



INSTANT KA

Despite never quite being the big dog in a group of juveniles deep in talent, Rock N Roll raised it up a notch in 2010. By Kimberly Rinker



Photo by Nigel Soult

RMA

Roll Heaven is looking to step

Call it karma or call it a hunch.

When Frank Bellino first spied a news item on a bantam two-year-old on the United States Trotting Association's web site in the spring of 2009, he felt an instant connection to the youngster.

Unbeknownst to Bellino, who resides in Bronxville, New York, and is in his fourth decade of owning Standardbreds, in a near parallel moment New Jersey-based trainer Bruce Saunders was talking with former Ontario horseman Roy O'Hagan about the same freshman son of Rocknroll Hanover. The colt had scored a pair of impressive qualifiers at Scioto Downs on May 30 (in 1:59.3) and June 6 (in 1:57.3), winning the latter by more than 10 lengths.

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"I had bought a colt from O'Hagan the year before," Saunders recalled. "I knew Roy to be a good and honest guy. He had told me he wanted a Rocknroll Hanover horse and joked that once he got him ready, he'd call me. Roy pinhooks his horses and makes a good living for himself. He called me after Rock N Roll Heaven qualified the first time."

Bred in Kentucky by the partnership of Steve Stewart (Hunterton Farm) and Charles, Julie and Francene Nash, the colt christened Rock N Roll Heaven was purchased by O'Hagan for \$57,000 at the 2008 Lexington Selected Yearling Sale. Small in stature (at just under 15 hands) Rock N Roll Heaven is the second foal out of the Artsplace mare Artistic Vision p,4, 1:50.2 (\$634,808) and is a half-brother to the gelding Clear Vision (by Western Hanover) p,3, 1:49.3f (\$466,060).

During a conversation the following day, Bellino, 75, told Saunders he liked the colt he had seen.

"Frank mentioned he had seen the photo and how much he liked what he saw, and how good looking he was," Saunders said. "He encouraged me to fly out to Columbus and take a look at him after the colt's second qualifier, so I did. I trained him and another Cambest colt early in the morning, we did a pre-purchase exam and he vetted out perfectly."

That was all the encouragement Bellino needed and \$300,000 later, Rock N Roll Heaven and Cambest Kisses (Cambest-Passionate Kisses) were on their way to Saunders' barn at Magical Acres in New Jersey.

"Other people were interested in the horse but they didn't want to pay that kind of money based on qualifying lines," Frank acknowledged. "After Bruce sat behind him, he told me 'he's a special, special horse, Frank.'"

"Frank wasn't as concerned about the price as I was," admitted Saunders, 65, who has had an enviable career with winners of over \$20 million. "The colt's dam, Artistic Vision, was a great mare. She held her own racing against Worldly Beauty and Loyal Opposition, and the cross with Rocknroll Hanover was a perfect match.

"Buying a horse at that stage is, in some way, easier than picking one out at a sale, where you have a lot of unknowns," Saunders continued. "I was able to sit behind this colt and get a feel for him. And Frank wasn't cautious at all with the horse, he wanted him from day one and seemed to have some type of karma for this colt."

THE FRESHMAN

Rock N Roll Heaven's first outing for Saunders and Bellino came on June 27 in a Meadowlands baby race. With John Campbell at the lines, the colt paced evenly to win in 1:57.3.

"The first time I sat behind him in Ohio, we went a mile in 2:15, and I knew right away he was a good horse with a nice mouth and very intelligent," Saunders said. "He was good gaited, very well-balanced and a handsome horse, but didn't have the kind of stature that you'd expect. And he didn't initially show the kind of speed and guts that would come through later.

"However, when John (Campbell) drove him the first time he was very impressed," Saunders added. "He told me, 'this is a very nice colt, an excellent colt and he's ready to go wherever you

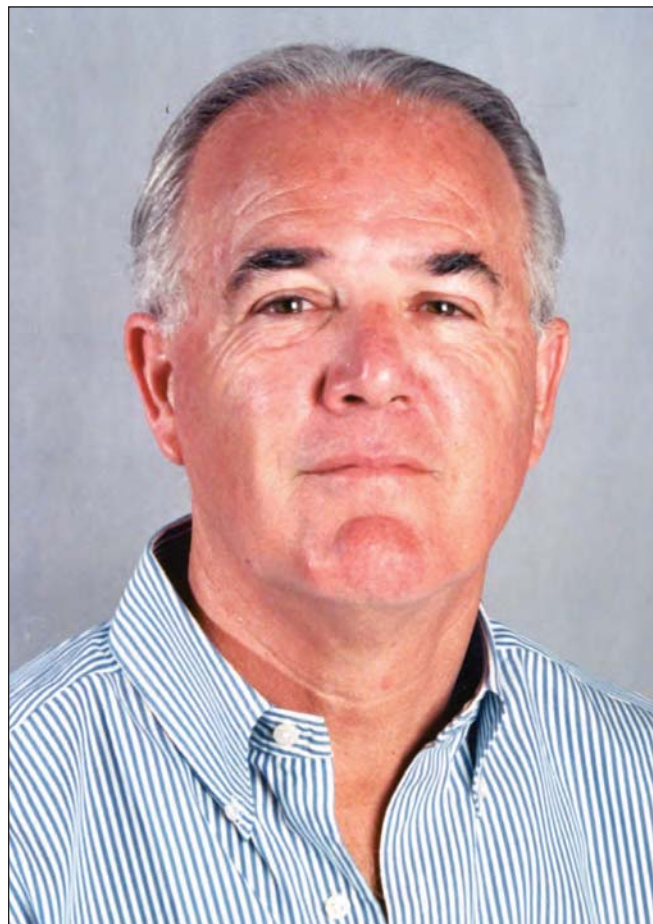


Photo courtesy of Hambletonian Society

"It became apparent that the colt was thriving on the competition. He's a funny horse because you can tell he has that kind of ability by the way he handles himself on the track even though in training he really doesn't give forth that kind of effort. He doesn't throw on that switch until he gets behind the starting gate." . . . trainer Bruce Saunders

want him to go.' Coming from John, that's quite a statement."

Rock N Roll Heaven's pari-mutuel debut came on July 9 in a \$40,300 New Jersey Sire Stake for freshman pacing colts. Leaving from post nine for Campbell, the colt was beaten only a length, finishing third in 1:54.2 with a final panel brush of :26.4. The following week, in the second \$39,800 NJSS leg, he was second, pacing in 1:52.2 and beaten only half a length with Campbell again at the controls.

"John drove him those first three times and helped to educate Rock N Roll Heaven, but he had already made a commitment on a Jimmy Takter horse. So with the \$200,000 final coming up, I had to find another driver and most of the Meadowlands regulars already had mounts in that race."

Daniel Dube did not. The partnership clicked, and in the July 23 final, Rock N Roll Heaven scored his maiden win in 1:54 drawing away with a spiffy :26.2 late brush.

"After Dube drove him the first time, he told me 'anywhere you race this horse, I'll drive him, he's a great horse,'" Saunders related.

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"You're always apprehensive when you go into a race and you don't know what to expect, but I was really happy with that start," Bellino admitted. "I knew Daniel thought very highly of him and it seemed like he and the horse really meshed."

Saunders then gave Rock N Roll Heaven a two week break before sending him out in a Big M qualifier on August 13 as a prep before heading to Canada and the \$1 million Metro Pace. The colt responded by pacing to a 12 length win with Dube at the lines clocked in a splendid 1:51.1.

"Watching him in that qualifier at the Meadowlands, Danny (Dube) was ripping his face off in 1:51.1," Saunders noted. "It became apparent that the colt was thriving on the competition. He's a funny horse because you can tell he has that kind of ability by the way he handles himself on the track even though in training he really doesn't give forth that kind of effort. He doesn't throw on that switch until he gets behind the starting gate."

Rock N Roll Heaven shipped to Mohawk Racetrack where he competed in a \$17,480 overnight event for freshman pacers on August 23, winning easily in 1:53.1 for Dube. He then finished second in both his \$40,000 Metro elimination (to Malicious) and the \$1 million Final (to Sportswriter), pacing in 1:52.2 and 1:49.4 respectively. Saunders and Bellino were both happy with the colt's efforts.

"In any race he won or lost, no horse had more pace at the finish than he did," Saunders stated. "And he never lost when he was on the front end."

"The races he got beat in were world records," Bellino offered. "He's the only two-year-old I know that went sub-1:50 miles and was beaten."

On September 13, Rock N Roll Heaven captured his \$20,000 Governor's Cup elim at Chester in a front-stepping 1:50.3 for Dube, besting Versado and All Speed Hanover and establishing a world record for freshman pacing colts on a five-eighths mile track.

"His Governor's Cup elim world record was outstanding, but then in every race he gave us a good effort," Bellino noted.

One week later on September 20, Rock N Roll Heaven assumed the bridesmaid role again, this time pacing in 1:49.3 in the \$600,000 Governor's Cup final. Despite his second-place finish to Ray Schnittker's One More Laugh, he still paced a final panel of :26.3, after negotiating around tiring horses in the lane.

"The Governor's Cup Final was one of the most brutal miles I've ever seen for freshman colts," Saunders stressed. "Ray's colt went a monster trip and Danny had to drive up through the passing lane around some really top notch colts."

But far and away Rock N Roll Heaven's finest effort was to be the last of his freshman campaign. On October 3, under less than ideal conditions that included temperatures of less than 10 degrees and a choppy racetrack, Dube steered Rock N Roll Heaven to a runaway, wire-to-wire victory in 1:50.2 with a thundering :25.4 final quarter and a new world record clocking.

"That day at Lexington for his world record mile, he just wanted to come right out of his harness he had so much pace," Saunders revealed. "Daniel told me 'I could have gone in 1:49 but I shut him down on the backside.' I thought that was remarkable."



Trainer Bruce Saunders, driver Dan Dube and owner Frank Bellino pose with the trophy after Rock N Roll Heaven captured the \$200,000 NJSS Final in just his third lifetime start.

Lisa Photo

"Dube said he was more concerned about winning the race than the time," Frank agreed. "Daniel thinks very highly of this colt and it's evident that they make a good team together."

Right there it was over. Rock N Roll Heaven's connections made the decision to end his freshman campaign on a winning note, despite being eligible to the Matron. The youngster wrapped up the year with four wins, four seconds and a third in nine starts, with earnings of \$614,186.

"I really thought it was time to shut him down and perhaps get a little earlier start with him in 2010," Saunders explained. "I can't say enough about the way he raced during his freshman season. He always put in a high-quality effort against a very high quality group of two-year-olds. It will be exciting to see the three-year-olds in action this year."

"Throughout last year I never really trained him hard at all, maybe just a couple of light trips during the week if he was racing," Saunders said. "His last four starts, he was either in a world record or set a world record or tied a world record. He's got a very impressive resume right now."

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"We raced against some outstanding colts, and it's hard to criticize any of them. But I don't think any of them accomplished what Rock N Roll Heaven did, he beat New Jersey horses, Canadian horses, Lexington horses, so I'm very, very proud of this horse.

"I really hope that all these horses come back safe and healthy in 2010 because it will make a great year for harness racing and a great one for the fans," added Saunders.

THE FUTURE

For Bellino, the ride with Rock N Roll Heaven thus far has been a great one.

"We put this horse away at the top of his game," Bellino noted. "I started out with claimers at Yonkers and have bought and claimed and bred a lot of horses over the years, but this is by far the best horse I've ever had. It gives me goose bumps to watch him race especially when he won the New Jersey Sire Stakes at the Meadowlands, he just stormed to the wire that night. It was very exciting."

Now semi-retired, Bellino is a former builder of municipal and water works, who now concentrates his efforts on real estate when he's not focusing on his horses and most especially, Rock N Roll Heaven.

"Bruce is the best trainer I've ever had," Bellino offered. "I've had a lot of phone calls and inquiries about Rock N Roll Heaven, but I'm happy right now doing things on my own, and making my own decisions about the horse."

"Frank really lives and breathes his horses and he deserves a really nice horse," said Saunders. "We've bought some nice horses over the past couple of years, but Rock N Roll Heaven is unquestionably the best horse I've ever trained. He just lays over anything I've ever had for sure, and quite honestly, did some things that some of the top aged horses I've had couldn't do. He's probably the best horse I've ever been around."

Rock N Roll Heaven spent the fall at Magical Acres in central New Jersey, jogging lightly, before getting a five-week break at nearby Blairwood Farm. In mid-December, the youngster returned to Saunders' barn at the Meadowlands to resume training.

"He's a very easy going horse and has never done anything surprising in a negative sense," added Saunders. "He just plods along on the racetrack going slow and is pretty ordinary looking until you really take a good look at him and see how well put together he is, and how well-muscled."

Saunders said he and Bellino have still not made definitive plans for Rock N Roll Heaven's entire sophomore campaign, but know it will include New Jersey Sire Stakes, The Meadowlands Pace, The Breeders Crown, Lexington and the Matron.

"He'll probably have 15 to 20 starts this year," Saunders said. "And as far as beyond that? I really can't say. This summer the phone never stopped ringing every time he raced. Rockroll Hanover is one of the most sought after stallions and people will be looking for sons of his. I'm sure Frank will want to do what is best for the horse and that would include getting a substantial offer from the right people.

"Frank loves to race and I think if Rock N Roll Heaven has a great year and the right proposal is out there, it would be tempting. From a financial standpoint, you almost have to stop with a champion horse after an outstanding three-year-old season in terms of a stallion prospect.

"But I'm not sure how much the 'financial thing' means to Frank. A top stallion is going to have an eight to 10 year career, but for someone who likes to have a top racehorse, the stallion option is not always an incentive."

Right now, Saunders says he's just focusing on keeping his star pupil happy and healthy. And about that size thing...

"Most would consider him small. We measured him out at the end of the season at just a hair under 15 hands. But when he comes that last quarter, that last eighth, that final sixteenth in the race he doesn't look small. He is long for his size and has a very, very efficient gait.

"He's one of those horses that looks much bigger in tack on the track than he does just standing in his stall. The colt doesn't want a lot of attention, but he's the type of horse that likes to get to work once the harness goes on. I like that he cleans up all his feed and is happy doing his work. He's just a professional racehorse, and I feel very privileged to be around him.

"Too many times in this business the trainers think it's about them, but it's really about the horse," Saunders concluded. "Rock N Roll Heaven understands what to do, and all we try to do is stay out of his way and let him do it. He's the complete package." 🐾

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