

SMOOTH TRANSITION A WINNER FOR YOUNG CHICAGO FANS

Harness racing is a large part of Illinois Harness Horsemen Association (IHHA) executive director Tony Somone's life. So it's only natural that his love for the sport, and for the Standardbred horse, would trickle down to his children.

That love especially caught on with Tony's son Tom, who is a student at Lyons Township High School in LaGrange, Ill.

"Tom graduated in 2009 and afterward became involved in the 'Life Skills Program' there," Tony explained. "It's geared for special needs kids who have graduated from high school but who are not yet ready to go into the work force. Tom has been in the program for two years, and will continue in it until he's 22."

Tom, 21, has Down syndrome. He is one of 19 students currently enrolled in the program, according to lead instructor Joe Duffy.

"We work with all types of special needs kids who are looking to transition into being on their own; functioning independently in society," said Duffy.

"Harness racing is a big part of my life and also Tom's life," admitted Tony, 49. "He's often my companion at the racetrack and then talks to his classmates and his teachers about what he did the night before. So his teachers and friends became interested in visiting the barn area."

Horseman Dave McCaffrey, who serves as the IHHA president, wasted no time getting involved with the life-skills program students.

"All of Tom's classmates—including those in wheelchairs—came to Dave's barn at Maywood Park. The kids just absolutely loved it," said Tony.

One horse in particular that seemed more interested in the kids than any other was a giant freshman son of Yankee Skyscraper—Miss Bootsy that Tony owned in partnership with his brother Mike, McCaffrey, and Michael Polansky.

Tony described the horse as "amazingly playful and responsive to the children. There was one little girl in particular, who has some serious issues and is in a wheelchair, and she wanted to pet him. We wheeled her up to his stall and he put his head over the gate and just stuck it in her lap and didn't move."

"It was really amazing," McCaffrey confirmed. "This horse had all the kids crowded around him and he seemed to be quite taken with them. Kids that had never been around horses or were afraid didn't seem to have a big problem with him. Even those with the greatest handicaps would go up to him and he was extremely accommodating. I was a little nervous about it initially, because I wasn't sure how the horses were going to react to them. But this horse in particular was taken with the group and the group was taken with him. He took treats from them and we brought him out and had the whole group stand around him. He inspired a lot of smiles that day."

While Tony and Dave watched, it occurred to them that they should let the youngsters choose a new name for the robust gelding, who was then still unraced. His previous name was Fox Valley Matrix, a \$7,000 yearling purchase from the 2010 Land Of Lincoln Sale.

"When we told the kids that they could name the horse, they thought it was the greatest thing in the world," Tony revealed. "When they got back to their classroom, they kicked around a bunch of names and eventually came up with Smooth Transition. It was so perfect because that's what their teachers are always telling them, that their goal will be to make a smooth transition into life through the program."

Since naming the colt, the class has kept a steady eye on him. Tony, Tom and the rest of the family were at Balmoral Park when Smooth Transition scored his first career victory on Aug. 27 in 1:56.1 for driver Brian Carpenter. Smooth Transition won his second start on Nov. 15 at Balmoral in 1:55.2 and appears to be improving each week, with \$8,473 in career earnings and a 2-1-1 record from nine starts.

"I think he's going to be a good horse—he's getting better as he matures," McCaffrey offered.

"My son is constantly talking about the horse and about the program," Tony confirmed. "And I know he's talking about him with his classmates as well."

"This has been a great opportunity for the class," Duffy said. "It really makes you stop and think how all of us relate to one another, and how we relate to other beings."—By Kimberly Rinker



Tony Somone and his wife, Jenny (far right) joined their son Tom in the winner's circle when Smooth Transition won at Balmoral Park on Aug. 27.