



# Plymouth Rocker

John Carver has quietly amassed his own harness empire with well over 200 horses. The very competitive owner and breeder has one goal in mind, to have the best horses possible.

By Kimberly Rinker • Photos by Carlson Creative Images

Just like his famous namesake, owner-breeder John Carver is a visionary.

As a direct descendant of the first governor of Plymouth Colony who chartered and sailed aboard the Mayflower with 100 other colonists in search of a better life some 200 years ago, Carver is charting the uncertain waters of today's harness racing industry at full throttle.

"He was my great, great, great, great, great grandfather," Carver acknowledged. "I'm straight down the line from him genetically."

The 64 year-old self-proclaimed harness fan is also similar to his famous forefather in that he's not afraid to take a dip into turbulent

waters. Just last fall, Carver, who rarely seeks the spotlight and prefers instead to conduct his business somewhat on the QT, spent over \$1.5 million at the yearling sales.

In fact, if you ask Carver how many horses he has, he'll state unabashedly, "Oh God, I don't know."

Despite his apparent passion for racing, the Rapid City, Illinois resident is extremely nonchalant about how much money he's spent in the business over the past four decades.

"I don't make a lot of noise about what I do, that's true," he offered. "But I enjoy the game. I'm very competitive and finishing second just doesn't sit well with me."

In his unassuming fashion, Carver



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has amassed a broodmare band of 60 plus mares, and has over 60 horses in training with his own small colony of trainers. Add into the mix a slew of yearlings and foals and there are over 200 horses Carver pays the bills on.

Carver was the second oldest of four boys, born to parents Roy and Lucille in Davenport, Iowa. His father, born in 1910, who was educated at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, founded Carver Pump in 1939 after working for the Ford Motor Company, setting up his company in Muscatine, Iowa. When World War II began, Roy Carver procured orders from England to manufacture pumps for the war effort.

"They're centrifugal, high-quality water pumps utilized in naval ships," Carver explained. "They're very high grade, and extremely precise. Dad was an industrial engineer who designed them and the war helped his company to expand tremendously. The Navy still uses Carver Pumps today; about half of all of their pumps are ours."

In 1957, the elder Carver began Bandag, Inc., a tire retreading company, after he garnered the North American rights from the Darmstadt, Germany founder Bernard Nowak.

"Dad met Nowak during one of his overseas trips," Carver remembered. "Dad used to travel all over the world with Carver Pumps and was routinely in Europe and South America."

Today, Carver's older brother Roy, 66 owns and operates Carver Pump. His father passed away in 1981, and his mother Lucille, still resides in the family's Muscatine home. A University of Iowa alum, she received the Distinguished Service Award from the UI Alumni Association in 1972, and previously served on the Bandag board of directors, as well as the University of Iowa's foundation board in the 1980s. Younger brother Martin, 60, is also a retiree, while brother Clayton, 11 months his junior, passed away shortly after serving in Vietnam.

"About a year and a half ago my brother Roy sold Bandag to Bridgestone," Carver noted. "It was a very lucrative deal."

The Carver name is synonymous with the University of Iowa, as the elder Roy and Lucille contributed approximately \$8.67 million to the University of Iowa programs. There's the University of Iowa Roy J. & Lucille A. Carver College of Medicine, and the Roy J. Carver Charitable Trust which is the largest private foundation in Iowa with \$300 million in assets and an annual grant-making budget of over \$14 million.

As well, the Carver-Hawkeye Arena is home to the University's basketball team, and is one of the 15 largest university-owned facilities in the United States.

"We're big donors to the University," Carver noted. "That's what Dad wanted."

Carver hasn't been a lifelong fan of harness racing. In fact, he entered the horse business as quietly as he is involved in it today.

"I started working for Dad when I was 12," he recalled. "I was changing truck tires for him from 1957 until 1973 and then I went out on my own and started my own company in 1977."

Carver graduated from Muscatine High School in Iowa, excelled in wrestling and football, and was a state champion in golf. He got married not long after graduation and had two children, Robert Roy (now 40 and working for Stanley



Engineering) and Alexandra (39, who works with her husband Steve in the film production company Lucky Hat). He divorced and married for a second time in 1977 to his current wife, Marcia Lynn Carver. Together he and Marcia had three sons: John, Jr., 30, Jered, 29 and Joseph, 26.

"John Jr. owns and operates Gaitway Marketing, a trading system for stocks, futures and cash," Carver revealed. "But none of my kids share my passion for the horses."

In the late 1980s, with his business thriving, Carver found he needed a diversion.

"My father-in-law took me to Quad City Downs a few times but it really didn't appeal to me at first," Carver stressed. "I was semi-interested, but it really didn't take a hold of me seriously until 1986. I have no real good reason; it just seemed like fun at the time."

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"Some friends talked me into claiming a horse and I did," he added. "I met Bill (trainer Darin) at the Downs one night and he became my first trainer. He only had one or two horses at the time, but seemed like a nice guy."

The first horse Carver owned was a pacer named Governed Angel p,4,1:58.4h (\$60,818).

"He won his first start and I was hooked then for good. In just a few years I had a really big stable."

Carver's first foray into the North American spotlight came when he purchased Anniecrombie p, 1:52.3 (\$1,414,477) on June 18, 1987. She won the 1988 Breeders Crown Aged Pace, American National, and countless overnights and Invitationals on the Chicago circuit for Carver, and later retired as the third richest pacing mare of all time.

"I had seen her race the previous season and really liked her and when she became available, I purchased her," Carver said.

That same year, Carver also won the Prairie State's premiere stake for state-bred sophomore pacers, the Langley Memorial, with the Illinois-bred gelding Steady Wiz p,3,1:54f (\$249,194).

"That (1988) was a great year for us," he noted. "Anniecrombie was definitely the toughest racehorse I ever owned. She was built like a stud and just a very tough mare. Steady Wiz had his best year in 1988, and it was great to win the Langley on our home turf."

In 1990 Carver sold his business and retired and began

devoting more time to his horses. He also began breeding his own horses, naming them with the moniker 'Revrac' which is Carver spelled backwards.

"It didn't take a rocket scientist to figure that one out," he laughed. "It was just something I decided to do."

When he and trainer Darin parted ways, Carver hooked up with conditioner Mike Borys, a popular Windy City trainer.

"I had met Mike at the track in 1987, and liked him. He was a very good trainer and ranks right up there with Erv (Miller)," Carver stressed. "I gave all my horses to Mike and we had over 100 horses at the time."

Tragically, Borys was killed during a trip that he, Carver, and Borys's wife Jackie were taking to see Anniecrombie race in the Roses Are Red in Canada. When Borys got out of the car to get a road map from the trunk, he was struck by another vehicle and killed.

"That was a terrible tragedy," Carver sighed. "It was just a freak thing. A guy driving another car had a diabetic seizure and hit Mike. He was killed instantly. The weird thing is, we were a good ten yards off the main road in the grass, so it wasn't like we were on the edge of the highway."

"That was very tough for me to get over. Mike was a very good horseman and a great friend. He was also a good driver, and even though he really didn't care about driving, I often pushed him to drive our horses because I thought he did the best job with them."

"When Mike died, that kind of took the heart out of me for a while," Carver said. "I never really got out of the business, but I cut way, way back for a number of years, until the mid-1990s. I went through a lot of different trainers, but Ron Phillips and Erv Miller have been two I've stuck with over the years."

Phillips and his wife Delores handle most of Carver's vast broodmare band at their base of Petersburg, Illinois.

"They've been very close friends and have taken care of my mares and some racehorses for the last ten years," Carver noted. "I hooked up with Erv in the 1990s for some time, and now have been back really strong with him for the last three or four years. I'm not even sure how many horses I have with him, but there's a lot, both racehorses and babies. I've also got my homebred youngsters with Jamaica Patton and his brother Freddie, Jr.; they're some of the hardest working people I know."

While Carver admits he's not afraid to gamble when it comes to purchasing and breeding Standardbreds, the wagering side of horse racing isn't as appealing to him.

"I was never a real heavy gambler, but I hardly place a bet at all anymore," he revealed. "I really like the sport of racing. I was very competitive in sports as a participant, and if I wasn't number one I wasn't a very happy camper. My innate competitiveness in sports probably rubbed off and is what keeps me in the harness business."

Despite spending millions of dollars over the years, Carver is seemingly indifferent about his investments.

"I spent a lot of money at the yearling sales this past fall," he said. "It was about \$1.5 million total. I spent half a million

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in Canada and bought the first four or five highest-priced horses up there, all of which I bought with Erv. Both he and Tony (assistant trainer Alagna) recommend horses to me and if I see something I like, then I'll go after it too.

"There was a Ken Warkentin yearling that I really liked and I bought him. I couldn't tell you his name, I pay no attention to names until after they qualify. I do know that this particular horse is as slick as he can be. I think he cost me around \$80,000 Canadian.

"The Canadian program is great, and I know Erv thinks so as well, so that's the reason we made it a point to buy quite a few Canadian bred's this year," Carver added.

And what did Carver spend at the 2008 yearling sales in the United States?

"Oh God, I don't know," he laughed. "I think I bought around 15 American-bred babies. I spent about a quarter million dollars in Kentucky and \$700,000 to \$800,000 at Harrisburg. I didn't really buy for any specific program in the U.S., I just bought horses I liked."

Carver is also in the process of shifting "ten or so" broodmares to Canada, so their foals will be eligible to the rich Ontario Sire Stakes program.

"The horses are just something fun to do, and I'm able to do it, so I do," Carver said. "I also have invested in some stallions."

Carver owns 10 per cent of the trotter Muscle Mass, and recently bought five shares of Lis Mara (at \$25,000 per share) and two shares of Rocknroll Hanover.

"I love the way Rocknroll Hanover's foals look," Carver declared. "I like a stallion that stamps his foals with his characteristics, and Rocknroll Hanover is one such stud."

In addition, Carver has also expanded his interests to Thoroughbred racing with 12 horses in training with California-based conditioner Jerry Hollandorfer who finished in the top ten in earnings among all American trainers in 2008.

"Jerry's a very good trainer," Carver said. "He usually has one of every class in the barn. Horses are his whole life and he's damn good at his job. I have a lot of respect for him."

Despite his huge investment in the Standardbred industry, Carver said he is often struck by the differences in the harness and Thoroughbred worlds.

"There's a total difference between the rascals you encounter in our business and in the Thoroughbred game," he acknowledged. "It's like night and day.

"There's so much cheating and bad stuff going on in the Standardbred sport and the tracks are reluctant to do anything about it. I was taught at a young age not to lie or cheat or steal and I expect to have the same thing in the people I deal with. It's very disconcerting that the cheating goes on the way it does in the harness racing industry and in most cases, trainers are just left alone because the racetracks need their horses to fill the races. It just seems the tracks are very reluctant to clean up the business."

Carver also feels strongly about the breeding industry.

"In the Standardbred business, we tend to over-breed everything, and it's just the opposite with the Thoroughbred industry," he said. "If you take a top pacer or any Standardbred who is at the top of his game, he's still worth 10 per cent or less than the top Thoroughbred, and most of that is due to over-breeding.

"I think our industry would be well served to limit the number of mares that any one stallion could breed. Until our industry gets into that mode, harness racing overall isn't going to get any better. Having too many foals drives the prices down.

"I understand that this would initially probably hurt a lot of the breeding farms with the market the way it is right now, but in the long run, it would strengthen our sport. We've got to reduce the inferior mare pool. This isn't about raising pets. This is a business and we should treat it as such.

"I have to say that my broodmare band could hold its own against many of the breeding farms out there today," Carver continued. "Doc Walker (Dr. Ken of Fox Valley Standardbreds) does all of our shipped semen breedings. I had 23 homebreds in 2008 and I'll have 33 mares that will foal out this year that I own.

"Erv and another partner help me formulate a plan as to what mare we're going to breed to what stallion each year. I prefer to have my foals born earlier in the season, so that they're developed mentally and physically along with the rest of their crop. If you don't do that, it's less likely a two or three-year-old will be on the same competitive level as his peers."

Easy-going in his words and actions has led Carver to partnerships with numerous other owners and trainers.

"I've got partnerships here and there, and own horses with Erv, Ron (Phillips), Brittany Farms and the Mystical Marker folks," Carver admitted. "I'm not real picky. If Erv says someone's all right, then they're all right. I'm pretty easy to get along with, and I really don't care if I own all of a horse or just a piece of one. It really doesn't make any difference to me.

"My goal is ultimately to have a stable of top horses, Breeders Crown winners, and to have a lot of fun," Carver said. "It's always great to have the best horse but I know that this business is like a lottery ticket most of the time. I kind of love it and kind of hate it but it's definitely hard to get away from."

Besides horses, Carver's other passion is playing cards.

"I love to play cards, especially Gin Rummy," he noted. "I can hold my own with almost anybody recreationally."

Carver attributes his fortitude, competitive spirit and passion for both horses and cards to genetics.

"My father and my brothers and I all have fairly high IQs," he admitted. "And by nature I'm very competitive. Second place is something I don't understand. I'm very laid back but very competitive.

"My father instilled in me that winning is the only way to look at life whether it was sports or anything else. I'm just not good at being second." 🐾

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