot. That means all other horses of that driver are removed from consideration.

For example, this year **Rick Fraser's Speierman** was the highest pointed horse and became the champion right leader. The next highest was **Kirk Sutherland's Colonel**, a left wheeler. This eliminated any of Kirk's and Rick's other horses from consideration.

There are a number of tie-breaking rules in case the standings get too tight.

Another good rule is that since some horses run in more than one position, their points count for the position where they earned the majority of the points.

For example, if they earned 40 points as a right leader and 20 as a left leader, they are considered to have earned 60 points as a right leader.

The Equine Award of Excellence is considered by the drivers to be one of the premier awards because it recognizes the true athletes of the sport.

Import Tool has remained the sponsor for these awards since their inception in 2005. They see a strong connection between their own corporate values and traditions, having been in business for 53 years, and the western traditions inherent in the WPCA.

Import Tool is not concerned if their sponsorship results in more tool orders.

Over the years, they have become synonymous with the Equine Award of Excellence, so it is likely that wagon fans in their business connect with them regularly.

Now the Equine Award of Excellence is an integral part of the WPCA's annual awards banquet. It is considered by the drivers to be one of the premier awards because it recognizes the true athletes of the sport—the horses.

The old saying is that "imitation is the sincerest form of flattery." That would be appropriate here, as this outstanding program has spread in the sport. Both the CPCA and the Calgary Stampede now feature their own Equine Award of Excellence modelled on the one that Eddie developed for the WPCA.

The 2013 Equine Award Of Excellence: Profiles Of The Winning Horses



Kelly Sutherland's **Spitfire Slew** (left portrait) and Kurt Bensmiller's **Pick An Ace** (right).

The 2013 Equine Outfit of Excellence champion right leader is **Rick Fraser's Paul the Speierman**.

This 12-year-old Alberta-bred grey gelding was acquired in the retirement sale of former world champion **Buddy Bensmiller** in 2011, and was immediately inserted into Rick's powerful 1 and 2 barrel outfits. A durable horse, as his 65 starts as a racehorse will attest, Speierman was the highest pointed chuckwagon horse in this year's standings. He helped power the Fraser outfit to final heat vic-



Rick Fraser's **Paul the Speierman**.

tories in Grande Prairie and Dawson Creek, and was a major force behind Rick's 2013 world championship.

"He gives me an honest effort and does the same thing every night," Rick says.

The champion left leader is **Kurt Bensmiller's Pick an Ace**.

This 15-year-old black gelding is the veteran of this year's champions. Ace made his WPCA debut in 2003 after a rather modest three-year racetrack career that saw him win four races. Ace began his chuckwagon career for Kurt's father Buddy Bensmiller in 2003 on the left lead, and has been a tough, consistent horse ever since.

Kelly Sutherland's Spitfire Slew is the 2013 Equine Outfit of Excellence champion right wheeler.

This nine-year-old Washington-bred black gelding was bought in the fall of 2008 out of Seattle after a racetrack career that saw him win 4 races in 16 starts. After a couple

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The 2013 Equine Award Of Excellence: Profiles Of The Winning Horses, continued



Kirk Sutherland's Juliesugardaddy, aka Colonel, (left portrait) and Jason Glass's Water Ratt.

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years of spot duty on both the left wheel and right lead positions, Spitfire came into his own in 2013 on the right wheel, and was a mainstay on Kelly's 1 and 2 barrel outfits, along with helping Kelly to victory at the 2013 Strathmore Heritage Days Stampede.

"He has quite a bit of character, took to the sport right away. He didn't like to stand at the barrels in the beginning but now I think he will probably race until he's about 15," Kelly says.

Kirk Sutherland's Juliesugardaddy, nicknamed **Colonel**, is the 2013 champion left wheeler.

This 11-year-old California-bred grey gelding lit up the board in a two-year racetrack career that saw him finish in the top three 9 times out of 10 starts, including four wins, and earned over \$230,000 in prize money.

Bought in 2008 out of California, Colonel made his debut on the left wheel in 2009 and quickly became a mainstay on Kirk's 1 and 2 barrel outfits. "This is a nice wagon horse even though he's a bit cranky at times," Kirk says, "which probably fits well with my own personality."

The first 2013 Equine Outfit of Excellence champion outriding horse is **Jason Glass's Water Ratt**.

This 10-year-old Manitoba-bred gelding was bought out of Assiniboia Downs race-track in Winnipeg after a rather inconspicuous career on the racetrack that saw him win one race. After joining the Glass camp six years ago, Ratt found his calling as an outriding horse. His calm demeanor makes him a barn and track favourite. Ratt helped Jason win the 2012 world championship and his first Calgary Stampede championship in 2013.

"He always runs good, never making mistakes. At home he is the first horse to come up to people," Jason says. "He's a special horse—always playing and loves water."

The other 2013 Equine Outfit of Excellence champion outriding horse is **Mike Vigen's Frosty Prince**.

This 14-year-old Minnesota-bred grey gelding rang up an impressive record on

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The 2013 Equine Award Of Excellence: Profiles Of The Winning Horses, continued

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the racetrack by winning 11 races and almost \$100,000 over a six-year career that included starts in Minnesota, Iowa, Arizona, Kansas and North Dakota before finding his home here in Alberta.

Prince made his WPCA debut as an outriding horse in 2007. He's been a mainstay in Mike's outfit ever since. An outrider favourite, he has proven to be durable and consistent on the WPCA tour.

"He's a hard-working, hard-running horse," Mike says. "He does have a bit of an attitude and we can't catch him at first in the spring."



Mike Vigen's Frosty Prince.

All images by Shelly Scott Photography

Woody: Third Time Lucky

By Billy Melville

When Academy Award-winning actor **Chris Cooper** played Hall of Fame thoroughbred trainer **Tom Smith** in the 2003 film *Seabiscuit*, he was quoted saying, "Every horse is good for something" and "You don't throw a whole life away just 'cause he's banged up a little."

Chris Cooper might as well have been depicting chuckwagon driver **John Walters** and a horse named **Justin's Call**, or **Woody** as he is affectionately known.

John was in the prep stages of his new career as a chuckwagon driver when he bought Woody at the Innisfail Auction Mart in August of 2008. He purchased the three-year-old Alberta-bred horse for \$600, outbidding a buyer in search of horses to process for export.

Looking up his record, Woody had a rather inconspicuous career on the racetrack, where one second-place and two fourth-place finishes in seven starts on the Alberta circuit were his career bests.

But John saw something in him that made him

think he might have a second chance as a chuckwagon horse.

"I started racing in 2009, and we packed Woody with us the first part of the year," explains John. "He was part of the morning crew, and he showed that he could really run, but he wasn't race ready so we sent him home."

That fall, Woody got sick. He was taken to a vet clinic where the original diagnosis was a grave situation. He had a twisted gut, and it might be in the horse's best interest to be euthanized.

This was a diagnosis John Walters would not accept.

"I lost a bulldogging horse to a twisted gut once," says John. "Woody wasn't acting the same and that's why I didn't think that was what his problem was. The vet sent us to another clinic for a second opinion and more investigation."

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Woody: Third Time Lucky, continued



Justin's Call, also known as **Woody**, is a very special horse to **John Walters**.

Photo by Bonnie Walters

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Further investigation determined that Woody's problem was a bleeding ulcer, and 21 litres of blood were drained from his stomach before he was sent home. John's wife **Bonnie Walters** treated Woody twice a day for a month, and he recovered well.

The following season, five-year-old Woody saw his first action in some races. As a six-year-old, he was on John's number one outfit.

Since Woody first cracked John's A-team, both his and John's careers have flourished. John received the Herman Flad Memorial Award in 2011 for being the WPCA's most improved driver. In 2012,

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he won his first career day money and qualified for his first championship final heat at the Ponoka Stampede.

This past season, John won his first show championship at the Saskatoon World Chuckwagon Races and won his first day money at the Calgary Stampede. Woody was with him every step of the way. Ultimately, Woody was named part of the Calgary Stampede's 2013 Equine Outfit of Excellence as the champion left wheeler.

"To have won this award," John says, "for me, has been the most prestigious award I could receive as a chuckwagon driver."

Devereux: A Horse With Heart

By Christina Weese

Rick Fraser, along with his daughter **Kaylee**, made the long road trip from Wetaskiwin, Alberta, to Kentucky in the fall of 2012 to purchase new recruits for the family's award-winning chuckwagon string.

They had filled their six-horse trailer and were on their second day of travelling home when they stopped in Saskatoon to rest and check on the horses.

That's when they noticed **Devereux**, a seven-year-old thoroughbred gelding, was not doing well.

"It was Saturday morning. I was on call at the clinic and I got a phone call from this man who was quite stressed out, saying that his horse was pretty sick after this long haul," says Dr. **Kate Robinson**, who was then an equine field service resident at the Veterinary Medical Centre at the Western College of Veterinary Medicine (WCVM).

"He was parked at the Grasswood Esso and asked if I would come out and meet him. I kind of wondered, 'What am I getting myself into?'"

Robinson agreed to come out to the truck stop on the outskirts of Saskatoon and have a look. After crawling past the other horses to get to Devereux at the front of the trailer, Robinson confirmed that the gelding's high fever, depression, bad-sounding lungs and trachea, and gargle in his breath meant a likely diagnosis of shipping fever.

She recommended that Devereux should be treated at the veterinary medical centre's Large Animal Clinic. Fraser didn't hesitate.

Once they arrived at the clinic, Fraser unloaded Devereux, and WCVM clinician Dr. **Chris Clark** and large animal resident Dr. **Sara Higgins** immediately went to work on the sick horse.

"It worked out for the best that we were here in Saskatoon," says Fraser.

"Circumstances played a big part in saving Devereux because timing is always critical."

Fraser adds that the WCVM clinical team was very thorough.

"It wasn't even 20 minutes and he was on antibiotics. He got in right away; they were very professional, courteous and explained everything they were doing."

Devereux was lucky. Thanks to prompt detection and treatment, he experienced a less complicated form of shipping fever that was akin to pneumonia. Given time, it could have progressed to painful fluid in his chest cavity known as *pleuropneumonia* that carries a much graver prognosis.

Still, shipping fever in any form is serious and can delay or even terminate a horse's athletic career.

After four days at the WCVM, Devereux was sent home on antibiotics with best wishes and hopes for recovery. Robinson didn't expect that she would ever see Devereux and Fraser again.

But when Saskatoon's Marquis Downs hosted its inaugural stop on the World Professional Chuckwagon Association circuit in June 2013, their paths crossed again.

Robinson, who was on duty as track veterinarian, was standing near the finish line as the last race went by on the first day of competition.

"I like to watch the horses as they come in

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Devereux: A Horse With Heart, continued



Rick Fraser and Devereux.

Photo by Christina Weese

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after the end of the race,” says Robinson, who recently became an assistant professor in equine ambulatory care at the WCVM. “It gives me a chance to see any lameness as they go by and I’m close enough that the drivers have a chance to ask me to meet them back at the barns afterwards if need be.”

When the last driver—the race’s winner—came back up the track, Robinson thought he looked oddly familiar.

“Rick recognized me before I recognized him,” says Robinson. “All of a sudden he stood up, yelling and pointing at the left wheel horse and saying, ‘This is him! This is him!’ And I yelled out, ‘Devereux!’ We were both so excited!”

Robinson met with Fraser after the race.

“Devereux’s been running and winning for Rick, and he’s one of the best horses in their barn. We’re just so happy we were able to help him. It was one of those ‘that’s why you become a vet’ type of stories,” she adds. “It was really cool to see that horse.”

Devereux is one of many thoroughbred racehorses that have found a second career in chuckwagon racing—a uniquely Canadian sport. The first races were held at the Calgary Stampede in 1923, and the sport has grown to encompass two professional circuits based in western Canada.

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Devereux: A Horse With Heart, continued

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Fraser, a third-generation chuckwagon driver, started as an outrider in 1976. He took the reins of his own team in 1982 and was the WPCA champion in 2004.

The sport is also a family affair: Fraser's wife **Sue Fraser** is alongside 24/7, whether it's driving a rig, being a barn hand, making meals and doing any other jobs that need to be filled. Their three children were always along on the road and helping when they were young. Now as adult children with jobs of their own, they come to race meets and help out as time allows.

Their oldest daughter **Amy** and her son **Coy** come and help out with cooking and cleaning. **Kaylee** is a certified equine chiropractor, massage and acupuncture therapist and works on the horses when needed. Their son **Cody** is a great help in the barn and in the wagon with his dad. Someday, he will take over the lines and have his own chuckwagon outfit.

Every year since 2010, the WPCA and/or the Calgary Stampede have honoured Fraser's team with an Equine Award of Excellence. The awards are meant to give greater recognition to the equine heroes of the races. Fraser's awards include two for **Nickle**, a left lead horse, two for **Max**, and one for **Beau** (both outrider horses). Fraser's right leader, **Speirman**, recently captured the 2013 Equine Award of Excellence.

"It's just like any other athlete," explains Fraser. "If you don't take care of them and train them really well and feed them properly, they can't perform for you. We're continually breaking track records that were set years ago and the only way

you can do that is better feed and training.

"Chuckwagon horses have to make a right-hand turn, for example, and if their poll is out, they fight the pressure. When everything's in line, a horse wants to do what you want him to do—always."

Devereux, a left wheel horse, is slated to move into the all-important right lead position in a couple of years. He took to chuckwagon racing like a natural.

"He's a really smart, classy horse," says Fraser. "And really athletic—it didn't take him long to figure out what to do."

In fact, the flashy dark bay horse was a key part of Fraser's top team at the Grande Prairie Stompede in June 2013 where they won the championship.

Devereux also performed with his team on the second and third days of the 2013 Calgary Stampede, taking home two top day money runs.

These wins helped Fraser earn a spot in the Stampede's \$100,000 Dash for Cash Sunday Final. Fraser finished a respective second in the aggregate final of the Stampede.

With Devereux and all of his other horse mates, Fraser captured the 2013 World Professional Chuckwagon Association title—a job well done.

"I can't say enough about what they did for the horse [at the WCVM]," he says. "They went beyond what they had to do to save his life. They really did. I'm really grateful for what they did to save my horse."

Reprinted with permission of the Western College of Veterinary Medicine's Equine Health Research Fund. To learn more, visit ehrf.usask.ca. This version of the story has been lightly edited for style and space.

The All-time Greats: Eddie Melville's Favourite Horses

What started as a casual conversation with **Eddie Melville** about horses he remembered over the years turned into the beginnings of one of the most interesting stories I've ever done.

Once I got Eddie talking, his passion and his knowledge of horses came through loud and clear. Eddie says you can find a great story about horses in every barn on the circuit.

For example, **Jason Glass's Hanuman Highway** competed in some of the most prestigious thoroughbred races in the world. In 1998, three-year-old Highway finished second by a head in the Arkansas Derby, which has a purse of \$1 million, to Victory Gallup, who later became a Belmont Stakes champion. Highway also ran a very respectable seventh in the world's most prestigious horse-race, the Kentucky Derby.

Grant Profit's Forever Grand had an incredibly successful five-year career on the racetrack. During his career, Grandy, as he was known around the Profit barn, won more than \$1 million, ran in 23 Stakes races, and finished third in Canada's most historic and prestigious race, the 2002 Queen's Plate. When Grant retired, **Kelly Sutherland** bought Grandy in the auction for \$92,000.

Another successful horse on the racetrack is **Hugh Sinclair's Bump**. This Oklahoma-bred Bay gelding was bought from Northlands Park in Edmonton in 2009 after an impressive racing career that saw him win a total of 20 races and over \$160,000 in prize money.

Not every successful wagon horse was a star on the racetrack, however.

The 2007 WPCA Equine Outfit of Excellence champion right leader was Kelly Sutherland's **Regent Park**. Kelly bought this Kentucky-bred gelding, nicknamed Reggie, in 1997 for a mere \$600. At the time, he was a thin, nervous three-year-old maiden with little to no track success.



Obrey Motowylo's Ben, ridden by outrider **Kris Flanagan**.

Photo by Lisa Cawte-Baker

The 2011 Equine Outfit of Excellence champion left wheeler was **Mark Sutherland's TEX X**, **Seattle Slew's** grandson. He was bought off the Emerald Downs Racetrack in 2008 after a four-year racing career that saw him win only two races.

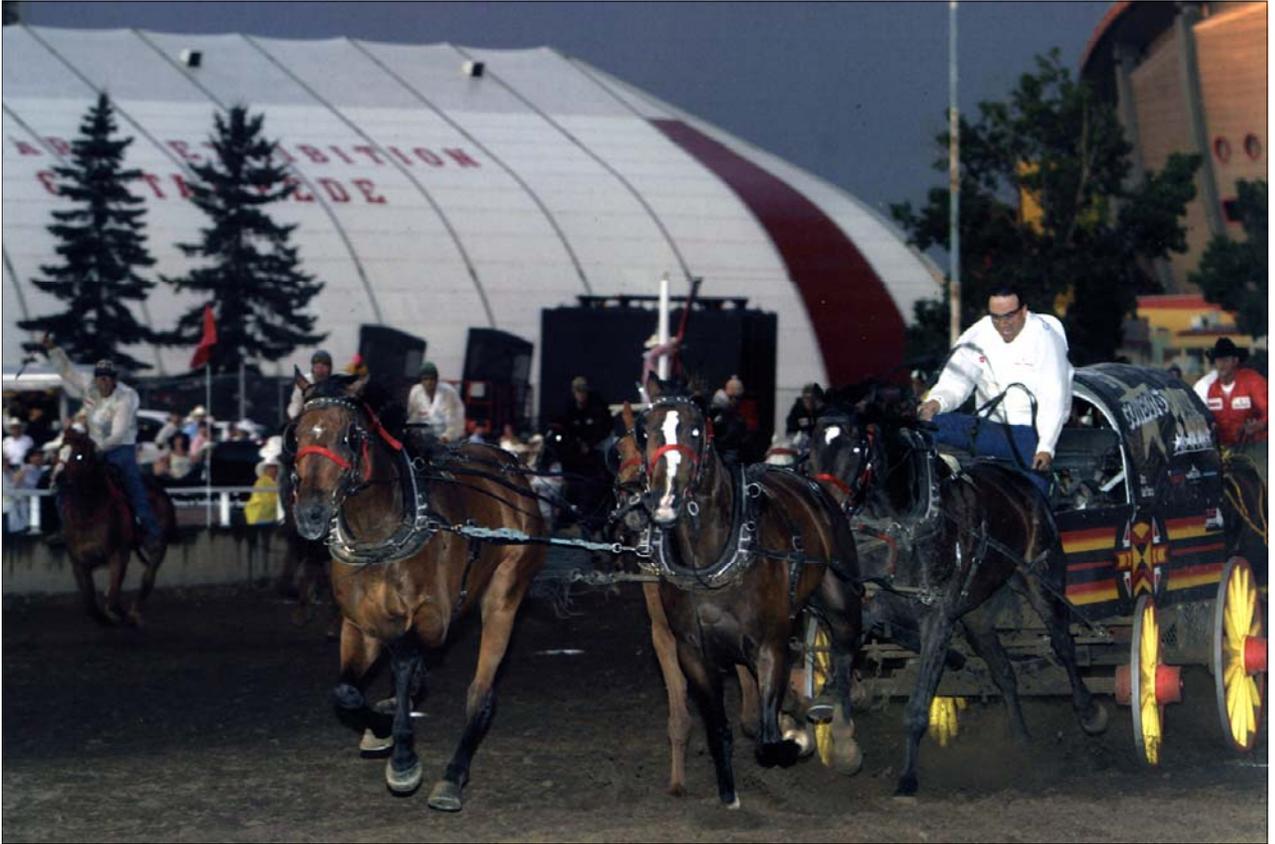
Obrey Motowylo's two-time outriding champion **Benny Benz**, or **Ben**, only won \$600 on the racetrack.

"Any size, any colour, any price," says Eddie, "any horse can succeed on the wagon circuit."

Luke Tournier's famous left leader **Port**

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The All-Time Greats: Eddie Melville's Favourite Horses, continued



Luke Tournier's 2007 outfit, with **Smoothy** and **Port** on lead, **Jag** and **Max** on wheel.

Photo by Billy Melville

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almost didn't end up in Luke's barn. He sold him to **Stan Waddell**. Stan's wife thought he was supposed to be saving up for a deck at their place so called the horse "Deck."

Luke later got him back and Port became the first two-time winner of the Equine Award of Excellence. He was the backbone of Luke's team for several years.

Eddie says his favourite riding horses were Luke Tournier's **Spoiler** and Kelly Sutherland's **Chessy**. He says he would like to ride those two any time. What if he could choose the best outfit for one run? Which one would it be? After thinking about his 40 years being around and involved in wagon racing, he narrowed it down to three.

His first choice would probably be Luke Tournier's 2007 outfit, he says, because they were so dominant at the Calgary Stampede. In an incredible display of dominance that week, that outfit had four first-place runs, two seconds and two thirds. With a performance like that on the biggest stage in chuckwagon racing, you can see that was a special outfit.

Eddie gave honourable mention to Hugh Sinclair's outfit of the late 1990s. He said this team did it all: started well, turned the barrels well and ran hard. He didn't use them often and geared his season around having them reach their peak at the Calgary Stampede.

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The All-time Greats: Eddie Melville's Favourite Horses, continued

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Another honourable mention went to **Dave Lewis's** 1982 outfit, which totally dominated the competition over the course of a season. Eddie adds that you can't ignore **Kirk Sutherland's** 2012 team, which won day money for seven days in an 11-race stretch.

Eddie talked about great horses he had seen but also said I needed to talk to people who had been around longer than him because there were great teams and horses in earlier eras too.

He specifically mentioned **Dale Flett's** outfits from the 1950s, Jason Glass's outfit that won the 2012 world championship, **Reg Johnstone's** 2005 outfit that won three shows and the world title, a legendary horse belonging to **Tom Dorchester** named **Blondie**, some of **George Normand's** horses, **Willie** and **Baldy** from **Norm Cuthbertson's** outfit, **Dallas Dorchester's** lead team of **Brandy** and **Say-Saw**, and **Faith** and **Duddy** from **Richard Cosgrave's** outfit. Those last two horses helped **Tom Glass** win Calgary in 1994 after Richard died in 1993.

When Kelly Sutherland was dominating, he had **Ralph** and **Bobby**. The former, a grey whose paper title was **Prairie Premier**, was named after Alberta premier **Ralph Klein**. Bobby was named after the man who sold him to Kelly. The pair raced as a tandem for 13 years and won \$750,000, including six Rangeland Derbies, the last one when they were aged 17 and 18, respectively.

Finally, I asked Eddie which horses would make up his personal all-star team. For left leader, he would put Kelly Sutherland's **Ralph**. His running mate at right leader would be Luke Tournier's **Smoothy**. At left wheeler, he would put George Normand's **Abby**. Paired up at right wheeler would be Hughie Sinclair's **Eddie**. For outriding



Kelly Sutherland's team lead by **Ralph** (left leader) and **Bobby** (right leader).

Photo by Paul Easton

horses, he would choose **Ron David's** **Denny** and Obrey Motowylo's **Benny Benz**. Speaking on Ben, Eddie says the horse was just a little guy but he can't remember him ever picking up a penalty.

How would this team stack up against your choices for equine all-stars?

As Eddie reminisced about top horses and teams he had seen, I realized this needed to be a three- or four-part story. I needed to talk to other drivers and outriders, and our own historian **Billy Melville**, to get their responses to these questions.

Future issues of the newsletter will see more stories paying tribute to past and present equine stars. There will be responses from a number of different people, each sharing their own fond memories of horses.

Every driver, outrider and fan has their own favourite horses to reminisce about and argue over. Who do you think were the best horses to ever run in the history of the sport of chuckwagon racing?