



# The Life of Brian

Brian Pinsky has been gone almost four years, but his influence and memory live on BY NICOLE KRAFT





ED KEYS

Marlys Pinske thought her son was just tired. There was no other explanation for her eldest child, Brian, to not have awoken early that autumn day in 2002 to begin preparing for another day at the Stan-

dardbred Horse Sale Company's Harrisburg yearling sale.

It was Tuesday, Nov. 5, and the week had already been full. The Pinske family—Marlys and patriarch Tim—had flown into Pennsylvania Sunday from Minnesota, stopping in Illinois to pick up Brian, plus horsemen Dan Knox and John Butenschoen. Monday was filled with browsing and buying, as Brian added four babies to his burgeoning stable of more than 100 Standardbreds. The sale session was followed by a late night of food, drink and friendship.

There was wine. There was laughter. There was the underlying feeling that

these were truly the good times of life.

Brian had not felt perfect this trip. His hand, broken while breaking a yearling days before, was encased in a soft cast. He was battling a head cold, further aggravated by the drafty and dusty Harrisburg sale arena. But at 38 he was a man on top of the world—with a beautiful wife and daughter, top-quality horses in the barn and a family that adored him—poised to reach the pinnacle of the sport he had embraced.

Marlys had bid Brian goodnight from the Marriot Hotel bar at 12:30 a.m., rubbing her hand up and down his broad back as she stood by where he sat. He

looked up at her with gentle blue eyes, his sandy brown hair softly spiked away from his forehead.

"I'll see you in the morning, Mom," he said with a smile.

Less than 12 hours later, Marlys Pinske stood outside her son's hotel room—the one adjoining her own—key-card in hand. Tim had thought Brian might have gotten up early and gone out, but she heard the television playing through the door. They had wanted to call, yet did not wish to awaken him should sleep be what he needed.

She had waited long enough.

She inserted the key into the door slot,



and felt the click of the lock releasing. She eased down the handle and stepped into the dimness of the room. Brian lay on his back on the bed. There was no rhythm of breath, no glow to his cheeks—only the tinny sound of the television in the too-still room.

Marlys Pinske began to scream.

It has been nearly four years since the shocking reports first emerged from the Harrisburg sale. Brian Pinske, one of the sport's true rising stars, was dead. Rumors swirled about the cause of death, the future of his 100-horse stable, the impact on one of the sport's most close-knit families.

Pinske had been an heir apparent to the great horsemen of years gone by, those who could work all day and night, who could drive as well as they could train, who could handle horse numbers in the triple digits and never lose sight of the winner's circle. In the years since Brian's death, much has changed for the Pinske family. But they remain entrenched in the industry that has been home to them for generations—building off Brian's dreams and memories and ensuring the racing world remembers that which it lost.

It's easy to look up statistics and think they represent a person's career, and certainly Pinske's more than \$20 million in earnings as a driver and trainer reflect significant success. His 561 driving wins and 844 training victories (since 1991) illustrate a qualified horseman who knew how to find the winner's circle.

But no figures can show Brian the boy who wanted to follow his grandfather and father into the sport of racing, despite growing up in Minnesota, far from the Standardbred spotlight. No numbers can show Brian the man, who was willing to work 20 hours out of

every 24-hour day to make sure he built the best stable on the strongest foundation, poised for a run at the sport's uppermost echelon.

There is no way to quantify Brian the father and husband, who once said he would not live to see 40, but changed his tune after the birth of daughter McKenna, and started instead to contemplate retirement at 50 to enjoy with those he loved most of the proceeds of the life he was building.

"A few months ago, Brian and I were having a conversation in my office, and I said, 'How old are you, Brian?'" Maywood/Balmoral race secretary Eliot "Doc" Narotsky told Marlys Pinske on the night of her son's track-side memorial. "He said, 'Well, if you count the days, I'm 37. If you add in the nights, I'm probably well into my 50s.'"

## Brian Pinske

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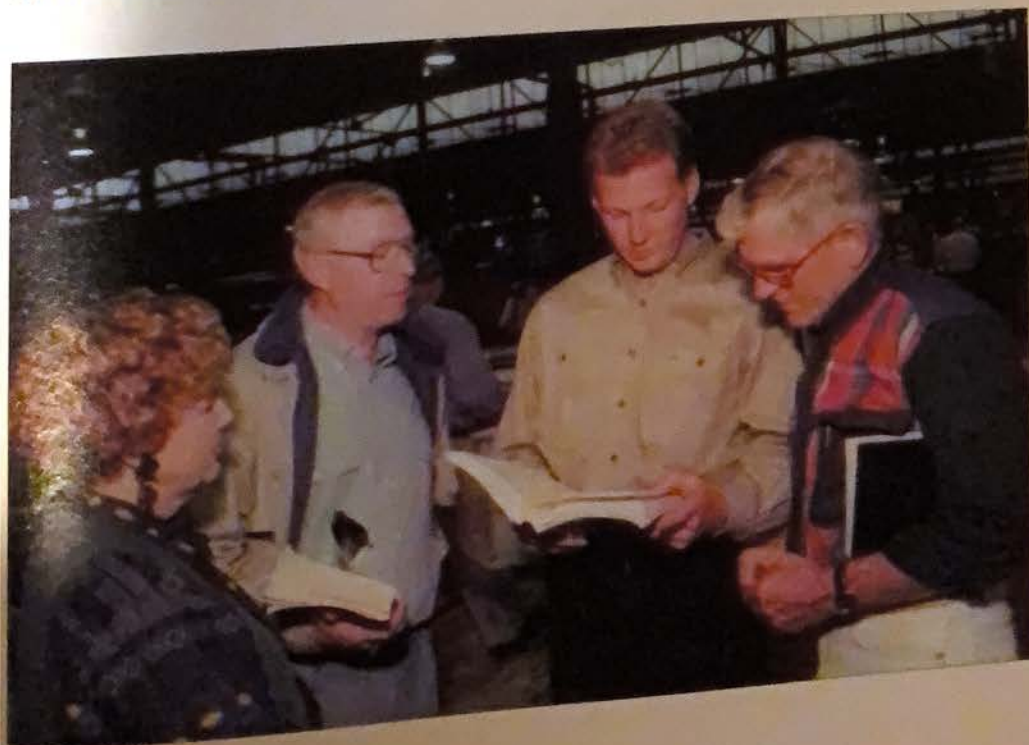
**Reaching for the stars:** Left, Brian Pinske's stable numbered more than 100 head and earned more than \$2 million in both 2001 and 2002. Below, Brian studies a sales catalogue with Dr. Ken Walker, while Marlys and Tim Pinske look on.

"There wasn't much of life that Brian missed," Marlys concurred with a wry smile.

Marlys and Tim Pinske married in December of 1964 in their hometown of Plato, Minn., the winter after their high school graduation. Brian was born Sept. 16, 1964. Marlys was 18 and barely knew how to spell "horse," but she knew she better learn fast.

"The Pinske family told me when we got married that they had the horses before they had me," she said. "I needed to realize at that point that if it was something I wanted to push, I was never going to win. So it never was a factor."

Marlys and Tim welcomed son Karl in 1968. Another son, John, followed in 1971. Tim, like his father, Robert, before him, trained horses from his earliest





days. He continued in the sport—racing in Ohio, Illinois, St. Louis and beyond—until his oldest son started school.

"We didn't have the financial stability for him to keep training horses," Marlys admitted.

Tim and Marlys turned their attentions to the family's business, Plano Woodwork, and horses were on the back burner until Brian's passion for the sport began to grow as a student at Glencoe High School and into college.

Brian had been at Mankato State University for two months when he came home one weekend, and sat in the kitchen watching his mother prepare dinner. He was quiet for a second, amid the stirring and chopping, then broke his silence.

"I hate it," he said.

"What?" she asked, looking up.

"School," he replied. "I hate it. It's like going to work at a job you hate and not getting paid."

He'd gotten his pari-mutuel license that year at the age of 18. He had big dreams and felt, as many teens do, that time was too short to waste any of it.

Marlys Pinske didn't say a word. She and Tim had told their son from the beginning, "If you really want to race horses, we want you to have an education first, because those are the people that you're going to want for owners. You're going to want stockbrokers and insurance people and doctors and attorneys, and you need to be able to deal with those people."

So she just looked at him, trusting he would, as usual, come up with the answer on his own.

"Don't worry, Mom," he said after a few minutes of pondering, his smile big enough to break a mother's heart. "I won't quit."

"Before he had the first semester in, he turned into the world's greatest student," Marlys recalled. "He absolutely loved college. He flourished all the way through, because he had his goal. He had his objective. And when four years was done, he was done with school—and in a state school, that's pretty unheard of. He graduated with a business and marketing degree."

Those college years, however, were made even more challenging by the family's first major heartbreak—the Dec. 17,

1986, death of John, 14, in an automobile accident. John Pinske, who had a broken arm at the time of his death, was a passenger on his way to school in Glencoe. Doctors speculated that the impact of the crash pushed his cast into his chest, and he died of a lacerated lung.

He was buried on his 15th birthday.

"That drew all of us really together, really close," Marlys said. "After John, Brian dwelled more on family. He hadn't really grown up until then."

But grow up he did.

By the time he graduated from college, Brian Pinske was a man with a plan. He would buy quality horses that hopefully retained resale value. He would train them with an eye toward improvement and resale. He accepted no hand-outs from his parents, but preferred instead that they invest in his burgeoning barn.

## Butenschoen

saw in Pinske the horsemen of yesteryear who could handle the owners, grooms, training, driving, staking, shipping and the care that comes with such an overflow barn.

Pinske started racing at The Meadows and Quad City Downs before moving to Darien, Ill., and setting up a base at the now-defunct Sportsman's Park. In 1989, he drove a career-high 429 mounts to 57 victories, though in the early 1990s he let his driving numbers ebb as his training stats flowed. By the summer of 1995, Pinske had 40 horses—mostly well-bred 2-year-olds. His stable broke \$1 million for the first time, as he sent out 88 winners from 383 starters, and still managed to drive 83 winners to purse earnings in excess of \$1.2 million. The barn was led by Athena Blue Chip, who finished second in the Mistletoe Shalee and won the Courageous Lady, and multiple stake winner Lady Ann Marhew.

Pinske and his stable wintered at Winter Miles Training Center in Florida,

and Brian seemed to have a full life. It was about to get fuller.

Brandy Willis had never even heard of Brian Pinske before her mother, Kay, came back from the Chicago races in 1993 and informed her, "Have I found the guy for you."

Brandy, then 20, had plenty of boyfriends, and she paid little mind to her mother's words. It took another year before she actually met Brian Pinske at the Illinois State Fair.

Their first date was a Vince Gill concert, even though Brian hated country music. He was eight years her senior, and had also enjoyed his share of relationships. He swore he would never be a divorce statistic, so until he was really sure, he would never consider marriage.

Brandy made Brian sure about a lot of things. Within a year they were living together, and they married on Nov. 23, 1996.

"His personality was very charismat-







ED KEYS

**Concentration:** Like horsemen of yesteryear, Pinsky could train all morning and drive all night, and never lose his enthusiasm for racing.

ic," said Brandy. "He was very confident, outgoing. He was always having fun and enjoying everything about life. He was always joking with people and said he picked me because of my legs. But really, he said it was because I was always happy. 'You're never in a bad mood,' he told me. 'That's what I like the most about you.'"

They were as different as the sun and moon. She was considered distant, a bit aloof, hard to approach or get to know. Brian was a friend to everyone—from Hall of Fame horseman to groom to fan. He was swift with a ready handshake, and a vibrant, mischievous smile. He was the one who made everyone feel at home. He was quick-witted, but so was Brandy. She was the one who would fire a one-liner right back at him, and stir up that

Pinsky grin.

Their wedding took place at a Catholic church in Darien, not long after Brandy completed her studies in radiation therapy at Parkland College, and in a year that Brian's stable had won more than 70 races and earned over \$900,000. There were 350 people at the reception.

The bridesmaids—all 10 of them—wore Brandy's favorite color of red. The groomsmen did, too—in a Brian sort of way. They all came parading down the hall's winding staircase, topped out in tuxedo jackets, white shirts, bow-ties and red boxer shorts, bought by Marlys. They then bunny-hopped around the floor.

Brandy, the daughter of Illinois horse veterans Nelson and Kay Willis, knew married life in the racing business would not be easy—and she could not even envision how the Pinsky stable would grow in the subsequent five years. What she could see, however, was that Brian could use some help.

"He asked me if I would take over the

bookwork because he couldn't keep up with it," she remembered. "Not only couldn't he keep up with it—he hadn't sent out bills in four months. I said to him, 'How can you do this?' and he said, 'I just don't have time.' It took me quite a while to catch up on four months, and then it became my permanent job.

"He was great at keeping things in his head. He would remember if a horse got there 30 or 60 days ago, where it had been and how much vet work it'd had. Even when we got 100 to 110 horses, he was still keeping it in his head. He'd never write anything down. I was always trying to put the pieces together to do the billing, and it was getting harder and harder. I finally told him, 'Brian, you have to carry a tape recorder and just speak into it when something comes up that I'll need to know.' He thought it was a grand idea, but he was stubborn. He never did it."

The Pinsky stable grew over the next two years, breaking 100 wins in 1999 and bringing home \$1.7 million in purs-





ED REYS

es—led by the good filly Mercy Mercy Mercy. The family grew with the arrival of another “filly,” daughter McKenna, who was born Feb. 20, 1999.

“I can still hear him the day that McKenna was born,” Marlys said. “He called and said, ‘Man, Mom, I’d recommend this to anybody.’”

“They were really tight from the minute she was born,” added Brandy. “He was so busy and work was so hard. It was all stress and hectic for him—people calling non-stop. But the minute he saw her, his eyes would just light up, and everything else would go away for a while. Of course, if he didn’t have to change a diaper, he wouldn’t. But he loved to give her baths in the sink. He’d take the sprayer in the kitchen sink and use it like a shower. They’d both be busting out laughing. I’d come in, and there she was giggling as he was spraying her in the face.”

It was the early 1980s when John Butenschoen, then in his 20s, was working in Pennsylvania for Hall of Famer Delvin Miller and first encountered the Pinske family. Being from Illinois, Butenschoen shared the family’s Midwestern experiences and values, and that provided for them a natural connection. That tie was made even stronger when Butenschoen moved back to Marengo, Ill., to start his own stable. Brian Pinske had already set up shop in the Land of Lincoln.

“Brian was someone often criticized for his ornery nature,” Butenschoen recalled with a soft chuckle. “But it was always in fun. He was quick with a one-liner, a joke. He had a fun personality. He was a goof, but someone I would have trusted with my life.

“We were like-minded warped individuals. We had a lot of things in common. We both like to drink beer and

**Cruise control:** Yankee Cruiser (above with Andy Miller in the Little Brown Jug) won more than \$800,000 as a 3-year-old and captured the North America Cup for trainer Tim Pinske (right).

drink wine, eat seafood.”

The pair may have been on parallel paths, but Butenschoen quickly saw his friend speed ahead like a pacer with a 25-second final quarter. Pinske built a stable of 50, then 75, then 100 horses. Butenschoen saw in Pinske the horsemen of yesteryear who could handle the owners, grooms, training, driving, staking, shipping and the care that comes with such an overflow barn.

“He was unique,” said Butenschoen. “To stay mentally focused 24-7 on that many horses is incredibly challenging. I asked him, ‘How long can you do it? Where does the fun end?’ He just said, ‘It’s no problem. I’ve got good help.’



"All trainers are whores—we prostitute ourselves to owners always looking for the next good horse. Brian could handle the pressure better than anyone. He seemed to thrive on it, actually. Even when he could have started saying no pretty comfortably, he didn't. He just kept trying to get the next one. He had to have one in the wings."

Butenschoen said part of Pinske's success came from the development and dedication of his business plan. To that end, every horse he bought had similar properties, and every horse was for sale.

"When he bought a horse, it was usually a dark horse, with a good head and a good eye," Butenschoen recalled. "They were always appealing horses—horses other people would want to buy if they looked at them in Brian's barn."

The fillies always had strong maternal families. Any major breeding farm would want to have mares bred like this back in their breeding ranks. He and Tim worked in concert, spending a lot of effort and time looking at yearlings. They would go to farms and look at the horses. Brian did his due diligence. And he managed the horses properly.

"I remember when I bought Falcons Scooter as a yearling [who went on to earn \$500,000]. He looked like just a horse. Brian would never even have looked at him. Brian said to me, 'You buy a horse at a reasonable price and expect a decent racehorse. I have to be able to sell them again. It's like a car—

you can buy a Buick or a Cadillac. When I go to sell, your Buick is still a Buick. But my Cadillac is still a Cadillac.'"

But even surrounded by Cadillacs, Pinske kept his attitude firmly grounded, and Butenschoen said there was no one who better epitomized the purity of selflessness that can be shared among fellow horsemen. It was always Brian volunteering to ease another's work burdens by shipping one here or there, or offering up a stall space or the help of a groom for the week.

"Wherever there was a chance to do a favor, he was always the first one to help out," he said. "There was always a will-

ingness to share what he had—knowledge, resources, friendship.

"If you were going on the stakes circuit, he was the guy you wanted to ask for advice. If you were going to have dinner and a beer, he was the guy you wanted to do it with. He was quick with a joke, quick with laughter. God, he loved to laugh. And you knew, almost whenever he was talking to you, he was thinking what he could do as a practical joke."

Just ask horseman Mark Fransen. One day at Du Quoin he left his brand-new colors hanging in the Pinske barn, where Pinske and Butenschoen came upon them after a trip out for dinner.

"Why would some idiot leave his colors in my barn?" Pinske asked Butenschoen, and soon after those colors

**"I was working**  
more behind the scenes for Brian,"  
said Tim Pinske. "Things have  
changed in the 30 or 40 years since I  
started training for a living, but the  
staff here has been excellent....  
Everything is the same, other than  
missing our quarterback."



were waving in the wind up in the rafters. Pinske then turned and saw Fransen's jog cart. A glimmer came in his eye, one Butenschoen had seen countless times before. The jog cart was soon strung up a rafter or two from the colors.

"The next year it was Roger Welch's turn," Butenschoen said, laughing. "Mini Me was in the barn, and he got his race bike on top of the barn. Brian was always doing something to needle someone. It wasn't malicious. It was just him."

**B**rian Pinske lived fast. He was the first on a roller coaster. He drove a car like he was in a race, with his headlights practically resting on the rear bumper before him—like a horse's nose to a driver's helmet in a pocket trip.



"I'd be like, 'Honey, you can't get that close to that person's bumper,'" Brandy said with a chuckle. "You have to leave more than six inches."

Driving to Florida from Illinois, he cruised at 90 mph—pulling a horse trailer.

His career, too, seemed to move at the speed of light. His stable earned over \$1.6 million in 2000, and had crossed \$2 million by 2001, led by a pair of pacers—sophomore colt Hawaiian Cowboy and freshman filly Roaring Good Time.

Between 2000 and 2002 he made a pair of purchases that would change the lives of him and his family—one was the Simpson Training Center, and the other a yearling colt named Yankee Cruiser.

Florida had become a salvation for Pinske—a respite from the controlled chaos that was his racing life. Though the sport itself didn't take a break, Pinske sought to, shipping his babies to Florida and having a few months where the barn did not call to him morning and night.

The sale of Winter Miles Training Center in Oviedo left the Pinske stable seeking a new off-season home, and Jim and Georgia Simpson, owners of the Simpson Training Center, threw open the doors.

"They had wanted Brian to come to the training center for several years," said Marlys Pinske. "When Winter Miles was bought up for development, he had to find another place to go. But by that time, his stable was more than 80 horses in the wintertime, so there wasn't room for them. They approached us and asked if we were interested in buying part of the place, and they would reinvest what we paid into building additional barns."

"Tim supervised the building of all those barns, so he traveled back and forth from Minnesota to Florida all summer before we moved in. We were going to build three barns, and then Erv Miller showed interest in coming down, too, so we built a fourth."

By January of 2001, the Simpson Training Center had finished its new barns and a sand jog track. The addition of 112 new stalls meant it could now house 208 horses—and there was still a waiting list. By 2002, Brian was clearly at home at the training center, and the Simpsons offered to sell out completely. Tim and Marlys, as well as Karl—with whom Brian had grown especially close

after John's death—and his wife, Melissa, joined Brian in the ownership venture that Brian renamed Southern Oaks. It represented the future in more ways than one.

**A**mong the yearlings Brian trained at Southern Oaks in 2002 was a colt from the first crop of Artiscape whom he and his parents had bought for \$23,000 at the 2001 Kentucky Standardbred Sale. His name was Yankee Cruiser.

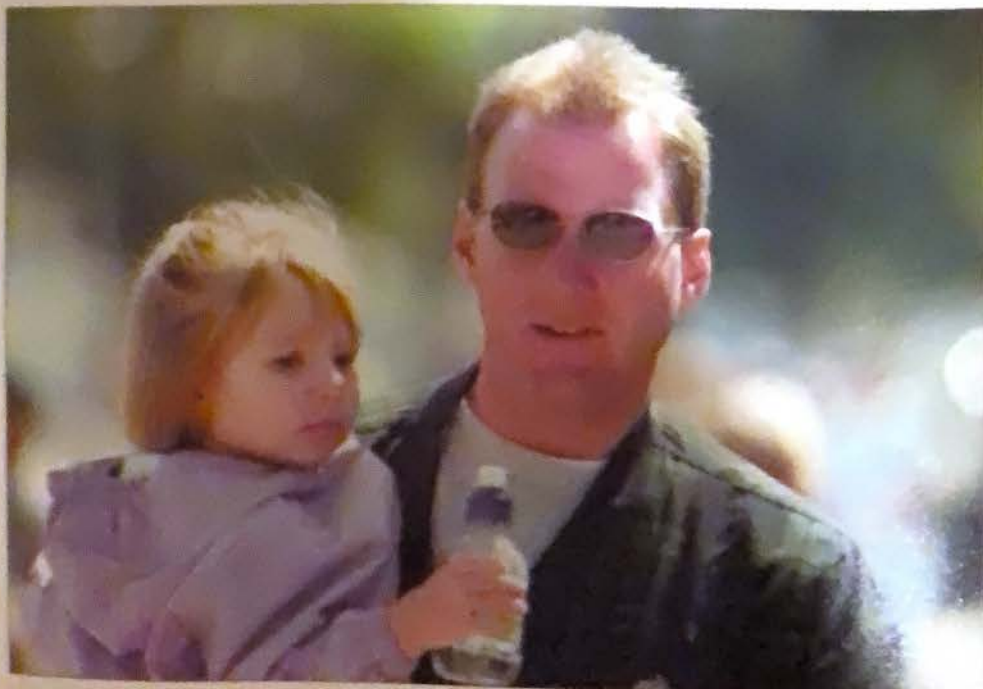
"Yankee Cruiser was a keen-looking horse who just caught my eye," Pinske

told the *Chicago Sun-Times* in 2002. "We wanted to try a couple of the Artiscales. This one was out of a Jate Lobell mare, and the price was right."

The colt had done little to impress his trainer by the time they shipped north in the spring of 2002, but Pinske's view began to change when the colt started qualifying at Maywood Park in June. He called his mother and said simply, "This horse is going to be a good horse," recalled Marlys.

Yankee Cruiser broke his maiden with a 1:57 effort at Hawthorne on July 4. Two starts later he won his American-National elimination in 1:53.2, and on July 28 won the final in 1:51.2. By the next week, when the colt won the Review at Springfield by six widening lengths in 1:51.2, the Pinske family knew

**"If I had to**  
do it all over," said Brandy Pinske, "I can't imagine never having loved him. I can't imagine a life that didn't have him in it. If I had to do it over...I would have asked him, 'If you were to die and I'm left with 110 horses, what would you like me to do?'"







TIMOTHY M. JONES

**The Pinske family:** Left, Brian and the light of his life, his daughter, McKenna. Above, the family today—Brandy and McKenna; Melissa and Karl and children Jaelynn, Mitchell and Carter; and Tim and Marlys.

it had a player.

After that race Nick Barbieri joined in the colt's ownership, and the Yankee Cruiser team watched their colt win the Lou Babic elim and final, divisions of the International Stallion Stake and Bluegrass, and the Abe Lincoln. His only real blemish: an eighth-place Breeders Crown finish after leaving from post 10 and racing three-wide through much of the mile.

But the colt had shown plenty, and his success prompted Pinske to spend \$145,000 on his full brother, Yankee Castle, at the 2002 Kentucky Standardbred Sale. Pinske was the most active yearling buyer in Kentucky that year, purchasing 30 yearlings and spending nearly \$1.1 million. Despite all he had accomplished and the tremendous toll his long hours took on his mind, body and family, Brian Pinske was showing no signs of slowing down.

"We had talked that maybe we should

downsize," Brandy said. "He said, 'Maybe I should go from 100 to 50, and be able to spend more on yearlings.' But he knew you are only big for as long as people want you. He said, 'If there are owners who want me, I will train for them while I still can. Someday I won't have 100 horses. Everything comes in a big circle. You get big and then you go down.'"

The Pinske plan: train for another 12 years or so, then let the next generation take over. Keep a little barn of 20 or so, and still be able to take a snowmobile or skiing trip—winter passions left over from his Minnesota childhood. Until then, he would keep working 20-hour days, keep racing and conditioning 100 horses, keep climbing for the summit.

"Just before he left for Harrisburg [in 2002]," Brandy recalled, "he said next year would be his biggest year ever."

**B**rian had not been feeling well the weekend before the 2002 Harrisburg sale, battling a cold that led him to tell Brandy, "I feel like death. If I didn't have horses selling [in the mixed sale], I wouldn't even go." As she drove him to the airport

hangar to meet the family plane, his discomfort seemed to grow.

"Come with me," he said to his surprised wife. "You and McKenna—get in the plane right now and come with me. You can buy clothes out there."

"I can't come," she said, confused and shaking her head. "We have the dog at home. I have to do the payroll."

Brian peered into his wife's face. He agreed she was right and he was "just being silly." They hugged and kissed goodbye before she drove away.

But Brandy Pinske stopped the car after just a few yards and watched her husband get on the plane. The thought that flitted across her mind: "What if that's the last time I ever see him?"

Those who spent the first sale day with Brian said he was like his normal self—bidding, socializing, bantering. He was tired but still festive when, at sale's end, he hooked up with his parents and friends for dinner.

"We ate, told lots of jokes and did lots of laughing," Marlys recalled. "Brian and John [Butenschoen] loved to pick wine—they thought of themselves as wine connoisseurs."

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During dinner, however, he took the soft cast on and off his broken hand several times and periodically held his hand up in the air and rubbed on it as if in pain. Once back at the hotel, he took his catalogue to his room and called his wife.

"He didn't have anything to say," Brandy remembered. "He was not one to get on the phone and gab about anything. He was very direct. Any call was, 'How's McKenna,' or seeking some other information. This time he just said, 'What are you doing?' He had nothing to say. I was frustrated.

"I asked him, 'What's the matter with you? You are acting strange.' But he just said, 'I'm probably just tired.'"

As the call came to an end, Brandy tried to engage her husband by asking, "Do you want to talk to McKenna?" but he declined.

"That was so weird. He always talked to McKenna," she said. "I was a little frustrated, because it seemed so odd. I just told him I loved him and would talk to him tomorrow.

"Then we hung up."

Butenschoen recalled his evening with the Pinskes in the Marriott bar—from the appointment he and Brian had made for the next morning with Dr. John Egloff to possibly trade a well-bred mare in for credit, to the last drink he and Brian shared. It was a Dewars and water, and Butenschoen picked up the tab. The bar announced last call around 1:30 a.m., and the two friends stood to part ways, since Butenschoen was staying at a hotel nearby.

"See you in the morning," they said to one another, as Pinske headed off toward the elevator.

The next morning, Butenschoen kept the appointment at Egloff's consignment area, and was surprised Pinske had not beaten him—or at least met him—there. He called on his friend's cell phone.

"What are you doing, Lazy, sleeping in?" he asked Brian's recorded voicemail message. "I know you got all your horses bought, but I'm down at Egloff's barn waiting for you."

Not long after, he was approached by a serious-looking David Reid of Preferred Equine Marketing, who told him to call Erv Miller at the Marriott

immediately, because "something bad happened."

Miller's voice on the phone was deep and serious: "Johnny, Brian is dead. You better get back over here."

"I called my wife, Jackie," said Butenschoen. "I was hysterical. I couldn't hardly even talk."

Butenschoen said he doesn't even remember the ride to the Marriott, but he can still see the controlled chaos around him. The Pinskes were surrounded by Erv Miller and owner Dave Miller. Driver Eric Ledford arrived soon after. The Pinskes were moved to a new room, and the group sat around in shock, trying to recall what had happened the night before that could have led to such an incomprehensible outcome.

Soon the reality of the immediate situation took hold.

There were still horses that had to go to Canada and Chicago. Horses from Lexington had to come in for the mixed sale. Horses had to be entered, drivers named.

"Everyone took a job," said Butenschoen. "Eric made calls to get shipping arrangements lined up. Erv called to

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(1) Outside-County as Stated on Form 3541	253	233	
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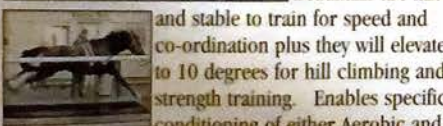


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Brian Pinske

make sure horses still got entered. Everyone did their own thing."

Butenschoen said he vividly remembers only one call.

"Tim stood up at one point and said, 'No one notified Karl,'" recalled Butenschoen. "We were all in the room. He called the woodworking company. He said, 'Karl, your brother's gone.' After that call, Tim looked at me and said, 'Johnny, I've only got one left.'"

Brandy Pinske, too, was dialing her husband's phone that morning, frustrated by the recorded voicemail. It was payroll day; Brian was the only one who knew who was owed what. It was closing in on the time Brandy had to meet the employees at the barn, and she could wait for Brian no longer.

She called Marlys Pinske on the phone and asked if she knew how to reach Brian. Marlys, still in shock as a squad took her oldest son to the morgue, said she would try to find him. Less than an hour later, Brandy's front doorbell rang. Standing on the foyer were Brian's best friend, Dr. Duane Wilcox, and his wife, Beth.

"When I saw Beth and they told me to sit down, I knew," Brandy said softly. "Once in a while Duane would pop by, but never both of them."

Brandy began to wail as the reality of Brian's death first hit her. She then called her parents, but drew silent after she hung up with them. By the time the Willises arrived, Brandy was at her desk finishing the payroll she had tried to start that morning.

"I have to work," she said simply to those who surrounded her. "I have to get this done for Brian."

Brian Pinske was buried in his hometown of Glencoe, Minn., not far from his younger brother. An autopsy revealed he had succumbed to "multiple drug toxicity," related to the alcohol and Darvocet in his system. The coroner who performed the procedure told the Pinskes, "It shouldn't have happened, but it did."

An overflow crowd filled with people from all walks of his life attended the funeral service.

When the church doors opened and his casket was rolled to the dais, Brandy and McKenna walked somberly behind it. It was, Brandy said, "the most awful moment of my whole life."

McKenna, then 3, sat quietly as the priest began his eulogy, but then looked

up at her mother. "Is Daddy in there?" she asked quizzically.

And when her mother replied, "Yes," Brian Pinske's only child burst into tears.

The funeral, however, proved to be the simplest part for a family coping with its loss. The week after Brian died, Marlys, Tim, Karl and Melissa went to Chicago for a memorial service. They gathered with the Wilcoxes, the Willises and Brandy in the house she had shared with Brian to talk about the future.

The Pinskes wanted to keep their son's lifelong dream alive, maintaining the stable and racing the horses. All Brandy saw was a burden, made impossible to bear by the incomprehensible void in her life.

"I've never been in charge," she admitted. "I'm not very good at being a leader. I don't like conflict. But I had to step up in this case, because the decisions were mine to make. For McKenna's sake, I had to take charge of our lives."

The Pinske family spent the winter in Florida, still in shock, but going through the motions of everyday life. The \$400,000 annual barn payroll was covered. The horses raced. The babies trained down. By spring, Brandy was back in Illinois and ready to disperse. Anything she owned outright went to her father. Everything else was sold in some way, shape or form.

But many of the horses did not go far. By June of 2003, they took up residence in a new Pinske barn, this one with Tim at the helm.

"As short as [Brian's] lifetime was, he spent his life building his monument, and we couldn't let that monument tumble in a heap," said Marlys.

"We knew if we [left] this business that's been a part of our lives, and say, 'My grandchildren want to do it,' we're going to lose 10, 12, 15 years," added Tim. "We just didn't feel like we wanted to give that up. Things change, once you are not in contact with it, and you want to start over, it's going to be difficult. We know the basics. We know a lot of people."

"I hate to say it this way, but losing Brian was very, very difficult—but it's our second time around. We've lost two sons. So you know things are going to get better. We have a lot of faith. I don't want to wear it on my collar, but we are church-going people. You have to go on."

Marlys, Tim and Karl bought from Brandy the horses on which they were partners and the ones who had outside



owners along with Brian Pinske Stable. The only horse they kept together was Yankee Cruiser.

It was Tim's goal to gradually wind down the stable to something more manageable for him and Marlys—and to put his experience to use where it was needed most.

"I never really left the sport," he said not long after taking over Brian's stable. "I was working more behind the scenes for Brian. Things have changed in the 30 or 40 years since I started training for a living, but the staff here has been excellent. We had a good winter. Everything is the same, other than missing our quarter-back."

Tim's philosophy on training horses is simple: "A good horse is a good horse. A bad horse is a bad horse. It's what you can salvage out of that middle bunch that is going to make you the money. There's not much you can do with a bad horse—you certainly have to manage him. A horse that needs a little more time or patience, try some different things, rather than just throw them away."

**T**he one horse definitely worth Pinks's time and patience was Yankee Cruiser.

The son of Artiscap was winless in his first three sophomore starts, but that did not stop Tim from pointing him toward the North America Cup at Woodbine in June. Sent off as the favorite in a weak elimination, Yankee Cruiser won in 1:50.1 for driver Dean Magee to set up a showdown with fellow elim winner and reigning divisional champion Allamerican Native.

Pacing with what some felt was an angel on his shoulder, Yankee Cruiser survived a tough three-wide journey to win by a half-length over dead-heating Artesian and Allamerican Native in 1:49.3 and take home the nearly \$500,000 first-place check.

There was not a dry eye in the winner's circle.

"I'm very emotional right now; I can hardly speak," Magee told reporters after the race. "I think somebody was watching out for us, and I think you know who that might be—Brian. I really wanted to win this race for him. This was his horse, and he stuck with me all through last year when he could have had anyone drive him. This was for him."

Yankee Cruiser became a millionaire



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Brian Pinske

with his win two weeks later in the American-National on the Pinskes' home turf of Balmoral Park. It was, co-owner Nick Barbieri said at the time, a bitter-sweet moment.

"Brian had told me two weeks before he died that the two races he most wanted to win with this colt were the North America Cup and the American-National before his hometown fans," Barbieri told reporters. "It's just so hard to believe that he wasn't here for either of them."

Though the colt won only one more race in 2003, he ended the season with lifetime earnings of \$1,150,123 and secured a place in the stallion barn of Ohio's Midland Acres. He was, without question, the best horse the Pinske barn had ever had.

"Yankee Cruiser probably had a whole lot to do with Tim's realization that he could carry on the barn," said Marlys. "Brian didn't go to sales without his dad, and the horses that we owned with other partners—Tim helped pick all those horses out. Tim was content to be in the background. His forte was running the cabinet shop, not training horses."

"But Tim said after Brian died, 'It's part of Brian's legacy, and I want to be able to continue to train horses for those same people.' So I think probably the biggest thing that Yankee Cruiser did was help him understand that he could do it—that a good horse is a good horse."

"Having such a great year with Yankee Cruiser after Brian died was like hell on Earth with a halo around it. I'm just glad we didn't have to do it without Yankee Cruiser."

And so life goes on. The Pinske Stable currently has two bases of operation: Classy Lane Farm in Ontario and Maywood Park in Chicago. In 2003, helped by Yankee Cruiser, the barn won 43 of 408 races and brought in \$1.4 million in purses. In 2004 the yield was 52 wins from 324 starters and \$475,365 in purses. Last year 34 winners from 215 starters brought in \$561,238.

There are about 25 horses in the Pinske Stable this year, and they plan this fall to add some Yankee Cruiser yearlings to the mix for 2007.

"The one thing Tim has said about training horses is that he is not necessarily doing everything the way Brian did it," said Marlys. "I've heard him say very many times, 'I have nothing to prove in

this business. And I need to enjoy doing it; I don't need the pressure of having to prove to someone that I can do it.' I'm glad he feels that way. He doesn't have to prove to anybody that he can do it. And I think that's what Brian would want—for his dad not to feel the pressure of having to do what he did."

"There were lots of times when Tim said, 'You have too many horses.' Brian never had any problem saying, 'It's my business, and this is the way I need to do it.' He always had the confidence to make his own decisions. We taught our sons to make decisions and live with it."

The Pinskes' woodworking business back in Minnesota continues, now under Karl's tutelage, while Tim remains with the stable. Marlys, always the glue that binds the Pinske family together, splits her time between husband and son, serving as an active partner in the stable, training center, and woodworking business—and even finding time to volunteer with the Harness Horse Youth Foundation's fund-raising efforts.

"I've had people tell me, 'You're such a strong person—how do you do it?'" said Marlys. "I don't know I do that. When something that tragic happens, you need to let the guy that's in charge lead you, and just say, 'Thy will be done.' Sure, you can say, 'Why me?' but what is the point?"

"I remember about a year after John was gone, Brian called me one day. He was at Quad City racing and training, and Karl was in college. We were talking about John and about going forward, and he said, 'You know, Mom, I look at life as being a merry-go-round that's going round and round and round, and we had to get off for a while. We got pushed off. All of our family and all of our friends did everything they could to help us, and we have to decide when to get back on that merry-go-round. As far as I'm concerned, it's time.'

"I thought of that many times after he was gone. What would he want us to do? Where would he want us to go?"

The Pinskes remain close with McKenna and Brandy, even as their lives head in different directions. Brandy bought 10 acres in Beecher, where she is building a home just minutes from her parents. Abouttosecond, a Camluck gelding she and Brian bought in August 2002, has earned nearly \$400,000 in purses. She plans to embark on her long overdue career as a radiation technician. She wants to meet new people and



out in a world she barely knows.

"When I married Brian, I knew what my whole life was going to be," she said. "I had it planned out. Now I have no idea what my life holds. In one second, your whole world is different. That changes you completely inside. You think differently, feel differently.

"I became a widow at 29 with a 3-year-old child. Some days it seems like it hasn't been that long at all since Brian died. Other days it seems like it's been 30 years."

McKenna, now 7, is in elementary school. She has her mother's dark eyes, and her father's reddish hair and Cheshire-cat smile. But the fact that Brian still lives in McKenna is most evident in her independence and her sense of humor.

"She doesn't like to be told what she should do, even when she knows what she's supposed to do," Brandy said, laughing. "One time she was eating something, and she said to me, 'Hey, Mom! Do you want a bite?' When I said, 'No thanks,' she said, 'How come? Are you afraid your butt's going to get too big?' I swear he must come to her in her dreams and give her these lines."

Brandy, too, still dreams of Brian—of the life they shared and the one that should have lasted into their old age. She finds herself starting to compare people she meets to him and quickly realizes it is unfair.

"He is untouchable to me," she said.

And in the dark of night, when her child is asleep and the house is quiet, when she still awaits the footsteps that will never come, Brandy Pinske remembers that which she loved over that which she lost.

"If I had to do it all over," she said, "I can't imagine never having loved him. I can't imagine a life that didn't have him in it. If I had to do it over, I would have planned better. I would have asked him, 'If you were to die and I'm left with 110 horses, what would you like me to do?' But I wouldn't have changed any aspect of my life with him.

"I tell McKenna how great her daddy was, and she'll ask me, 'Why did Daddy have to leave?' The only thing I can tell her is God needed him for something even bigger." **HB**

Illinois writer Tim Jones contributed to this article. To comment on this article, e-mail us at readerforum@ustrotting.com.

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## USTA District Meeting Dates—2006-2007

DISTRICT	DAY/DATE	PLACE	*NOMINATING PETITIONS POSTMARK DEADLINE	**RECEIPT OF BALLOT DEADLINE
#1	Sat., Jan. 20, 2007	Marriott Northwest Hotel, Dublin, OH	Dec. 1, 2006	Jan. 16, 2007
#2	Sat., Jan. 27, 2007	Novi Sheraton, Novi, MI	Dec. 8, 2006	Jan. 23, 2007
#3	To be determined			
#4A	Sat., Jan. 20, 2007	Best Western Regency Inn, Marshalltown, IA	Dec. 1, 2006	Jan. 16, 2007
#4B	Sat., Jan. 20, 2007	Howard Johnson, Madison, WI	Dec. 1, 2006	Jan. 16, 2007
#5	Sat., Jan. 20, 2007	Crowne Plaza, Springfield, IL	Dec. 1, 2006	Jan. 16, 2007
#6	Sat., Dec. 9, 2006	Pompano Park, Pompano Beach, FL	Oct. 20, 2006	Dec. 5, 2006
#7	Sat., Jan. 13, 2007	Mountain View Inn, Greensburg, PA	Nov. 24, 2006	Jan. 9, 2007
#8	Sun., Oct. 22, 2006	Tioga Downs, Nichols, NY	Sept. 2, 2006	Oct. 18, 2006
#8A	Sat., Dec. 2, 2006	The "New" Yonkers Raceway, Yonkers, NY	Oct. 13, 2006	Nov. 28, 2006
#9	Sat., Jan. 13, 2007	Augusta Civic Center, Augusta, ME	Nov. 24, 2006	Jan. 9, 2007
#11	Fri., Jan. 5, 2007	Sheraton, Dover, DE	Nov. 16, 2007	Jan. 1, 2007
#12	Fri., Dec. 8, 2006	Freehold Raceway, Freehold, NJ	Oct. 19, 2006	Dec 4, 2006

\* Article III, Section 6(b) "Nomination for Director shall be made by filing a written petition signed by at least 25 voting members from his district to be filed at the Main Office of the Association at Columbus, Ohio, at least 50 days before the election. Nominating petitions forwarded by mail shall be by registered mail, return receipt requested, and shall be considered filed as of the postmark date. All others shall be considered filed at the time they are actually received at the Main Office of the Association..."

\*\* Article III, Section 6(e) "...the deadline for receipt of ballots...shall be four days prior to the Annual District Meeting."

In accordance with Article III, Section 6(g), the Certified Public Accounting Firm is determined to be Ernst & Young, 1100 Huntington Center, 41 South High Street, Columbus, Ohio 43215.