



Finding Peace

in the Quiet Life

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After training the winners of nearly \$35 million, declining results finally got the better of **JOE STUTZMAN**. “Mentally, I couldn’t take it anymore,” Stutzman said of his abrupt decision to quit training and concentrate on his training centre full-time.

If this were a movie, guaranteed there would be a part about the mysterious man on the farm who keeps to himself and his work. The script practically writes itself. Cue the scene where the grizzled old trainer puts an arm around the young buck who just moved in with a small stable.



“See that fella over there in the coveralls, drivin’ the tractor?” the old trainer would say, pausing to spit tobacco. “That there fella’s big toe knows more about training horses than you’ll ever know.”

“That guy?” the young trainer would say with skepticism. “The one that hardly speaks?”

“Uh huh,” says the first with a nod and a spit. “That there’s Joe Stutzman. Once, not too long ago, he was Canada’s trainer of the year and the leading trainer in the big city. That’s why the track here is so good.”

Admittedly, it would be a bad movie. But, you can’t help but feel the story line watching Stutzman blend into the background of the First Line Training Centre. The complex, located just north of Mohawk Racetrack, was purchased by Stutzman almost three years ago as a side project to training one of the most successful stables in the last 20 years.

In August of 2010, after training the winners of almost \$35 million, Stutzman abruptly announced he was quitting as a trainer. He would devote all of his considerable energies to the training centre.

The announcement came as a

huge shock considering Stutzman will only turn 49 on Feb. 21.

Wasn’t his barn a fixture in the trainer standings year after year?

Wasn’t he one of the first Canadian trainers to open a dual stable in New Jersey to compete both in Toronto and at the Meadowlands?

Wasn’t his barn the one that had earned over \$1 million in each of the first 15 years training records have been kept, starting in 1992?

But therein lies the rub. In 2008, just four years after Stutzman earned the O’Brien Award as Canada’s trainer of the year, his barn narrowly missed the seven-figure mark for the first time. His stable earned just over \$600,000 in 2009. By the mid-point of 2010 Stutzman packed it in.

“In 2004, I was trainer of the year. Then, 2005, I was the leading money-winning trainer. Then, 2006 wasn’t bad, but 2007 just was terrible. Quite frankly, I was getting frustrated. To me, when I’m not winning a lot it just drives me crazy,” Stutzman said.

“I just got so frustrated that, mentally, I couldn’t take it anymore.”

Here is where we get to the quiet, mild-mannered man’s deep dark

secret. Inside that pleasant, low-key demeanor, the losing was slowly killing him.

“I’m a deeply competitive person. I don’t really show it, but I just can’t take it when the horses aren’t racing well. It just depresses me. It’s just got so frustrating that I wanted to do anything to not go through that,” Stutzman said.

Claiming horses was always Stutzman’s forte. When the Ontario Racing Commission (ORC) put strict restrictions on claiming horses in place in 2003 with an eye to better protect horses being bounced too often from barn to barn, Stutzman’s business suffered. Still, he doesn’t blame the claiming rule itself for his demise.

“It definitely hurt, the claiming rule. There’s no question about it. However, that wasn’t the be all and end all reason why I quit,” Stutzman said. “But, ironically, they lifted (the rule) earlier (in 2010).”

It was too little too late for Stutzman, whose frustration had already risen to the boiling point.

“In my particular situation, it was like letting you up for air after you’ve already suffocated,” he said.

Luckily, he had the training centre as a fallback plan.

“I had no intentions of, at that time, giving up the stable or anything. When I took over I thought I’d do both, but I guess as this summer went on and this year was a terrible year for me....” Stutzman’s voice trails off.

“I really thought about it a long time.”

First Line has eight barns, 186 stalls, 25 paddocks a covered equi-ciser and three tracks — a five-eighths, a half-mile and a mile straight strip through the woods and fields. The track surfaces are the best anywhere, say those who train there.

It’s a particular point of pride for Stutzman, who relishes working the tracks himself.

“I’ve trained horses, I know what a good track looks like. I know what a good track should be,” Stutzman said. “I remember not too long ago there was an article by Dan Coon where he said a horseman is apt to be much better at maintaining a track. That makes so much sense.”

He also uses a trainer’s mentality in billing for stalls. “I go by the day rather than by the month. I set



everything up from a trainer's viewpoint," Stutzman said. "How would it be best for a trainer? I only charge by the day, so if the horse is gone, you don't have to pay for that stall. You're not out of pocket. A trainer's never out of pocket for any money that they spend here. They don't pay anything extra for anything except a stall."

Though he said he misses training and his main owners were disappointed he retired, he's not anxious to return to the game for a host of reasons.

"The thing that really got me down was not having the results and having to answer to owners as to why the horse didn't race well. I just absolutely hate that, having to make excuses. I don't like making excuses. I like results. It's so much more fun. When owners lose money, that just bothers me, personally," Stutzman said.

"Also, I guess I'm getting older

and being out in the cold training a horse is not as appealing as it used to be."

He also doesn't want to give back the gains he's made to his health and well-being. For the first time he can remember, he is home at night and has time on his hands.

"Since I haven't trained the horses, I'm amazed how much less stress there is," Stutzman said. "When you're training horses, you're always thinking about how you can help the horse race better. Each horse is an individual and you're always wondering how you can get this horse to race better and that horse to race better. In hindsight, it really takes a lot of head space up training horses. Not training horses anymore is like, whoa."

Though, in truth, that's what Stutzman misses most — the equine puzzle. "I miss when I first get a

new horse, going out and training him and seeing what I can change, seeing what equipment or shoeing I can change. That was my favourite part," he said with a hint of fondness in his voice.

"I just loved... seeing the horse go on. That was, really, rewarding to me. And winning, of course. Winning is everything as far as I'm concerned. Everything else falls into place if you win races as a trainer. The training centre, if you have a great track and keep the track well, everything else will fall into place. If you don't, everything will fall apart. Simple as that."

The bonus is he didn't quit horses cold turkey.

"Obviously, there's things I miss about training. There's nothing more fun on a nice day than going out and training a horse," he said wistfully before snapping back to reality.

"I would never say never, I guess,

but I'm certainly not planning to train again at this point in time, at least not any time in the foreseeable future," he said.

He will always have the memories.

"My two favourite horses were back in the '90s, Ball And Chain and Impeccable Image. Those were horses — obviously, since I owned part of them — that really helped out a lot," he said. "I guess I've probably trained more different horses than almost anybody else because of turning horses over so much in the claimers."

It is that depth of knowledge one would think those who train at First Line would try to tap from time to time, but Stutzman said people rarely ask his advice.

The quiet man in the overalls is content to keep to his tractor and his work and leave the glory days behind. ❁