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Farewell to the Admiral

Wednesday, October 20, 2010 - by Karen Briggs, USTA Web Newsroom Senior Correspondent



Karen Briggs

Toronto, ON --- In a year when far too many champions have passed prematurely already, it came as a shock to Ontario racing fans when the news spread today of the death of Admiral's Express.

The "Grey Gladiator" -- a former O'Brien Award-winning pacer and one of the toughest hombres to ever wear a harness -- was euthanized on Tuesday night, October 19, after breaking a leg in a pasture accident.

The 14-year-old son of Admirals Galley-Platinum Card showed promise at two and three, but racing on Michigan's half-mile tracks clearly didn't suit the burly gelding. Owners Gary and Laurel Gust, of Cedar Springs, Michigan, and Cheryl and Edward Sayfie, of Rockford, Michigan (who paid just \$3,700 for him as a yearling), thought the Ontario circuit might be a better fit, so they sent the big grey to trainer Mike Hales, of Orillia, Ontario, at the close of his sophomore season.

The Admiral didn't take long to show what he was made of. In a leg of the Toronto Pacing Series at Mohawk in February 2000, he defeated [Dragon Again](#) in 1:53.4, and from there on in, the lighter his grey coat got, the more he won. He set a lifetime mark of 1:48.2 at the age of nine, was named Canada's Horse of the Year and Older Pacer of the Year in 2005, and remains the fastest grey Standardbred on the books.

That coat color, and the gritty way he had of wearing down his competition, week after week after week, also made him a fan favorite, instantly recognizable to even the most casual racing fan. Former Woodbine race-caller Frank Salive dubbed the gelding "The Grey Gladiator" and the moniker stuck as Admiral's Express continued to rake in purses. By the time the horse retired (for the first time) in 2006, he had compiled more than \$1.6 million in purses and had scored 14 sub-1:50 victories.

Admiral's Express was honored with a special retirement ceremony at Woodbine, amid much hoopla, but a year and a half later, the gelding, then 12, was back in harness. Hales maintained he wasn't content in retirement, and indeed Admiral's Express returned to racing with all of the gusto he ever had, but many fans were dismayed to see the old champion struggle to remain competitive, despite a significant drop in class.

He did manage four wins, from 33 starts, as a 13-year-old, and in January of this year Admiral's Express finally retired for good, with earnings of \$1,766,644 and a record of 86 wins, 53 seconds, and 44 thirds in 353 lifetime starts.

Longtime caregiver, Wellington Charles, pledged to give the Gray Gladiator a happy retirement, and was as good as his word, introducing the gelding to a new career under Western tack. Knowing his high-profile horse could do some good promoting the cause of the Ontario Standardbred Adoption Society, he brought Admiral's Express to several of the Ontario horse shows which showcased Standardbreds as pleasure horses, where the pair clearly had a blast showing in halter, costume classes, and Western games.

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Karen Briggs photo

'The Admiral' appeared earlier this year at the Standardbred horse show in Orono, Ontario, with Wellington Charles up.

The passing of Admiral's Express came as a shock not only to Charles but to a huge community of fans who had followed his career for over a decade. Among the poignant comments posted on the Standardbred Canada website was this observation from former Flamboro Downs race secretary Rob McKay: "He always came with his game face on, ready to race, and you knew that each and every night, he was the one you had to beat. He made you earn your money."

Charles has requested that those who would like to honor the memory of Admiral's Express do so with a donation to the Ontario Standardbred Adoption Society (www.osas.ca or 905.854.6099).

"I used him as a poster child to help save horses," he told Standardbred Canada. "He absolutely loved getting out and seeing the people. He was an unbelievable horse, and I'm really going to miss him."

Related Articles :

- [Admiral honored with Cam Fella Award](#) (Monday, January 10, 2011)
The Cam Fella Award is intended to honor "meritorious service to the Canadian harness racing industry" and it will go to the connections of Admiral's Express.

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