

### Back Stretch

for mail, the other for the occasional passengers who lacked other means of locomotion and who were sturdy enough to stand the dirty, bone-jarring ride.

"The tiny passenger section was occupied that morning by two mules. One was an Indian. He boarded the car with a stick slung over his right shoulder. Attached to the end of the stick was a red bandana in which was apparently wrapped his worldly belongings. The Indian sat down in the seat and promptly went to sleep. He snored loudly. It is something of a minor tragedy that the Indian did not remain awake and observant. He might possibly have engaged the other passenger in conversation and thus achieved some stature for posterity as a witness to the thoughts and feelings of a young man embarking on a way of life. The other passenger was, on that day, no more prosperous than the Indian and possibly much less affluent. He was 18 years of age and had yet to feel the touch of a razor on his fuzzy chin. Everything he owned was either on his back or in a small black carpet bag which he clung to tightly. In his pocket was lodged the magnificent sum of \$2, all that remained of the money he had saved and, in part, borrowed, in order to make the trip.



Here's a closeup of one of harness racing's top teams: Trainer-driver Joe O'Brien at the left and owner Sol Camp.

"A few hours later, while the Indian still snored loudly, the train wheezed into a whistle stop called River Hebert. The young boy with the fuzzy chin piled off enthusiastically. He had expected to be greeted by his new employer. But the station, such as it was, was deserted. The boy made inquiries. He was directed to a house at the end of a dirt road three miles distant. He clutched his carpet bag to him and trudged through the snow and mud to the indicated abode. A housekeeper directed him to the second floor where the master lay abed, ill. The man in the bed looked at the newcomer. "You don't look near a oiled I expected," he snorted. He paused for a few contemplative seconds. "You don't look near as big as I expected either." He cleared his throat. "But you're here," he said, "so you might as well get to work. The horses are down thataway," he indicated with a wave of a hand toward a bedroom window and through it to a barn which stood on the side of the hill.

**FIRST HARNESS RACING JOB**  
"Joseph Cyril O'Brien, who stood 5'4" in his hob-nailed boots and who weighed 100 pounds give or take a few ounces either way cleared the biggest lump in the world from his throat and said, "Yes, sir." And then he turned and ran to the room before the man in the bed, William T. Latta, a well-known Nova Scotia horseman, could change his mind. Little Joe had come a long way for this, his first harness racing job, and he wasn't about to lose it before his term of employment actually began. Little Joe is still referred to by that sobriquet occasionally, but aside from that there is little to link him with River Hebert, Nova Scotia, Canada, and the March morning in 1936 that set off the chain reaction that has now been heard round the harness racing world. Two inches have been added to his altitude and something like 35 additional pounds added to his slight frame. But it is in the handbook and in the knowledge of training and driving techniques that Joe O'Brien has come of age. He couldn't exactly buy the railroad that carried him to River Hebert that day but he could make a nice down payment on it and, if he really wanted it, there's a man in California who'd probably buy it for him.

"In 1954 he earned \$307,777.20, second best in the nation, and won 111 races to rank third nationally in that category. Both were new personal highs for the canny Canadian. In addition he was the leading Grand Circuit driver both in money and races won, marking the first time he had ever achieved either honor. He collected \$218,873 on the Roarin' Grand in 1954 and got home first in 80 heats. But above and beyond such material considerations, he is genuinely ranked as one of the world's foremost trainers and drivers of harness horses. A far cry from the day of his arrival at the Latta homestead which he reached armed only with the knowledge that harness horses were for him and that this, for good, bad or indifferent, was his life. He has achieved his present stature as a top Grand Circuit reinsman and as a superb conditioner of horses solely on the basis of his own ability. Nobody ever gave Joe O'Brien a thing. He worked his way out of the mountains of Nova Scotia, back through the land of his birth, Prince Edward Island, across wide bodies of water to the Canadian Ontario, down through Maine and Massachusetts, and thence to the Big Harness Racing Wheel, the Grand Circuit, by training every horse and driving every race as though the animal and the event were, respectively, the best horse and the biggest stake in the world.

**HEAD TRAINER**  
"He is safely entrenched now as the head trainer for one of the finest sportsmen harness racing has ever known, the eminent gentleman from California, Mr. Sol Camp. Mr. Camp spends liberally for yearlings and will buy aged performers if "his boy" wants them. Both Camp and O'Brien have been satisfied with the arrangement since the word "go" was given three years back and in 1954 they hit harness oil. In 1954, the cotton man from California and the shy kid from Canada registered a harness racing first that had eluded others in the sport for a century, generally speaking, and for more than a decade in specific terms. Camp owns and O'Brien trained and drove the 2-year-old harness horse to go a mile in two minutes in a race. That horse is the trotter Scott Frost, a bay son of Hoot Mon-Nora

and a horse he could usually come out with one a week or two later that could beat the other for fun. Before he was old enough to climb into a sulky himself, Joe was making the rounds of the Alberton track, his father's lay and he still recalls the first time his dad nodded his head and told him to jog on himself. Joe guesses that he must have been all of seven years old and he remembers that it wasn't many years after that that he was putting a wire strip across the sulky stirrup to compensate for the disadvantage of having a six foot tall father who really stretched out into the stirrups.

**FIRST HORSE AT 14**  
"When he got to be ten or so, Joe had graduated to the role of full fledged second / trainer, or third or fourth depending on how many of the O'Brien boys were working on a particular day, and he had handled the other. "Dad never told me that I looked like I might be a driver," he says, "but I knew that I wanted to be one and believe me, nothing else ever crossed my mind." When he was 14 Joe got his first horse. He is not certain now as to his identity. The horse was called either Mickey Mouse or Ace Bailey. At any rate, Joe remembers that his dad purchased him for \$40 from a neighbor who was tired of having the animal kick him out of the road wagon. Joe was given the task of breaking and getting the pacer and then was given permission by his father to take him around to the matinee and race him. Joe did and won with him several times, once in 2:18 which was a pretty rapid rate for young O'Brien and his steed.

"At one time or another, every young man has to make a fateful decision. Joe made his in the winter of 1936, the year after he was graduated from his school. His mother wanted Joe to attend college and study veterinary medicine and while she admits now that he probably should have done so, he was hell bent for racing horses and college, even veterinary college, would only have slowed down his pace. In the fall of 1935, William T. Latta, the River Hebert man who has been mentioned earlier in this story, wrote a letter to the elder O'Brien asking if he or one of his sons would be interested in training his horses. Harry O'Brien replied that no thank you there were no O'Briens available. He recommended another horseman living nearby who was unable to accept the job. Joe O'Brien gave the situation a lot of thought and then, without consulting his father or mother, sat down and wrote a letter to Mr. Latta applying for the job. He conveniently neglected to state his age, rambling on generally to the effect that he was one of Harry's boys and quite a horseman. The letter turned the trick. A few weeks later the return mail confirmed that Joe had landed the post.

"It was an apprehensive Joe O'Brien who approached his dad the next day and advised him that he was going to work for Mr. Latta. What Mr. O'Brien said, much of it to do with his son's ability or, rather, lack of it, was tempered at the conclusion of the never-to-be-forgotten interview by his final words which, to Joe's way of thinking, put his dad's unofficial approval on the project. "How you fixed for money?" his dad inquired. Truth to be known, Joe was pretty badly fixed. He had exactly \$5 to his name but he sure wasn't going to let his father use that as a point in rebuttal. "Fine," he lied, "got all I need."

### BROTHER KILLED

"But before he was deposited, or, more properly, propelled himself, into his present exalted role, Joe O'Brien travelled a rocky race track road that saw him spend a dozen years in the minor leagues before the call of the big time reached him. Those years, beginning in 1936, and actually, preceded by years on the farm at home, were valuable ones though, for arriving at the top; without them he would have been ill-equipped to make the decisions, both in training and driving, that are now required of him. Joe was born on June 25, 1917, at Alberton, Prince Edward Island, Canada, the sixth child and fifth son of Harry and Jennie Foley O'Brien, both of whom are still living. Joe O'Brien was born into a harness racing family and destiny had him marked as the best of a fine brood of brooders. Ray is currently a trainer-driver in Canada. Another brother, Claude, has assisted Joe on the Camp job and does some driving of his own in the Maritimes although his primary occupation is with a telephone company. Another brother, Lloyd, who rates as much the best horseman in his family, was, unfortunately, killed in an accident near Foxboro a few years back. The remaining brother Bill, is the only one who didn't take up harness racing. He is a steel worker in New Jersey.

**DIRECT L.**  
"When Joe left Latta's bedroom that March morning in 1936 he went to the stables and looked over his charges. There were a half dozen horses, only one of which had ever been broken. All were by Bill L., named after the owner, and carried such names as Direct L., Aaron L., Happy L., Buzz L., etc. Joe walked down the row of stalls, behind the horses and stopped when he approached Direct L., a huge stallion. Direct L. immediately lashed out with his hind feet and missed his new trainer by a yard. So Joe reversed the field and approached from the front. This time Direct L. struck out with his fore feet and missed by a foot. I'm a little guy, Joe said to himself, and he thinks he can bully me. I'll try some strategy. So he walked up to the end of the barn and came marching back and forth over the row of stalls, his hob-nailed boots down hard on the floor boards and hollering at the top of his lungs. This was to have impressed the horse that a big man was on the job, nobody to fool with. Direct L. missed by only six inches.

"Joe gulped and made another big decision. He either had to go tell Mr. Latta he couldn't handle the job, that the horses were too tough, or he had to master Direct L. at once. Being Joe O'Brien, there was only one way to do it. He grabbed Direct L., led him from the stall, hitched him to the cross ties, and then backed him into a big, high wheeled sulky. O'Brien broke and drove Direct L. that day. The summer Sun took Direct L. and Aaron L. to the races and started making a name for himself, even though it was in the Nova Scotia bushes. Both horses won for him and both could go around 2:15. In the fall he went to the Halifax Exposition, the Lexington of Nova Scotia. All the big owners, horses and trainers were there, including Joe's dad who was about to send him race for the first time in an important competition. "Aaron L., a 20 class pacer, was named in a field which also in-

cluded the two top free for allers in the Maritimes. They were reported to have trained in 2:08 Joe figured he could go in 2:14 if pressed. His chances weren't considered bright. When the field went away, Joe ducked back into last place, content to wait for the final drive and then settle for all he could get back of the Big Two. As they went down the backstretch the second time, Joe looked up front and saw the two big boys licking and driving. He himself had a lapful of horse so he set sail with what we must visualize now, although it certainly was not recognized as such then, one of those typical O'Brien finishes. Later, his mother was to tell him that she knew it was her Joe when the radio announcer, who was beaming the big race to all parts of the Maritimes, cried out in surprise: "A big bay horse with a white face and a little fellow driving is really making the outside. He's 7th, he's 6th, he's 5th, he's 4th, he's 3rd, he's 2nd, and by gosh, he's gonna win it."

### FIRST PUBLIC STABLE

"Mr. Latta was in the stands that day, the first time he had seen Aaron L. race. With him were Wellington MacNeill, a Prince Edward Island horse dealer, and Dr. J. A. MacIsaac, a Cape Breton vet. MacNeill had a watch. Latta did not. MacNeill caught the time, 1:11 1/2. Being a reinsman, he backed from the stand, MacNeill asked Latta what he would take for the horse and when the owner said \$1,500, MacNeill handed him the cash. When the time was announced, Latta tried to invalidate the sale but failed. MacNeill sold half to Aaron L. to MacIsaac and asked Joe to go to work for him. Joe said he would provide MacNeill bought Direct L. as well. MacNeill had trouble with Latta at first on that one but finally got the job done for \$1,000. Again MacIsaac was made a partner. That winter Joe returned to Alberton and tried to talk his way into buying Happy L. the next in line from the farm of Direct L. and Aaron L. Dad declined and Joe still likes to remind him occasionally that Happy L. later took a record of 2:01 1/2 in the United States. Thus it came to pass that Joe O'Brien, with Direct L. and Aaron L. as his nucleus, opened his first public stable. He got \$10 a week for each of those two horses and the following summer, which was 1937, picked up a few others here and there. Young O'Brien was on his way.

"Joe confined himself to Canada in 1937 and made his first invasion of the U. S. in the fall of 1938 when he raced with moderate success at the overcoat meetings in Maine. He campaigned successfully in Canada in 1939 and had his first horse ready to go to Maine when he was 20. That kept him at home for the next eight years. In retrospect, it is probably the best thing that ever happened to the young Canadian. His driving ability was such that it alone probably would have landed him in the American scene five or more years before he actually did. And it probably would have found him woefully unprepared as a big time trainer. He might have been forced back into Canada and national oblivion. But what the war did was to give O'Brien a long period of time to learn the fundamentals and skills to do and to improve his race driving. What he learned about rigging and shoeing horses in the period from 1940 through 1949 was monumental.

### WAR YEARS

"Like all Canadians, O'Brien headed for the enlistment office when war came. He was accepted and assigned to the Cavalry. But it was soon determined that he was physically unfit, by reason of one leg being shorter than the other, and he was discharged. So O'Brien took a job in a New Glasgow, Nova Scotia, munitions factory at night and raced horses in the day time. He also took a bride. This important event occurred on April 8th, 1942, when he married Betty Flood, whom he had met in Charlottetown, P. E. I. Betty O'Brien has since been her husband's constant companion. She is both intelligent and attractive and has played a tremendously important role in Joe's life.

Through the war years, Joe continued to learn about horses. It was during this period that he had the great Duddy Patch, his first world's champion. Duddy Patch came to Joe as an 11-year-old with a reputation as a quitter. Joe didn't think much of him at first but he was in large doses and it proved the proper treatment. At Dufferin Park in the fall of 1942, Joe and Duddy went five eights of a mile in 1:10 1/2, a world record that still stands. Duddy was a community-owned horse and the property of the Duddy Patch Club, a New Glasgow, N.S. club that had been formed because of his great speed. Duddy is also one of the reasons that Joe seldom goes for a time trial record with a top horse. After Duddy's record days had been ended by defeat in the opposition, Joe agreed to race against his better judgment to send Duddy against the fence in an exhibition. Duddy, who loved competition only, made six breaks and paced his mile in 2:25. Joe was more than a trifle embarrassed and has never forgotten it. "In the early forties, it was not Joe O'Brien to sweep the card in the Maritimes. He won as many as several dashes in one day and on several occasions swept a three race card of three heats to a race. In 1946 Joe expanded his public stable and inherited the Ohio pacer Tip Abbe. He removed the hobbles and check and sent out a real race horse. Tip Abbe raced to mark the 2:05's. O'Brien star was now in the ascendancy and it was time for him to strike out again on the trail that had been crossed by war. He was recognized as the leading driver in the Maritimes, perhaps the greatest that had ever performed there, and for five straight years, beginning in 1944, had won the British Consols Trophy as leading reinsman. In the fall of 1947 he descended on Foxboro with an assortment of actual winners and swept the board clean. He was

47 heats with such animals as Baron, My Partner, Mac Fingo, Leo's Nightmare and McKlivo Cash. Tip Abbe was his ace performer and set a track standard. Dick Kelly wrote of Sep Palin, telling him that Joe was a comer. Dick Joe, and John Dagler, who was also in O'Brien's corner, met with Palin at Harrisburg that fall. Sep asked Joe a few questions about shoeing horses and other things about harness-raising. Nothing more was said.

### FRONT RANK

"Joe returned to Canada and a few days later got a call from Palin. The Boston reinsman wanted him to report to Del Mar, California as second trainer for the Castleton Farm string. It was 4,200 miles and in another world but Joe and Betty picked up in a hurry. The wheel of fortune had spun around to their number. From that time on the Joe O'Brien story has fairly well known to anyone conversant with harness racing. He was an instant success, first as a driver and then, as he began to develop champions of his own, as a trainer. In 1947, O'Brien won something in excess of \$13,000 racing at Foxboro. In 1948, on the Roarin' Grand, he won \$69,367. He got off to a good start that spring in California by scoring a stunning upset with Indian Land in the \$50,000 Golden West. It was a spine-tingling, earth shaking drive he gave the old horse but, actually, nothing more than a typical O'Brien drive. He went on to win stakes that year with Merry Way and Miss Morris Chief. At the end of the season he severed connections amicably with Castleton and opened his own public stable.

"While operating his own stable, he made the acquaintance of Sol Camp and catch drove many of the California's horses including Mighty Sun and Prince Jay. He drove Prince Jay a mile in 1:59 in 1950 although his first entry in the two-minute list was posted earlier that year with Robert Morris when he went against the fence in two minutes. Joe O'Brien, incidentally, had 15 two-minute races, all but the first one with Robert Morris in races. His fastest rides have been in 1:58 behind both Diana Streak and Mighty Sun. His other two-minute rides, in addition to the one behind Prince Jay, have been with Newport Chief, Scotch Victor, Diamond Hal, Scott Frost and Meadow Pace. O'Brien continued with his public stable through 1951 and went with Camp in the spring of 1952. In three years he has selected, trained and driven some of the finest horses in the world.

"In 1954 he came up with no fewer than six 2:10 2-year-old trotters. In addition to Scott Frost, they are Butch Hancock 2:02 1/2, Home Free 2:06, Dragon Fly 2:08 1/2, Butler Wyn 2:09 1/2 and Littlestown 2:10. Few trainers, if any at all, can match that record and Joe is conservative in his taste for yearlings. He hews to the normal line except as regards head and width between legs. "I don't particularly care what the head looks like but the horse must have a clear eye and a perfectly broad forehead. I don't much stress it being laid these days on classic looking heads and I don't feel they are necessary. Also, I don't care much about the width, or lack of it, between the front legs. That width in front may be only inches but if the colt stands straight that's the important thing with me.

"Off his feats with Scott Frost, Meadow Pace, Scotch Victor, Butch Hancock, et al., O'Brien has developed a solid reputation as a trainer. And a deserved one. But it is still as a driver that he commands his major reputation. The fact of the matter is that horse owners and just plain fans will invariably use the O'Brien comparison in discussing another reinsman. Time and again, in assessing the merits of this driver or that one, he will be considered in light of how he rates with regard to the canny Canadian. That is the flattery in his highest and purest form. Justice to say, he rates with the small handful in history who can literally be classed as the "all time greats". In driving a harness horse, Joe O'Brien figures that the percentage lies with the man who walks. Anybody who saw him drive Step Lively at the beginning of the war and wait and wait before he made his move that brought her from 11th and last to first in the final three eights will know what he means. It was one of the most perfectly timed driving exhibitions our sport has ever seen.

### A QUESTION OF PERCENTAGES

"When you leave the gate," says Joe, "you have two choices. You can either try to go to the top or you can take back and tuck in along the rail—we are considering of course that you aren't lucky enough to slip in the hole someplace. Well, to me, it's a question of percentages. If you go to the top you may not have used your horse too much and you might win. Wherever you tuck in last you may not be able to get a time. Suppose the percentage comes out even. I maintain that you should tuck back and save your horse. You know he will have more brush at the end. And even if the percentage didn't favor you on the win for win basis, you would still be saving something in your horse's condition and he would last longer and race better for you. No matter which way you go, you're going to get beat a great many times, many more than you win. I'd rather get beat by waiting too long than by coming too early. In the former case, you will at least have saved your horse as long as possible. Also, your horse will get in the habit of coming on in the stretch instead of stopping. That's an important consideration, too.

"When do I like to make a move in a race. Well, there's no particular formula. It depends a great deal on the horse, the race and the type of opposition. But I can set up one pattern that has proved successful for me. Move out behind the horse you figure you have to beat when he makes his move. If you are a better driver than he is, I think that's

flakes began to thicken and fluffy spirals of snow filtered across the pavement. I pointed the Chevy home-ward. I don't believe in taking chances. I've seen squalls come up almost out of a clear sky that if a motorist was a half hour drive from home he couldn't make it. It was just as well that I did. I made it alright but others who were less than an hour behind me admitted they wouldn't have made it if it were not for the bus and some heavy trucks that kept the drifts open.

### Hunters' Corner

We might as well face the facts in respect to our Hun coveys. In Kings County the birds are getting by so far but in Prince and Queens it is a different story. There is less snow in Kings and the coveys have found spots where they can secure food and grit. Steamy, grassy springs are favourite hang-outs. A covey will spend a winter around such a spot if a succession of heavy snow storms do not cover them (the springs) up. I travelled over a hundred miles in Kings County on Thursday and didn't spot a single covey. To my way of thinking that's a good sign. If they are getting by they stick close to their food supply. When one sees the coveys wandering aimlessly over a bare expanse of crusted snow, with wings on the verge of drooping, it's a bad sign. When a covey reaches a horse on a week of it is about all they can stand unless a thaw intervenes or help from a human source is forthcoming.

### I know one enthusiastic Hungarian partridge hunter who car-

wrong. If you go out ahead of him, you have to cut the wind and on the outside. But if you wait and follow him he's cutting the air and you, in behind him, are almost as well off as though you were on the outside. You know trailing a horse on the outside isn't nearly as difficult as breaking the air on the outside. So wait for that horse you figure is the one to beat and go when he goes—but behind him. This is especially true on half mile tracks where the home stretch is short. When you follow him, you can figure you're getting handier to the front if he lets go a little, you can always go around him. If he's not good enough to gain ground at that stage, he shouldn't be able to give you much trouble when you want to go by.

### BEST TO WAIT

"Coming through the stretch, I think it's best to wait along the rail for a hole rather than to dash to the outside. Once again it's the Continued on Page 10

ries heavy paper bags filled with coarse sand and gravel in his car during the course of frequent business trips through the country. Placing out commercial poultry grit is to a great extent a waste of time and money. Those who have tried both contend there is nothing better than shore sand. That has also been my own experience. They'll sure go for that fine Belle River gravel especially if a lot of those minute conks are mixed in with it. Along our shoreline conditions are better but in the inland farm country it's a pretty grim picture. Recently I tramped for miles across country and found the stubble fields covered with a deep crust that will carry a man. In places one's foot-prints are barely discernible. In the back farm land of Mount Allison, Lake Verde and Dromore it is a wintry scene that meets one's gaze and if weather conditions worsen the past season's take by hunters will be a mere bagatelle compared to what King Winter can do when he goes on the rampage. The amount of snow that is down at the moment wouldn't bother the Huns in the least if it were not crusted and frozen. They'll burrow down through a foot of fine snow to reach the clover and grasses underneath like rats. The pheasants take to the trees

Two important changes in our trout regulations are to be considered at the meeting of the Special Fishery officials at Hallifax this week. . . . the doing away of the six inch size limit and the ten pound weight limit. The saltake for the coming season could be 20 trout regardless of size or weight. Any change will be announced promptly. Methinks the abolition of the six inch size limit is a top conservation move. When trout are running on the small scale an angler often kills 40 to get his daily limit of 20. Very few trout that are taken on bait live after being returned to the water. As regards the 10 pound weight limit . . . that was so much excess baggage to clutter up the regulations.

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and buds when the going gets tough. They'll eat anything. They consider discarded fox carcasses a treat in the winter time. Fox and rabbit hunters have reported a lot of pheasants on the rounds; and that it is nothing unusual to see, and hear, four or five big Cocks erupt out of a spruce thicket when the hounds move in and start to bay. The hen birds are in reality more cagey than their consorts. They are inclined to slip noiselessly away without being seen or heard.

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