



Mornings are hard for Chuck Sylvester. But it wasn't always so.

- In years past, as the northern winter receded, Sylvester would be at his Spring Garden Ranch base in Florida, eagerly readying the babies for their upcoming racing debuts. He'd be fine-tuning 3-year-olds who might bring even more glory to Sylvester's Hall of Fame career. He'd be enjoying fine weather, family and friends, and his life.
- Beside him would be his son, Troy, his right-hand man. Every year he seemed to inherit a bit more of the responsibility for the legendary stable.
- But in the seven months since Troy Sylvester died from injuries suffered in an all-terrain vehicle accident at the family's Magical Acres Farm in New



Jersey, Sylvester's mornings have never been the same. He now awakens to a moment of warm twilight, when his heart tells him his son will be at the barn waiting for him. He will be hooking up a horse for a training mile, and his eyes and smile will greet his father, flashing with mischief.

And then reality smothers Chuck Sylvester, taking his breath away.

"It's hard for me to get up, hard for me to do anything," Sylvester said quietly. "But we have to exist. It's not easy. A big part of your life is gone. I don't know what else I would do if not get up and do these horses."

One horse, among all others, has the greatest potential in 2010 of lifting the veil of Sylvester's grief, if only for the briefest moments. As Sylvester's first freshman trotting champion since the legendary Mack Lobell 24 years ago, Lucky Chucky would already have a special place in his trainer's heart. But his presence now, at truly the worst of times for the Sylvester family, has made him a beacon of hope that better days are yet to come.

"No one enjoyed winning more than Troy," said the colt's driver and Sylvester's close friend, John Campbell. "He thought Lucky Chucky would be a good colt, and he was right. Every time that horse races we are all thinking about Troy—and it will be that way all though 2010."

Even under the best of circumstances, Lucky Chucky would have been a hard horse for Sylvester to overlook. He was

BITTERSWEET

SEASON: Clockwise from left: Sylvester was bedside in a hospital room with his son, Troy, as Lucky Chucky finished third in the Peter Haughton Memorial on Hambletonian Day. Lucky Chucky (4) finished second to a hard-charging Pilgrims Taj in the Breeders Crown final. Warming up before the Breeders Crown.



the son of a former Sylvester pupil, the Muscles Yankee mare Aerobics, who turned out to have a good reason for her poor performance and overweight physique as a 2-year-old: An unsupervised chance encounter in the spring of 2002 at the Meadowlands with claiming pacer Do Not Disturb left her in foal (see sidebar on next page).

Retired that fall to owner Perretti Farm's New Jersey facility, Aerobics birthed a colt by her pacing paramour. She followed with two mediocre trotting fillies, before heading to the court of Windsong's Legacy.

And that was the pairing that made Sylvester take notice.

"She was good gaited, and I wanted to see what the colt looked like," he recalled.

"I thought I'd try a Windsong's Legacy, since I had the filly, Southwind Wasabi, who was good, and I couldn't afford to buy a Muscles Yankee for myself. This colt was a good-looking horse—kind of big and athletic looking."

Sylvester thought the trotter would bring \$30,000. For a \$10,000 final bid, he took the colt home.

But there was a problem: namely, his name.

Lucky Chucky is now, of course, christened for his Hall of Fame conditioner. But he started out as Winchonization, which even Bob Marks at Perretti Farms—who named the colt—admitted is an unpronounceable moniker he blamed on a typographical error.

And then the USTA rejected Sylvester's

Lucky Chucky

STRETCHING OUT: Clockwise from top left: Lucky Chucky and Sylvester out for a jog on a balmy south Florida morning in February. Sylvester said Lucky Chucky is always eager to "do right for you." Chuck and Troy at Spring Garden Ranch in 1997.



first renaming choice: What The Chuck.

"We argued with the USTA for two months, and then we got tired of it," Sylvester admitted. "It was getting late, and my daughter suggested Lucky Chucky. That was the one that stuck."

There was much to like about Lucky Chucky from his earliest days. He was, according to Sylvester, perfect-mannered and aiming to please—constantly seeking to "do right for you." But the colt impressed his closest connections a lot more than the outside world for one prominent reason: Speed made him look lame and on the verge of breaking stride.

Sylvester and Campbell, however, said that was—and is—the furthest thing from the truth.

"He doesn't look as fluid or as smooth as you'd want," said Campbell. "But he feels better on the lines than he looks. He doesn't feel at all like he will make a break. It's just when he wants to trot too much, he doesn't trot as well."

"He was a little bit aggressive early on, and we thought lightening him up would help, but we didn't want to do it all at once," added Sylvester. "He drifted in the straightaways, and that made him

look sore, but he was never lame. He just wanted to grab the left line and run out."

In following what Campbell called a "normal pattern" for Sylvester, Lucky Chucky baby-raced twice before making his first purse start July 2 in the Harriman Cup at the Meadowlands. The colt got away fifth and was far enough back coming around the last turn to make second place look like an accomplishment, but when leader Ripken made a break an eighth of a mile from the fin-

ish line, Lucky Chucky inherited the lead and his first victory.

Three weeks later in a Peter Haughton Memorial prep race, Campbell let Lucky Chucky float out from post 8 to drop into the two-hole. Once he took the lead at the half, the race was virtually over. Lucky Chucky drew away by $5\frac{3}{4}$ widening lengths to win in 1:56.2.

"I didn't ask him to trot in either of his baby races, but I knew I was sitting on something that could go," Campbell said. "That conditioned race was the first time he showed a sign of what he could really do."

Though it was clear Lucky Chucky could trot fast, the colt wanted to go a bit more than his connections wanted of him in his early starts and was prone to bearing out. That prompted Sylvester to put on him a steering bit, which showed good results in his July 31 Peter Haughton elimination, when Lucky Chucky won wire-to-wire in 1:56.2.

In the days that followed,





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is to stay busy," said Chuck Sylvester.
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if I did not have [the horses]."**

Lucky Chucky trained strongly for the \$523,600 final, and the Sylvester barn put its focus on the colt that could become the first protégé of the Hall of Fame conditioner to capture the premier event for freshman trotters.

But that focus soon shifted.

Reports first came out Aug. 6 that Troy Sylvester had been "seriously injured" the day before in an ATV accident at the family's Magical Acres in Chesterfield, N.J. Known as an ever-smiling practical joker, with a burning need for speed, who liberally used the nickname "Dawg," the 45-year-old Sylvester had been speeding along the trails with his nephew, Ryan, when his ATV flipped end over end, and smashed to bits.

Sylvester was flung to the ground with such force that he suffered two collapsed lungs, a broken pelvis and tailbone, broken facial bones, punctured spleen and brain injury. Transported to Capital Health Hospital near Trenton, Sylvester underwent emergency surgery to reduce brain swelling, but remained in a coma and on a ventilator.

The horses were all but forgotten, as the Sylvester family gathered by his bedside, facing the incomprehensible reality that Troy, who never seemed to stay still, was the prone form before them. As machines beeped and pumps whooshed, Troy Sylvester clung to life, and his family clung to hope.

But racing stops for no one person, and three days after Troy's accident, while hope for his recovery was beginning to wane, Lucky Chucky went post-ward for the Peter Haughton Memorial, for the first time on the undercard of the Hambletonian.

Hambletonian Day had been, for decades, Chuck Sylvester's playground, as he captured four editions of trotting's greatest race between 1987 (Mack Lobell) and 2002 (Chip Chip Hooray), but this one would go on without him. While he sat 67 miles south in a hushed hospital room, Lucky Chucky was sent off as the odds-on Haughton favorite from post 2.

Campbell was comfortable with the colt sitting third going into the backstretch, but Lucky Chucky wasn't. Gaining aggression when Brian Sears

'Lucky' Mare

Chuck Sylvester welcomed the 2-year-old Muscles Yankee filly *Aerobics* to his Meadowlands barn in July 2002, and knew three things about her: She had been trained by Ron Gurfein, she seemed fairly thick-bodied, and she was slow.

"She was a big mare, and heavy," he recalled of the Perretti Farms-owned mare. "We monkeyed around with her but couldn't get her to do much. When we got her to Lexington, I trained and trained her, and she wasn't losing any weight. We knew something was going on, so we had her examined."

It was then Sylvester learned something new about *Aerobics*: She was pregnant.

Bob Marks of Perretti Farms said nature took its course that summer at the Meadowlands, when a power failure resulted in claiming pacer *Do Not Disturb* getting loose and joining *Aerobics* for a late-night rendezvous. Eleven months later, on April 7, 2003, a pacing colt was born.

Appropriately named *Rude Awakenings*, the uniquely bred colt raced to four wins in eight starts and \$3,525 in earnings as a 2-year-old, before ending his career.

Aerobics' new career as a broodmare was just getting started, but she was still slow off the gate.

Her first trotting-bred offspring was the *Enjoy Lavec* filly *Endorphan Annie*, who sold at the Standardbred Horse Sale Company's 2005 Harrisburg sale for \$6,500 and earned \$19,921 in three seasons. A year later she and *Dream Vacation* sent another filly to Harrisburg, *Aerobic Linda*, who brought \$27,000 and earned \$22,798.

After *Aerobics* was barren from a 2005 breeding to *Dream Vacation*, Perretti opted in 2006 to send her to 2004 Trotting Triple Crown champion *Windsong's Legacy*. The result: a colt Marks named *Winchonization*.

"I intended to name him *Winchonization*, like 'synchronization,'" Marks recalled. "Either the USTA or I forgot the 'r,' so his name made no sense. Chuck, of course, changed it."

started to move with *Holiday Road*, *Lucky Chucky* made his move and had the lead as the 10-horse field pushed past three-quarters in 1:25.3. But the effort cost him.

Holiday Road trotted right by him in the stretch to win in 1:54, giving trainer Greg Peck a day to remember, with an astounding daily double of the Haughton and Hambletonian.

It was too, for Chuck Sylvester, a day that he would never forget—for the most devastating of reasons.

Troy Sylvester died that second Saturday of August, his body unable to cope with the violations of his injuries. The announcement from Ken Warkentin came across the Meadowlands loud speaker late in the afternoon, after the Hambletonian hoopla had quieted and much of the crowd had left.

The words seemed to force from those in attendance a collective sigh, deflating the hope that had lingered, the belief a miracle would come.

"We just sat there, the whole family," Sylvester recalled of Aug. 8. "We knew it was coming to the end for Troy. There was no hope. It didn't matter to me what the horse did. Nothing mattered."

Three days after Troy's death, his family and friends—more than 600 strong—came together to celebrate his life in a three-hour service at Hamilton Manor in Hamilton, N.J. And it was a true celebration, as memories were shared and jokes told, with the only instructions to those attending to dress casually—preferably in Sylvester green.

The next day, an aptly named 2-year-old was the first Sylvester horse to compete after Troy's death. And the music played on did more than just finish fourth at *Freehold* on Aug. 12—she also put back in motion a racing family that felt it could not go on after such a heartbreaking loss.

But go on it did.

"Chuck knew he had to get back to work," said Campbell. "I think that was better for him than not having something to do. He had some horses racing very

well. I think that helped a lot, too. Going to work is one thing, but if you are not having success, that almost makes like it's piling on. Having good horses was a benefit for Chuck, for the family and entire stable."

"Keeping busy is what keeps you busy," Sylvester agreed. "The only way to stay sane is to stay busy. I'm not sure what I'd do if I did not have [the horses]."

And *Lucky Chucky* more than did his part. After a three-week rest, he was at Harrah's Chester, romping in his elim for the Valley Victory. A week later, with \$450,000 on the line, he was a length the

LOVING CARE: Below: Caretaker Tiffany Pease tries to figure out if *Lucky Chucky* is yawning or trying to bite her. Right: Pease gives *Lucky Chucky* a bath after his morning jog.



best in the Valley Victory final in 1:56. And front and center in the winner's circle was his trainer, a smile on his lips, if not in his eyes.

"That win meant a lot to the whole family," admitted Sylvester. "All the kids are involved in the barn—we have a family operation. The grandkids all worked the farm and worked the horses. It's so hard to believe Troy is not part of it."

"As soon as I came back [to the winner's circle], my first thought was of Troy and for everyone," said Campbell. "And I had to think how much the win would mean to him."

And the wins kept coming for *Lucky Chucky*—the Bluegrass and International Stallion Stakes at The Red Mile and his



Breeders Crown elim at Woodbine. A tough journey in the Breeders Crown final on an unforgiving night resulted in a runner-up finish to Pilgrims Taj, but Lucky Chucky rallied to end his year in the winner's circle, by capturing the Matron Stakes at Dover, wrapping up the division.

"He raced well in the Breeders Crown—he fought so hard to be second," said Campbell. "You don't see horses do that that often. It was a tough night with the wind. He raced well—he just didn't win. We were pretty proud of him."

Lucky Chucky wintered in Florida like all Sylvester champions have, and his dance card is filled with the big-money events for 2010. Only time will tell if he proves himself worthy of a place alongside the Sylvester stars from years gone by, but there is no doubting that, for these challenges, at this time, he is the right horse.

"My granddaughter goes right up and brushes him, he is so gentle," Sylvester said. "She could walk him all day long. He is so well-mannered in the barn and on the track—I never have to worry for a minute. I ask myself, 'How is he so good mannered?'"

The Sylvester barn, which once held dozens, is now down to 12 filled stalls. The conditioner said those numbers will continue to dwindle, for Chuck did not realize how much work had been shouldered by his son until his son was there no more. For now, the trainer who long

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dominated trotting concentrates on the simplest tasks of every day—getting up and out of bed, putting one foot in front of the other, and letting the horses help him pack away the sorrow for just a few moments at a time.

"I go through the motions," said Sylvester, "but I don't worry about certain things. I know that no matter what happens, it can't be any worse. I wonder a lot if it's a dream. Is he coming back? I realize more and more, though, that it's over. That's life. We have to go on."

"I cry every day. And I ask a million times, 'Why?' And I get mad at him for being gone. But then we get up the next morning and do the best we can. And a horse like this makes you look forward to seeing him every day. A horse like this makes you dream again."

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