

Driving for the big times

Island harness racing driver Robert Shepherd is enjoying much success this season in Ontario

By NICHOLAS OAKES
SPECIAL TO THE GUARDIAN

Robert Shepherd is enjoying a career year in the harness racing bike.

Last year, Shepherd finished with 85 wins, a career best, and this year is looking even better.

"At the first of the year I was just joking around saying maybe I'll go for 200 wins, never thinking I'd get it," Shepherd said from his Dundas, Ont., home recently. "I'm over 200 wins already. I never imagined having the year I'm having right now."

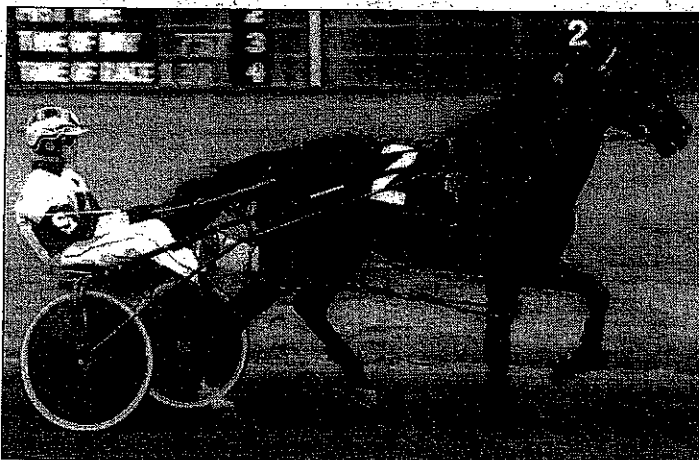
Shepherd comes from humble beginnings.

The 27-year-old grew up in Stratford, the son of Charlottetown trainer/driver Harold Shepherd.

He got his licence to drive horses before his 19th birthday with his first win coming on Whattheblazes, a mare he owned himself. He says she was his favourite horse to drive.

"She was so tough. She taught me a lot more than any horse I've drove."

He credits his early lessons to his father, as well as Charlottetown trainer Earl Smith, who gave him the drive on Hugh Too, his first win-



Robert Shepherd credits his father, Harold, and trainer Earl Smith for his early training as a harness racing driver. Submitted photo

ning mile faster than 2:00.

Shepherd decided to see what racing was like away from the Maritimes and after a brief stay in Ontario he headed west to Alberta to work for fellow Islander Bill Andrew.

While in Alberta, he started driving for other trainers and worked his way up the ladder.

When The Bruster's regular driver moved away, Shepherd picked up the drive on the three-year-old colt and the rest is history.

The colt won three out of his first four races then was second in his elimination of the Nat Christie stake at Calgary's Stampede Park.

The colt came back in the final later that day and won the \$120,000 race.

"It was a big thrill. I was a celebrity in Alberta for a couple of weeks," said Shepherd.

In the winter of 2005-06, Shepherd made the move to Ontario to further his career.

"I always wanted to come here (Ontario). If you want to be the best, this is where you want to be."

He started working for noted Ontario trainer Suzie Kerwood.

While working for Kerwood, he

got to drive the young trotter Long On Ability to a sweep of the Tie Silk series at Toronto's Woodbine Raceway.

After doing some more catch driving at the smaller Ontario tracks he landed a drive on Tigerra in the \$200,000 Dan Patch Invitational at Hoosier Park.

He said it was the best horse he's ever drove.

"He was a real nice horse to drive. I would've done a lot better only Roger Mayottes horse (Escape The Wind) ran in front of me."

Still, the biggest thrill was yet to come.

In August 2006, he returned home to drive Tough Luck in the Gold Cup and Saucer trials, winning his elimination race.

"It was amazing winning the elimination. I could hardly hold back from crying in the winner's circle. It's one of the best feelings I've had after winning a race."

Tough Luck finished sixth in the final but it doesn't deter Shepherd.

"It was the most exciting race of my life. I'd love to win it some day."

Shepherd says that there is no

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Robert Shepherd, on driving Tough Luck in a Gold Cup and Saucer trial race

main stable he drives horses for while in Ontario.

"I drive a little for everybody. Most of the time I just pick the better horse and I don't have any bad friends."

An ordinary summer week would find Shepherd spending Monday, Tuesday, and Friday driving at Grand River Raceway in Elimira, Ont., while Wednesday, Thursday and Sunday would mean a trip down the road to Flamboro Downs.

Saturday is a night driving at Georgian Downs in Barrie, Ont.

He recently picked up four wins at Dundas and was ranked third at Flamboro in wins (130) and purse money (\$818,521) going into the weekend.

"I always wanted to drive at the big times," said Shepherd. "I told my father I wanted to drive at Woodbine or The Meadowlands (New Jersey)."

"I'm not in a rush to jump in there. You can hurt yourself by going in there too early and not make it. We'll see where it goes, but I'm taking everything in stride right now. I can't believe the year I'm having."

Nicholas Oakes is a student from Bluefield high school who is currently in a co-op work placement with The Guardian