

A Driving Force! ... IOWA'S NICK ROLAND

By Mary Lou Lawless, with Lesa Peters

It is not unusual for Nick Roland to capture Iowa Harness Racing's top driver title after a super season on the state's county fair tracks. The 26 year old horseman from Grinnell had accepted this coveted award three times in previous years, but his final statistics for 2008 reflect an important career move for Roland; a decision to work fulltime with Standardbred race horses.

Instead of driving the 20 miles or so from Grinnell to the Best Western Regency at Marshalltown for the January 10th awards banquet, Nick caught a quick flight from New York, leaving behind a sizeable racing stable and the adventures of live racing for just a few hours to spend time with family and friends.

"So, you're turning pro then?" we asked. "Semi-pro... maybe," he countered modestly, with his easy smile.

Since winning his first race at the Missouri State Fair in Sedalia, in August of '98 with the '92 homebred pacer *Teswick* (named for himself and siblings Tessa and Will), Nick Roland has never wanted for horses to drive. Along with the drives came the accolades. Out of 481 purse starts last year he piloted 107 winners, 83 2nd place finishers and 69 3rd place contenders; horses with combined earnings of well over a quarter of a million dollars. He scored an over all UDRS of .366 for the year and was rated as third in the nation among drivers with a UDRS of .300-.499."

In 2008 Nick trained and campaigned the Iowa Registered, 2 year old reserve champion pacing colt, *Cole Hard Cash*, and the 3 year old champion pacing filly *Beach Fire*, whom he owned in partnership with grandsons of the Immortal Iowa Harness Racing Hall of Famer, G.J. "Junie" Manatt, Chris Manatt and Cliff Rhodes. Award winning trotters *Indy Source* and *Governor Sands*, were also piloted by Roland in 2008, at the fairs and then at Prairie Meadows for cousins Jeff and Nancy Carey of Columbus Junction.

Several Iowa champions raised, developed and raced by Nick and his family have succeeded far beyond the Iowa circuit, including the fastest ever 2 year old on an Iowa track, *MercantileExchange*, p2, 1:53.1M, winner of both the elimination and the championship in the Heartlander Pace at Prairie Meadows in 2007.

Cole Hard Cash was sold as a 2 year old last fall after a monster 1:54.4 mile at Prairie Meadows. After a few months off, "Cash" is just returning to racing at the Meadowlands in New Jersey, and has won his last two starts in an impressive 1:52M. This mark kept the youngster at the top of the USTA's list of top performers for several weeks into the new year. The gelding, now owned by Fabulous Farms in Glen Ridge, NJ, won his leg of the Jr. Trendsetter Series in 1:53.2 after being parked the entire mile and still paced the final quarter in :27.1!

"I am really proud of what those two guys have accomplished!" Nick said. The :53 mile

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"Merck" paced was the biggest individual performance I've ever been a part of. Everything was just right that night. The track was live and the pacesetters got down to the three quarters on time. From day one Cash gave 110%. He was one of the hardest trying horses I've ever had. It's neat to be able to say I developed the fastest three year old pacer in North America...and then that he came from central Iowa!"

Early on, Nick had campaigned many homebred Midwest Circuit champions and family favorites such as *Indian Folklore* and *Mighty Casey* and by end of season in 2001 he was just one short of 100 lifetime wins. Recognized by the USTA as a top achieving trainer in 2003, he has frequently ranked among the top ten in the nation among drivers with 500 or less race starts.

As Roland won the Iowa awards for 2002, '03



Iowa Harness Horsemen's Association president Royal Roland presents the 2008 Driving Award to Nick Roland and his son Ethan at the 2009 awards banquet on January 10, 2009



Nick Roland and champion pacer Cole Hard Cash head for a win at the Great Jones Co Fair in Monticello



Nick and champion filly Beach Fire show the way for Rick Magee and the rest of the field at the Humboldt Co Fair Track in Humboldt

and '04 consecutively, he was also putting himself through college, taking classes at Hawkeye CC and UNI, and then receiving his four year degree in Business Administration from Buena Vista in Storm Lake, IA. Remarkably, his college education was funded on a cash basis, entirely by what he earned training and racing horses.

Nick Royce Roland is said to have been "born in the bike," and you take that as a figure of speech, until you talk to his mother. Lesa (Roland) Peters, a registered nurse by profession, says it was nearly a literal event in July of 1982, when she and Nick's father, Royal Roland were racing horses at Quad City Downs in East Moline, Illinois. Well accustomed to the rigors of

racing, Lesa was about 7½ months along with their first born, but the extra 25 pounds did not deter her from jogging to the winner's circle for the photo, riding back to the barn on the racebike and caring for the winning horse in the detention barn. Nick arrived the next day, more than a month early.

Nick's brother Will is just 13 months his junior and both were bound to become accomplished horsemen. Their family life and closest relationships have revolved around the treasured traditions of Iowa's Standardbred industry, as they and sisters Tessa and Leah are fifth generation successors of Lesa's great grandfather, harness horseman Robert Carey,



of Columbus Junction. Their great grandfather, Royce "Red" Carey, earned a prestigious USTA driving achievement award in 1961, and both Nick and Will have followed the trail he blazed.

"My brother, sisters and I are really close," said Nick. "I feel very fortunate to be able to do what I love and work with so many people that I enjoy. Will and I are always plotting ways to improve or do things better."

Lesa Peters is understandably proud and at the same time empathetic of Nick's career choices. "It's a rare thing, to have both the talent and courage to go out in the world and try to make a living doing the thing you love most," she said. "There are no guarantees when you're working with animals that can easily become ill, stressed, over tired or injured...just like any of us! Challenges and disappointments come; that you have little or no control over."

"By far the hardest thing about coming out East has been leaving my son at home," added Nick. "I got to see him for a couple of days when I was back for the banquet, but it has been tough. I have learned a lot though and have an opportunity that most people will never have."

** (The US Trotting Association continuously compiles a UDRS (Universal Driver Rating Score) for every race driver. The score is comparable to a batting average, and any number over .300 is excellent. Roland's score for Iowa's Midwest Fair circuit, a 12 week run, was .427 and his career average is .389)