



FOILED AGAIN

How Ron Burke's 'nothing special' horse
became the richest pacer of all time.

STORY BY KAREN BRIGGS // PHOTOGRAPHY BY MATT WAPLES

When Standardbred Canada recently asked Canadian horsemen which horse came to mind as a truly great aged pacer, Foiled Again came up, well... again and again. But coming off a couple of fifth-place efforts, the eight-year-old gelding didn't get a lot of respect from bettors going into September's Canadian Pacing Derby at Mohawk racetrack.

Big mistake.

Foiled Again (Dragon Again-In A Safe Place) had his eyes on the prize. And quite a prize it was. His share of the \$787,000 purse pushed his lifetime earnings to \$4,356,551, surpassing Gallo Blue Chip's \$4.29 million achieved in 2005, and making him the richest pacer of all time.

It was another remarkably gritty performance from a little horse who has delivered so many similar finishes that they almost seem mundane. Almost. With 163 starts under his belt at press time and 64 wins, Foiled Again triumphs more often than he lives up to the also-ran implications of his name.

PLAIN BROWN WRAPPER

Foiled Again is not an animal who would immediately catch your eye should you stroll past his stall. Unlike Gallo Blue Chip, who at least had that striking profile, Foiled Again is unremarkable at first glance. “People forget how plain and average he is,” says trainer Ron Burke, who seems to have a golden touch when it comes to aged pacers.

“Surpassing Gallo Blue Chip’s earnings mark was something of a big deal to us, but for quite a while we were sure it was going to be (stablemate) Won The West who did it. (Foiled Again) was always ‘the other horse’. Then last year, he became ‘the horse.’”

Won The West, also eight, was retired earlier this summer after having bankrolled \$3,977,956 over 109 starts, among them the 2010 edition of the Canadian Pacing Derby. The son of Western Hanover could also boast of back-to-back Breeders Crown wins (2009 and 2010), a pair of Dan Patch Awards and an O’Brien Award for best aged pacer.

“As West got older, his weight became an issue,” Burke explains. “He was beautiful to look at, but in terms of getting him fit, it was a problem. He matured into a linebacker of a horse, and it got too hard for his legs. So we sat down and said, ‘we’re not going to ask him for any more’. I give credit to his owners

(the partnership of Strollin Stable, William J Robinson, and Country Club Acres) for recognizing that he didn’t owe us anything. He was one of the greatest we’ve had, but it wasn’t worth asking him to keep going just to reach that milestone.”

Especially not when you’ve got a horse like Foiled Again who’s so capable of taking over. Burke’s stable is substantial, of course, with about 90 head in New Jersey and another 100 horses or so at The Meadows, according to assistant trainer Kris Hinchcliff. But a stable star like Foiled Again still stands out in Burke’s mind. “You know, when we bought him as a four-year-old, we thought he’d be all right, but he impressed me in his first start with us and he’s been impressing me ever since. Every time I thought I’d found his level, he’d step it up another notch and surprise me.

“He’s tenacious. That’s his best quality. You know, when we took him up to Rideau Carlton for the Des Smith (July 15, 2012) and he lost to Betterthancheddar, that was one of his best efforts ever, I think. He’s a horse who just keeps coming.

“Now I worry that I’ve become spoiled. Between him and Won The West, and Buck I St Pat (the champion trotting mare who retired last fall) who are probably my three

favourites — I’ve had a lot of luck with these aged horses in general, and they will be big shoes to fill when all three have retired.

“The idea of replacing Foiled is scary.”

SECRETS OF SUCCESS

What keeps a horse like Foiled Again battling it out, week after week, in top stakes company, at the age of eight? Burke isn’t shy about saying what he knows raises some eyebrows in the industry. “Honestly? What keeps them going is that we train (the older horses) hard.

“A lot of people believe you should go easy on an aged horse and keep him fresh. But I’ve found that it doesn’t always work going easy on them, at least not for me. Training them hard keeps them fit and keeps them sound.

“I know we’ve been criticized for that, and I know some horses don’t fit my program. That’s fine. I just send those ones to other trainers.”

Certainly Foiled Again has thrived on Burke’s program, getting better with each passing year. The fact that he didn’t take part in the big two- and three-year-old stakes as a youngster (when he was under the tutelage of Hermann Heitmann of Jobstown, New Jersey, may help account for the gelding’s current durability, as well. But don’t get the impression he was lightly used as a young-

ster. By the time he was purchased by Burke, in partnership with Joe, Joe Jr, and Kevin Koury (JJK Stables), Mark Weaver, and Mike Brusceci, mid-way through his four-year-old year, Foiled Again had made 46 career starts. His career didn’t begin until October of his two-year-old year — and he earned just \$7515 that year, in five starts — but once he made his debut, there was barely a week when he didn’t find himself behind the starting gate.

These days, of course, the veteran pacer has gotten pretty good at taking care of himself between races. “He’s easy on himself because he’s basically lazy,” says Hinchcliff, who has worked with Foiled Again since he arrived at the Burke Stables as a four-year-old. “He jogs slowly, and he doesn’t tear around when he’s turned out. He knows when it’s important and when it’s not. When it’s time to race, he’s always game and he always gives you everything he has.

“When we first got him, you had to make him (train) because he wasn’t going to do it on his own. And you had to get him on his toes before a race, but now you don’t really need to. He’ll race anyone to the wire because he hates to lose.

“At the age of eight, he has some wear and tear, but nothing major. Nothing that you’d have to pay attention to week to week. Ronnie’s program keeps these older horses going really well. Foiled always seems to get a quarter crack when he first starts up in March, but once that’s cleared up he just gets better and better through the season.”

Prior to the Canadian Pacing Derby, however, Hinchcliff admits Foiled Again was a little off his game. “He was fifth in



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the William Haughton (August 17) at the Meadowlands, and that was not up to par for him, so we pulled some blood and it turned out his liver enzymes were down. So we treated him for that and he turned around pretty quickly. I figured he’d be better (in the Canadian Pacing Derby). He roared like a stud horse when I turned him out the morning of the race!

“He’s been a warrior the past four years. The fact that we beat Golden Receiver and Betterthancheddar, both of whom have been really sharp, was sweet redemption.

“I’ve never seen a horse as gritty as him.”

TWO STARS, ASCENDING

If you’re an up-and-coming young driver and you manage to hitch your career to a rocket like Foiled Again, you can’t help but rise together. So it has been with Yannick Gingras,

who has been along for the ride for 90% of the gelding’s starts for the Burke Stables.

“As Foiled Again’s career has taken off, so has Yannick’s,” says Burke. “Yannick is a lot of the reason he’s as successful as he is. He knows the horse better than anybody.”

“He’s a pleasure,” said Gingras admiringly, shortly before driving Foiled Again to the Derby win. “He’s just a dream horse. He’s as tough as they get. You know, he’s just a little guy and he’s not the fastest that ever lived, but I think he’s the toughest that ever lived.”

Gingras admits to a learning curve when he and Foiled Again were first partnered. But four years later, the two know just what to expect of the other. On an ideal night, Gingras engineers a first-over trip, because Foiled Again thrives on having a horse to go after.

“He’s fine on the front, but his preferred trip is really first over. When I first get in the



bike, I can't tell what kind of night it's going to be with him. Usually I can't even tell till the three-quarter pole. He'll be going on a loose line and if he's feeling good he'll start grabbing on and he just can't wait to get by horses. If he's no good, then he doesn't grab on.

"He's getting better every year, and maybe I'm getting a little better every year. In 20 years will I look back on him (as a pivotal horse in my career)? I think so, definitely."

Being compact has worked in Foiled Again's favour as well. Unlike a lot of good aged horses, he's just as comfortable on a half-mile track as he is on a larger oval. That accounts for his four appearances — with two wins, a second, and a fifth place finish — in the Molson Pace, Western Fair's signature event each May.

The 2009 edition of that race really was an example of being 'foiled again', and Burke counts it as one of the horse's biggest career disappointments. "He got locked in with Jody (Jamieson) in the Molson Pace and he just never got a chance," he recalls. "That was the same year we lost Maltese Artist at the Western Fair, so it was hard." (Maltese Artist, another aged pacing star from the Burke Stable with earnings of \$2.3 million, broke down during a 2009 Molson Pace elimination and had to be euthanized.)

All in all, the triumphs have far outweighed the disappointments in Foiled Again's career, however, and as Burke observes, it's all gravy from this point on — though he has gone on record as saying he'd like to surpass the all-time earnings record of \$5.5 million set by the great trotting mare, Moni Maker, back in 2000. "It's a long shot, but he might do it," he says. "He's already in uncharted territory."

Foiled Again certainly seems to be on track to surpass \$1 million in earnings for the second year in a row. Last year's haul of \$1.4 million made him the oldest horse in history to have a million-dollar season. At this writing, his 2012 bankroll stands at \$959,545, with the Breeders Crown still to come.

"No matter what, he's a great horse," says Burke, "and one of my favourites."

There are thousands who'd agree.