



THE ELITLOPP EXPERIENCE

American contingent impressed
with Swedish racing journey

text and photos by Kimberly A. Rinker

A LONG TIME AGO, in a country far, far away, there loomed a mighty racetrack where the horse was king. + This is no opening crawl line from a blockbuster movie. + This is Solvalla. This is reality. This is the Elitlopp. + Built in 1927, the Solvalla Racetrack outside Stockholm, Sweden, is the grandest harness racing venue in Scandinavia, and the Elitlopp its premier event. Sixteen of the globe's finest diagonally gaited Standardbreds are invited to participate annually since it was inaugurated in 1952. + Traditionally raced on the last Sunday in May, the Elitlopp features two elimination rounds, with the top four horses from each division



GREETINGS FROM SOLVALLA:
Yannick Gingras warms up Maven
before the first elimination of the
Elitlopp on May 25.



progressing to the final. All heats are contested at the distance of 1,609 meters (roughly one mile) on the same afternoon.

Only three American horses have ever won the coveted Elitlopp crown. Elma and driver Johannes Fromming were the first in 1965, followed by the mighty Mack Lobell and John Campbell in 1988. The last horse carrying the stars and stripes to victory was Moni Maker with Wally Hennessey in 1998.

Two months ago, a group of American trainers, caretakers, owners and drivers packed their bags and headed to Scandinavia. For some, it would be their first trip abroad; for others, a return visit to their native land to participate in, and hopefully win, Sweden's coveted trotting crown.

American co-hope Maven had a loyal following in attendance that included her owner, Bill Donovan; trainer Jonas Czernyson; caretaker Caroline Mundin; and driver Yannick Gingras. Likewise, Uncle Peter's connections consisted of trainer Jimmy Takter; caretaker Anette Zackrisson; driver David Miller and several of the dark bay's owners.

"TREATED LIKE ROYALTY"

"I've been to Sweden before, but never to a horse racing venue," said Bill Donovan, Maven's owner. "In America we don't have access to the European races to the degree that we should, in order to

appreciate good European horses. Those horses were much better than I anticipated and the way of racing is completely different. I've watched Elitlopps from past years, and you don't realize how aggressive the driving style is, and that racing two-wide is the norm. A mile race is a short race there."

Donovan said besides the horseflesh, it was the Swedish fans that impressed him the most.

"North Americans pale in comparison to Swedish fans," he said. "They seemed genuinely excited and appreciative of every horse that came onto the track. The only comparison I've seen in [North America] in regards to that kind of enthusiasm is at the Little Brown Jug and the Gold Cup and Saucer.

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BILL DONOVAN

“We were treated like royalty by the track, too. Everyone—even the guards at the track—were so welcoming. I was particularly impressed by the dinner on the eve of the Elitlopp. The connections of each horse were invited, and a nice video on each Elitlopp contender shown. We were all treated like we had the best horse in the world.”

Leaving from post 6, Maven and driver Yannick Gingras finished with a strong brush to be third in the first Elitlopp elimination.

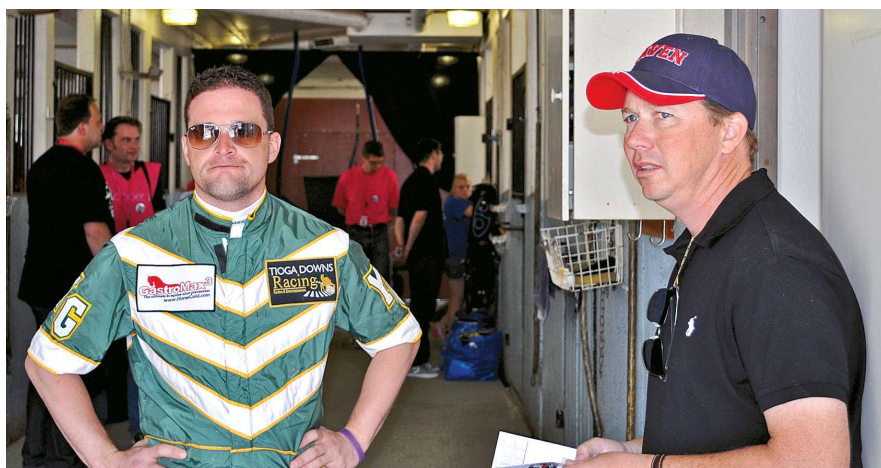
“I never saw Maven until after the races,” Donovan said. “Actually, I’ve only seen her race live a few times, and each time it was a disaster. Once, in the Hambletonian Oaks when a horse broke in front of her, and another time, I snuck up to Vernon and didn’t tell anyone I was coming—and she got a flat tire in that race. So I feel like I’m a jinx to watch her race live.”

Donovan walked quietly to the Solvalla parking lot, and listened to the call of Maven’s elimination, a process he repeated for the final.

The 5-year-old daughter of Glide-master finished sixth in the final to Timoko and trainer-driver Bjorn Goop



GAME FACES: The respective teams for Maven and Uncle Peter had to navigate busy schedules and complex logistics to get their charges safely to Solvalla. *Clockwise from left:* Anette Zackrisson and Uncle Peter share a rare quiet moment race day morning. • Caroline Munding and Maven regroup after shipping in from a Swedish training center. • Gingras, left, and Maven’s trainer, Jonas Czernyson, did not discuss racing strategy, knowing instinctively what they had to do.





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JONAS CZERNYSON

after facing numerous traffic problems throughout the race.

“The whole experience was tremendous and I'd like to duplicate it again, but with better results,” Donovan said. “What stood out at Solvalla was the celebration of the horse. That was clear. With so many different types of races that day—in the end it was all about the horse. It's obvious the Swedes really love their horses.”

“DEFINITELY TAXING”

Certainly, the preparation needed to ship a horse thousands of miles takes weeks of planning, and a huge part of that responsibility falls to the caretakers, said Uncle Peter's groom, Anette Zackrisson.

“Uncle Peter had raced Friday night (May 2, and won in 1:52.1 at the Meadowlands) and was leaving Monday morning (May 5), so there was lots to do,” she said. “It was definitely taxing. The horse flew to Belgium and I took a regular flight and met him there, and then we shipped to Denmark on a van.”

Zackrisson, 38, is a native of Kalmar, Sweden, and grew up in a harness racing family. Despite having a degree in

economics, she prefers caring for horses and has worked for Jimmy Takter since 2009. She began taking care of Uncle Peter at the start of his 3-year-old season.

“After (Uncle Peter finished fifth in) the Copenhagen Cup (on May 11 at Charlottenlund Racetrack, Denmark), we moved to my parent's farm in Sweden until we got to Solvalla on May 24,” she said. “We were happy to be in one place and to be settled a bit.”

Zackrisson also took care of Corky, who put in a stunning performance on Elitlopp day at Solvalla, winning in 1:53.2f with a tireless, first-over bid.

“PRETTY OVERWHELMING”

Jonas Czernyson, Maven's conditioner, said being at Solvalla as a trainer was much different than being there as a caretaker. The 41-year-old trainer had been the groom for Giant Force 20 years ago when that trotter competed in the Elitlopp.

“Initially, they were going to have us ship two days before the race, but that was too close,” Czernyson said. “I know what flying does to me, and I knew what it would do to her. Maven left the



BRING IT ON: Clockwise from upper left: Pageantry and the Swedes' love for horses are on display in many forms on Elitlopp day. • After checking some equipment on Maven post warm-up, Munding gets ready to release the filly and Gingras for their elimination, only minutes away. • Gingras described Maven's elimination effort as “a really tough trip,” although the filly finished with a strong brush to be third, and thus qualified for the final.



barn Saturday, May 17 at 11 a.m. with Caroline (caretaker Mundin) and went to JFK. At about 8:30 that night they loaded her up in a container, and then rolled the container onto the plane.”

“There was definitely a lot of pre-planning involved,” Mundin said. “The trip over wasn’t too bad. The horses rode in one section of the plane and I rode in the people section. But once we got here, my main objective was to be here for Maven; to keep her relaxed, happy and calm. She handled the entire trip very well, but it was great to finally be in Sweden, and to be settled.”

After flying to Amsterdam, Maven was quarantined for eight hours before





TAKTER TWO-FER: Trainer Jimmy Takter had two horses competing on Elitlopp day.

Clockwise from above: Zackrisson leads David Miller and Uncle Peter through the barn area for the second elimination. • Miller and his charge, fourth in from right, left from post 3 but didn't "get a fair shot," as Takter put it, and placed seventh, thus not qualifying for the final. • Takter goes postward with Corky for an undercard event, which the plucky 4-year-old sealed up with a sensational 1:53.2f first-over performance.



leaving Holland on a ferry to Denmark, and then vanned another nine hours to Sweden, to the Erikssund Training Facility near Stockholm.

"We were based 45 minutes south of Solvalla," Czernyson said. "Solvalla management set that up for us and it was great. It was relaxed there and she had her own paddock. We didn't bring her to the track until 10 a.m. the day of the race."

Czernyson said testing procedures are strict and there is little room for mistakes in regards to medication that many take for granted in the U.S.

"As a trainer, you've got to be up on European rules," he said. "It's a lot stricter. Bute is 14 days out, and there's no Lasix. It's pretty regimented, and the vets turn in journals every week. They test blood, urine and hair samples randomly before and after the races. They



pulled blood on us right when we got into Sweden and after the race they did a hair sample.”

Czernyson, a native of Ystad, Sweden, said he and Gingras did not discuss driving or racing strategy for Maven’s Elitlopp.

“Yannick was very knowledgeable about the horses we were racing against and had a good feel for the track and racing style,” Czernyson said. “He is super comfortable with the filly and I knew he would handle her and any situation well.

“When we drew the 6-hole again (in the final), I knew we were in a tough spot, but she gave it all she had.”

Maven returned to the U.S. later that same week and did not seem affected by her Scandinavian adventure.

“They have some outstanding racehorses, but if they had a race of the same caliber here and had to do all the ship-

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JIMMY TAKTER

ping we did and the trip, I wonder how they would take it,” Czernyson said. “Different people take flying and being away from home differently, and you never know what the horses are thinking, or how that trip might affect them.

“Overall, it was very exciting being there,” he added. “This was the first time I had sat behind a horse on that track, and the surface is incredible. It’s a little more dirt than stone dust. I don’t think we have a comparable surface in the U.S. The closest might be The Red Mile, but even that doesn’t compare to Solvalla’s surface.”

Czernyson said he is already planning his next trip back to Sweden.

“Now we know what we need to do if we get the opportunity to go back,” he said. “There are things we could improve on—I can’t say what exactly, but being there once gives you a better idea of what



SPECTACLE: Above and right: Solvalla overflows with racing fans on Elitlopp day.

to expect.

"It's pretty overwhelming. The one thing about Solvalla—the fans there don't care what horse comes out. They celebrate each and every horse that steps onto that track."

"THE WAY IT SHOULD BE"

Jimmy Takter, who has conditioned Uncle Peter to \$1,196,869 in earnings, said he enjoyed his homecoming.

"The Elitlopp is something that everyone who loves horse racing has to experience," he said. "The fans are unbelievable and Solvalla is so wonderful. We need to wake up in the U.S. and get our tracks to have those kinds of surfaces. I grew up in Sweden, so for me that surface is the way it should be."

Though Uncle Peter finished seventh in his elimination and failed to make the final, Takter's other charge, Corky, looked stunning in his winning perfor-

mance that same afternoon.

"Corky was scary good," Takter said. "I was proud of both my horses and I hope Uncle Peter will get a chance to redeem himself. He didn't get a fair shot in his Elitlopp elim, and that came after he got a tough trip at Copenhagen. I still think he's much better than he showed, and that's why I want to leave him in Scandinavia for a few months."

"Those Elitlopp horses are tough—both of the U.S. horses were the youngest in the field—and it's tough for our horses to adjust for these races. Our horses are faster, but not used to that style of racing. Very few horses can do what Corky did Elitlopp day, racing on the outside like that. As a 4-year-old, Corky has more opportunities to race against 4-year-olds in Europe than in the U.S. He'd be forced to race against aged horses here."

"This is the way all horse racing should be," Takter emphasized. "It should be an event. That's what makes winning a race on Elitlopp day so special."

"SUPER IMPRESSED"

Uncle Peter's regular driver, David Miller, said he was impressed with the spectacle of the race, even if his trip was a bit of a whirlwind journey.

"The Elitlopp is definitely everything I'd heard it was and more," said the Hall of Fame inductee. "The track did a great job of making the race a spectacle. It would be a great race to win. Just to be in it was a thrill. It's a beautiful place and the fans are really into it and it's definitely something special."

Miller arrived in Stockholm Friday morning, May 23.

"I went right to the track," he said. "The track had arranged for me to drive a few so I could get the feel of everything. The track has a tremendous bank in the turns. It was like Northfield Park in the early '80s. I was super impressed by how they took care of it and how great the surface was. Most of the horses in the



Elitlopp raced barefooted and I can see why. It was very impressive.

"I didn't find the driving style that different. There weren't a lot of lead changes and nobody jammed horses up, even in a race that had 14 horses in it. Some of the rules were different. For instance, you have to keep the lines in both hands and you can only hit them four or five times and if you hit them more than that, they'll fine you. You're allowed to chase them all you want, but they're very strict on the whipping rules. I didn't have any problem with that.

"The Elitlopp horses were an exceptional bunch," he added. "They were all big and strong. I think Uncle Peter took the ship all right, but I felt the recall did hamper his performance a bit. He didn't go back to the gate quite as strong after that."

Like all the U.S. connections, Miller stressed the wonderful Swedish hospitality.

"Everyone I came into contact with treated me great," he said. "I got to meet

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quite a few of the drivers and they were all professional.

"For me, the racetrack was what I'll remember most. I've dealt with the hype and the fans at big races like the Jug, but this was pretty special. To have all those people, some 35,000, cheering for you during the post parade and scoring down, well, that was exciting."

“LOVED EVERY MINUTE”

Yannick Gingras, making his first journey to Solvalla, said he was enthralled by the crowds and the excitement.

"The roar from the crowd during the post parade was nothing like I've experienced before," he said. "I loved every minute of the whole experience."

The driver said he studied up on the different style of racing before embarking on his trip.

"I watched a lot of replays before going over," Gingras said. "I knew that



FINALE: Above: Maven and Gingras (whose green and yellow helmet is visible at the rear of the field) left from post 6 for the final, just as they had for the elimination, but traffic problems conspired to bring the tiring filly in at sixth place. Below left: Timoko and trainer-driver Bjorn Goop win the final. Below right: Goop celebrates with fans.



post 6 would be a tough hill for Maven to overcome because of their style of racing. Their gate goes slow, and that's a big disadvantage for our horses. Horses have to go from zero to 60 in an instant. Maven's not super quick off the gate, and with an inside post, she would have had a better shot. In the first heat she had a really tough trip, and in the second, she was tired, but she never stopped trying. She never saw the fence for even one pylon and she still gave 150 percent each time."

The other Elitlopp contenders were all terrific athletes, Gingras noted.

"I thought Timoko was the horse to beat from day one," he said. "I was very impressed by him, and by all those horses. But I don't think the European horses are any she can't beat. It's a lot to ask of a horse in a 10-day period with the shipping ours had to endure and being in

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YANNICK GINGRAS

new surroundings.”

Like Miller, Gingras had no problem with the differences in the Swedish driving regulations.

"I was OK with their rules," he said. "The only one that seemed odd is that you can't allow your horse to drift out—even if you're five lengths ahead in the stretch, you have to maintain a straight path or you'll be fined.

"We learned a lot from this experience," he added. "The drivers were all great, and everyone treated us like royalty. Solvalla is beautiful and the racetrack is amazing—from the footing to the way it's banked. It's definitely a place I want to return to in the future."

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