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Risa Tanaka: Long, strange trip

Thursday, May 06, 2010 by Karen Briggs



Photo by Mark Hall

Risa Tanaka in the winner's circle with All Speed Hanover.

The unsung heroes of harness racing are the hard-slogging grooms. They work long hours for marginal pay, and they rarely find themselves in the spotlight. But every now and then a singular moment comes along to make it all worthwhile.

The casual observer may not have twigged that one of those moments was happening as All Speed Hanover, the gritty winner of the 2-Year-Old Colt Pace Breeders Crown, came to the winner's circle at Toronto's Woodbine Racetrack on Breeders Crown night, Oct. 24, 2009.

Caregiver Risa Tanaka, celebrating her 30th birthday, was at the colt's head as the cameras flashed, no doubt thinking about the long, strange journey which has taken her to that moment.

Tanaka was born in Japan, and it wasn't until she was 2 years old that her parents realized she was deaf.

People with disabilities are treated badly in Japan, according to Tanaka, so her family moved to Christchurch, New Zealand to "have a better life."

"My parents didn't want me to attend a deaf school," she said. "They wanted to raise me like everyone else, for which I'm so grateful."

And Tanaka knew early on that she wanted horses in that life.

"I had been riding competitively for about 10 years, doing dressage, show jumping, and eventing in Pony Club," she said. "When a job in harness racing came up, I grabbed the opportunity."

In New Zealand, Tanaka worked with the likes of Doug Williamson, Robert Cameron, Mark Purdon, and Colin and Julie de Filippi. With excellent lip-reading skills, she found her deafness less of a challenge than her initial lack of backstretch mileage.

When the director of cadet training for Harness Racing New Zealand suggested she head to North America in April 2007, for more experience, she seized the chance.

"I haven't returned to New Zealand since because I'm much happier here," she said.

In North America, Tanaka has worked with Chris Ryder and his associate, Kevin O'Reilly, as well as Mike Vanderkemp. She joined Noel Daley's barn in April 2008.

She feels she has found a new home, especially in Canada.

"Canadians treat me like everyone else," she said. "I don't feel any difference because of my race, my deafness or my background. People have been very friendly and willing to help."

Tanaka is now seeking landed immigrant status, despite the fact that she found her first Canadian winter "shocking."

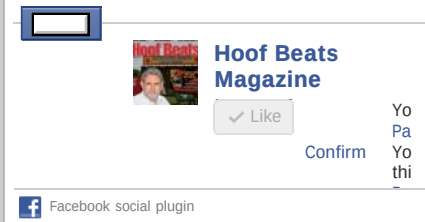
"I was so looking forward to a white Christmas, since New Zealand is summer at that time of year, but the reality was horrible!" she said.

Perhaps as compensation for the climate, Tanaka has had the privilege of caring for a number of prominent stakes horses, including Mystical Sunshine, who won the Breeders Crown mare trot in 2007. She has also worked with Yankee Skyscraper, Southwind Swallow, and Up Front Hotsey, who is a favorite.

"She's the toughest mare I have ever seen," Tanaka said. "With tying up problems, a broken tailbone, and all of that in her background, she just grins and bears it and always tries her best. I just love her."

Tanaka first got All Speed Hanover while he was being broken in at Daley's New Jersey barn back in November

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2008. She described him as “big and fat, with a Roman nose.”

“I felt like a midget beside him,” she said. “He was a handful, very full of himself, but I knew he’d make a good horse with that character.”

Because she relocated during the racing season to Canada, leaving “Speedy” in New Jersey, she did not see him again until he came north two weeks prior to the Breeders Crown final.

“I couldn’t believe he was the same baby,” she said. “He was so athletic and fit! But he still had the same manners and attitude.”

Tanaka didn’t have much opportunity to think about turning 30 on Breeders Crown night. She admitted her heart was in her throat when the colt was locked in his head-to-head duel with Sportswriter.

“I couldn’t breathe,” she said, “and when Speedy beat him, my knees were shaking, I was so relieved.”

As is always the case when you’re a caretaker, there was more work to be done before Tanaka could celebrate.

“Unfortunately, Speedy refused to pee in the testing barn, and it took a very long time,” she said. “I ended up taking him home by myself to Classy Lane at 1 a.m. We had a quiet celebration at the Hound Pound at Classy Lane after I put Speedy to bed.

“It was a very long night, and I was so tired, but it was worth it.”

Tanaka said that although grooms get little recognition for their hard work, she still loves what she does—for now.

“Horses are my life and my passion, no matter what,” she added. “There will always be ups and downs in the racing game, and it’s very important for me to keep my focus on what I’m doing, to make sure the horses are well cared for.

“I’ve been thinking about becoming a trainer myself, but I’m in no hurry. I’m happy with what I’m doing for now.”



Photo by Mark Hall

A close-up of Tanaka with All Speed Hanover.

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