

Hooked on Harness

The Cushing family's presence in harness racing spans six decades

story by **Kimberly French**

WHEN MITCHELL CUSHING WAS a small child, he appeared destined to follow his father, uncle, aunt, grandfather, great-uncle and great-grandparents into the family business.

"This was long before you could watch the races on TwinSpires," said the 21-year-old. "We had an old RTN box with a card in it and a rocking chair set up with two dog leashes in our living room. While I would watch the races, I would pretend I was driving and that I was Tim Tetrick."

A native of Albion, Maine, Cushing possesses a prime pedigree to excel in his selected form of employment and is coming off a season during which he collected his first triumph at The Meadowlands, earned \$1.51 million in purses and steered Foiled Again to victory at the Windsor (ME) Fair.

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NEXT GENERATION / Mitchell Cushing (left) carries on the Cushing family harness racing tradition. He was just getting started as a driver when this photo was taken in the fall of 2013. Joining him were his dad, Ron (center), and uncle, Mike, who are also still heavily involved in the sport.



The work ethic and passion for harness racing was first infused in the Cushing family through Mitchell's maternal great-grandparents, Murray and Mary Smith.

"My grandfather and grandmother owned a dairy farm," Mike Cushing, Mitchell's uncle, said. "My grandfather was an excellent handicapper long before the days of OTBs and ADWs. He and my grandmother never missed the races in their free time and traveled all over, even going as far as New York, on the weekends to watch racing.

"My dad got into it when he started dating my mom and he got my Uncle Bob involved. My uncle is 83 and he's still driving, but he was never into it like my dad was."

"Dad" was Roderick "Rick" Cushing, who was a math teacher at Mt. Blue Middle School for 38 years, but never considered that position as his primary employment.

"He told his accountant for years that racing horses was how he made a living," Mike said about his father.

"Teaching math was just a hobby."

Ron, Mike's older brother and Mitchell's father, concurred with his sibling's assessment on what harness racing meant to his father.

"He lived and died for Maine harness racing," he said. "And he did it all. He and my uncle, who is a retired pilot and recruiter for the Air Force Academy, were stabled at Farmington Fairgrounds. My father was a member of the Farmington Horsemen's Association, Maine Harness Horsemen's Association, and was a director on

MAINE MEN / Above: Ron Cushing, shown winning last year's Paul Bunyan Pace at Bangor Raceway, starting driving in 1981 at age 17 and has 2,555 driving wins, plus 1,018 training wins, under his belt. **Opposite, left:** Mike Cushing and his wife, Charlene, run their small stable at Farmington Fairgrounds, where Mike and Ron's dad, Rick, was also based. **Opposite, right:** Mitchell Cushing (4) has earned \$2.41 million in purses so far during his career.

the Maine Harness Racing Promotion Board. He was one of those people everyone liked, and I don't think anyone ever had a bad word to say about him." Rick, however, did not actively encourage his sons to embark on careers in harness racing, despite Mike and Ron deciding early on that is exactly the course each would take.

"I started driving in 1981, when I was 17," said Ron, who has 2,555 victories in the sulky and 1,018 as a conditioner. "I didn't do the Grand Circuit grooming thing, but was at The Meadowlands for the first time when I was 19. I worked with Teddy Wing in his prime when I was 20 and that was my college education.

"I got started when catch driving was just starting off, so I had to make my own drives. My barn was my strength and the only one that was going to make things happen was me. I never really drove any horses for my father. In fact, my first catch drive for him was in 1989 in a Maine championship, which was a win. I had to make my own opportunities."



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Mike, who has 344 wins as a trainer and 1,370 as a driver, and announces on the Pine Tree circuit, realized what his life’s work would be while he was still in middle school.

“By the time I was 10, I knew what I wanted to do,” he said. “I don’t remember it, but have been told when I was a kid, we were on our way back from the races and I was in the backseat of the car recapping them like I was an announcer. Back then, you could get your fair license when you were 16. My birthday is in February, and by the first week in March I took my test.

“I went to the University of Maine and got my degree in agriculture. My father wanted me to be a teacher and work in the sport part time, but even while I was in college I took classes while making sure I could work with the horses. I always knew what I wanted to do with my life.”

Mike’s love of the sport is also shared by his wife, Charlene, who shares responsibility for their small stable located at Farmington Fairgrounds and has 671 wins as a trainer, in addition to 320

wins as a driver.

“My wife is an outrider and also has her judge’s license,” Mike said. “She will be going to Goshen [Historic Track] this year to help out with the races there.”

Although Mike and Ron have enjoyed their own special journeys and meaningful moments in the sport, the brothers concur the driving force behind their involvement in harness racing centers upon one cornerstone: family.

“I would have to say the most significant thing to me was winning the 2-year-old Maine Sire Stakes final with Maine Cast, the last trotting colt my dad bred,” Mike said.

In July 2011, Rick was diagnosed with acute myeloid leukemia, a blood cancer that was treated with chemotherapy and required an extended hospital stay. By October, he was in remission and returned home just in time to witness Maine Cast, who he had high hopes for since his birth, enter training.

Unfortunately, Rick’s condition took

a turn for the worse and by January he had returned to the hospital with the news that a bone marrow transplant was necessary to save his life. After an exhaustive search, a donor was discovered and the procedure was conducted, but by Thanksgiving 2012, an infection had set in. Rick was not strong enough to undergo another transplant and at 68 determined he wanted to spend the last day of his life at home.

“He was in a hospital in New Hampshire,” Mike said. “He didn’t realize he could go home and one of his nurses told him of course he could, and that decision was entirely up to him. So we made arrangements within a few hours to get an ambulance to take him home. On the way home, my mom [Gloria] had the ambulance swing by the barn so he could finally see his colt train.

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Mike did exactly that on Sept. 8, 2013, despite the odds being stacked against him.

“We raced Maine Cast eight times that year and he was still a maiden,” Mike said. “And I’m not going to lie—I was nervous the morning of the race and wondering if we were really going to win. But when my wife asked if she should come to the track for the races or stay home, I told her to come because we were going to win.”

Sent off at odds of more than 34-1, Maine Cast got away fifth, had moved to fourth by the half-mile marker and remained in that position at the three-quarter pole. Ron, who was driving Katahdin Fifteen, was directly in front of his brother, when Mike gave Maine Cast the green light. The colt moved into second at the top of the stretch and trotted under the wire first.

“For nine months, I couldn’t even talk about my dad’s death,” Mike said. “In the winner’s circle, all that emotion came pouring out.

“[U.S. hockey Hall of Fame coach] Jack Kelley, who had just had his own stakes win earlier in the day with Kate At The Gate, said, ‘No one is going to re-

member any of the races today except that one.’ Later that week, I was talking to David Sawyer, the race secretary at Scarborough Downs, and he said, ‘I’ve been to thousands of races: the Little Brown Jug, the Hambletonian, and my horse won the Joseph Ricci Memorial Trot. But what I witnessed that day was the greatest moment in harness racing. Not just in Maine, but anywhere.’”

Ron’s description of his most memorable situations was not quite as poignant, but just as emotionally charged.

“Of course, I’ve had some special moments, like winning a leg of the Levy Series, and favorite horses like Our First Falcon, but it’s being able to share the sport with my family,” he said. “That is the greatest thing in the world. To have

the opportunity to have my family and my finance, Heidi [Gibbs], with me is the best thing I can ever ask for or hope to experience.”

The Cushing brothers also echo the same sentiments when it comes to another family member.

“Mitchell is very gifted,” Ron said. “He’s always just been a super-talented kid and things have always come so easily to him. When he was 14, he went to nationals for soccer and he was an outstanding football player in high school. He either led the state or was close to leading the state in scoring touchdowns until he blew out his ACL when he was 17.

“I think that is when he decided he was going to be a driver. Looking back now, he would have gravitated to it eventually, but the plan was to go to college and play football. I am very proud of him, but I just want him to stay hungry and not become complacent. You can’t do that in this business, and since things have always come so easily to him, I still want him to put maximum effort in. Most kids his age try too hard.

MENTOR / Left: Although teaching middle-school math was his official vocation, Cushing patriarch Rick was passionate about Maine harness racing right up until his death at the end of 2012. **Right:** From left, Mike, Ron and Rick were a force to be reckoned with on the Maine circuit when this photo was taken in 1989.

I know I did. But I've already told him he is 10 times better than I was at his age. He is driving like a 30-or 35-year-old."

Mike also believes the sky is the limit for Mitchell's future.

"Mitchell is just so talented," he said. "Even when he first started driving at 10, 11 and 12 years old, he was so mature and composed. He has something you don't see come along quite often and he should have a very special career.

"Not only has Mitchell always been gifted as an athlete, he is just a great kid. He is willing to listen and learn and he really wants the respect of other people in the sport. I think he will do great things."

It appears Ron and Mike have quelled any type of sibling rivalry, but Ron and Mitchell admit competing with one another does provide some challenges to their relationship.

"I'm not retired yet," Ron said. "I've given him opportunities, but I have also made him learn.

"I've told him, 'No one will drive my horses except me or you if you can

make it to the races.' That is my promise to him, but I also need to make my own living and keep my own stable running.

"I know there are times he gets mad at me and probably thinks I am ruining his life, like any other kid does with their mom or dad that is his age, but I don't plan on quitting this business anytime soon, so I'll be around for a while."

Mitchell has his own thoughts on racing with and against his father.

"It is a little different driving against your dad," he said. "And he's right about driving his own horses. Ugly Stik was the only horse he would let me drive at first. Also, there are times he makes me mad when he is just joking around and teasing me in front of people. I know he's kidding, but sometimes other people may not. I'm trying to be the best I can and push forward. I look at my creditability as a job application and this is a very competitive business. I don't want anyone to get the wrong idea about me, so I'm a little sensitive about that."

No matter what the future holds for any of the Cushing family members, two things are certain: they will all be involved with horses and will continue to share that connection with one another.

"My daughter, Jessica, isn't involved in harness racing, but she has loved horses all her life," Ron said. "She went to the University of Louisville and lives in Kentucky working for the American Saddlebred Association. She used to work with the college football team, but left that job to take this one, and she could not be happier.

"I'm thrilled to see what Mitchell will accomplish. I'm one of those people that if you were going to war, you would want me in the foxhole, so I think my brother and I still have good years left in us. But it's all about what I said before: I'm content as long as I have my family to share the sport with."

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