



# BLUESTONE





# FARMS:

*A success story in the making*

BY KEITH MCCALMONT



**O**utspoken, studious and successful are three words that come to mind to describe Mitchel Skolnick, President of Bluestone Farms located in beautiful Hopewell, New Jersey.

The spacious Bluestone operation, launched in 1997 with Eric Freeman and Frank Russo, is spread over 296 acres of rolling green hills on a parcel of land that looks more like Ireland than New Jersey.

Mitchel resides on the beautiful property with his wife Brianna, an accomplished Canadian equine artist with horse racing roots in the London, ON area.

Skolnick, with an MBA from Adelphi University as well as a Bachelor's degree in Physics from Emory University, made his name in the business world by designing, construct-

ing and implementing software for a number of top companies in New York City including Yves St. Laurent and Bank of America.

When his father, the late Allen Skolnick, got into the racing game, Mitchel was brought aboard to oversee the financial management of an operation that grew into Southwind Farm, standing such harness racing legends as Chapter Seven, Muscle Hill and Sportswriter. But, after an admittedly angry falling out with the family, Mitchel went out on his own.

Success did not come overnight. Nor did it come via the usual avenues of the industry. Star stallion, Always A Virgin, of whom the 60-year-old Mitchel owns a percentage, has risen to great heights in Indiana and is now making a dent on the Grand Circuit as well,

with high profile progeny Always B Miki and Colors A Virgin.

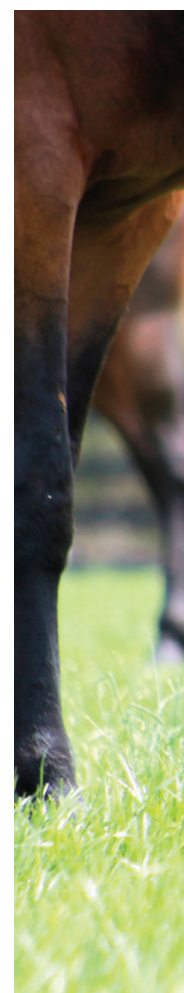
Always B Miki, also owned in-part by Skolnick and indisputably the best older pacer in North America, is undefeated in four 2015 starts with definitive scores in the Breeders Crown and, most recently, the American National. Colors A Virgin, who just surpassed \$1 million in career earnings, took the Jugette in her sophomore season and recently capped her four-year-old campaign with a Breeders Crown win, at Woodbine.

Thanks to their efforts, Always A Virgin joined Muscle Hill and Donato Hanover as the only sires with multiple winners at the 2015 Breeders Crown.

While it took many years for Skolnick to gain success in his own name at Bluestone



**BRIANNA & MITCHEL SKOLNICK**





Farm, employing a strategy of breeding high end trotters sold in small numbers, it appears the ball is now rolling downhill and picking up steam.

And yet, despite a well-educated background that screams stats and facts, Skolnick finds that when it comes to honing in on that quantifiable trait of the next great racehorse, he's searching for a certain 'Je ne sais quoi,' that mystical quality of Celtic legend, bred of fairies and pixie dust.

"An interesting thing about most successful trainers, drivers and owners is that they really can't explain what it is they see when they spot a great horse, but they know what it looks like when they do see it," said Skolnick.

It's a magic that Skolnick is keen to possess. Perhaps that's why he has settled in the

rolling green paradise of Hopewell.

The Skolnick name is well known in racing circles today, but Mitchel admits that he didn't have that typical horseman's introduction to the sport, jogging horses on the backstretch.

"I have no recollections of horse racing

as a kid, growing up on the South Shore of Long Island, New York. Family history has me attending some races with my father and uncles at Roosevelt Raceway, but I do not recall having had any interest in horses," said Skolnick. "My father became a horse owner while I was in college and had some success in subsequent years. On a few occasions - in those years - I attended the races with my family, but again, I do not recall having had any interest in the horses."

In 1986, Allen Skolnick put together an ownership group for three horses and asked his son to oversee the financial aspects of the venture.

"It was the first time I truly paid attention to the sport. The first IBM PC's had been introduced just a few years before, and I used mine to develop some of my own programs to analyze costs and manage staking," he recalled.

Analyzing the numbers and then a deep dive into pedigree, drew Skolnick further into the sport.

"While I learned a great deal about pedigrees, success at racing remained elusive. I would often talk with trainers and successful owners about what it is that they saw in an individual," said Skolnick. "For instance, I would ask why it mattered that a horse toed in or out. Hell! At that time I couldn't even recognize a conformation flaw in a horse let alone understand why a flaw may be detrimental to a horse's performance."

But when it came time for horsemen to answer that great question, identifying that 'spark' that determines greatness, all that remained was the unsatisfying 'I know it when I see it.'

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“For many years I wanted to be able to claim the same,” said Skolnick. “Obviously, an ability to recite pedigrees in detail wasn’t going to get me there so I looked around for other information.”

Ever the student, Skolnick sought to quench his thirst for knowledge from the vast experience of horsemen Fred Grant and Jim Crane.

Grant, who worked with Stanley Dancer, is best remembered for the speedy Cambest. He also enjoyed success racing at Blue Bonnets in Montreal and at the Meadowlands in New Jersey, where he captured the 1984 edition of the \$500,000 New Jersey Classic with Markims Pride.

Crane, a key advisor and friend of Mitchel’s father, helped develop star pacers such as Nero, Royce, Judge and Black Ace, to name a few.

Skolnick feels indebted to their generosity of spirit in his quest.

“We are blessed with a lot of very talented people who are willing to share their thoughts, experience and counsel,” said Skolnick. “I remember Fred Grant taking the time to have me to Yonkers on several Saturday nights, He explained to me why races set up the way they do, the importance of post positions and race classifications.

“I spent hours and hours with Jim Crane looking at horses... he couldn’t articulate worth a lick what it was about a yearling that signaled to him it could be a top race horse. But, he knew it when he saw it. Jim picked out a lot of top individuals in his day.”

This unorthodox horsemen’s education took Skolnick far and wide across the industry. Each piece of information answering some questions, but inevitably left him asking more and more.

A further piece of the puzzle was snapped into place by Bob Brady, co-owner of Kentuckiana Farms, at the Lexington Sale one year.

“Bob asked me why I was not looking at a particular pedigree and subsequently went on to explain its importance. The mare was Karril Hanover,” said Skolnick of the legendary broodmare that anchors a family of countless stakes and open class winners.

“I was always looking for the mare that





ALWAYS B MIKI WINNING THE BREEDERS CROWN



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had produced the top horse, but here was a mare that simply produced consistently, and produced horses with good times and earnings,” continued Skolnick. “I was missing things and it was Bob’s casual observation of ‘why don’t you look at it like this?’ that turned me around. When he explained it, it was a non-moment for Bob Brady but it was a big moment for me.”

It was a conversation with top trainer Joe Holloway that finally led Skolnick to believe he was on the right path. While out watching the Southwind Farm contingent train one morning, Holloway pointed out a potential star.

“Joe was training the second foal from Consuela Lobell, a Baltic Speed colt,” started Skolnick.

That colt was Baltic Bound.

“I remember Joe saying, ‘I got the next Hambletonian winner in Baltic Bound.’ Unfortunately Baltic Bound had an injury that

kept him from being as good as Joe hoped,” recalled Skolnick.

The family line, and Holloway’s enthusiasm for their prowess, was imprinted in Skolnick’s memory, particularly when he discovered that Consuela Lobell had a second highly-regarded colt from Baltic Speed that was hamstrung by a similar injury.

“I got to thinking if Consuela Lobell is ever bred to another sire, and has a filly, I should look to purchase her. A year later, in 1994, I am turning the pages of the Lexington Yearling Catalog and see an Armbro Goal filly from Consuela Lobell,” recalled Skolnick. “To this day I can remember the feeling that came over me. I imagined I was feeling pretty much like what Jim Crane must have felt when he saw something special.

“After Dominick Santerelli (Southwind’s Farm Manager at the time) approved her, I was able to convince my father to buy her.

She made us nearly \$200,000, finished second in the Hambo Oaks and brought my family’s farm its first truly outstanding broodmare prospect.”

That mare, Miss Goal, went on to produce three winners with over \$100,000 in earnings including Southwind Maywood 2,1:57.1 (\$297,251).

Skolnick enjoyed that first measure of success at his father’s farm, but his greatest victories would come in his own name after a measure of unpleasant family business.

“I did not leave my father’s employ on good terms. We had had a falling out which caused me, mostly out of anger, to seek my own farm,” said Skolnick. “Our real estate agent lined up six or seven properties for me to see. I do not recall where in the order our current location was shown that day, but as soon as I saw it I had a feeling (there is that ‘feeling’ thing again) it would be mine.”

At first, Skolnick, and his partners, concentrated on the horses, but soon they went to work on upgrading the facilities as well.

“We replaced the ramshackle house, built additional structures, planted trees and constructed gardens. I believe most people who visit have an appreciation that we treat the horses with the same quality of care we afford the property,” said Skolnick.

With a horseman’s education from his time growing Southwind intact, Skolnick was well on his way to making his own name with a focus on high-end trotters.

“The impetus for breeding trotters only came after I left my father’s farm and opened Bluestone Farms with my partners Eric Freeman and Frank Russo,” said Skolnick. “Southwind had been breeding both pacers and trotters and I thought it would distinguish Bluestone from Southwind if we focused on the considerably more difficult assignment of breeding trotters.”

Part of the development of the Bluestone brand was building a strong partnership with Elizabeth and Rikki Caldwell of Cane Run Farm. Skolnick has a great deal of admiration for Elizabeth’s horsemanship and they have purchased a number of horses together

including Bar Slide, who won the \$750,000 Hambletonian Oaks for them in 2010.

Bar Slide is now a broodmare at Cane Run Farm where Caldwell has bred and raised three other Hambletonian Oaks winners.

“Elizabeth has a very good sense of quality pedigree,” said Skolnick. “While we find very few yearling fillies and even fewer mares to purchase, together we have purchased and subsequently raced Oasis Dream (1:53.4; \$221,961), Allstar Hanover (1:55f; \$333,328), Bar Slide (1:52.4; \$649,392) and Bright Baby Blues (1:54.4s; \$457,208.)”

While it’s not always easy to find that needle in the haystack, the methodology appeals to Skolnick’s sense of logic.

“Being highly selective is something we

most importantly, accepted counsel.

How many people in your life ask questions but only end up doing what they were going to do in the first place?

“There’s two parts to it, having enough experience of your own to recognize those individuals that have that kind of experience more so than yourself, and it’s the willingness to listen to people and engage people who do know more,” said Skolnick.

Listening is an act of humility and Skolnick has taken his own desire, knowledge and life experience and bred it to the wisdom of those he respects to carve out a potential goldmine led by star stallion Always A Virgin.

Ironically, it was at the barn of one of Skolnick’s respected horsemen that Always

proached, I insisted Bob join me to watch him train,” recalled Skolnick. “I do not think the horse made it to the quarter pole that day before Bob turned to me and said ‘make the deal.’ We purchased 50 percent of the horse thinking we might have a good sires stakes horse. No one could have guessed ‘Virgin’ would turn out as he did.”

Always A Virgin, under Holloway’s tutelage, went on to incredible success dominating the competition at the Meadowlands in an incredible 2007 campaign that saw the son of Western Ideal pace his way to 13 wins in 20 starts while banking in excess of \$1 million.

But it was a night at Yonkers that sticks out the most in Skolnick’s mind.

“The Messenger night at Yonkers,” grinned Skolnick. “My friend and partner, Lynn Jones, and I had been to the Breeders’ Cup at Monmouth during the day and traveled over to Yonkers later that evening to see ‘Virgin’ race.

“Lynn was dazed and confused and it wasn’t from betting on horses all day,” continued Skolnick with a laugh. “It was a cold October night. I joined Bob and Lynn (both partners in ‘Virgin’) trackside to watch the race. Virgin won by six lengths and Bob had the biggest smile on his face. He was giving out hugs and handshakes.”

And it seems fitting that, of all the recent successes, this is the moment that stands out for Skolnick. A man, who while searching for success, learned from and made friends of the people he respected most along the way.

“It is one thing to celebrate a horse’s victory. It’s another thing entirely to be able to share it with friends,” said Skolnick.

‘Virgin’ has proven to be the gift that keeps on giving. Standing at Victory Hill Farm, the progeny of the stallion with the unlikely name dominate the Indiana circuit and he’s now making big waves on the Grand Circuit.

“‘Virgin’ has proven himself to be a very good sire with Always B Miki, Colors A Virgin and Always At My Place to his credit,” said Skolnick. “His success, in part, has to do with the Indiana breeders. We have enjoyed a warm, supportive, and successful relationship with Victory Hill Farm and the entire



(FROM LEFT TO RIGHT) BRENDA RENO, JOE HURLEY, BOB BONI, DAVID MILLER, CHRISTINA & JIMMY TAKTER, BRIANNA & MITCHEL SKOLNICK

simply fell into but has proven to be a worthy endeavor,” said Skolnick. “I know for many breeders and owners it is a ‘numbers game.’ I understand the reasoning of buying many horses in hopes of finding the good one. Elizabeth, my partners and I think that doing the analysis, putting in the time to locate and purchase only the ‘good one’ is a better effort for us.”

A common theme in Skolnick’s rise to success with Bluestone Farm is his willingness to listen, to absorb and put into practice the advice of respected horsemen. From Grant to Crane to Caldwell, Skolnick has asked and,

A Virgin stepped into view.

“I noticed Always A Virgin at Joe Holloway’s barn. The last few years I have spent a considerable amount of time watching Joe train horses. Joe had come to train him at the start of his three-year-old year. I don’t recall who began to notice it first, but the horse appeared to be a cut above the rest,” said Skolnick.

Skolnick sought the advice of Bob Boni (Northwood Bloodstock) and eventually spoke with Joe Hurley (Roll The Dice Stable), the breeder and owner of Always A Virgin, about possibly purchasing the horse.

“As the time to qualify the colt ap-

Indiana breeding industry.”

Always B Miki’s rise to prominence, which started under the tutelage of Holloway and is now in the capable hands of Jimmy Takter, has been gradual and not without a few bumps along the way.

After winning his elimination of the Breeders Crown for three-year-old colts & geldings at the Meadowlands in 2014, Always B Miki was scratched on the night of the final on November 22.

“I had not seen him warming up prior to the race, but knew immediately when he came out to race that he was not right,” said Skolnick. “Joe Holloway scratched him. Dr. Nagle

following the experience of those who have enjoyed previous success.

“One of many things we considered before returning ‘Miki’ to training after his first injury was Jimmy’s experience,” said Skolnick. “Jimmy had trained American Jewel, who had suffered a similar fracture of the long pastern bone. She made a successful return to racing.”

A now healthy Always B Miki is one of a few that currently fly the flag for the Indiana racing community. After taking a mark of 1:47.4, winning multiple stakes finals and finishing second to Hes Watching in his record-setting Meadowlands Pace victory at

cluding a crackdown on illegal drugs and the need for alternative gaming options to support the racing industry.

“As the new season begins we believe this is the most pivotal in the history of standardbred racing at the Meadowlands,” said Gural in a recent release on the Meadowlands site. “It is quite obvious that without the benefit of alternative gambling it is very difficult for the Meadowlands to compete with tracks in New York and Pennsylvania for horses and for the breeders in New Jersey to compete as well.”

Despite Gural’s on-track enhancements and endeavours to market the sport to a younger audience, Skolnick remains unconvinced.

“I have predicted for many years that slot machines would not come to the Meadowlands and I have no use for those who insist it will,” said Skolnick.

“I find the policies in place for detecting unauthorized drugs and the fines imposed for using them to be enigmatic, inconsistent, and often hypocritical. I believe Jimmy Takter and Ron Burke exemplify our own form of disruptors - as used in the business world to define forward-thinking upstarts whose innovations are revolutionizing industries. I wish others like them would come forth in the management of our racetracks.”

Skolnick prefers a more vigorous investment in breeding to bolster the New Jersey product.

“I am convinced of the inherent value of the New Jersey Sires Stakes and continue to work with all those involved to return it to its former status as the leading sires stakes program in the nation,” said Skolnick. “I believe refueled purses (particularly Sires Stakes purses) at the Meadowlands Racetrack will attract commerce from other states, promote the expansion of New Jersey standardbred farms, secure productive open space for the state, and improve the quality of New Jersey horse racing.”

Outspoken indeed. But if you have a differing opinion, we know Skolnick is willing to listen because the goal, for all his endeavours, hinges on one common outcome - success. **T**

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took x-rays that evening and found a hairline fracture of the left hind long pastern bone.

“On November 24th, Dr. Hogan took additional x-rays that revealed the injury to be a complete fracture which she repaired with four screws. As she writes ‘the fracture was reduced back into perfect position.’ She followed with, ‘his prognosis for racing at his previous elite level is actually quite favorable.’

Always B Miki returned to training on February 13, 2015 with Takter.

“On May 12th, Jimmy informed us he had taken ‘Miki’ to Dr. Hogan’s clinic where he was diagnosed with a hairline fracture of the right hind long pastern bone,” informed Skolnick. “As in the left hind injury, Dr. Hogan repaired it with four screws and again provided us with a very favorable prognosis to return to his previous ‘elite level’ of racing.”

The reasoning for moving ‘Miki’ from Holloway to Takter makes a lot of sense when you appreciate Skolnick’s history of

age three, ‘Miki’ has now fought back from multiple surgeries to race at age four. And with his recent scores in the Breeders Crown and American National, he seems well on his way to success as an older horse, something that eluded his famous father.

“Frankly, I do not see any similarities between ‘Virgin’ and his son Always B Miki,” noted Skolnick. “‘Miki’ is built entirely different. He is much leggier than ‘Virgin’ and has a nicer head. Whatever kept ‘Virgin’ from being a top four-year-old has not visited ‘Miki’.

We have learned much of the studious and successful Skolnick over the previous pages, which leaves only one descriptor missing to complete the triactor - - outspoken.

With Skolnick’s operation based in New Jersey, it’s not surprising that he has a few bones to pick with racetrack operator Jeff Gural, who owns Meadowlands, Tioga Downs and Vernon Downs, and is keen to make a number of industry-wide changes in-